

# Transportation through the Lens of Literature

## The Depiction of Transportation Systems in American Literature from 1800 to the Present in the Form of an Annotated Bibliography

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You can examine this site by reading through the chapters, beginning with the [early 1800.htmls](#), or you can use one of these indexes.

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The [Introduction](#) is an essay which explains the rationale for the project and gives an overview of some of the general conclusion.

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### How to read the chapters and entries

The annotations are arranged chronologically, by the decade of the **setting**.

## 24 (Entry number)

**Author:** Name, followed by birth and death dates

**Title:** Name ("In" = a larger work, e.g., a short story or poem in a collection)

**Date:** of first publication ("Written" = date is significantly different)

**Systems:** train, automobile, etc.

**Context:** "Contemporary" with the publication date or specific dates, followed usually with a locale, and sometimes a comment on perspective

**The entry comes here.**

**Edition used:** The specific book we used; often paperbacks.

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URL: [http://english.cla.umn.edu/FacultyProfiles/DonaldRoss/Transport/title\\_page.htm](http://english.cla.umn.edu/FacultyProfiles/DonaldRoss/Transport/title_page.htm)

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<a href="#">Dreiser</a>	Theodore	1871	1945	<i>An American Tragedy</i>	1925	<a href="#">122</a>
<a href="#">DuBois</a>	W. E. B.	1868	1963	<i>The Souls of Black Folk</i>	1903	<a href="#">73</a>
<a href="#">Dunbar-Nelson</a>	Alice	1875	1935	"Mr. Baptiste"	1899	<a href="#">76</a>
<a href="#">Dylan</a>	Bob	1941	-	"Highway 61 Revisited"	1965	<a href="#">235</a>
<a href="#">El-Shabazz</a>	El-Hajj Malik	1925	1965	<i>The Autobiography of Malcolm X</i>	1965	<a href="#">172</a>
<a href="#">Ellison</a>	Ralph	1914	-	"King of the Bingo Game"	1944	<a href="#">192</a>
<a href="#">Ellison</a>	Ralph	1914	-	<i>Invisible Man</i>	1952	<a href="#">155</a>
<a href="#">Erdrich</a>	Louise	1954	-	<i>Love Medicine</i>	1984	<a href="#">238</a>
<a href="#">Erdrich</a>	Louise	1954	-	<i>The Beet Queen</i>	1986	<a href="#">186</a>
<a href="#">Faulkner</a>	William	1897	1962	"Red Leaves"	1930	<a href="#">16</a>
<a href="#">Faulkner</a>	William	1897	1962	<i>As I Lay Dying</i>	1930	<a href="#">125</a>
<a href="#">Faulkner</a>	William	1897	1962	<i>Absalom! Absalom!</i>	1936	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Faulkner</a>	William	1897	1962	"An Odor of Verbena"	1938	<a href="#">51</a>
<a href="#">Faulkner</a>	William	1897	1962	<i>The Hamlet</i>	1940	<a href="#">97</a>
<a href="#">Faulkner</a>	William	1897	1962	<i>Go Down, Moses</i>	1942	<a href="#">67</a>
<a href="#">Faulkner</a>	William	1897	1962	<i>Two Soldiers</i>	1942	<a href="#">174</a>
<a href="#">Faulkner</a>	William	1897	1962	<i>The Reivers</i>	1962	<a href="#">98</a>
<a href="#">Ferlinghetti</a>	Lawrence	1919	-	"In Goya's Greatest Scenes"	1958	<a href="#">227</a>
<a href="#">Ferré</a>	Rosario	1942	-	<i>The Youngest Doll</i>	1976	<a href="#">185</a>
<a href="#">Fitzgerald</a>	F. Scott	1896	1940	"The Ice Palace"	1920	<a href="#">100</a>
<a href="#">Fitzgerald</a>	F. Scott	1896	1940	<i>The Great Gatsby</i>	1925	<a href="#">119</a>
<a href="#">Fitzgerald</a>	F. Scott	1896	1940	<i>The Last Tycoon</i>	1941	<a href="#">167</a>
<a href="#">Forché</a>	Carolyn	1950	-	The Country Between Us	1981	<a href="#">268</a>
<a href="#">Freeman</a>	Mary E. Wilkins	1852	1930	"On the Walpole Road"	1884	<a href="#">64</a>
<a href="#">Frost</a>	Robert	1874	1963	Selected poems	1955	<a href="#">104</a>
<a href="#">Fuller</a>	Margaret	1810	1850	<i>American Literature</i>	1846	<a href="#">23</a>
<a href="#">Gardner</a>	Erle Stanley	1889	1970	<i>The Case of the Curious Bride</i>	1934	<a href="#">154</a>
<a href="#">Garland</a>	Hamlin	1860	1940	<i>Main-Travelled Roads</i>	1930	<a href="#">66</a>
<a href="#">Glancy</a>	Diane	1941	-	"Without Title"		<a href="#">285</a>
<a href="#">Gregory</a>	Horace	1898	-	"This is the Place to Wait"		<a href="#">188</a>
<a href="#">Grey</a>	Zane	1872	1939	<i>The U. P. Trail</i>	1918	<a href="#">42</a>



<a href="#">Grey</a>	Zane	1872	1939	<i>The Desert of Wheat</i>	1919	<a href="#">103</a>
<a href="#">Griffith</a>	Beatrice			"In the Flow of Time"	1948	<a href="#">175</a>
<a href="#">Guthrie</a>	Woody	1912	1967	<i>Bound for Glory</i>	1943	<a href="#">163</a>
<a href="#">Hawkes</a>	John	1925	-	<i>Second Skin</i>	1964	<a href="#">206</a>
<a href="#">Hawthorne</a>	Nathaniel	1804	1864	<i>The House of the Seven Gables</i>	1851	<a href="#">22</a>
<a href="#">Hawthorne</a>	Nathaniel	1804	1864	<i>The Blithedale Romance</i>	1852	<a href="#">24</a>
<a href="#">Hawthorne</a>	Nathaniel	1804	1864	Short stories	1837-50	<a href="#">17</a>
<a href="#">Hayden</a>	Robert	1913	-	"Middle Passage"	1966	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Hemingway</a>	Ernest	1899	1961	<i>The Sun Also Rises</i>	1926	<a href="#">132</a>
<a href="#">Hemingway</a>	Ernest	1899	1961	Short stories	1938	<a href="#">134</a>
<a href="#">Hoban</a>	Russell	1925	-	<i>Riddley Walker</i>	1980	<a href="#">278</a>
<a href="#">Hogan</a>	Linda	1947	-	"Making Do"	1986	<a href="#">284</a>
<a href="#">Hollander</a>	John	1929	-	"Helicon"	1962	<a href="#">242</a>
<a href="#">Hopkins</a>	Pauline	1859	1930	<i>Contending Forces</i>	1900	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Howells</a>	William Dean	1837	1920	<i>The Rise of Silas Lapham</i>	1885	<a href="#">58</a>
<a href="#">Howells</a>	William Dean	1837	1920	<i>A Hazard of New Fortunes</i>	1890	<a href="#">61</a>
<a href="#">Hughes</a>	Langston	1902	1967	"On the Road"	1952	<a href="#">139</a>
<a href="#">Hughes</a>	Langston	1902	1967	Selected Poems	1959	<a href="#">130</a>
<a href="#">Hurston</a>	Zora Neale	1891	1960	"Sweat"	1926	<a href="#">129</a>
<a href="#">Hurston</a>	Zora Neale	1891	1960	"The Way of a Man with a Train"	1927	<a href="#">128</a>
<a href="#">Hurston</a>	Zora Neale	1891	1960	"The Gilded Six-Bits"	1933	<a href="#">142</a>
<a href="#">Hurston</a>	Zora Neale	1891	1960	"John Henry" in Mules and Men	1935	<a href="#">68</a>
<a href="#">Irving</a>	Washington	1783	1859	<i>Tales of the Alhambra</i>	1832	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">Irving</a>	John	1942	-	<i>The World According to Garp</i>	1978	<a href="#">271</a>
<a href="#">Jackson</a>	Shirley	1919	1965	<i>Come Along with Me</i>	1965	<a href="#">197</a>
<a href="#">Jacobs</a>	Harriet	1813	1897	<i>Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl</i>	1861	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">James</a>	Henry	1843	1916	<i>The American</i>	1876	<a href="#">46</a>
<a href="#">James</a>	Henry	1843	1916	<i>The Bostonians</i>	1886	<a href="#">59</a>
<a href="#">Jarrell</a>	Randall	1914	1965	"Next Day"	1960	<a href="#">250</a>
<a href="#">Jeffers</a>	Robinson	1887	1962	"Roan Stallion"	1925	<a href="#">124</a>
<a href="#">Jewett</a>	Sarah Orne	1849	1909	"The Courting of Sister Wisby"	1894	<a href="#">71</a>
<a href="#">Jones</a>	LeRoy	1934	-	<i>Black Magic: Collected Poetry</i>	1961-67	<a href="#">243</a>
<a href="#">Jong</a>	Erica	1942	-	<i>Fear of Flying</i>	1974	<a href="#">239</a>
<a href="#">Kennedy</a>	William	1928	-	<i>Ironweed</i>	1983	<a href="#">158</a>
<a href="#">Kerouac</a>	Jack	1922	1969	<i>On the Road</i>	1957	<a href="#">203</a>
<a href="#">King</a>	Stephen	1947	-	<i>Cujo</i>	1981	<a href="#">276</a>
<a href="#">King</a>	Stephen	1947	-	<i>Christine</i>	1983	<a href="#">272</a>
<a href="#">Kingston</a>	Maxine Hong	1940	-	<i>China Men</i>	1980	<a href="#">41</a>
<a href="#">Lardner</a>	Ring	1885	1933	"Gullible's Travels"	1916	<a href="#">105</a>
<a href="#">Larison</a>	C. W.	1837	1910	Silvia Dubois, The Biography of the Slav...	1883	<a href="#">4</a>

<a href="#">Lensky</a>	Lois			<i>We Live by the River</i>	1956	<a href="#">224</a>
<a href="#">Lewis</a>	Sinclair	1885	1951	<i>Main Street</i>	1920	<a href="#">101</a>
<a href="#">Lewis</a>	Sinclair	1885	1951	<i>Babbitt</i>	1922	<a href="#">120</a>
<a href="#">Lewis</a>	Sinclair	1885	1951	"Travel is So Broadening"	1928	<a href="#">121</a>
<a href="#">London</a>	Jack	1876	1916	<i>Martin Eden</i>	1909	<a href="#">88</a>
<a href="#">London</a>	Jack	1876	1916	"South of the Slot"	1909	<a href="#">91</a>
<a href="#">Lowell</a>	Robert	1917	1977	"For the Union Dead"	1960	<a href="#">228</a>
<a href="#">Lowell</a>	Amy	1874	1925	"The Taxi"		<a href="#">115</a>
<a href="#">MacLeish</a>	Archibald	1892	-	"Empire Builders"	1933	<a href="#">141</a>
<a href="#">Maltz</a>	Albert	1908	-	"Man on a Road"	1936	<a href="#">148</a>
<a href="#">Marquand</a>	John	1893	1960	<i>The Late George Apley</i>	1936	<a href="#">84</a>
<a href="#">Marshall</a>	Paule	1929	-	<i>Praisesong for the Widow</i>	1984	<a href="#">288</a>
<a href="#">Mason</a>	Bobbie Ann	1940	-	"Shiloh"	1982	<a href="#">275</a>
<a href="#">Mason</a>	Bobbie Ann	1940	-	<i>Spence + Lila</i>	1988	<a href="#">294</a>
<a href="#">McCullers</a>	Carson	1917	1967	<i>The Member of the Wedding</i>	1946	<a href="#">184</a>
<a href="#">McCullers</a>	Carson	1917	1967	Short stories	1954	<a href="#">150</a>
<a href="#">McMurtry</a>	Larry	1936	-	<i>The Last Picture Show</i>	1966	<a href="#">215</a>
<a href="#">Melville</a>	Herman	1819	1891	<i>Moby-Dick</i>	1850	<a href="#">28</a>
<a href="#">Melville</a>	Herman	1819	1891	<i>The Confidence Man</i>	1857	<a href="#">32</a>
<a href="#">Melville</a>	Herman	1819	1891	Short stories	1850s	<a href="#">29</a>
<a href="#">Miller</a>	Arthur	1915	-	<i>Death of a Salesman</i>	1949	<a href="#">202</a>
<a href="#">Mooney</a>	Ted	1951	-	<i>Easy Travel to Other Planets</i>	1980	<a href="#">291</a>
<a href="#">Moore</a>	Merrill	1903	1957	"Old Men and Old Women Going Home ..."		<a href="#">181</a>
<a href="#">Morrison</a>	Toni	1931	-	"1920.htm"	1973	<a href="#">131</a>
<a href="#">Morrison</a>	Toni	1931	-	<i>Jazz</i>	1992	<a href="#">95</a>
<a href="#">Mukherjee</a>	Bharati	1940	-	"Orbiting"	1988	<a href="#">283</a>
<a href="#">Munro</a>	Alice	1931	-	"Miles City, Montana"	1986	<a href="#">236</a>
<a href="#">Nabokov</a>	Vladimir	1899	1977	"Signs and Symbols"	1948	<a href="#">198</a>
<a href="#">Nabokov</a>	Vladimir	1899	1977	<i>Lolita</i>	1955	<a href="#">204</a>
<a href="#">Nabokov</a>	Vladimir	1899	1977	<i>Pnin</i>	1964	<a href="#">221</a>
<a href="#">Nemerov</a>	Howard	1920	-	"Boom!"	1960	<a href="#">223</a>
<a href="#">Norris</a>	Frank	1870	1902	<i>McTeague</i>	1899	<a href="#">81</a>
<a href="#">Norris</a>	Frank	1870	1902	<i>The Octopus</i>	1901	<a href="#">82</a>
<a href="#">Norris</a>	Charles	1881	1945	<i>Bread</i>	1923	<a href="#">107</a>
<a href="#">O'Connor</a>	Flannery	1925	1964	<i>Wise Blood</i>	1952	<a href="#">207</a>
<a href="#">O'Connor</a>	Flannery	1925	1964	"The Life You Save May Be Your Own"	1955	<a href="#">212</a>
<a href="#">O'Connor</a>	Flannery	1925	1964	"A Good Man is Hard to Find"	1955	<a href="#">213</a>
<a href="#">O'Connor</a>	Flannery	1925	1964	"The Artificial Nigger"	1955	<a href="#">229</a>
<a href="#">O'Connor</a>	Flannery	1925	1964	"Everything that Rises Must Converge"	1965	<a href="#">254</a>
<a href="#">Oates</a>	Joyce Carol	1938	-	"Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been"	1970	<a href="#">251</a>

<a href="#">Oates</a>	Joyce Carol	1938	-	"Stalking"	1972	<a href="#">265</a>
<a href="#">Paley</a>	Grace	1922	-	"Samuel"	1974	<a href="#">280</a>
<a href="#">Payne</a>	Emmy	1919	-	<i>Katy No-Pocket</i>	1944	<a href="#">195</a>
<a href="#">Phillips</a>	Jayne Anne	1952	-	<i>Machine Dreams</i>	1984	<a href="#">179</a>
<a href="#">Phillips</a>	Jayne Anne	1952	-	"Fast Lanes"	1987	<a href="#">274</a>
<a href="#">Piper</a>	Watty			<i>The Little Engine That Could</i>	1938	<a href="#">170</a>
<a href="#">Pirsig</a>	Robert M.	1928	-	<i>Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance</i>	1974	<a href="#">261</a>
<a href="#">Plath</a>	Sylvia	1932	1963	"Getting There"	1965	<a href="#">257</a>
<a href="#">Poe</a>	Edgar Allan	1809	1849	Short fiction	1832-49	<a href="#">19</a>
<a href="#">Porter</a>	Katherine Anne	1890	1980	"Old Mortality"	1936	<a href="#">102</a>
<a href="#">Porter</a>	Katherine Anne	1890	1980	<i>Ship of Fools</i>	1962	<a href="#">135</a>
<a href="#">Pound</a>	Ezra	1885	1972	"In a Station of the Metro"	1916	<a href="#">110</a>
<a href="#">Prince</a>	Mary			<i>The History of Mary Prince...</i>	1831	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Reed</a>	Ishmael	1938	-	"The Conjure Man"	1973	<a href="#">69</a>
<a href="#">Reed</a>	Ishmael	1938	-	<i>The Last Days of Louisiana Red</i>	1974	<a href="#">281</a>
<a href="#">Reed</a>	Ishmael	1938	-	<i>Flight to Canada</i>	1976	<a href="#">37</a>
<a href="#">Rey</a>	H. A.	1898	-	<i>Curious George</i>	1941	<a href="#">136</a>
<a href="#">Ridge</a>	John Rollin	1827	1867	"Atlantic Cable"	1868	<a href="#">48</a>
<a href="#">Robbins</a>	Tom			<i>Even Cowgirls Get the Blues</i>	1976	<a href="#">262</a>
<a href="#">Robinson</a>	Marilynne	1944	-	<i>Housekeeping</i>	1980	<a href="#">164</a>
<a href="#">Roethke</a>	Theodore	1908	1963	"Journey to the Interior"	1961	<a href="#">208</a>
<a href="#">Roethke</a>	Theodore	1908	1963	"All Morning"	1964	<a href="#">240</a>
<a href="#">Roethke</a>	Thoedore	1908	1963	"The Far Field"	1964	<a href="#">241</a>
<a href="#">Rölvaag</a>	O. E.	1876	1931	<i>Giants in the Earth</i>	1925	<a href="#">54</a>
<a href="#">Rukeyser</a>	Muriel	1913	1980	"Ceiling Unlimited"		<a href="#">189</a>
<a href="#">Salinger</a>	J. D.	1919	-	<i>Catcher in the Rye</i>	1951	<a href="#">200</a>
<a href="#">Salinger</a>	J. D.	1919	-	<i>Nine Stories</i>	1953	<a href="#">201</a>
<a href="#">Sandburg</a>	Carl	1878	1967	"Chicago" and other poems	1916	<a href="#">109</a>
<a href="#">Saroyan</a>	William	1908	1981	"Harry"	1941	<a href="#">159</a>
<a href="#">Saroyan</a>	William	1908	1981	<i>Short Drive, Sweet Chariot</i>	1966	<a href="#">237</a>
<a href="#">Schwartz</a>	Delmore	1913	1966	"In the Naked Bed, in Plato's Cave"	1938	<a href="#">153</a>
<a href="#">Schwartz</a>	Delmore	1913	1966	"In Dreams Begin Responsibilities"	1948	<a href="#">90</a>
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<a href="#">Selby</a>	Hubert	1928	-	<i>Last Exit to Brooklyn</i>	1965	<a href="#">205</a>
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<a href="#">Shapiro</a>	Karl	1913	-	"Auto Wreck"	1942	<a href="#">176</a>
<a href="#">Silko</a>	Leslie Marmon	1948	-	<i>Ceremony</i>	1977	<a href="#">178</a>
<a href="#">Sinclair</a>	Upton	1878	1968	<i>The Jungle</i>	1906	<a href="#">86</a>
<a href="#">Springsteen</a>	Bruce	1949	-	Songs	1975-80s	<a href="#">282</a>
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<a href="#">Stafford</a>	William	1914	-	"West of the City"	1960	<a href="#">230</a>
<a href="#">Stafford</a>	William	1914	-	"The Trip"	1961	<a href="#">216</a>
<a href="#">Steinbeck</a>	John	1902	1968	"The Chrysanthemums"	1938	<a href="#">161</a>
<a href="#">Steinbeck</a>	John	1902	1968	<i>The Grapes of Wrath</i>	1939	<a href="#">162</a>
<a href="#">Steinbeck</a>	John	1902	1968	<i>East of Eden</i>	1952	<a href="#">85</a>
<a href="#">Stewart</a>	George R.	1895	-	<i>Storm: A Novel</i>	1941	<a href="#">169</a>
<a href="#">Stowe</a>	Harriet Beecher	1811	1896	<i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i>	1852	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">Stratemeyer</a>	Edward	1862	1930	Boys' and girls' books	1910-	<a href="#">111</a>
<a href="#">Tate</a>	Allen	1899	-	"The Subway"	1928	<a href="#">113</a>
<a href="#">Taylor</a>	Peter	1917	-	"What Do You Hear from 'em?"	1951	<a href="#">145</a>
<a href="#">Thompson</a>	Hunter	1939	-	<i>Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas</i>	1971	<a href="#">266</a>
<a href="#">Thoreau</a>	Henry David	1817	1862	<i>A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers</i>	1849	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Thoreau</a>	Henry David	1817	1862	"Resistance to Civil Government"	1849	<a href="#">18</a>
<a href="#">Thoreau</a>	Henry David	1817	1862	<i>Cape Cod</i>	1852	<a href="#">25</a>
<a href="#">Thoreau</a>	Henry David	1817	1862	<i>Walden</i>	1854	<a href="#">20</a>
<a href="#">Thoreau</a>	Henry David	1817	1862	"Walking"	1862	<a href="#">26</a>
<a href="#">Thoreau</a>	Henry David	1817	1862	"Life Without Principle"	1863	<a href="#">27</a>
<a href="#">Thorpe</a>	Thomas Bangs	1815	1878	"The Big Bear of Arkansas"	1841	<a href="#">9</a>
<a href="#">Thurber</a>	James	1894	1961	"The Secret Life of Walter Mitty"	1942	<a href="#">171</a>
<a href="#">Thurber</a>	James	1894	1961	<i>The Thurber Carnival</i>	1931-45	<a href="#">117</a>
<a href="#">Tillman</a>	Lynne			<i>Motion Sickness</i>	1991	<a href="#">286</a>
<a href="#">Toomer</a>	Jean	1894	1967	<i>Cane</i>	1923	<a href="#">116</a>
<a href="#">Tyler</a>	Anne	1941	-	<i>Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant</i>	1982	<a href="#">263</a>
<a href="#">Updike</a>	John	1932	-	<i>Rabbit Redux</i>	1971	<a href="#">252</a>
<a href="#">Vonnegut</a>	Kurt	1922	-	<i>Hocus Pocus</i>	1990	<a href="#">293</a>
<a href="#">Warner</a>	Gertrude Chandler			<i>Caboose Mystery</i>	1966	<a href="#">259</a>
<a href="#">Warren</a>	Robert Penn	1905	1989	<i>All the King's Men</i>	1946	<a href="#">149</a>
<a href="#">Warren</a>	Robert Penn	1905	1989	"Dragon Country: To Jacob Boehme"	1957	<a href="#">210</a>
<a href="#">Washington</a>	Booker T.	1856	1915	<i>Up from Slavery</i>	1901	<a href="#">52</a>
<a href="#">Welty</a>	Eudora	1909	-	"Death of a Traveling Salesman"	1941	<a href="#">146</a>
<a href="#">Welty</a>	Eudora	1909	-	"The Hitch-Hikers"	1941	<a href="#">147</a>
<a href="#">Welty</a>	Eudora	1909	-	<i>Losing Battles</i>	1970	<a href="#">144</a>
<a href="#">West</a>	Nathaniel	1903	1940	<i>Miss Lonelyhearts</i>	1933	<a href="#">151</a>
<a href="#">West</a>	Nathaniel	1903	1940	<i>The Day of the Locust</i>	1939	<a href="#">166</a>
<a href="#">Wharton</a>	Edith	1862	1937	"The Other Two"	1904	<a href="#">89</a>
<a href="#">Wharton</a>	Edith	1862	1937	<i>Ethan Frome</i>	1911	<a href="#">96</a>
<a href="#">Wharton</a>	Edith	1862	1937	<i>Summer</i>	1917	<a href="#">80</a>
<a href="#">Wharton</a>	Edith	1862	1937	<i>The Age of Innocence</i>	1920	<a href="#">60</a>
<a href="#">White</a>	E. B.	1899	1985	<i>Stuart Little</i>	1945	<a href="#">196</a>
<a href="#">Whitman</a>	Walt	1819	1892	<i>Leaves of Grass</i>	1856-	<a href="#">30</a>

<a href="#">Wilbur</a>	Richard	1921	-	"Grace"	1947	<a href="#">187</a>
<a href="#">Wilder</a>	Laura Ingalls	1867	1957	<i>Little House in the Big Woods</i>	1932	<a href="#">55</a>
<a href="#">Wilder</a>	Laura Ingalls	1867	1957	<i>These Happy Golden Years</i>	1932	<a href="#">56</a>
<a href="#">Wilder</a>	Laura Ingalls	1867	1957	<i>The Long Winter</i>	1940	<a href="#">57</a>
<a href="#">Williams</a>	William Carlos	1883	1963	"The Last Turn"	1944	<a href="#">194</a>
<a href="#">Williams</a>	Tennessee	1911	1983	<i>A Streetcar Named Desire</i>	1947	<a href="#">180</a>
<a href="#">Williams</a>	Joy	1944	-	"The Yard Boy"	1982	<a href="#">273</a>
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## Transportation through the Lens of Literature

The Depiction of Transportation Systems in American Literature from 1800.htm to the Present  
in the Form of an Annotated Bibliography

by Donald Ross

### PREFACE

Imaginative literature can, and often does, give a special insight into society and its institutions which is not available from other sources. Unlike a history, or the official documents which are history's typical sources, literature locates the world at the individual, family, or intimate group level. Unlike private diaries or memoirs, fiction, drama, and poetry are consciously contrived to make up a good story and they show imaginative control. Of course, literature is made up, invented - but so, in their own ways, are corporate documents and diaries. The real or objective picture is inevitably a composite which the reader or listener puts together - it is not out there, in a particular source. These works of literature give us insiders', travelers' views. Obviously formal histories might cover the same path by using private writings such as journals and diaries, and, in doing so, could include a wider scope of travellers, transportation workers, and casual observers. While these sources could be more diverse, it's not clear that they would be any less biased or authentic than what we can get from poetry or fiction.

This book is chiefly a chronological traverse through a wide variety of American literature from 1800.htm to the present. From reading the story we have put together, you will see how people reacted to new transportation systems, what they perceived as their good and bad features, and how they dealt with a succession of systems. The book begins with an "Overture," which, like the orchestral piece before an opera, strikes the major and themes and findings from a historical and then a literary point of view. Finally, the introduction ends with some practical advice on what the reading of literature teaches us about transportation in America.

### OVERTURE

#### What We Tried to Do

For the past two centuries novels, poems, and plays have helped shape America's understanding and appreciation of its transportation systems. [Walt Whitman](#), writing in 1871 at the openings of the Suez Canal and the U.S. transcontinental railroad, saw those two "passages to India" as welding the earth together: "Nature and Man shall be disjoin'd and diffused no more" and Occident and Orient would connect. As new modes of transportation were developed in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, novelists and poets tried to capture their cultural significance. An elderly couple in Nathaniel Hawthorne's [The House of the Seven Gables](#) (1851) rides the train for the first time, and one of the pair, Clifford Pyncheon, talks to others in the carriage about a new "nomadic state" fostered by the railroad which will remove all stumbling blocks to happiness and spiritual improvement. In contrast, by the 1920s, such prophesies seemed empty to some writers. [E. Scott Fitzgerald](#), for example, describes a place near New York City where rail, automobile, and barge traffic converge as a "valley of ashes," a wasteland setting for the moral decay and faded idealism of urban culture (*The Great Gatsby*, 1925). And, in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), [John Steinbeck](#) makes the road west by automobile both the way to flee the depression dust bowl and the way to enter the political and economic oppression of the "Hoovervilles" in California.

This site does two main things. First, it is a survey of what American literature has said about transportation. Second, through its chronological arrangement, it provides a history of the country's changing and interacting systems. And, yes, sotto voce, it has a third goal. We would like you to become intrigued by the works we present and appreciate the role which literature plays in our social and intellectual culture.

We have presented the relevant parts of novels, poems, and plays with the hope that you will see how imaginative writing highlights the infrastructure, the environment, where "environment" is construed broadly to include how transportation interacts with the general society, and how it is perceived by individuals. Of course, characterizing societies and individuals is the mainstay of imaginative literature which makes up stories, expresses emotions, and



invents landscapes in complex ways. And then there is the unique contribution of literature - its penchant for finding new ways to use the English language to convey thoughts and feelings.

We imagine our reader to be a person who has a professional or personal interest in the transportation environment, especially in its social context. To this end, we have tried to capture the experience that such a person would have in reading a literary work with his or her special interests and concerns. We are not writing chiefly for the literary scholar or the historian. Our imagined readers go to literature first for entertainment - to follow the plot and identify with the characters, and for the artists' creative visions of the world. They also read for excellent language and original metaphors which provide insight into people and the society. Our entries, then, put a high premium on allowing the artists' words to come through as much as possible.

We are especially interested in showing how the perspective of literary study can shed light on a technical topic like transportation and on the public policy issues which surround it. This project should expand the ways that the professional looks at the role of transportation systems and the society which they serve. These windows into past and current attitudes can also give us insights into the future, not, of course, for the technical innovations, but for public perceptions and acceptance. Furthermore, we envision another audience, especially among the general public and policy makers, that should find our approach much more accessible than that of technical papers from the applied and social sciences. Put another way, this study suggests new ways to talk and write about what transportation means to society.

Our initial goal was to survey widely-available, famous American literature carefully. We have thus included selections and authors found in anthologies, on high school and college reading lists, and in public libraries and bookstores. Literary scholars have debated extensively about what qualifies as literature, and what belongs in textbooks or in the "literature" section of the library or bookstore. This debate has frequently pointed out that the category changed radically toward the end of the nineteenth century. Before then, almost anything that was written with some care and that was still being read after its author's death was called literature - including all poems, plays, prose romances, and highly embellished histories and philosophical treatises (1). Since then, many social and economic forces, including the invention of English departments in American and European colleges, universities, and normal schools, the incredible number of books published each year and the need to market to readers' special interests, have narrowed the term. Within schools and colleges, literature departments had settled on a fairly limited number of readings which helped the faculty control admissions and certification. We, however, have consciously expanded the view to show the diversity of literature, to go beyond high-profile, anthologized works. Therefore, we have included samples of popular literature in several flavors - children's books, detective and Western novels, and romances, blues and ballads.

The entries include relatively little "non-fiction," but even there the issue is murky. Frank Norris's novel [\*The Octopus\*](#) is, of course a fictional work, but Norris consciously includes extensive economic and political background on the California railway industry. On the other hand, Tom Wolfe's histories of the 1960s, such as [\*Kandy-Kolored Tangerine Flake Streamline Baby\*](#) and [\*Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test\*](#), with their stylistic ornamentation and embellishments, easily fit our definition. Other, more traditional histories are not part of the sample. Private writings which authors did not intend for publication - letters, journals, and diaries - are excluded, not because these are not literature, but because we focus on writing clearly made available to the public.

This study concentrates on the movement of civilians and goods along more or less public pathways. It does not deal with what goes on within plant grounds, on a farm, or in the driveway. Nor does it include commercial vehicles which operate off the public pathways - tractors, combines, and crop-dusting airplanes. No military settings, either - no troop trains, battleships, or tanks. Coverage of American literature which focuses on travel on other continents is limited.

Despite serious temptations, we did not cover science fiction stories which depict travel with purely imaginary machines. Speculative accounts of how rocket ships negotiate through the atmosphere of Venus are beyond the realistic or lyrical approaches of what we have included. Finally, we restricted ourselves to printed texts and have not tried to deal with movies, television, or radio; these continuous media present significant methodological difficulties. [Nathaniel Hawthorne](#) uses one phrase to get Phoebe Pyncheon off an omnibus. A moving picture or television shot would have to include horses, a street and (perhaps) a sidewalk, sides on the bus, all invented or reconstructed by a twentieth-century set designer, and it is not at all obvious what the writer or director sees as being significant among megabytes of video information.

While we have surveyed a wide range of literary works, we do not claim to have found or covered everything. Our point is to convey the flavor and the range of American writing. For example, Frank P. Donovan, Jr.'s *The Railroad in Literature* (1940) (2) lists about 250 books, as well as short stories, poems and songs. Of the books only about half are readily available in research libraries; most are mystery stories and many are children's books. As we progressed through this project, we kept thinking about other works we could have included, and we hope you will do the same. Our project is inevitably open-ended.

Part of the fun in our project has been the distortion it has placed on our general approach to literature - we now read the daily newspaper or monthly magazine and look approvingly when the authors explain how people or goods get from one place to another. We watch a young couple in a short story about to begin a courtship and wait expectantly to see how they get together: "Come on, Eugene, go to the station, and wait for her train!" Some famous writers turned out to be quite silent on our topic, and so they do not appear on these pages. The reader with specialized interests can consult the various indexes we have provided. In addition to the subject and geographical indexes, keyed to the entry number, the contents are also presented by author, title, and the date of setting. This latter represents the basic organization of this site.

## Approaches

In the entries for each book, collection, or smaller work, we have tried to look at all aspects of transportation, from the vehicles themselves, to the infrastructure of roadways and terminals, to the logistics, for example, of getting baggage on or off a bus or railway carriage, to the social customs which travellers obey or flout. The entries also give enough of the context to show how transportation fits into the scene. This process has led us to look more closely at narrative paragraphs and longer character speeches than at dialogue or passages which present characters' emotions, states of mind, motivations, and philosophies.

We first thought to arrange this site according to transportation systems - a chapter on canals, big ones on the railroads and automobiles, and one on airplanes. This is the way most histories of transportation are arranged. It soon became clear that this wouldn't work. As soon as Americans had more choices than walking or horseback most trips in literature (and in the world) involved more than one mode - a stage coach to the ferry, then across town by streetcar to the train station.

- "One could not ask May, at the close of a winter afternoon, to go alone across the ferry to Jersey City, even in her own carriage..." to meet Madame Olenska arriving on the Washington, DC train. ([Wharton](#), *The Age of Innocence*, 1920; 1870s setting)
- At the Bonneville California train station at the turn of this century: "The Yosemite 'bus and City 'bus passed up the street, on the way from the morning train... The electric car line, the city's boast, did a brisk business, its cars whirring from end to end of the street, with a jangling of bells and a moaning plaint of gearing." (Frank [Norris](#), 1901)

The entries are arranged chronologically, by decade of their setting. By reading this book from cover to cover you will get an interesting picture of how transportation systems changed, began, and (sometimes) died. One clear message is the striking complexity which arose in the decades after the Civil War with the development of alternative ways to get around. Before that war, most citizens walked. A few had access to a horse; fewer could use some kind of wagon or carriage on a regular basis. A ride on a canal boat, steam boat, or train was for most people quite rare - often once in a lifetime, to a particular destination. It probably won't be surprising that the railroad is the dominant mode of transportation in these pages between its appearance in the 1840s until the first quarter of this century. After that, the automobile, having replaced horse-drawn vehicles, became the chief topic for literary treatment (3).

This chronology implies a succession, perhaps a "logical" succession, of transportation systems in what we would now call a "developing country," i.e., the United States from after the Civil War to the 1920s. Changes in transportation technology were relatively abrupt and not continuous, especially when viewed from a particular city or region. Once the Erie Canal was built, or the "thundering subway" in New York (Charles [Norris](#), 1923) was completed, they made sudden and often dramatic changes in its region, often in the whole country.



The student of a particular technology or region of the country can inquire of our data whether important patterns or events are reflected or not. In addition to the [place index](#), each entry has a "Systems" line and a "Context" line which gives the years covered and the main locales (4). It is important to recognize that writers don't come from every region, nor do they care to depict every city. While it is easy to follow developments in New York city from Herman [Melville](#) in the 1850s, to Edith [Wharton](#) in the 1870s and William Dean [Howells](#) in the 1880s, to J. D. [Salinger](#) in the 1940s, no other city had such a comprehensive transportation (or literary) history. Because of her background, Willa Cather gives pictures of [Nebraska](#) and [Wyoming](#), and Sinclair Lewis concentrated on [Minnesota](#), while none of our entries touches significantly on Denver or Seattle, Alabama or Kansas (5).

## What We Found Out about History

The histories of the railroad (especially) and the automobile are richly demonstrated in American literature. Literary approaches typically have a detailed and personal focus, so the major movements of culture and history tend to be shown at the personal, family, or local level. We are often invited to infer a general picture from what is, in effect, a "case history."

### *Early reactions to new systems*

Some authors waxed enthusiastic, sometimes poetic, upon the introductions of the railroad, elevated train, automobile, and airplane.

- "Ah, here comes the down-train: white cars, flashing through the trees like a vein of silver. How cheerfully the steam-pipe chirps! Gay are the passengers. There waves a handkerchief - going down to the city to eat oysters, and see their friends, and drop in at the circus." ([Melville](#), "Cock-a-Doodle-Do..." 1855)
- A young couple, just arrived in New York sees "the train, just starting, throbbled out the flame-shot steam into the white moonlight." "The most beautiful thing in New York - the one always and certainly beautiful thing here," said March; and his wife sighed, "Yes, yes." ([Howells](#), *Hazard*, 1920, 1880s setting)
- The hero's father's 1913 Ford, "purchase of an inspired hour of madness, occupant now of half Gant's conversation, object of abuse, boast, and anathema." ([Wolfe](#), *Look Homeward*, 1929)
- "To George F. Babbitt, as to most prosperous citizens of Zenith, his motor car was poetry and tragedy, love and heroism." The prospect of a new purchase "was much more than a study of transportation. It was an aspiration for knightly rank." ([Lewis](#), *Babbitt*, 1922)
- Hart [Crane](#) on the Wrights' airplane: "Wheeled swiftly, wings emerge from larval-steel hangers. Taught motors surge, space gnawing, into peripheries of light..." (1933)

In some cases writers of stories, poems, and plays consciously conveyed new information to many of their readers, telling them about transportation systems, especially urban ones, that they had never seen. These works were elaborately descriptive of both the technical details (what the stations are like, the noises), as well as the social changes (who rides, how much it costs, where people go). Such news could have struck a responsive chord in the hearts of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century urban leaders as they charted a course toward Progress. Of course, people could read about developments in London and Paris, as well as New York, in illustrated magazines such as Harper's and Atlantic; and they could see Progress when they traveled at home and overseas.

In the final decades of the nineteenth century, transcontinental railroads opened up lands for commerce and development, and streetcar lines expanded the scope of cities. Some novelists describe these patterns, picking up the notions of the literal frontier out West and the suburban frontiers at the city's edge. Aside from the fact that rail travel was more interesting and accessible than the canal or the carriage, it grew up and proliferated with the country's striking demographic spread. As a public system, it was also perceived to be somewhat personalized with an agreeable combination of privacy and social contact. Notice, however, that many of the examples are told in retrospect from the 1920s, so the enthusiasm also reflects the later era's attitudes.

- The Archers have a reserved compartment for their honeymoon to upstate New York; the train, "shaking off the endless wooden suburbs, had pushed out into the pale landscape of spring." ([Wharton](#), 1920; 1870s setting)
- "One fine day a strange monster came writhing westward over the prairie, from Worthington to Luverne [another 30 miles]; it was the greatest and most memorable event that had yet happened in these parts.... People felt that day a joy that almost frightened them; for it seemed now that all their troubles were over, that there could be no more hardships to contend with." ([Rölvaa](#), 1925; 1870s setting in South Dakota)
- The social and psychological limits of urbanization are defined by the reaches of its fixed-rail transportation system when the Marches ride to the end of the West Side line where they "saw the city pushing its way by regular advances into the country." ([Howells](#), 1890; 1880s setting)
- The railroad president in *The Octopus* explains: "try to believe this - to begin with - that Railroads build themselves. Where there is a demand sooner or later there will be a supply... Do I build the Railroad? You are dealing with forces, young man, when you speak of Wheat and the Railroads, not with men... the Wheat will be carried to feed the people as inevitably as it will grow." (F. [Norris](#), 1901)
- "Its rails extended down the valleys. New towns sprung up, new sections were opened and populated, for the company had to create customers to get custom. The long Salinas Valley was part of the exploitation." Later, "when the railroad puts a branch out here" they can ship out their oak logs. ([Steinbeck](#), 1952; 1900s setting)

While proliferation of highways and streets in the twentieth century turned out to be more expensive and more extensive than the railroads, literature is rather silent about what we now call the automobile infrastructure.

- [Lewis's](#) *Babbitt* is an exception. As a real estate investor, he uses his involvement in a political campaign to get "advance information about the extension of paved highways" to buy land. (1922)

Not all of the early descriptions were so enthusiastic, especially when the effects of a new technology on the local neighborhoods were brought out. Railroads were (and are) notorious for taking rich passengers through poor districts.

- "Straight as a die the railroad cut it; many times a day tantalizing the wretched shanty with the sight of all the beauty, rank, fashion, health, trunks, silver and gold, drygoods and groceries, brides and grooms, happy wives and husbands, flying by the lonely door - no time to stop - flash! here they are - and there they go! - out of sight at both ends - as if that part of the world were only made to fly over, and not to settle upon. And this was about all the shanty saw of what people call 'life.'" ([Melville](#), "Cock-a-Doodle-Do..." 1855)
- [James](#) in the *Bostonians* gives the view from Basil Ransom's New York apartment: "at the end of the truncated vista, of the fantastic skeleton of the Elevated Railway, overhanging the transverse longitudinal street, which it darkened and smothered with the immeasurable spinal column and myriad clutching paws of an antediluvian monster." In the same novel Boston's poor neighborhoods "gave a collective impression of boards and tin and frozen earth, sheds and rotting piles, railwaylines striding flat across a thoroughfare of puddles, and tracks of the humbler, the universal horsecar, traversing obliquely this path of danger." (1886; 1870s setting)

### *Disadvantages and advantages*

In addition to the obvious point that trains and automobiles move people and goods around more efficiently than what was previously available, authors also talked about how they brought families and friends together, or how mobility increased alienation. In contrast to general optimism, we do get some hints about the dangers and travails of building transportation systems. Folk songs and, especially, the blues give several images of men who have "been workin' on the railroad all the livelong day" and yet will probably never ride on a train. A sense of economic injustice was outlined rather early in Henry David Thoreau's discussion of railway building:

- We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us. Did you ever think what those sleepers [ties] are that underlie the railroad? Each one is a man, an Irishman, or a Yankee man. The rails are laid on them, and they are covered with sand, and the cars run smoothly over them. ([Walden](#), 1854)
- Melville expresses a similar view concerning "the engineering forces employed in the construction of the American Canals and Railroads... the native American liberally provides the brains, and the rest of the world as generously supplying the muscles." ([Moby-Dick](#), 1850)
- It ain't no telling what that train won't do, / It'll take your baby and run right over you. / Now that engineerman ought to be 'shamed of hisself. / Take women from their husbands, babies from their mother's breast.

([McCoy](#), "That Lonesome Train Took My Baby Away")

Through twentieth-century hindsight the damage done to the Chinese men who built the Union Pacific was reflected by Shawn Hsu Wong, Maxine Hong Kingston, and John Steinbeck. The devastating impact of the railroads on Native Americans got scant attention. An exception is at the end of Zane [Grey's](#) retrospective *The U. P. Trail* (1918):

- "This beast that puffed smoke and spat fire and shrieked like a devil of an alien tribe... Those white men were many as the needles of the pines. They fought and died, but always others came." The train is "a symbol of the destiny of the Indian - vanishing - vanishing - vanishing - "

In the South of the twentieth century, the use of black convict road gangs to build highways was noticed and deplored by Langston Hughes, Robert Penn Warren, and others.

- Makin' a road  
For the rich old white men  
To sweep over in their big cars  
And leave me standin' here. ([Hughes](#), "Florida Road Workers")

The money-conscious realism of late nineteenth and early twentieth century analyzes the big economic picture, the railroad trusts.

- "The generation between 1865 and 1895 was already mortgaged to the railways." (H. [Adams](#), 1918)
- Owen [Wister](#) notices of the Northern Pacific "the whole thing was sired by a whole doggone Dutch [German] syndicate." (1902, 1874-1890 setting)
- Silas Lapham's midwestern mill is liable to control by a fictional railroad which is "the only road that runs within fifty miles of the mills, and you can't get a foot of lumber nor a pound of flour to market any other way." ([Howells](#), 1885; 1875 setting)
- In *The Octopus* the railroad's chief operative in the San Joaquin valley simply describes the freight rate as "All-the-traffic-will-bear." The railroad takes advantage of its monopoly, as well as its ownership of half of the land along the right of way to control prices and as well as rents. Not surprisingly images of the train itself are unpleasant, "a locomotive, single, unattached, shot by him with a roar, filling the air with the reed of hot oil, vomiting smoke and sparks." The power extends horizontally to intra-urban systems as well where the railroad's name is "upon the street-railway cars, upon the ferryboats, on the locomotives and way-coaches of the local trains." (F. [Norris](#), 1901)
- "The power which really governs the United States today is the Railroad Trust. It is the Railroad Trust that runs your state government, wherever you live, and that runs the United States Senate. And all of the trusts that I have named are railroad trusts - save only the Beef Trust! The Beef Trust has defied the railroads - it is plundering them day by day through the Private Car." ([Sinclair](#), *The Jungle* 1905)

The economic systems that bankrolled and organized automobile or airplane companies, or the highways and airports were seldom mentioned in the literature we surveyed. For most authors, these systems were quasi-mystical "givens"; they appeared at the door or at the end of town, and the characters either could or could not afford the ticket, cab fare, or a tank of gas. When they examined costs at all, most twentieth-century authors restricted their complaints to the personal level.

- The family's first car in *Look Homeward, Angel*: "Each bill for gasoline, repairs, or equipment brought a howl of anguish from him; a puncture, a breakdown, a minor disorder caused him to circle about in maddened strides, cursing, praying, weeping." ([Wolfe](#), 1929; 1910s setting)

If authors and the characters whom they invented represent typical citizens, Americans have not cared much about the technical details of transportation systems. For example, while the nineteenth century had several identifiable types of wagons and carriages - buckboard, hansom, barouche, dray - these distinctions were rarely made in literature. The transition from coal to diesel locomotives was a major event for the railroad industry but literary travelers rarely notice that a train has a locomotive, much less its fuel availability or efficiency. As early as the 1910s, once the Model T dominance was over, brand names of cars were frequently mentioned, but chiefly to clarify social and economic class. Later, especially in southwest settings, ownership of pickup trucks became an important social-class symbol. Even though most authors accepted commercial stereotypes about automobile ownership, they rarely focused on the kind of details about cylinders and camshafts, upholstery and color patterns that are the keynotes of advertisements. For cars, brand name alone is the salient token.

- In Thomas [Wolfe's](#) North Carolina, the Model-T is given a glamorous aura: "Bouncing tinnily down the coiling road that came through the Gap from the town, a flivver glinted momentarily through the trees." The local millionaire has a Packard, while the main character only has a Ford. (1929; 1910s setting)
- Bigger Thomas is at first excited at the prospect of driving a wealthy man's car: "He hoped it would be a Packard, or a Lincoln, or a Rolls Royce. Boy! Would he drive!" but the dark blue Buick is "not so expensive as he had hoped," Bigger finds driving an unprecedented rush: "He had a keen sense of power when driving; the feel of a car added something to him." ([Wright](#), *Native Son*, 1940)
- The punks in *Last Exit to Brooklyn* are "Watching cars roll by. Identifying them. Make. Model. Year. Horse power. Overhead valve. V-8. 6,8, a hundred cylinders... Cant beat a Plymouth fora pickup... Outrun any cop in the city with a Roadmaster..." ([Selby](#), 1965; 1950s setting)
- The extensive catalogue in *Last Picture Show* includes the young hero's '41 Chevrolet pickup, the big shot's Mercury ("best car in the country"), a farmer's red GMC pickup, the lovely and wealthy girl's white Ford convertible and her mother's big blue Cadillac, the night watchman's old white Nash, as well as the "first Ford Thunderbird in that part of the country." ([McMurtry](#), 1966; 1950s setting)

Accidents litter the landscape of American literature. Steamboat groundings and crashes punctuate Mark Twain's tales. There are occasional carriage mishaps, owing to equipment failure more often than careless driving. Accidents really took on a literary impact with the motor car, and they became important from the early 1920s on. Auto accidents are personal. They involve the driver as an identifiable agent who is somehow personally responsible for the event - the narrator of F. Scott [Fitzgerald's](#) *The Great Gatsby* calls accident causers "careless people," and he links their driving to their immoral behavior. Karl [Shapiro](#) links the gruesome details, "the mangled [are] lifted / And stowed into the little hospital," with a sense of the wreck's pointlessness: "The grim joke and the banal resolution" ("Auto Wreck," 1942). Probably like most people, literary characters see these accidents as isolated events with profound impacts on the survivors, rather than seeing them as part of accumulated annual carnage.

While it was a popular wonder that these systems were established in the first place, once they did exist, people came to depend on them. Laura Ingalls [Wilder](#) in *The Long Winter* (1940) gives a harrowing account of a Dakota town whose food supplies in the winter of 1877-78 are stuck by massive snow drifts on the rail line from October to April. Because they had abandoned subsistence farming, their harvest has been shipped out and they resorted to eating their seed grain to survive. Even Sinclair Lewis's *Gopher Prairie* ([Main Street](#), 1922) becomes "motor-paralyzed" in winter, and people must return to horse-drawn sleighs to get around town. An extensive treatment of the topic of dependency is in George



[Stewart's](#) fascinating *Storm* (1941) which details the cascading effects of a national storm on plane, rail, and highway; his book should be consulted by specialists who are concerned with disaster relief, since the basic situation has changed little since the late 1930s. In one of his stories, J. D. [Salinger](#) points out the difficulty Long Islanders have in arranging their schedules around the last commuter train out of the city, the unstated consequences of which are having to find a hotel room (if they're lucky) in a place perceived to be extremely dangerous ("Pretty Mouth and Green My Eyes," 1953). Finally, we have Stephen [King's](#) grotesque situation of a rabid dog trapping a terrified mother and her young son in a stalled Pinto (*Cujo*, 1981).

## Succession of systems

In the middle of the nineteenth century, water-based travel and commerce through canals and on riverboats were challenged by the railroad, and American writers became variously sentimental or regretful of the changes. After the Civil War, especially in the 1870s, the Eastern cities of Boston and New York developed choices of ways to get around town. The presence of parallel, competing systems was in contrast to smaller cities and rural settings up to the early twentieth century where the choices were often private carriages or walking. Literary accounts became a way to explore different riderships and their motivations. In some cases we can sketch out a small-scale history from a few texts.

For example, Mark Twain chronicles changes in the Mississippi river valley from the 1830s to the 1880s. *Huck Finn* focuses on the raft which floats rather passively downstream, with an occasional interaction with steamboats and other river traffic. The first part of *Life on the Mississippi* gives an extended picture of the pilot's training during the "flush times" of steamboating in the late 1850s. This part ends with a discussion of the whole industry from the pilot's point of view, with emphasis on new professionalism and the development of a Pilot's Benevolent Association. The second half of this book, set in 1882, is a social and economic analysis of the decline of steamboating in the face of "the unholy train." Willa [Cather's](#) gentle portrait of Brownville, Nebraska in "A Resurrection" (1897) adds further details. Steamboats ironically caused their own demise by shipping in steel rails in the 1870s and thus put this steamboat-centered town off the map. Richard [Bissell](#) follows all this up with two novels depicting the life of a twentieth-century Mississippi river tugboat pilot who can see both trains and trucks whose roadways are down in the valley.

Several stories highlight the end of the era of horse-drawn vehicles, and their replacement by motor cars. William Faulkner's *The Reivers* dramatizes the initial shift from a horse culture to a car culture in rural Mississippi. The key incident occurs in 1904 when eleven-year-old Lucius Priest joins two of his grandfather's hired men in absconding with the grandfather's new car. The book recounts their trip to Memphis, the loss of the car, and the subsequent attempt through the ironic agency of a horse race to reacquire it. Looking back from the 1960s the now elderly Lucius sees the coming of the car as the beginning of the end of a way of life that he revered and now misses. Conflicting trends seemed evident from the start. The grandfather, a livery stable owner, foresaw a paved future financed by the banks, since "people will pay any price for motion... They will even work for it ... We don't know why." His liveryman gives one explanation; in the first car he ever saw he finds "his soul's lily maid, the virgin's love of his rough and innocent heart." Articulating America's so-called 'love affair' with the automobile in such terms also points to the notorious role of the back seat as the key to young peoples' sexual mobility.

After years of change, we get striking pictures of transportation systems built in multiple levels and layers. While these images are literally true of New York city, the concept of three-dimensional and intersecting transportation modes is metonymous for a modern nation's infrastructure.

- "There are very few horses left on the streets; their place is taken by taxicabs and private automobiles with shining brasswork that pant beside the curbs." ([Marquand](#), 1936; set in the 1910s in New York)
- "Taxis spun and honked and two old-time closed carriages still in use rolled here and there, their curtains drawn." Later in New York state farming country, Clyde's girlfriend's father drives the "old family conveyance," a buggy, "at a time when excellent automobile roads were a commonplace elsewhere." ([Dreiser](#), 1925; set in Kansas City a decade earlier)
- "The bus takes too long, while the subway is always crowded," so the characters take taxis. ([West](#), *Miss Lonelyhearts*, 1933; set in contemporary New York)

• "For this is the country where the age of the internal combustion engine has come into its own. Where every boy is Barney Oldfield... Where the smell of gasoline and burning brake bands and red-eye is sweeter than myrrh." ([Warren](#), *All the King's Men*, 1946; set in rural Louisiana in the 1930s)

And the multiple dimensions:

- In James' 1870s Boston, private carriages run on roadbeds which were designed for streetcars. "As they rolled toward the South End, in a good deal of silence, bouncing and bumping over the railway tracks very little less, after all, than if their wheels had been fitted to them" Even newer systems are available in New York "The beauty of the 'elevated' was that it took you up to the Park and brought you back in a few minutes, and you had all the rest of the hour to walk about and see the place." ([The Bostonians](#))
- New York in the 1910s has the "clatter of L trains overhead" and the subway beneath: "elbows, packages, shoulders, buttocks, jiggled closer with every lurch of the screeching express." On the ground the "grinding rattle of wheels and scrape of hoofs on the cobblestones," and "a few rattling sounds of cabs and trolleycars squirmed in brokenly through the closed windows" of a hotel, with "two endless bands of automobiles that passed along the road in front of the station" and buses "crowded into line like elephants in a circusparade." ([Dos Passos](#), 1925)
- Ellison creates a more personal and dynamic scene: "Along the walk the buildings rose, uniform and close together... Out of the grounds and up the street I found the bridge by which I'd come, but the stairs leading back to the car that crossed the top were too dizzily steep to climb, swim or fly, and I found a subway instead.... I dropped through the roar, giddy and vacuum-minded, sucked under and out into late afternoon Harlem" ([Invisible Man](#), 1952; set in the 1930s)

Literature clearly gives the impression of there being a time in the late nineteenth century when the country was defined by New York City on the one hand, and everywhere else on the other. Characters in William Dean Howells' [A Hazard of New Fortunes](#) (1890) and John Marquand's [The Late George Apley](#) (1936) trace the movement of a perceived center of cultural gravity from Boston to New York. With the forward-looking, "progressive," urban anchors of New York, Chicago, and San Francisco, the "monstrous changes taking place in the world" that John [Steinbeck](#) saw happening in 1900 gradually radiate out to the various regions of the country. Stories of the middle west find Chicago as first the railroad hub in the 1890s, but later as an important, complex center on its own in Theodore Dreiser's [Sister Carrie](#) (1900) and Upton Sinclair's [The Jungle](#) (1906). The entries give a sense that, even well into the twentieth century, the rural areas, especially in the South, were bypassed by modern transportation.

### Private ownership and public transportation

The train compartment and even the trolley were presented as the sites of social interaction, where strangers marveled about the passing scene or just groused about delays in the schedule. Waiting rooms were attractively furnished and people there talked with each other. On the trains, because coach-class cars allowed benches to face each other, four or more people could sit face-to-face, an arrangement giving families and strangers the chance to talk during the long trips. Several scenes show experienced travelers introducing their spouses and children to these institutions.

- A young, recently-married couple marvels at the parlor car, then on to the dining car with the "finest meal in the world." The coach has "dazzling fittings ... sea-green figured velvet" and frescoes in olive and silver on the ceiling. ([Crane](#), "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky," 1894)
- The Union Station waiting room has frescoes depicting the early French explorers of the mid-west, benches of "ponderous mahogany," a marble newsstand with a brass grill, and other decorations which are almost identical to a hotel lobby. ([Lewis](#), *Babbitt*, 1922)
- Charles Babbitt introduces his son to "the other sages of the Pullman smoking compartment" on their way to Chicago. ([Lewis](#), 1922)
- Woodie [Guthrie's](#) song about the "train bound for glory" stipulates that it "don't carry no smoker."

- A grandfather showed his grandson the men's room, "demonstrated the ice-water cooler as if he had invented it," and took him to the diner, "the most elegant car in the train." We see, but the grandson doesn't quite understand, that the dining car is segregated - two tables "set off from the rest by a saffron-colored curtain." ([O'Connor](#), "The Artificial Nigger," 1955)

From the first years of the railroads, African-Americans were excluded from these niceties owing successively to slavery, Jim Crow laws, and segregation. Jacobs, writing in 1861 about the 1840s, succinctly describes the circumstances from both a black's and a woman's perspective:

- "We were stowed away in a large, rough car, with windows on each side, too high for us to look out without standing up. It was crowded with people, apparently of all nations. There were plenty of beds and cradles, containing screaming and kicking babies. Every other man had a cigar or pipe in his mouth, and jugs of whiskey were handed round freely. The fumes of the whiskey and the dense tobacco smoke were sickening to my senses, and my mind was equally nauseated by the coarse jokes and ribald songs around me. It was a very disagreeable ride." ([Jacobs](#) 1861, setting in 1840)

White writers of this era did not often comment on segregated trains, or on the close quarters of lower-class coaches. The "emigrant's quarters" in the Mississippi river boat of Herman Melville's *Confidence Man* (1857) are described, but they were empty at the time, so they seemed more like a "dormitory" than a place where people might suffer.

Economic prosperity in the last quarter of the nineteenth century gave rise to much wider availability of private carriages. Several literary works from the 1870s and 1880s dramatized the freedom that privately owned and controlled transportation gave to the wealthy as they went about their business, conducted courtships and other sexual liaisons, and tried to keep their families together. Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* elaborated on the social and economic distance between those who could command private transportation and everyone else. Some owned or, in this novel at least, rarely rented one; others took streetcars.

- The wealthy Archers in the early part of the nineteenth century knew "everybody between the Battery and Canal Street: and only the people one knew had carriages." ([Wharton](#), 1920; setting in the 1880s)
- The young narrator visits a couple who had romantically eloped to New York. During the visit she and Myra ride home from Central Park in a hansom and Myra expresses what the narrator calls "insane ambition... here, Mrs. Myra was wishing for a carriage - with stables and a house and servants, and all that went with a carriage!" ([Cather](#), *My Mortal Enemy*, 1925; setting in the 1880s)

These stories, with their lovely portraits of private carriages for the urban wealthy, help to show the readiness of the United States for the automobile. In the rural west and midwest, private transportation wasn't even an option: carriages, buggies and later cars in various states of repair were essential for farm work and for doctors' rounds. Privacy was emphasized as most twentieth-century literature depicts automobiles as closed, little worlds.

- "There is nothing more alone than being in a car at night in the rain.... It is a vacation from being you. 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" ([Warren](#), *All the King's Men*, 1946; set in 1933)
- The Hudson owned by the displaced migrant family during the depression is "the new hearth," since they sell everything they can to get it. ([Steinbeck](#), *Grapes of Wrath*, 1939)
- In [O'Connor's](#) *Wise Blood* (1952) the advantage of having a car is "of having something that moved fast, in privacy, to the place you wanted to be."

The ability for young couples to get away by car from their parents and chaperones is notorious. However, the situation obtained even before motorized vehicles were available. [Anderson's](#) *Winesburg, Ohio* showed young men renting

buggies from the livery stable to take their girl friends out on special occasions. In [Wharton's \*Summer\*](#), also set in 1890s, the young woman uses a rented bicycle to get to her trysts; her lover rents a carriage.

- The wealthy aunt in *An American Tragedy* complains about "too much dancing, cabereting, automobiling to one city and another, without due social supervision." ([Dreiser](#), 1925)
- The Southern town is filled with boys "taking their girls to the country at night and on Sunday afternoons, and anybody knows what that means." ([Saroyan](#), "Harry," 1941; set in the 1930s)

## Missing systems

The historically important systems of canals, steamships, and airplanes are rarely found in American literature. It is possible to speculate that a combination of economic and artistic factors have contributed to this situation, but it's much harder to account for why artists avoid topics than why they treat them. (For example, maybe all the short stories about riding on the Erie Canal were poorly crafted and turned down by the editors.)

The relative absence of airplanes from these pages is puzzling. American writers do have a long-standing interest in the idea of flying, but, once scheduled airliners became a reality, literary interest waned. There are hints of a fascination with balloons in the nineteenth century. Edgar Allan [Poe's](#) "The Balloon-Hoax" (1844) parodies a newspaper account of a make-believe trans-Atlantic trip and "Hans Pfal" (1835) describes a ride across Holland. Later, Emily [Dickinson's](#) "You've seen Balloons set - Haven't You?" begins with a lyric description:

Their Liquid Feet go softly out / Upon a Sea of Blonde - / They spurn the Air, as 'twere too mean / For  
Creatures so renowned -

In other poems she talks of a balloon's path as being "Upon an Ether street" and refers to "Its soaring Residence." People occasionally wrote about dirigibles, presumably in the expectation that they would become a viable passenger vehicle. A character in Zane [Grey's](#) *The Desert of Wheat* (1919) visits New York city and writes back to his family in Washington, "An' up overhead a huge cigar-shaped balloon, an' then an airplane sailin' swift an' buzzin' like a bee. Then [sic] was the first airships I ever seen." This craft is mentioned also in John [Dos Passos'](#) *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) and Rita [Dove's](#) poem, "The Zeppelin Factory," set in 1928. [The *Hindenburg* disaster in 1937 ended the zeppelin craze.]

Some fifty years after the first balloon poems, after a flurry of youthful enthusiasm in [Stratemeyer](#) and his Syndicate's boys' books of the late 1910s through about 1930, literary interest in the airplane seems almost to vanish. Civilian air travel failed to capture the imagination of many poets, playwrights, or novelists (6), despite its ongoing presence in moving pictures including, for example, "Flying Down to Rio" (1933) and "Passenger 57" (1992). One reason is that, even though commercial aviation has existed for decades, until the 1960s it chiefly served businessmen. Robert [Serling's](#) documentary novel *Stewardess* (1982) does dramatize the transition. We guess that, before cheap air fares, few writers had flown unless they were in the armed services. Once ticket prices fell, family and personal travel quickly became regular and ordinary, even for penniless poets. Even so, contemporary literature has few airplane scenes beyond the simple mention of a flight's taking place. Perhaps, plane trips aren't long enough for credible settings for conversation. Or maybe it's the ambiance of the plane - people strapped in place, all facing in the same direction like sitting in a theater waiting for the movie; narrow seats and narrow aisles preclude much on-board action. Publicly-funded airports never had the glamor of turn-of-the-century railway stations. In the past trains were not depicted as being perfect - accounts of scheduling delays, bumpy and noisy rides, lost luggage, and even an occasional accident recur throughout American literature. However, literature often gave pleasant images of the smokers, dining and parlor cars, in appreciation of the fact that most travelers' plans worked out, and in acknowledgment that the system as a whole was remarkable.

The great era of canals, in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, is rarely represented in American literature. For one thing, the population was relatively small, so there were simply fewer writers. For another, canals were designed almost exclusively for freight handling - although (in Samuel Hopkins [Adams'](#) twentieth-century account [1959]) citizens could pay to ride at a few cents per mile. Some historians claim that east-west canals had a greater impact on national development and consciousness than did the railroad, despite the brevity of the time when canals had an exclusive presence. Perhaps the failure of canals to reach the literary (or public) imagination accounts for this neglect in most



American histories (7).

Katherine Anne [Porter's](#) *Ship of Fools* (1962, set in 1931) is unusual for treating luxury steamships. We had expected more, since this setting should work out well for a novelist or dramatist who would like to create a laboratory for social and psychological interactions in a small space (8). Perhaps the cost of such travel, especially in the twentieth century, gave few literary figures the chance to observe what went on. In several books, "Cunards" are in the background, but the trips themselves are not dramatized. James [Baldwin's](#) "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon" (1961) has a long passage on the young black actor's steamship ride back to the States from Paris. Another African-American writer, Paule [Marshall](#), describes a Caribbean cruise (*Praisesong for the Widow*, 1984). In Baldwin's case, the trip is a kind of parody immigration which ends with traditional images of a welcoming New York harbor. Marshall uses the voyage as a symbol of the "middle passage" of slavery times (9).

### Comments on history and literature

Is literature a better or worse source for history or for understanding the past than, say, statutes or corporate balance sheets? In the past two hundred years, American literature has focused on individual characters and has also emphasized the presence of the poet or the narrator as an identified speaker's voice. It has not taken much care to be "objective," but has gloried in subjective, personal views of the world. That trend is mitigated significantly by serious efforts by some artists to place their characters in "realistic" settings, in places where the reader's experience lets her or him enter the fictional world. We also need to recognize that historians' traditional documentary sources are quite a bit less than unvarnished Truth. The economic historian must be skeptical of balance sheets; the political historian can hardly accept statutes or legislative debates as neutral, unbiased accounts of reality (10).

Unlike the social sciences, literature is not systematic. There's no agreed-upon paradigm that a poet or novelist must follow to do a complete or satisfactory job. With no "discipline," literature can open up a wide range of topics and treatments.

### What We Found Out about Literature

We close this overture with a few comments of interest chiefly to the literary scholar. This study focuses on setting, a topic addressed less often than character, narration, or theme. Based on this somewhat unusual view, we have suggestions. Scholars should attend to the precise moment in the culture which is being depicted.

American authors are rather precise about when they place their works in history. In our own lives, we know very well that the 1960s feel different from the 50s and the 70s, and, depending on our age, we are aware of anachronisms and implausibilities. For the nineteenth century, most literary histories and anthologies typically distinguish only between pre- and post-Civil War America and assume a kind of uniformity which the writers from those eras did not share. Walt [Whitman's](#) three key poems, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," (1855) "When Lilacs...", (1866) and "Passage to India" (1871) are fifteen years apart in composition but they reflect both different technologies and views of the world - the first poem is focused on New York city, the middle poem is national, and "Passage" is global.

It also matters whether a story is about the writer's contemporary culture or is retrospective. Some writers, like Henry David Thoreau, give detailed accounts of their own times and focus on those events which occurred while they were active writers. Others, like Mark Twain and Willa Cather, bring together events from throughout their lives, placing some of their works during their childhood and others in their adult years. Finally, a few American writers like William Faulkner, range freely over more than a century of American events and quite consciously set out to reconstruct the past.

William Dean [Howells'](#) *Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890) and [Faulkner's](#) *Go Down, Moses* (1942) treat the 1880s. But Faulkner knows "how it turned out"; indeed, a final chapter of his novel, "Delta Autumn," is a nearly documentary account of the effect of the automobile and the highway on the wilderness he had discussed in "The Bear," a wilderness which had earlier been reached with difficulty by wagon, but which in the 1940s is accessible by paved highway. Howells reflects his age's enthusiasm for New York's new elevated trains, gaily painted omnibuses, taxis, and paved streets - in contrast to the slower-paced Boston which the fictional Marches had left.

In a moment of playful anachronism, Edith [Wharton](#) in *Age of Innocence*, written in 1920 about the 1870s, has a passage

toward the end where Newland "prophetically" anticipates a tunnel under the Hudson linking the Washington-to-Jersey City train line to Manhattan, five-day Atlantic crossings, and airships for passengers - the final chapter, set about 1905, "shows" that these "Arabian Night marvels" to have come true - Wharton's contemporary readers of course would have recognized the full social consequences of these developments which had taken place in their own lives.

The difference between the fictional events and the time of publication can lead to cultural anachronisms. Writings from recent years on historical topics often reflect our values, rather than those of the era being depicted. *Stewardess* (1982) by Robert Serling and Darryl Brock's time-traveller, baseball novel *If I Never Get Back* (1990) are self-consciously historical, involving apparently careful research into previous ages. In both cases, the authors express their liberal views on topics such as race relations and the roles of women. It all seems fairly comfortable to us now, and it is almost credible that some people from earlier ages would have shared our enlightened ways of looking at social issues (11). Still the net effect is one of "reading" the past through a modern set of glasses.

Metaphors about transportation are unusual in American literature. Even the famous "iron horse," developed at length in *Walden* (1854) is not mentioned often. From the start airplane parts, "wings" and "tails," were metaphorically linked to birds, while "rudder" was from ships. However, these terms are literal, in that they have no substitutes. Howard Nemerov describes "cruciform airplanes," but such metaphors are rare. We get little personification, beyond the standard talk of vehicles in general as "she"; *The Little Engine that Could*, a children's story, gives personalities and genders to the several candidate engines who would deliver the toys to the kids.

More typical, but still not very frequent, are incidental similes and metaphors which use modes or individual features to interpret something else.

- "An omnibus, with its populous interior, dropping here and there a passenger, and picking up another, thus typifying that vast rolling vehicle, the world, the end of whose journey is everywhere and nowhere." ([Hawthorne](#), 1851) *A horse-carriage as an allegory of life.*
- The "steel engine of the Devil's contrivance, a philanthropist." ([Hawthorne](#), 1852). *The locomotive and a personality type.*
- "I think the longest Hour of all / Is when then Cars have come - / And we are waiting for the Coach - / It seems as though the Time / Indignant - that the Joy was come - / Did block the Gilded Hands - / And would not let the Seconds by - / But slowest instant - ends - " ([Dickinson](#), Poem 635). *Railroad schedules and life's progress; "cars" is shorthand for the railroad.*
- A boss describes great wealth as "dollars enough to construct a silver railroad, double track, from this office to the moon." ([Howells](#), *Hazard*, 1890). *Hyperbole using railway construction.*
- The bear's path "rushed through rather than across the tangle of trunks and branches as a locomotive would." ([Faulkner](#), *Go Down*, 1942). *A simile describing a notorious animal in the region.*
- "They told me to take a street-car named Desire, and then transfer to one called Cemeteries and ride six blocks and get off at - Elysian Fields!" (T. [Williams](#), 1947). *Car lines and place names as an ironic allegory about the play's events.*
- [Roethke's](#) "Journey to the Interior": "In the long journey out of the self, / There are many detours, washed-out interrupted raw places / Where the shale slides dangerously / And the back wheels hang almost over the edge." (1961) *The image goes beyond metaphor to a detailed psychological allegory which continues in the whole poem.*
- "One June, Richmond, Virginia, woke up with its brakes on and kept them on all summer. That was okay; it was the Eisenhower Years and nobody was going anywhere." ([Robbins](#), 1976). *Car performance is compared with political events.*
- "Growing into old age toward death is like shifting gears in a car; now she's going into high gear, plowing

out onto one of those interstates, racing into the future." ([Mason](#), Spence, 1988). *An automobile ride as an allegory of life*.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the dramatic proliferation of the automobile and the highway took on metaphorical significance in several American literary works. As Herman, the main character in Harry [Crews'](#) 1972 novel *Car*, tells us, "Everything that's happened in this goddam country in the last fifty years...has happened in, on, around, with, or near a car." However, as Herman's tone reveals, the response to the automobile, to its pervasive influence, has consistently been ambivalent. Some writers glory in the wonders of high speed coupled with privacy to celebrate the freedom of the road; other see that the privacy can become a prison; others note how the apparent ability to use a car to escape can lead to just another psychological, social, or economic trap.

Of these broad themes in twentieth century American literature that are dependent on the automobile the first concerns the relation between time and experience and long-distance highway travel on the road, where the "road" is not synonymous with the automobile, but the idea takes on a particular meaning in car culture. In Jack [Kerouac's](#) *On the Road* (1957), Dean Moriarty and Sal Paradise repeatedly talk about "it," an undefinable goal that seems to involve an unmediated, moment-by-moment self-knowledge that is detached from both past and future. Attaining "it," living in and "digging" the moment, is best attempted or is most possible driving cross country in big cars at high speeds. William [Saroyan's](#) *Short Drive, Sweet Chariot* (1966), though presenting a very different situation, articulates a similar (if less frenzied) idea. He's travelling with his cousin from Ontario to California in a 1941 Lincoln limousine. In their long, non-stop dialogue he says that he considers life must be fully exhilarating in the present moment. In the limo, enjoying movement itself, apart from thoughts of destination or the road behind, he finds a freedom that is miraculous and revelatory, providing, if only fleetingly, an access to "truth" unavailable at a more mundane pace. For both novelists the physical movement through space and the parallel with a movement of time - awareness of the link between driving and time - provide an opportunity for moment by moment experience, the leisure to pull even with the ever evasive moment, and to cruise alongside it and to experience it.

Robert [Pirsig](#) describes a similar connection between driving and time in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, but he distinguishes between different types of roads: highways are about departures and destinations, past and future time, but smaller roads, because people live alongside them and are not so bent on getting somewhere else, provide a sense of "hereness and nowness" that rubs off on the driver. Further, Pirsig distinguishes between cars and motorcycles, claiming that on a motorcycle one is "in" the environment while cars function as a buffer between themselves and their drivers.

Other books are much less optimistic about the possibility of an ideal experience. The first is Vladimir [Nabokov's](#) *Lolita* (1955), the story of Humbert Humbert's sexual exploitation of his stepdaughter, the prepubescent Lolita. Humbert takes Lolita out on the road where he can anonymously indulge himself with her in the motels and motor courts they stop at each day. Humbert's apparently erratic and directionless trip across the country, coupled with his concern that Lolita is growing older suggests that the drive is an effort to stop time by doubling back upon it. He wants to hold time still, evade the future, and preserve the present moment. Of course, he loses - his driving strategy doesn't work. And actually the car and driving betray him. On their last road trip together, Lolita navigates, and she takes them straight to Colorado - no zigzagging - where she meets up with Humbert's nemesis and escapes.

Hunter [Thompson's](#) *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971) is a cynical account of the road and the possibilities it offers. Initially the drive from Los Angeles to Las Vegas and the excitement of driving around the casino city seem to represent the freedom of the road and the joy of driving (a joy enhanced with generous doses of various drugs). But it turns out that the road swarms with cops and those with "cop hearts" who are all around, circling and watching, policing experience, waiting to strike anyone who steps outside the boundaries of lawful behavior. Further, the big cars of America here come to represent not freedom, but excess and exploitation. The freedom to drive, like other freedoms, is limited in its availability. Certainly the role of the cops and the dangers of the highway are evident in [Kerouac's](#) *On the Road*, but in that work there is still room to maneuver. Thompson's book depicts a darker and less open American highway, one on which unmediated experience is only a dream.

A second strand of automobility in American literature involves the tradition in which the road provides an escape from intolerable conditions - the road as a way out. In such literature a destination, a future, and not just movement, is crucial.

But in these works, too, the promise often proves illusory.

The early, influential key work in terms of the literature of escape is John [Steinbeck's](#) *The Grapes of Wrath* (1936). The novel opens when the Joads lose their farm in Oklahoma and the sale of their horses forces them to switch to a car culture. The car comes to replace the house and becomes the focal point for the family. As a moving hearth, the car is supposed to take them to a better life, out to golden California, where they can find work. But the promise of California proves false, as they're hounded from one town to another in their search for work. And ironically the car that was supposed to be the vehicle of salvation marks them as impoverished and so leaves them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. The Joads' car journey is not an end in itself; it is a means to an end. Although they ultimately hope to get back to farming, their old life, they wind up on the road indefinitely, unable to get off.

A later version of this theme is Bruce [Springsteen's](#) song "Seeds," which tells the story of a family from the "rust belt" which, out of work, drives down to Texas. Finding no work, and reduced to sleeping in their car, they are pushed from one place to another by the police. The song ends, "Movin' on movin' on it's gone gone it's all gone." In both these works the road is an isolating force. The Joads are separated from their land and their community and forced to head out without social supports. In this situation the car functions as the last buffer between the family and absolute destitution. But their isolation makes it much tougher to reconnect with society, to reclaim a place in a community. The road in *Lolita* serves a similar alienating role, cutting the young girl from the protection which society could offer.

Another dimension of the connection between automobiles and psychological alienation involves the vehicle itself and its owner. Ownership, by definition, suggests mastery - and the ownership of a car has long been a symbol of prestige, particularly for males, and an important element of self-esteem. Considering this role, it's not surprising that the car can function as a stand-in for various deficiencies, again, especially for men. In Jayne Anne [Phillips'](#) *Machine Dreams* (1984), the father, despite having trouble supporting his family, always has a new car which he keeps in immaculate condition. The car (actually, the series of cars) is the one thing in his life that he can nurture and control. Cars (like other vehicles) have commonly been feminized and sexualized, as in e. e. [cummings'](#) 1926 poem "XIX," which metaphorically likens driving to sexual possession - the car is a virgin that must be "driven" carefully, broken in just right to insure a good ride.

This harmless, perhaps playful sexuality contrasts with Stephen [King's](#) *Christine* (1983), which tells the story of the relationship between an awkward young man and a '57 Plymouth Fury, the "Christine" of the title. He fixes the beat-up car, and as its appearance improves, he begins to bloom. His acne clears up, and he goes out with an attractive girl. But his obsession with the car begins to alienate him from others, first his parents, and eventually the girl. His anger drives him closer to Christine, even though she/it is depicted as malevolent - a real bitch who has some sort of supernatural agency. But she's the perfect woman,

- "She would never argue or complain.... She would never demand. You could enter her anytime and rest on her plush upholstery, rest in her warmth. She would never deny."

This conception of the "perfect woman" obviously puts a high value on passivity, and certainly the feminization of cars has much to do with the desire for total control of the female. Christine turns out to be a demanding lover who works to destroy first anyone who crosses her owner, and then all those close to him who express worry about his obsession. Once completely isolated, she/it kills him as well when he has the temerity to rebel.

Control and possession take a more unpalatable turn in Harry [Crews's](#) *Car* (1972), where the young man sets out to eat a '71 Maverick, half inch piece by half inch piece. His desire to swallow the car is told in sexual terms, and the car is clearly his love object. Ingestion has become his life's purpose, but it becomes a sexual act he literally can't stomach; after working his way through much of the front end, he is stopped by the pain. He ultimately shifts successfully to a human relationship.

A final, technical note about how stories are put together. Writers often use passing mention of a trip to move characters on and off the "stage." As speeds and distances increased, the characters can credibly get further, quicker:

- "Six months later he went to Hadleyburg, and arrived in a buggy at the house of the old cashier" (Mark [Twain](#), "The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg," 1899)



- "He got his car and started north a little after dark. He spent the night in Albany and got to the town of Lake St. Francis in the middle of the morning." ([Cheever](#), "Metamorphosis," 1978)

A fair number of narratives, especially short stories, begin with telling how the characters traveled to the site of the events. Several of Willa [Cather's](#) stories, for example, use a formula with the train's arriving at the start and leaving at the end.

- In "'A Death in the Desert'" (1903) Everett Hilgarde becomes aware of the man across the aisle on the "High Line Flyer" "jerking along through the hot afternoon over the monotonous country between Holdrege and Cheyenne." "The four uncomfortable passengers [in the car] were covered with a sediment of fine, yellow dust... [which] blew up in clouds from the bleak, lifeless country through which they passed."
- In "The Sculptor's Funeral" (1905) a "group of townspeople stood on the station siding of a little Kansas town, awaiting the coming of the night train, which was already twenty minutes overdue." After they speculate about when the train will arrive, "The night express shot, red as a rocket, from out the eastward marsh lands..."

### Comments on the literary perspective

Most of this literature presents us with middle-class views of the world. While occasionally an independently wealthy person or a landed aristocrat writes stories or verse, this is rare. Alternatively, few American writers have come from poor or manual-laboring families. The expense, and especially the time to learn literary conventions, to read extensively, or to write and polish for publication are simply not available. In the nineteenth century some writers from modest backgrounds managed to find the time through indulgent parents or spouses to build literary careers sufficient for them to support their families. A larger group began their careers as printers or journalists. In the later twentieth century, support has become more readily available, through college scholarships for apprenticeships and creative writing programs for ongoing employment. While a few imaginative writers have become quite wealthy (Stephen King), they are the exception, and rarely does their wealth get them away from an essentially middle-class perspective on the world.

These generalizations about American writers obtain for most readers as well. Except for using free public and school libraries, readers need some spare money to buy books or magazines and, again, spare time to read them. We thus find that many famous and influential writers and writings appeared in Harper's and Atlantic from the middle of the nineteenth century and in the New Yorker, especially after World War II.

Except for the consciously political and economic analysis by Zane [Grey](#), [Charles](#) and [Frank Norris](#) and Upton [Sinclair](#), we get views of transportation essentially from the naive consumer's or passenger's perspective. These literary works show little sense of the railroads or automobiles as industries, as massive economic enterprises involving equipment manufacturing, a road-bed infrastructure with major public subsidies, and extensive safety and rate regulations. Literature rarely touches on the support staff - the gas station attendants, Pullman porters, or airplane stewardesses, although African-American writers pay continuing attention to road gangs and porters. These works show little awareness of costs beyond the price of a ticket - little sense of the environmental effects of road building, railroad track construction, or operating vehicles. That is, literary artists are rarely environmentalist prophets.

In principle and in practice, there's nothing to stop literary artists from approaching social issues in any detail they want. The turn of the century era shows that fine novels and poems could include economic analysis, reform politics, discussion of social consequences, and even a bit about the environment. That earlier writers, and especially that contemporary writers ignore these issues is a matter of literary taste, combined with the realities of literary "production," in the sense that an author must find a publisher in order to create or find an audience. For example, while [Updike's](#) *Rabbit Redux* (1971) commented extensively on middle-class life and customs, Black Power, and other issues, he chose not to deal extensively with the automobile industry beyond a few racist remarks about Japanese competition, even though one of the main characters works at a Toyota agency.

This is not to condemn literature as being willfully naive. Literature reflects the ongoing citizen's sense that what matters in transportation in its function - what it can do to move people and goods around - not for its form - what it is,

physically and economically.

One might properly conclude from these observations that, if a person learned about the world only from imaginative literature, that person's view of the world would be limited. Fair enough. But the same could be said for learning exclusively through history, sociology, or environmental impact statements. On the other hand, we hope that, by adding a literary perspective to the study of transportation, you will conclude that it is (almost) essential to include that perspective in order to see the issues in their full complexity.

### **SOME PRACTICAL OBSERVATIONS**

People who work in the field of transportation will draw personal, aesthetic, social, and political conclusions from reading imaginative literature about their topic. This is what any reader does. However, it is possible to tease out some practical advice from our survey which might help transportation professionals design and refine multimodal systems for the twenty-first century, and which might help public officials explain those systems to their constituencies.

Several themes appear often in our survey. With a topic like transportation, which is, for most literary works, part of the general backdrop, we can rely on the authors' perceptions as being fairly accurate, at least within the limits of their own experiences and those of their families and friends. For reasons outlined above, literature reflects ordinary citizens' views of transportation systems. So we can let the poet or novelists (or the narrator, or the characters) speak for "the people."

1. People don't care much about the technical details of transportation; they just use what they can; they seldom look "under the hood." In the horse-and-buggy age, they rarely even counted the horses.
2. They view transportation systems as givens - vehicles are patiently waiting, at the depot or in the garage. They care little about the development or expansion of existing networks. Highways or train tracks are "just there" for most writers, even though a few authors at the end of the last century depicted the expanding railway on the eastern horizon, ready to bring goods and people to the frontier.
3. People have almost no interest in the higher finances of transportation; they don't know or care where the investment capital comes from. They do care a lot about the price of an individual ticket for personal transportation, particularly when a character is poor. On the other hand, concerns about the purchase price or maintenance costs of automobiles dropped out of literary consciousness after the 1920s, to be replaced in a vague way with the simple naming of car brands.
4. A few literary works, chiefly popular novels, make a point that, for example, the poor have Chevys and the rich have Packards. A more frequent and more consequential social distinction has been between competing systems - the poor take trains while the rich own cars (or, earlier, carriages).
5. The airplane's virtual absence from literature until the past two decades shows that, no matter how technically or poetically inspiring a new system is, it doesn't matter until the middle-class can afford a ticket.
6. People pay much more attention to the movement of passengers than to the movement of goods. Freight trains and trucks are much less noticed than Pullmans and automobiles. The railroad and steamer are now perceived to be "dead," despite their continued, crucial role in carrying freight across the country and around the world.
7. Many authors celebrate the social interactions that take place in the vehicle or at a waiting room. Even in the light of delays and messed up schedules, a pleasant and chatty wait can mitigate the inconveniences.
8. People of color, especially African Americans, have a very different view of transportation from that held by the white middle class. Blacks could not help notice the effects of racism; slavery, Jim Crow, and segregation are still bitterly remembered.
9. The causes of most (literary) accidents are separated from human agency; they rarely arise from careless driving, or poor road or track conditions. Accidents are usually "off stage," although several works show their terrible and

surprising effects on a family and a community. There's little smog. Most of the smoke from the railroads serves to add a picturesque touch to a landscape. Literary transportation functions pretty well.

10. The broad view of American transportation history which comes through from this survey could be quite instructive to people in other countries who are planning their national systems to serve the public. The introduction of new modes looks quite different now, where layers of options are available, than it did in the last century where one system appeared to have followed and to have replaced another. Also, the significant lag between the multiple systems which supported New York city at the turn of the century and the relatively slow diffusion to the rest of the country suggests interesting political and economic policy alternatives. Finally, the national planner should appreciate the importance of individuals' perceptions and limited perspectives on the success or failure of what is being proposed.

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# The Early 1800s

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[Cooper](#) shows wagons trains moving across the prairie. [Hopkins](#) and [Hayden](#) give retrospective glimpses of the slave trade, while [Larison](#) and [Prince](#) describe travel by slaves on the East coast and the West Indies. [Adams](#) relates stories from his grandfathers about the Erie Canal.

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## 1

**Author:** James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1831)

**Title:** *The Prairie*

**Date:** 1827

**Systems:** Wagon

**Context:** 1805, probably Nebraska

The novel brings together wagons of the first settler families into the Louisiana Purchase territory, the now-old Natty Bumppo (known as Deerslayer in Cooper's novel set in the 1740s), and several groups of Cooper-style Indians who fight each other and disrupt the settlers. The story begins in the autumn, "when a train of wagons issued from the bed of a dry rivulet, to pursue its course across the undulating surface of what, in the language of the country of which we write, is called a 'rolling Prairie.' The vehicles, loaded with household goods and implements of husbandry, the few straggling sheep and cattle that were herded in the rear, and the rugged appearance and careless mien of the sturdy men who loitered at the sides of the lingering teams, united to announce a band of emigrants seeking for the Eldorado of the West. Contrary to the usual practice of the men of their caste, this party had left the fertile bottoms of the low country, and had found its way, by means only known to such adventurers, across glen and torrent, over deep morasses and arid wastes, to a point far beyond the usual limits of civilized habitations." They are between the Rockies and the waters of "La Platte." In this party of twenty people, some wagons have rude furniture and personal effects. Cooper writes, presumably to his late 1820s audience, "Perhaps there was little in this train, or in the appearance of its proprietors, that is not daily to be encountered on the highways of this changeable and moving country. But the solitary and peculiar scenery, in which it was so unexpectedly exhibited, gave to the party a marked character of wildness and adventure" (Ch. 1). "The loaded vehicles were to be drawn by hand across a wide distance of plain, without track, or guide of any sort, except that which the trapper [Leather-Stocking's current guise] furnished, by communicating his knowledge of the cardinal points of the compass" (Ch. 7).

The trapper later asks "What this world of America is coming to, and where the machinations and inventions of its people are to have an end, the Lord, he only knows." In his youth, "Natur' then lay in its glory along the whole coast, giving a narrow stripe between the woods and the ocean to the greediness of the settlers.... Had I the wings of an eagle, they would tire before a tenth of the distance, which separates me from that sea, could passed; and towns, and villages, farms and high ways, churches, and schools, in short all the inventions and devilttries of man are spread across the region!" (Ch. 23).

Cooper explores how wagons, civilization, and women start to change the mythic West, a theme which appears throughout the nineteenth century. The ambiguous figure of the old-timer who leads the train while later regretting its effects also has an early example here.

Edition used: New York: Penguin, 1987.

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## 2

**Author:** Pauline Hopkins (1859-1930)

**Title:** *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South*

**Date:** 1900

**Systems:** Ship

**Context:** 1790, Newburne, North Carolina; 1890s, Boston

The action of this historical novel begins on Pamlico Sound, where the bustle of port activity is interrupted by the arrival of the *Island Queen*. Charles Montfort, a wealthy Bermudan and a plantation owner, has decided to move his family and his slaves to the United States. The abolition movement in England has stepped up, and Montfort decides he and his slaves will be best served by a more gradual emancipation than might occur in islands still held by the British. Montfort intends to relocate, grow richer still and then free his slaves of his own accord. Much of this information is discussed on the wharf as onlookers anticipate the docking of this important vessel.

Hopkins pays attention to the scene at the wharf. Three or four vessels lay in the harbor awaiting their cargo (rice, tobacco, or cotton), and the shore is buzzing with "a motley crowd of slaves, overseers, owners of vessels." She devotes two pages to the work song of the "band of slaves" who unload a recently arrived barge. But all activity stops as the *Island Queen* "turned her majestic prow and steered for the entrance to the sound." Hopkins depicts the arrival as a grand, romantic spectacle; she details the ship with some care: "The ship came on very slowly, for there was little wind, under topsail, jib and foresail, the British flag at the peak and the American flag at the fore. The people on shore could see the captain standing by the pilot, the anchor ready to be dropped, and the bowsprit shrouds loose" (Ch. 2). Once in port, "a great deal of confusion reigned." There is great todo over the carriage and teams that arrive to transport baggage and an equal todo over the disembarking passengers. Mrs. Grace Montfort, the most lovely type of Southern beauty, provokes "a murmur of involuntary admiration" which "ran through the motley crowd of rough white men and ignorant slaves."

This is the opening spectacle of a novel that will close on board a ship.

After 400 pages spent unraveling the mixed racial genealogies of the Montforts' descendants, we arrive back on board a ship in the 1890s. This time the ship is a "Cunarder bound for Europe." While one son of Charles Montfort moved to England and raised his family to be white, the other son and his descendants remained in the U.S. and lived as blacks. The novel depicts physical violence and economic injustice that separate the American branch of this family from their English cousins. In the end the white Britisher Montfort Withington claims the American clan and grants them their rightful inheritance (which has been reserved until such time as the Montfort Smiths were identified.)

The final, highly symbolic voyage carries the weight of colonial and imperial legacy. It resonates with the many earlier and momentous voyages that have created this family history; the first voyages that brought English settlers to the American colonies; the Middle Passage that brought slaves to the Americas; Montfort's relocation aboard the *Island Queen* in an effort to circumvent British abolition. This final voyage is a return to England and Europe, and it is meant literally to bring home the legacy of slavery and early modern imperialist expansion. Hopkins's novel is written at the close of the nineteenth-century - a time of increased American imperialism abroad and violence against African Americans at home. The romantic return to England of the multi-racial Montfort clan suggests that only international cooperation could bring to a close what international imperialism began.

Edition used: Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers. New York: Oxford, 1988.

## 3

**Author:** Robert Hayden (b. 1913)

**Title:** "Middle Passage"

**Date:** 1966

**Systems:** Slave ship

**Context:** 1800, Atlantic ocean; African-American perspective

The poem in the form of ships' logs recounts a slave revolt, starvation, contagious blindness with the victims thrown overboard, and other horrors. On *The Bella J*, a "cargo of five hundred blacks and odd" are like "cattle stowed spoon-fashion." The Captain and crew use the women for sex; when fire breaks out, the crew abandons ship, leaving the Captain and the slaves to perish.

Shuttles in the rocking loom of history,  
the dark ships move, the dark ships move,  
their bright ironical names  
like jests of kindness on a murderer's mouth;  
plough through thrashing glister toward  
fata morgana's lucent melting shore,  
weave toward the New World littorals that are  
mirage and myth and actual shore.  
Voyage through death.

The poem ends with a successful revolt on *The Amistad*. Hayden's motivation for the poem, "Deep in the festering hold thy father lies," is a comment on the forced migration.

Edition used: Charles Kaplan, ed. *Literature in America: The Modern Age*. New York: The Free Press, 1971.

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## 4

**Author:** Cornelius W. Larison, M.D. (1837-1910)

**Title:** *Sylvia Dubois, A Biography of the Slav Who Whipt Her Mistress and Gave Her Freedom* [sic]. Edited by Jared C. Lobdell

**Date:** 1883 (Oral history)

**Systems:** Ferry, skiff, turnpike

**Context:** 1800-1830 New Jersey and Great Bend, PA; 1880s Sourland Mountain, NJ

Sylvia Dubois lived for a full century (1788-1889) as both slave and tavern owner on the New Jersey and Pennsylvania frontiers. She offers an account of wilderness travel from a rare point of view - that of the social degenerate. According to Dr. Larison, her story demonstrates the results of "a life of dissoluteness...[it shows] what unbridled passions lead to, how abject and squalid a person can be and yet live not far from the fairest phases of civilized life" (Foreword).

The slave of a tavern keeper and eventually the keeper of her own tavern, Dubois lived at the commercial hub of the frontier of her day. Boatmen, those "driving beasts," those moving west, and those conducting all manner of commerce stop with her master, Dominicus Dubois, in Great Bend, Pennsylvania on the Susquehanna river (p. 55). Well aware that there is money to be made in accommodating travelers - which means taking them through your own land - Dominicus and his brother, Abraham, form the Great Bend-Cohecton-Newburgh (Pennsylvania to New York) Turnpike Company. Their letters, which include minor details on turnpike transactions, are included in Appendix II to this volume.

Sylvia details the operations of her master's ferry on the Susquehanna. This brief section (pp. 58-59) shows the competition among ferry operators for business. Sylvia's speed and skill on the water earn her a large clientele and

"many a shilling and many a good drink too." Sylvia, who excels at stealing customers from other ferrymen, at age 14 could "manage a boat as well as anyone." She also claims that in racing a skiff she could (and did) "beat any man on the Susquehanna." A letter in Appendix 2 to this edition describes building an ice bridge for crossing the half-frozen Susquehanna in the winter. This letter also tells us that in 1814 the Great Bend bridge put the ferry out of commission.

Even as a young girl, Dubois was a clever entrepreneur and a hard drinker. In 1808 she "whipt her mistress - throwing her down in the middle of a crowded tavern and then offering the same to any who dared approach her." As a rather bizarre result of this episode, her master set her free, and Sylvia tramped alone with a child through the rugged forest country between Great Bend, Pennsylvania and Flagtown, New Jersey. (She took a brief raft trip down the Delaware river with the Brink family - from Easton to the area north of Trenton.) Back in New Jersey, she eventually inherited one of the most disreputable taverns in the state from her grandfather Harry Put. She operates Put's Tavern with great success until it was burned to the ground in 1840 by "those damned Democrats."

Edition used: Schomburg Library Edition, NY: Oxford UP, 1988.

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## 5

**Author:** Mary Prince

**Title:** *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave. Related by Herself*

**Date:** 1831

**Systems:** Ship

**Context:** 1800-30, Bermuda and London, England

Born a slave in the Caribbean, Mary Prince is transferred from Bermuda to "Turk's Island," travels back to Bermuda, and eventually crosses the sea to England. Yet, in contrast to the symbolic treatment of transportation in the narratives of Frederick Douglass and Sylvia Dubois, this registers only the physical conditions and the duration of travel, and carries only muted social and psychological significance.

Shipping, though peripheral, shapes the contents of Prince's narrative in particular ways. Prince's first two masters are ship's captains, Captain Williams and Captain I - . Because their trade means they are often absent from plantation life in Bermuda, the mistresses become the central antagonists in this narrative. She spends four weeks on board a sloop, sailing from Bermuda to her third master who lives on Turk's Island. Prince's narrative expresses no anticipation or dread concerning the transition between masters, and the only details she records are the names - not of the sloop and its captain - but of "the black man called Anthony, and his wife" who shared their food with her and kept her from starving en route.

Similarly, she extended sea voyage to England (with her fourth set of owners) is presented only in terms of her treatment as a passenger. For this reason it stands out when Prince tells us, "The steward of the ship was very kind to me. He and my husband were in the same class in the Moravian Church." Her mistress however, "was not kind to me on the passage; and she told me, when she was angry, that she did not intend to treat me any better in England than in the West Indies."

Edition used: *The Classic Slave Narratives*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., New York: New American Library (Penguin), 1987.

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## 6

**Author:** Samuel Hopkins Adams (1871-1958)

**Title:** *Grandfather Stories*

**Date:** 1959 Written: 1947-1955 mostly for *The New Yorker*

**Systems:** Erie canal, railroad

**Context:** 1820s, New York state

Adams, writing in the mid-twentieth century reports on stories he heard from his grandfathers in the 1870s and 1880s about events in the 1820s, thus getting us almost a century and a half into the past. Grandfather Myron Adams was involved as a financier and administrator of the Erie Canal from its start under Governor De Witt Clinton in 1828 and he was also involved in the early railroad in upstate New York in the mid-1830s. Grandfather Miles Hopkins, a minister was involved in steamboats and the Southern Central Railroad on and near Lake Owasco.

The stories give details about Erie Canal construction and maintenance. "A Deal in Gems" talks about the physics of locks, Irish diggers working for \$1 a day. The Canal was expected to bring prosperity to merchants along the route, diggers, equipment suppliers, food suppliers for workers, but it was heralded by political opposition to Gov. Clinton and the \$6 million in taxes (the overrun added another million). The tax investment was paid off in less than ten years, and early skepticism vanished. "The Big Break" discusses the damaging effect which muskrats have on the tow path and berm, the role of the pathmaster in routine maintenance, the patrol and repair boats for every ten miles of canal, and the ways local people and canal users worked together to repair major leaks in the system.

"Canal Bridge" is presented as a diary of a very observant woman who was on a boat with her husband. Here we find that larger barges carried relief teams on board; only the rich packets could afford relays every 12 to 15 miles, that the Albany to Buffalo rate was \$100 per ton by wagon and \$6 per ton by barge, that the canal was closed in winter and on Sundays. The anonymous (and, perhaps, fictional) diarist reports on the social life in great detail with accounts of the merchants, vagrants, dirty-picture salesmen, cheap whiskey, patent medicine sellers who met the boat in Rochester, the protest meeting against allowing a Lake Erie steamboat on the canal, and apprentices who deserted their positions and used the Canal to escape to the west. A Hamilton College professor and his wife were charged 2 1/2¢ a mile to hitch a ride; Irish immigrants 1 1/2¢ a mile to get out of New York City.

"The Parlous Trip" gives Grandfather Adams' views on trains. It is "dirty, sooty, bumpy, uncomfortable, dangerous, and faithless to its schedule." Boiler explosions, wheels falling off, and "snake rails" coming up through the cars were mentioned, as was stopping at all curves to clear debris and livestock off the tracks. Gamblers take odds on whether the train will arrive on time. The Auburn Railroad does 76 miles in 3 hours and 40 minutes with lots of stops, to Rochester. Troy, NY, banned locomotives, so trains were pulled into town by horses.

While these are framed as authentic accounts from the distant past, the literary device of having young Adams listen to his grandfather's yarns is quite different from a traditional or academic historical account of these events.

Edition used: New York: Signet, 1959.

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# The 1830s

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[Faulkner](#) and [Douglass](#), from quite different perspectives, describe the complex ways that wagons and boats of various sorts were used in the South. [Thorpe](#) and [Twain](#) picture Mississippi river traffic. [Irving](#) talks about carriages and mule carts in Spain. [Thoreau](#) describes the infrastructure of travel on New England rivers and canals, as well as the stage coaches and railroads which come to the rivers' banks. [Bryant](#) conveys impressions of the railroad in its early stages.

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## 7

**Author:** William Faulkner (1897-1962)

**Title:** *Absalom! Absalom!*

**Date:** 1936

**Systems:** Wagons, steamboat

**Context:** 1833 to 1910, Mississippi

Mississippi in the 1830s, when Thomas Sutpen creates his plantation and his empire, had a "river full of steamboats" and gamblers "bent on throwing away their cotton and slaves before the boat reached New Orleans" (Ch. 1). A few twelve-mile trips by wagon between the fictional town of Jefferson and Sutpen's Hundred are described several times in the novel as they echo and resonate in the character's memories. Jefferson in the 1830s had six buildings including the blacksmith and livery stable. With "the proceeds of a business which he had brought to Jefferson ten years ago in a single wagon," several West Indian blacks, and a virtually-kidnapped French architect, he builds a mansion in which the odd group lives without furniture. Then Thomas takes four ox-drawn wagons back to the river and returns "with windows and doors and the spits and pots in the kitchen and the crystal chandeliers in the parlors and the furniture and the curtains and the rugs," installed by "his now somewhat tamed negroes." In the tavern, they say, "This time he stole the whole durn steamboat" (Ch. 2). His bride, Ellen Coldfield, is taken to the plantation in a carriage, a vehicle with greater prestige than the earlier wagons, and once their household is established she uses a carriage for "the weekly ritual of store to store" in Jefferson, which now has twenty shops (Ch. 3). The Civil War forces Rosa Coldfield, Ellen's sister and Thomas' second wife, to use a mule and buggy, a step down in dignity. "[T]he dustcloud in which the buggy moved not blowing away because it had been raised by no wind and was supported by no air but evoked, materialized about them, instantaneous and eternal, cubic foot for cubic foot of dust to cubic foot for cubic foot of horse and buggy" (Ch. 7).

Later in the novel we hear, third hand, of the Sutpen family's travel in a "lopsided two wheeled cart and two spavined oxen" from Virginia to Mississippi in 1817, a trip which takes "weeks and months, maybe a year, since he became confused about his age" (Ch. 7). This contrasts with Christmas trips taken by Sutpen's acknowledged son, Henry, and his bastard son, Charles Bon, from the University of Mississippi to the plantation on fine horses and steamboats in the War years (Ch. 8).

Edition used: New York: Modern Library, 1964.

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## 8

**Author:** Frederick Douglass (1818-1895)

**Title:** *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave; Written By Himself*

**Date:** 1845

**Systems:** Sailing ships

**Context:** 1820s-1830s, Easton and Baltimore, Maryland; New Bedford, Mass.; New York

Douglass was born a slave in the Chesapeake Bay region, and his various masters depended on Baltimore markets for sale of their crops. For this reason ships and ship-building appear frequently in Douglass's narrative. Passage by sloop marks each significant transition from plantation to city to plantation (and master to master to master). In shipyards Douglass learns to read and write and to caulk ships, the two skills that make his escape to freedom possible.

Perhaps for these reasons, when Douglass dramatizes the pivotal moment in which he vows to end his slavery or end his life, he imagines his freedom both literally and metaphorically as the freedom of sailing: "Get caught or get clear, I'll try it ... I will take to the water. This very bay shall yet bear me into freedom" (Ch. 10).

A view of sails on the bay here provides the occasion for what is by any measure an important rhetorical moment in the tradition of the slave narrative. Here, when the slave's hard-won and therefore acute consciousness of his condition forces the commitment to freedom-whatever-the-price, the new emotional and intellectual vantage point is made to correspond exactly with an elevated geographical perspective ("I have often ... stood all alone upon the lofty banks of that noble bay") and a heightened diction and prose style ("I would pour out my soul's complaint, in my rude way, with an apostrophe to the moving multitude of ships").

Not only is this a stylistic departure for Douglass in this text, but an imaginative one as well. In a long passage, the narrator addresses the ships as if they are sensible beings whose freedom he envies: "You are loosed from your moorings, and are free; I am fast in my chains, and am a slave!" The merriment, gallantry, even nobility he attributes to these ships, "freedom's swift-winged angels," allows a momentary (and highly rhetorical) lament over his humanity - "O, why was I born a man, of whom to make a brute! The glad ship is gone; she hides in the dim distance..."

Undoubtedly much more could be ferreted out of this passage for comment. The most pertinent conclusion about these personified ships is, of course, that Douglass's text hereby accents the extent to which the very possibility of travel they offer provides a nagging reminder of the slave's immobility.

[There's more: when ruminating on the first moments of freedom in a free state, Douglass describes "the indescribable" as the feeling of an unarmed captain who is saved from the pursuit of a pirate ship by the intervention of a "friendly man-of-war" (Ch. 11)]

Douglass is careful to record the name of the vessel and captain each time he is transferred via sloop from Baltimore to Easton, Easton to Baltimore. He also includes the traveling time (24 hours). He takes three such rides on board the Sally Lloyd, the Wild Cat and the Amanda. These were obviously important details; he is remembering trips when he was age 8-16.

Lastly, three shipyards are crucial to the narrative. In one, Douglass discovers that by watching the carpenters cut and mark the wood for ships, he can learn to write the first letters of Larboard, Starboard, Forward, and Aft. In doing so he proves an old master correct about negroes and literacy - "you give a nigger an inch, he'll take an ell." He cleverly parlays these first marks into an entire alphabet.

He learns ship-building in Baltimore (Ch. 10) doing errands for carpenters on Man-of-Wars to be sold to Mexico (this would be in the early 1830s). He eventually learns ship-caulking, a skill that enables him to eventually hire his own time. That added measure of independence allows him to risk an escape in 1841.

The shipyard passages are of interest in that they record different phases of working-class racism in the early nineteenth-century. Douglass acquires an eagerness for freedom after two Irish workers counsel him to escape north. Several years later white fear of black competition creates a policy of job segregation and an atmosphere of racial hatred - in a



resulting fight, Douglass nearly loses an eye. Finally, once Douglass overcomes all the obstacles to freedom and arrives in New Bedford, Massachusetts, he discovers that only white caulkers get positions on Massachusetts wharfs. (He appends a note in 1845 saying that "colored persons can now get employment at calking in New Bedford - a result of anti-slavery effort.")

Edition used: New York: Signet, 1968.

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## 9

**Author:** Thomas Bangs Thorpe (1815-1878)

**Title:** "The Big Bear of Arkansas"

**Date:** 1841

**Systems:** Mississippi steamboat

**Context:** Contemporary, Mississippi river valley

On the Mississippi steamboat, people take trips of from one to two thousand miles in length amidst a group of heterogeneous passengers. Men come from all states and from other countries; "Here may be seen, jostling together, the wealthy Southern planter and the peddler of tin-ware from New England - the Northern merchant and the Southern jockey - a venerable bishop, and a desperate gambler." The *Invincible* is what is called a "high-pressure-and-beat-everything" steamboat. After celebrating the boat and America's wonderful mixture of peoples, the story settles down to a telling of the story about the bear.

Edition used: Eugene Current-Garcia and Bert Hitchcock, eds. *American Short Stories*, 5th ed. Glenview: Scott, Foresman, 1990.

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## 10

**Author:** Mark Twain [Samuel L. Clemens] (1835-1910)

**Title:** *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

**Date:** 1884-5 Written: 1879-85

**Systems:** Paddle boat

**Context:** Circa 1834 to 1844, Mississippi river

The central drama of the novel is Huck and Jim floating down the Mississippi River from Missouri to Arkansas or northern Louisiana. Along the way they confront a variety of river traffic, notably paddle boats, two of which which are shown wrecked on a sand bar (Ch. 12), running over the raft (Ch. 16). and blown up (Ch. 32).

Drifting with the current in the raft gives little sense of motion (Ch. 15). The raft with Huck and Jim aboard is a microcosm "what you want, above all things, on a raft, is for everybody to be satisfied, and feel right and kind toward the others" (Ch. 19).

Edition used: Berkeley: University of California Press, Mark Twain Library, 1985.

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# 11

**Author:** Washington Irving (1783-1859)

**Title:** *Tales of the Alhambra*

**Date:** 1832

**Systems:** Mule-driven carriage, horses

**Context:** Contemporary, travel in Spain

Known as the "Spanish sketch book," this volume of tales begins with a long chapter on Irving's journey in 1829 from Seville to Granada. Accompanied by "a friend, a member of the Russian Embassy at Madrid," and a servant, Irving undertakes a leisurely and eventful trip by horseback between the two cities. The dangers of the mountainous roads are discussed at length, particularly the frequent predations of robbers. The precautions taken to evade the robbers are described, as are the travel arrangements in general, including the hiring of the horses and servant. Mule caravans, used to transport local products to the larger cities, are also described. Overall, Irving provides a romantic account of the Spanish countryside and of the horsemen and muleteers that traverse the roads. The journey ends in Granada, where Irving takes up residence and collects the tales that make up the bulk of the book. The last (very brief) chapter describes his departure, which is undertaken in a two-wheeled vehicle that resembles "a covered cart."

Edition used: Leon, Spain: Editorial Everest, 1986.

# 12

**Author:** Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862)

**Title:** *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*

**Date:** 1849 Written: 1846-49

**Systems:** Train, canal

**Context:** 1839, central New England (Massachusetts, New Hampshire)

Thoreau's week with his brother involves a leisurely trip up the two New England rivers to Mount Washington. Rivers, "the natural highways of all nations," let the Thoreaus see the conflux of roads, canals, and railroads along the way, and sets up an implied contrast between natural and man-made pathways. "The river is by far the most attractive highway, and those boatmen who have spent twenty or twenty-five years on it must have had a much fairer, more wild and memorable experience than the dusty and jarring one of the teamster who has driven, during the same time, on the roads which run parallel with the stream" ("Tuesday"). Being on the river lets them behold the country "privately." "Other roads do some violence to Nature, and bring the traveler to stare at her, but the river steals into the scenery it traverses without intrusion, silently creating and adorning it, and is as free to come and go as the zephyr" ("Wednesday").

The Eastern states' canal age is winding down in the decade since the Thoreaus' trip in 1839. "Since our voyage the railroad on the bank has been extended, and there is now but little boating on the Merrimack. All kinds of produce and stores were formerly conveyed by water, but now nothing is carried up the stream... The locks are fast wearing out, and will soon be impassible, since the tolls will not pay the expense of repairing them, and so in a few years there will be an end of boating on this river." At low water, the channel is cleared and deepened by "mowing the weeds in mid-channel" ("Tuesday").

The many falls and rapids of the Merrimack river are bypassed by an elaborate canal system. At Billerica Falls on the



Concord, one brother runs along the tow path while the other keeps the cord off the shore with a pole. "This canal, which is the oldest in the country, and has even an antique look beside the more modern railroads." The Merrimack is navigable for "vessels of burden" for twenty miles; by canal boats as far as Concord, New Hampshire. A small steamboat went between Lowell and Nashua before the railroad. The river is a major commercial pathway, but now "its real vessels are railroad cars, and its true and main stream, flowing by an iron channel farther south, may be traced by a long line of vapor amid the hills, which no morning wind ever disperses, to where it empties into the sea at Boston.... Instead of the scream of a fish hawk scaring the fishes, is heard the whistle of the steam-engine, arousing a country to its progress" ("Sunday").

Near Litchfield is a place where the sand is ten to twelve feet deep; the rumor is that it had been overgrazed by sheep thirty or forty years ago. That scene is immediately contrasted with another impact of humans on the landscape. "Lawsuits, as we hear, have in some cases grown out of these causes. Railroads have been made through certain irritable districts, breaking their sod, and so have set the sand to blowing, till it has converted fertile farms into deserts, and the company has had to pay the damages." This chapter gives extensive details on the canal boats: they only cost \$200; they are managed by two men who use iron-tipped poles or sails, if possible. They can carry up to sixteen cords of wood or 16,000 bricks - chiefly from up-river to the coastal towns. The boatmen "have the constantly varying panorama of the shore to relieve the monotony of their labor... they thus glided noiselessly from town to town, with all their furniture about them" ("Tuesday").

The river is traversed by several ferries. One "was as busy as a beaver dam, and all the world seemed anxious to get across the Merrimack River at this particular point, waiting to get set over, - children with their two cents done up in paper, jail-birds broke loose and constable with warrant, travelers from distant lands to distant lands, men and women to whom the Merrimack River was a bar." Thoreau imagines this as the classic Styx, two travelers as Virgil and Dante. "Many of these Monday men are ministers, no doubt... They cross each other's routes all the country over like woof and warp, making a garment of loose texture." The Thoreaus cross over the ferry chain; later they have to duck under overhead cables ("Monday").

This atmosphere is quite relaxing. At one point Thoreau playfully recommends that people would be better off taking two days to build a small boat to cross the river rather than looking for a ferry or a bridge ("Tuesday"). Later, we "lock ourselves through in some retired place." With no lock-man present, one brother takes the easy task of opening the gate to watch the lock fill. "These old gray structures, with their quiet arms stretched over the river in the sun, appeared like natural objects in the scenery, and the kingfisher and sandpiper alighted on them as readily as on stakes and rocks" ("Wednesday").

The stage coach is a symbol of conservative, New England culture. "Sometimes we saw the river a quarter or half a mile distant, and the parti-colored Concord stage, with its cloud of dust, its van of earnest traveling faces, and its rear of dusty trunks, reminding us that the country had its places of rendezvous for restless Yankee men" ("Tuesday").

Away from the river, while walking, "I have climbed several higher mountains without guide or path, and have found, as might be expected, that it takes only more time and patience commonly than to travel the smoothest highway.... So far as my experience goes, travelers generally exaggerate the difficulties of the way" ("Tuesday").

Edition used: Boston: Houghton Mifflin Sentry Edition, 1961.

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## 13

**Author:** William Cullen Bryant (1794-1878)

**Title:** *Poems by William Cullen Bryant*

**Date:** 1849

**Systems:** Railways, carriage

## Context: 1820s and 1830s, Rhode Island and New York

"A Meditation on Rhode-Island Coal" anticipates the effects of the early coal age on both land and sea, and recognizes the role American resources would have upon that age.

For thou shalt forge vast railways, and shalt heat  
The hissing rivers into steam, and drive  
Huge masses from thy mines, on iron feet,  
Walking their steady way, as if alive,  
Northward, till everlasting ice besets thee,  
And south as far as the grim Spaniard lets thee.

Thou shalt make mighty engines swim the sea,  
Like its own monsters - boats that for a guinea  
Will take a man to Havre - and shalt be  
The moving soul of many a spinning-jenny.

"Noon" also picks up the motif of the "iron horse," and emphasizes the social and sensory effect that the engine has on the environment:

... a mingled sound  
Of jarring wheels, and iron hoofs that clash  
Upon the stony ways, and hammer-clang,  
And creak of engines lifting ponderous bulks,  
And calls and cries, and tread of eager feet,  
Innumerable, hurrying to and fro,  
Noon, in that mighty mart of nations, brings  
No pause to toil and care.

Unlike some other early celebrators, Bryant's prophetic tone does not see the steam age as solving basic social problems.

Edition used: Philadelphia: Carey & Hart, 1849.

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# The 1840s

[Jacobs](#) and [Stowe](#) give detailed accounts of the travel and involuntary transportation of slaves (and fugitives) within the South, especially on the Mississippi and by sea. [Faulkner](#) also depicts river traffic along with wagons in the state of Mississippi. [Hawthorne's](#) short stories touch on New England's various modes of stage coach, sleigh, and carriage travel, as well as developing a railroad-based allegory. [Thoreau](#) mentions the state highway tax. [Poe](#) praises walking as better than railroads or carriages as the way to see the landscape, and he gives fanciful accounts of balloon travel. [Walden](#) expands the "iron horse" metaphor in a long celebration. The song, "[Pat](#) Works on the Railroad," points to the Irish workers who built the system. [Hawthorne's](#) *House of the Seven Gables* contrasts small-town street traffic with the ability of the railroad to unite families and the nation, and to expand psychological horizons; these latter sentiments are echoed by [Fuller](#).

## 14

**Author:** Harriet A. Jacobs (1813-1897)

**Title:** *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*

**Date:** 1861

**Systems:** Ship, train, steamboat

**Context:** 1830-1850, North Carolina, New York, Boston

Now considered a classic example of the nineteenth-century slave narrative, Jacobs's *Incidents* recounts this ex-slave's remarkable escape by ship and train, and her subsequent maneuvers as a fugitive in New York and Boston. The details of her flight fascinate for two reasons: first, one realizes that no slave escaped entirely on his or her own - fugitives relied on the close cooperation of a powerful network of allies and multiple transportation links; each leg of the journey and every hiding place was supervised or arranged by friends, strangers, and industry insiders. Second, just as slave traders reaped considerable profits from circulating the enslaved in the south, captains, conductors and other middlemen reaped considerable profits smuggling fugitives north.

Harriet Jacobs grew up in a port city, Edenton, North Carolina. Once she deserts her master, she hides in her grandmother's attic for an incredible seven years. When she makes her way to this hiding place and when she finally departs, she disguises herself in a suit of sailor's clothes ("jacket, trousers, and a tarpaulin hat"). The fellow slave who first helps Jacobs into this get-up coaches her: "Put your hands in your pockets, and walk rickety, like de sailors."

When Jacobs finally boards the vessel that will take her to Philadelphia, she joins another fugitive in a small comfortless cabin - "purchased at a price that would pay for a voyage to England." She also tells us that the captain was "paid handsomely" and promised "anything within reason" for conveying them north.

Although two of Jacobs's accomplices are "seafaring men" and dear friends, Jacobs is candid about her low opinion of sailing men: "Neither could I feel quite at ease with the captain and his men. I was an entire stranger to that class of people, and I had heard that sailors were rough and sometimes cruel." In retrospect, however, Jacobs praises the captain: "Southerner as he was ... if Fanny and I had been white ladies, and our passage lawfully engaged, he could not have treated us more respectfully." Jacobs closes the account of her voyage with a paean to Chesapeake Bay; her manner recalls Frederick Douglass's ode to sails in his *Narrative*. She and her fugitive partner watch "the sun rise for the first time in our lives, on free soil" (Ch. 30).

Once in Philadelphia, Fanny and Jacobs postpone the next leg of their journey until "some suitable" escort can be

arranged. Says Jacobs, "I had a dread of meeting slaveholders, and some dread also of railroads. I had never entered a railroad car in my life, and it seemed to me quite an important event" (Ch. 31). In another passage, Jacobs links segregated rail travel to her entire disillusionment with the North. Realizing she had not received first-class tickets, she believes she has erred by not offering enough money to buy them. The man advising her sets her straight:

"O, no...they could not be had for any money. They don't allow colored people to go in the first-class cars." This was the first chill to my enthusiasm about the Free States. Colored people were allowed to ride in a filthy box, behind white people, at the south, but there they were not required to pay for the privilege. It made me sad to find how the north aped the customs of slavery.

We were stowed away in a large, rough car, with windows on each side, too high for us to look out without standing up. It was crowded with people, apparently of all nations. There were plenty of beds and cradles, containing screaming and kicking babies. Every other man had a cigar or pipe in his mouth, and jugs of whiskey were handed round freely. The fumes of the whiskey and the dense tobacco smoke were sickening to my senses, and my mind was equally nauseated by the coarse jokes and ribald songs around me. It was a very disagreeable ride. Since that time there has been some improvement in these matters" (Ch. 31).

Jacobs's first impression of New York is not dissimilar to what late twentieth-century visitors report: "When we arrived in New York, I was half crazed by the crowd of coachmen calling out, 'Carriage, Ma'am?'" She reports haggling with a "burly Irishman" for a ride, only to discover that the "decent conveyance" Jacobs had bargained for amounted to a seat atop her own trunk in the back of his truck (Ch. 32).

Life as a fugitive in New York, just after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, propels Jacobs through a series of quick getaways and "hairbreadth escapes." She tells of a close call in which she had to flee from New York to Boston by carriage, then board the steamboat Rhode Island with her little girl. Since that line "was much travelled by the wealthy," the colored were forced to sleep above deck. Knowing this might expose her to the wrong eyes, Jacobs is most grateful when the intercession of a lawyer friend gains her a berth below. The final leg of her journey is by train, and by some flukish chance the conductor is on board the boat; the boat captain speaks to train conductor and arranges for Jacobs's continued safety on the train (Ch. 36).

Jacobs takes employment as a governess and travels frequently with her white employers. These trips provide Jacobs with new material for her social critique. In a rhetorical move that will be repeated by such Authors as Anna Julia Cooper and W.E.B. DuBois, Jacobs holds that transportation systems are the measure of America's humanitarian, not technological progress. Though expected to travel with the white family, Jacobs is not allowed to eat with them. She is gruffly refused a seat and service on board the steamboat Knickerbocker. "I looked up, and, to my astonishment and indignation, saw that the speaker was a colored man. If his office required him to enforce the by-laws of the boat, he might, at least, have done it politely" (Ch. 35). Anna Julia Cooper (*A Voice From the South*) makes this same distinction regarding the discriminatory laws of the land and the lack of civility with which they are enforced. Jacobs uses her travel to England as almost a direct counterpoint to this situation. She declares "for the first time in my life I was in a place where I was treated according to my deportment, without reference to my complexion" (Ch. 37).

Edition used: Jean Fagan Yellin, ed. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1987.

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## 15

**Author:** Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896)

**Title:** *Uncle Tom's Cabin, or Life Among the Lowly.*

**Date:** 1851-52 (serial publication in *The National Era*)

**Systems:** Steamboat

**Context:** 1840s-1850s, Mississippi river, Kentucky to New Orleans and Red River, Louisiana

Uncle Tom passes into the hands of his most saintlike master on board a steamboat; another steamboat delivers him into the hands of the dastardly Simon Legree. In both cases Stowe emphasizes the commercial purpose of steamboat traffic. In the passage introducing Tom's first ride on the Mississippi, the steamboats are eclipsed by the river itself. It is a river without vessels that seems to bear the cargo to the Gulf:

What other river of the world bears on its bosom to the ocean the wealth and enterprise of such another country? - a country whose products embrace all between the tropics and the poles! Those turbid waters ... that headlong tide of business which is poured along its wave.... Ah! would that they did not also bear along a more fearful freight, - the tears of the oppressed.... (Ch. 14).

Because the all-loving, ever-watchful Tom saves the cherubic Evangeline from those same "turbid waters," Tom is purchased by her grateful father, Augustine St. Clare. Tom thereby changes hands from bad master to better aboard ship. Not only does the steamboat setting emphasize the commerce in slaves, but it also shows that when Tom is able to turn "the headlong tide of business" in his favor, his old master Haley receives compensation as well.

Stowe shows how a slave's-eye-view of the river landscape differs from that of a slave owner's: "The traveller from the deck of the steamer, as from some floating castle top, overlooks the whole country for miles.... Tom, therefore had spread out before him...a map of the life to which he was approaching." Stowe tells us that, while most would in such cases share the view, by mail, with a wife or child, Tom could not write and his ties to his relatives were consequently severed forever.

Stowe gives us some details regarding the boat's landing. The boat "groans like a monster" as it approaches the "multiplied steamers at the levee" (Ch. 15). Like the levee, the boat itself is a "general bustle of expectation and preparation." The steward and chambermaid (only one of each) spiff up the "splendid boat, preparatory to a grand entree" (Ch 14).

This "grand" landing in New Orleans stands in marked contrast to the second passage by steamboat that takes Tom up the Red River, deep into Louisiana. The title of this chapter, "Middle Passage," alerts us to Stowe's ironic allegory. Tom's passage is not one from freedom to enslavement, but rather one from cultured, gentle slavery into a more harrowing version of the same institution. On board *The Pirate*, Tom wears heavy chains. His new owner, Simon Legree strips him of the dignified clothes the St. Clares had provided, forcing him to don slave's rags. His trunk and its contents are auctioned to the crew. Once again the steamboat passage emphasizes Tom's status as a commodity, but somehow, he is valued at an even lower rate on this trip than on the one previous (Ch. 31).

Edition used: Penguin Classics. New York: Viking, 1986.

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## 16

**Author:** William Faulkner (1897-1962)

**Title:** "Red Leaves"

**Date:** 1930

**Systems:** Steamboat, wagon

**Context:** 1840s, Northern Mississippi

In this tale of Indians in slavery days, Doom, Issetibbeha's father, has dismantled the deck house of a steamboat for the family home. As a young man he took a keel boat to New Orleans; six months later a young woman, Issetibbeha's mother, boarded the St. Louis packet and landed near Doom's home - four Indians with a horse and wagon took her on

the three-day ride to the plantation. This expropriated steamboat is the background throughout the story, and, like other accounts, these boats are notable for their diverse travellers and the relative anonymity which it affords.

Edition used: Charles Kaplan, ed. *Literature in America: The Modern Age*. New York: The Free Press, 1971.

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## 17

**Author:** Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864)

**Title:** Selected short stories

**Date:** 1837-1850 Written: 1834-1849

**Systems:** Stage coach, railroad

**Context:** Contemporary, New England

Hawthorne's stories incidentally give us a picture of New England roads in the 1830s, with special emphasis on the stage coach. "The Ambitious Guest" (1837) describes the Notch of the White Hills, "the bleakest spot of all New England," which is a stage coach stop and "a great artery, through which the life-blood of internal commerce is continually throbbing" between Maine and the St. Lawrence River. The coach stop is praised by the guest for its warm welcome and cheerful fire. In "David Swan," written between 1834 and 1837, the title character sleeps and dreams about several street scenes while waiting for the coach; the noise of the wheels wakes him up and he finds "room on top" for his trip to Boston.

Aside from walking, Hawthorne uses the stage coach as a literary vehicle for bringing strangers together to interact.

The winter variant, the "stage-sleigh," appears briefly in "Peter Goldthwaite's Treasure" (written between 1837 and 1840) as part of a charming urban street scene which includes other sleighs bringing frozen pigs, sheep, and deer imported from Vermont, and local farmers delivering eggs and butter in a twenty-year-old sleigh.

"Mr. Higgenbotham's Catastrophe" (before 1837) shows how the roads can disseminate false rumors faster than what is possible on foot. A peddler in his mare-driven cart thinks he sees a murder and the news travels sixty miles in less than a day, since the mail stage also gets involved. The narrator speculates that this report can easily go from Maine to Florida and eventually to London, since the newspapers can pick it up. In passing, we learn that the operator of the toll house on the Kimbellton turnpike is also part of the rumor mill.

"The Celestial Railroad," from the 1840s is a sustained treatment of the newer system. Hawthorne uses Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* as the basis for the story. Mr. Smooth-it-away, the guide, is a director and large stockholder of the railroad. The engine, "a sort of mechanical demon," is run by the devil figure, Apollyon, Christian's enemy. The noises of the engine, the vibrating bridge they pass over, and the screaming whistle emphasize this association. A tavern keeper who had opposed the railroad is punished by the train's not stopping at his place of business. The final scene is of a noisy steam ferry which takes the pilgrim from the train station to the Celestial City.

Another story, "The Great Stone Face," written about the same time, charts Mr. Gathergold's aging through two eras where rich visitors to his isolated valley arrive in coaches driven by four horses to the new time where the celebrated poet comes by train.

Edition used: New York: Modern Library, 1937.

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## 18



**Author:** Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862)

**Title:** "Civil Disobedience" or "Resistance to Civil Government"

**Date:** 1849 Written: 1848

**Systems:** Highway

**Context:** 1846, Massachusetts

The famous incident of Thoreau's night in jail was precipitated by his not paying his poll tax which supported the Mexican War. However, "I have never declined paying the highway tax, because I am as desirous of being a good neighbor as I am of being a bad subject."

Edition used: New York, Modern Library, [1937] 1965.

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## 19

**Author:** Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849)

**Title:** The Short Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe

**Date:** 1832-49 (career)

**Systems:** Boat accident, balloon

**Context:** 1840s, East coast

"Morning on the Wissahiccon" (1843). "Indeed, in America generally, the traveller who would behold the finest landscapes, must seek them not by the railroad, nor by the steamboat, nor by the stage-coach, nor in his private carriage, nor yet even on horseback - but on foot." Aside from the chronology which puts the most modern first, this sentence reflects Poe's preference in nearly all his stories to have characters on foot, and his skepticism about the progress afforded by the latest inventions. A couple of wrecked sailing ships are exceptions: "MS. Found in a Bottle" (1833) and "A Descent into the Maelström" (1841).

"The Balloon-Hoax" (1844) is a parodied newspaper story for the New York Sun about crossing the Atlantic by balloon from Wales to South Carolina. The coal-gas balloon had a fake propeller but actually got its power from an inclined plane launcher and an Archimedian screw. The sketch is filled with quasi- and pseudo-scientific specifications. The story reflects the fascination with real balloon flights in Europe and England, e.g., one in 1836 by Monck Mason, who is mentioned. "Hans Pfaal" (1835) is a longer, more fanciful account of an imagined balloon ride in Holland, while "Mellunta Tauta" (1848) is a commentary on science and politics, fancifully dated "On Board Balloon 'Skylark,' April 1, 2848." A person on the ground watches balloon traffic overhead.

Edition used: Stuart and Susan Levine, eds. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1976.

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## 20

**Author:** Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862)

**Title:** *Walden*



**Date:** 1854 Written: 1846-1854

**Systems:** Railroad, ship

**Context:** Contemporary, Massachusetts

*Walden* gives a classic statement, extended and amplified, of America's mythologizing of the iron-horse image. Thoreau's sensuous enthusiasm is tempered by his concerns about the faster pace of industrial life.

The cabin at Walden Pond was 100 rods from the Fitchburg railroad and he used the causeway to walk to Concord. The tracks go through a cut in the pond's bank which is celebrated as the site of spring and as the symbol of universal organicism ("Spring"). The railroad is cited among other "modern improvements" which are "improved means to an unimproved end; an end which it was already but too easy to arrive at; as railroads lead to Boston or New York." As with other of Thoreau's writings, he prefers to go afoot, rather than by taking the cars and seeing the country. The distance is 30 miles and the fare 90¢, "almost a day's wages. I remember when wages were sixty cents a day for laborers on this very road" ("Economy").

Thoreau complains about the economy: "It lives too fast. Men think that it is essential that the Nation have commerce... and ride thirty miles an hour, without a doubt, whether they do or not.... If we do not get out sleepers [ties], and forge rails, and devote days and nights to the work, but go to tinkering upon our lives to improve them, who will build railroads? And if railroads are not built, how shall we get to Heaven in season? But if we stay at home and mind our business, who will want railroads? We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us. Did you ever think what those sleepers are that underlie the railroad? Each one is a man, an Irishman, or a Yankee man. The rails are laid on them, and they are covered with sand, and the cars run smoothly over them... And when they run over a man that is walking in his sleep, a supernumerary sleeper in the wrong position, and wake him up, they suddenly stop the cars, and make a hue and cry about it, as if this were an exception. I am glad to know that it takes a gang of men for every five miles to keep the sleepers down and level in their beds as it is." Thoreau here uses the economics of track laying and reports of accidents as striking images of the gap between spiritual and personal values and the nineteenth-century notions of progress ("Where I Lived..."). "[T]he wood-cutters, and the rail-road, and I myself have profaned Walden" ("The Ponds").

In "Sounds" Thoreau celebrates the noises from the trains along with those from animals. "The whistle of the locomotive penetrates my woods summer and winter, sounding like the scream of a hawk sailing over some farmer's yard, informing me that many restless city merchants are arriving within the circle of the town, or adventurous country traders from the other side. As they come under one horizon, they shout their warning to get off the track to the other, heard sometimes through the circles of two towns. Here come your groceries, country; your rations, countrymen!" A train loaded with timber will bring chairs to the city at 20 miles per hour and will strip the huckleberry hills and cranberry meadows for urban consumption. Cotton goes in one direction and woven cloth in the other; "up come the books, but down goes the wit that writes them." The trains move with planetary or comet-like motion, since its velocity makes it seem "not like a returning curve, - with its steam cloud like a banner streaming behind in golden and silver wreaths, like many a downy cloud which I have seen, high in the heavens, unfolding its masses to the light, - as if this travelling demigod, this cloud-compeller, would ere long take the sunset sky for the livery of his train; when I hear the iron horse make the hills echo with his snort like thunder, shaking the earth with his feet, and breathing fire and smoke from his nostrils (what kind of winged horse or fiery dragon they will put into the new Mythology I don't know), it seems as if the earth had got a race now worthy to inhabit it...." He watches the train's passage as he watches the sunrise. The "train of clouds" is "going to heaven while the cars are going to Boston"; it hides the sun and shades the fields, "a celestial train beside which the petty train of cars which hugs the earth is but the barb of the spear." Thoreau enjoys the way the "vital heat" is contained in the engine, and how a giant plow is, like snow-shoes, used to "plow a furrow from the mountains to the seaboard, in which the cars, like a following drill-barrow, [the trains] sprinkle all the restless men and floating merchandise in the country for seed. All day the fire-steed flies over the country, stopping only that his master may rest, and I am awakened by his tramp and defiant snort at midnight."

Thoreau continues in the same chapter. "The startings and arrivals of the cars are now the epochs in the village-day. They go and come with such regularity and precision, and their whistle can be heard so far, that the farmers set their clocks by them, and thus one well-conducted institution regulates the whole country." It works miracles - people get to

Boston on time, doing things "railroad fashion" is the byword. "We have constructed a fate, an Atropos, that never turns aside. (Let that be the name of your engine.)" The trains are like Wilhelm Tell's arrow: "the air is full of invisible bolts. Every path but your own is the path of fate. Keep on your own track, then." Moving the train in the winter happens "notwithstanding the veto of a New England northeast snow-storm," as the men on the mould-board turn back the drifts. The freight train dispenses "odors" from Long Wharf to Lake Champlain, and reminds Thoreau of foreign parts, coral reefs, Indian oceans, tropical climes, "and the extent to the globe." It makes him feel like a citizen of the world, although some of the goods are "the old junk, gunny bags, scrap iron, and rusty nails." He sees "rags in bales, of all hues and qualities, the lowest condition to which cotton and linen descend, the final result of dress." The catalogue includes salt fish (preserved food which can also be used as a sun and wind screen), Spanish hides, molasses (which puts Cuttingsville, Vermont on the map), "the cattle of a thousand hills" (bringing a pastoral valley or a stampede past his home). "Now that the cars are gone by and all the restless world with them, and the fishes in the pond no longer feel their rumbling, I am more alone than ever."

Thoreau uses imagery from shipping, mostly sailboats, throughout Walden, usually as metaphors for the human spiritual condition. Typical is this passage from "Economy": "If your trade is with the Celestial Empire, then some small counting house on the coast, in some Salem harbor, will be fixture enough. You will export such articles as the country afforded, purely native products, much ice [harvested from Walden Pond each year, some sent as far as India] and pine timber and a little granite, always in native bottoms." Thoreau then details all the jobs of running a commercial ship, from being pilot, captain, owner and underwriter, to keeping abreast of the markets and studying the charts - all of which indicate the complexity of strict economic and spiritual "business habits."

In "Visitors" the metaphor is psychological: "You want room for your thoughts to get into sailing trim and run a course or two before they make their port." Sailing metaphors are central to the final chapter, "Conclusion." "Our voyaging [literal and spiritual] is only great-circle sailing." Our redeemed life is compared with explorations to Africa or the Northwest Passage or a South-Sea Exploring Expedition, but we need "to explore the private sea, the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean of one's being." The proper passage through life does not involve taking cabin passage, but going "before the mast and on the deck of the world." Even the image of hearing a different drummer is likened to being "shipwrecked on a vain reality."

Thoreau's preference, as noted, is to walk. There is a cart path behind the house which is, however, difficult to follow at night. Two visitors got back to town successfully one night, but couldn't find their homes until morning. "I have heard of many going astray even in the village streets, when the darkness was so thick that you could cut it with a knife, as the saying is." People come to town "a-shopping" on their wagons, but have to stay overnight. "It is a surprising and memorable, as well as valuable experience, to be lost in the woods at any time" - in a snow storm, one can come to a well-known road but still not know how to get to the village ("The Village"). In keeping with the general themes of Walden, these images of the difficulty of moving about at night become metaphors for spiritual travel. In "Conclusion," this pattern is repeated: "How worn and dusty, then must be the highways of the world, how deep the ruts of tradition and conformity."

The local roads had previously "resounded with the laugh and gossip of inhabitants," and become a physical reminder of "Former Inhabitants" in the chapter with that title. "In some places, within my own remembrance, the pines would scrape both sides of a chaise at once, and women and children who were compelled to go this way to Lincoln alone and on foot did it with fear, and often ran a good part of the distance." The changes are not just road improvements, but the widespread clearing of woods and swamps (where a road used to run on logs) have led to the modern highway. In the winter, the road is delineated by falling oak leaves which absorb the sun's rays and ease walking through the snow.

Edition used: New York: Modern Library, [1937] 1965.

**Title:** "Pat Works on the Railway"

**Date:** 1844

**Systems:** Railway

**Context:** Contemporary, Irish construction workers

The stanzas are explicitly dated from "In eighteen hundred and forty-one." It charts a worker's annual progress, from putting on corduroy pants, leaving the Old World, meeting Molly McGee, traveling "the land from shore to shore," and finally to Biddy McGee's death, at which time "If she left one kid she left eleven," perhaps (biology notwithstanding) because it rhymes with "1847" and "heaven." The setting is presumably the eastern United States, where Irish immigrants did the bulk of the physical labor during this decade.

Edition used: Paul Lauter, et al., eds. *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, Vol. 1. Lexington, MA, D. C. Heath, 1990.

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## 22

**Author:** Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864)

**Title:** *The House of the Seven Gables: A Romance*

**Date:** 1851

**Systems:** Railroad, horse carts and carriages,

**Context:** Contemporary, after 1848, New England

The house of the title is on a side street in Salem, a small New England town, where its psychologically imprisoned characters spend much of their time watching traffic. The scene includes "an omnibus, with its populous interior, dropping here and there a passenger, and picking up another, thus typifying that vast rolling vehicle, the world, the end of whose journey is everywhere and nowhere," i.e., the traditional etymology of "utopia" (Ch. 11). This is in contrast with the railroad's fixed routes and schedules. The street scene also includes horse-drawn carts for the butcher, fish-seller, "countryman" (vegetables), and the baker, as well as pushcarts for the knife grinder, barrel-organ (Ch 11), and, later in the book, Uncle Venner's wheelbarrow used to collect garbage to feed his pigs (Ch 19). Road maintenance is an ongoing problem. There is a regularly scheduled water cart which goes through the streets to settle the dust (Ch. 11), and we are reminded of the water-filled puddles every time it rains, and in a hard rain, it's too muddy to walk in the streets.

On the psychological and symbolic horizon is the railroad, the agent of change. The somewhat crazed Clifford Pyncheon, a man in his 60s, regrets that there are "no stage-coaches nowadays," those being replaced by the railroad, whose "obstreperous howl of the steam-devil" he hears and whose "brief transit" he can see by leaning out of his window. The narrator comments that his attitude illustrates his "loss or suspension of the power to deal with unaccustomed things [echoing Coleridge], and to keep up with the swiftness of the passing moment." (Ch 11).

"The Flight of the Owls," Ch. 17, is an extended description of Clifford and his sister, Hepzibah, on a "strange expedition," their first train ride. The puffing train is "like a steed impatient for a headlong rush" and the travellers go "onward like the wind" and are thus "drawn into the great current of human life." The passing landscape is dream-like and surrealistic - towns grow up and then vanish "as if swallowed by an earthquake"; steeples seem "adrift from their foundations" - "everything was unfixed from its age=long rest." In the car, it is amazing that 50 people, under one roof, can sit quietly amid the "noisy strength." Passengers read and play catch; boys sell cakes and candy - "It was life itself." Hawthorne here sees the train as a microcosm, somewhat like the way boats are depicted by other contemporary writers.

Clifford buys tickets to the end of the line, and, while the conductor suggests they would be more comfortable in front of the home fire, Clifford sees the train as "destined to do away with those stale ideas of home and fireside, and substitute something better." We will re-enter the "nomadic state" since all human progress is in a circle; or, to use a more accurate and beautiful figure, in an ascending spiral curve." Railroads "give us wings" and they "spiritualize travel." Another passenger echoes the narrator's line that, with regret, we now live "everywhere and nowhere." Clifford obliquely refers to his family's house with a corpse sitting in a chair as a sign of the fixed past he wishes to escape, the real estate "on which nearly all the guilt of this world rests." The train is linked to mesmerism, rapping spirits, and the telegraph, or "electricity, - the demon, the angel, the mighty physical power, the all-pervading intelligence" which will link people around the globe. The technical problem is that Clifford's effort to use the train to escape to a distant "city of refuge" can be thwarted by the telegraph which will alert the city to the fugitives.

Edition used: New York, Modern Library, 1937.

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## 23

**Author:** Margaret Fuller (1810-1850)

**Title:** "Its Position in the Present Time, and Prospects for the Future" In *American Literature*

**Date:** 1846

**Systems:** Train

**Context:** Contemporary

In a passage expressing hope that "the fusion of races among us is more complete," Fuller notes that it will not happen until "this nation shall attain sufficient moral and intellectual dignity" or until "the physical resources of the country being explored, all its regions studded with towns, broken by the plow, netted together by railways and telegraph lines, talent shall be left at leisure to turn its energies upon the higher department of man's existence" (Emphasis added.). These sentiments are frequently expressed in the early railroad and telegraph decades, where transportation and communication are optimistically seen as promoting social benefits such as overcoming racial and regional barriers.

Edition used: Paul Lauter, et al., eds. *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, Vol. 1. Lexington, MA, D. C. Heath, 1990.

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# The 1850s

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[Hawthorne](#) comments briefly on the railroad's growing impact on the countryside, while [Thoreau](#), in three works, comments on travel by boat, road, and train in New England. Melville in *Moby-Dick* uses metaphors which allude to the modern systems, while his [short stories](#) include an extended criticism of the railroad's dangers and social dislocations. [Whitman](#) celebrates the Brooklyn ferry boat, railroads including the Union Pacific, and the Suez Canal, built later in the century. [Chesnutt](#) points to the metaphor lying behind the Underground Railroad. Two detailed accounts of steamboats on the Mississippi by [Melville](#) and [Twain](#) highlight the best years of that industry. [Davis](#) gives snapshots of industry-focused transportation in western Virginia. [Cather's](#) historical account of New Mexico's history begins with no organized transportation and ends with the diffusion of railroads in the 1880s.

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## 24

**Author:** Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864)

**Title:** *The Blithedale Romance*

**Date:** 1852

**Systems:** Railroad

**Context:** Contemporary, near and in Boston

During the narrator's visit to Boston he discusses how one can learn much about the city by looking at its alleyways, and the back views of its residences. Then he says, "The posterior aspect of any old farmhouse, behind which a railroad has unexpectedly been opened, is so different from that looking upon the immemorial highway, that the spectator gets new ideas of rural life and individuality in the puff or two of steam-breath which shoots him past the premises. In a city, the distinction between what is offered to the public and what is kept for the family is certainly not less striking" (Ch. 17). This is an odd note on the intrusion of the railroads on the settled countryside.

The "steel engine of the Devil's contrivance, a philanthropist" (Ch. 9) is a passing example of the incidental use of a train metaphor as a mindless automaton, an echo of Clifford Pyncheon's "steam-devil" phrase from *Seven Gables*.

Edition used: New York: Modern Library, 1937.

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## 25

**Author:** Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862)

**Title:** *Cape Cod*

**Date:** 1852 and 1864 (magazine) Written: 1852 ff.

**Systems:** Stage coach, steamer, sailing boats

**Context:** 1849 and early 1850s, Massachusetts

Thoreau's steamboat ride across Boston harbor to the Cape is delayed by a storm, so he takes the "cars" (railroad) to the southern end and gets a nine-passenger stage coach, "that almost obsolete conveyance." In the cars he can't read his guidebook "as fast as [he] traveled," but he can keep up in the coach. Thoreau comments on the good humor among the passengers, even though they are strangers, and he notes no "foolish respect" for "wealth and station," a note on the democratic nature of the conveyance ("Stage-Coach Views"). At the end of the book, he goes from the Cape to Boston on a little steamer, although a two-sail schooner also made regular trips.

"Shipwreck," the first chapter, sets part of the tone for the book. A brig has been wrecked, and Thoreau, among others, searches the shore for bits of its cargo and bodies. This motif continues in "Wellfleet Oysterman," where the title character reports on the rescue of most of the Franklin's passengers when that boat stuck on a sand bar the year before. In "The Beach Again," more comments on searching the shores for cargo (e.g., soap, bolts of cloth) and bodies; big pieces of a ruined ship are sold for salvage, while seeds are planted. Other, more pleasing views of boats are from a distance, as when he climbs a hill to see the mackerel fleet, or sees the smoke on the horizon from steam boats.

Thoreau also describes the infrastructure of the boating industry. He devotes a chapter to the light house, describing the light itself in technical detail and echoing the keeper's sense of responsibility for this job. In "The Sea and the Desert" we hear about a government project of planting beach grass to preserve the Provincetown harbor.

At Provincetown the drifting sand is such a problem that the coach wheels are one to two inches wider than the typical five inches; however, he only saw one horse and cart in two days. People walk or ride saddle horses.

Edition used: Thomas Y. Crowell, Apollo Editions, 1961.

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## 26

**Author:** Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862)

**Title:** "Walking" or "The Wild"

**Date:** 1862 Written: 1850s

**Systems:** Road, steamboat

**Context:** Early 1850s, Massachusetts

As the title suggests, this essay is on Thoreau's favorite mode of travel. Throughout he emphasizes the mid-nineteenth-century usage of the word "road" to denote where people walk, rather than where vehicles go. "The village is the place to which the roads tend, a sort of expansion of the highway, as a lake of a river. It is the body of which roads are the arms and legs, - a trivial or quadrivial place, the thoroughfare and ordinary of travellers." When he is engrossed in thoughts it is "as perchance he is walking on a railroad, then indeed the cars go by without his hearing them. But soon, by some inexorable law, our life goes by and the cars return."

In the essay Thoreau describes a painted panorama of the Mississippi River whose features include steamboats "wooding up," Indians crossing to the west, and legends of Dubuque and Wenona's Cliffs - all of which involve "thinking more of the future than of the past or present." This will be a new heroic age, in contrast to a previously discussed panorama of the Rhine and its medieval remnants.

Edition used: New York, Modern Library, [1937] 1965.

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## 27

**Author:** Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862)

**Title:** "Life without Principle"

**Date:** 1863 Written: 1850-5

**Systems:** Railroad, road construction

**Context:** 1850s, Massachusetts

In a paragraph complaining about America's obsession with business, Thoreau uses the train as a symbol of "infinite bustle." "I am awakened almost every night by the panting of the locomotive. It interrupts my dreams. There is no sabbath." As another example of the same obsession we are told about a man who leads an ox team which is drawing a heavy hewn stone swung under the axle - "Such is the labor which the American Congress seeks to protect." Tunnelling through a mountain is another instance of the community's raising money for silly purposes, when it should be hiring a man to mind "his own business." Thoreau later questions whether it was worth while to fill a ship with Italian juniper berries and bitter almonds since the ship sank off New York with many lives lost.

Thoreau compares the closed mind which is "profaned by the habit of attending to trivial things" with a detailed description of road construction. "Our very intellect shall be macadamized, as it were, - its foundation broken into fragments for the wheels of travel to roll over; if you would know what will make the most durable pavement, surpassing rolled stones, spruce blocks, and asphaltum, you have only to look into some of our minds which have been subjected to this treatment so long."

Edition used: New York: Modern Library, [1937] 1965.

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## 28

**Author:** Herman Melville (1819-1891)

**Title:** *Moby-Dick: Or, The Whale*

**Date:** 1850

**Systems:** Sailboats, steamboat, canal, railroad

**Context:** Contemporary, Great Lakes, whaling in Pacific ocean

Most of the novel takes place on the whaler Pequod, which is essentially a factory ship. Ishmael, the narrator, gives extended accounts of the Pequod's operations from how a whale is first sighted to closing down the try-pots once the barrels are filled with oil. We also get details on navigation in the open seas by quadrant, compass, log and line, comments on the use of maps, and examples of how encounters with other whalers become part of the chase for Moby-Dick and for other whales.

For whaling and "the engineering forces employed in the construction of the American Canals and Railroads... the native American liberally provides the brains, and the rest of the world as generously supplying the muscles" (Ch. 27). The international crew of the Pequod seems at first to echo this observation, but Ishmael's admiring portraits, especially of Queequeg, the lead harpooner, and Ahab's madness turn the dichotomy upside down.

Land-based means of transportation are referred to briefly, and often metaphorically. The "Town-Ho's Story," Ch. 54, includes digressions on the economy and culture of the Great Lakes (but not much on shipping) and the Erie Canal, chiefly on the picturesqueness of where it goes. Ahab uses a railroad metaphor for his obsession: "The path of my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run" (Ch. 37). The rowing energies of the crew of



Fedallah's small boat are "like a horizontal burst boiler out of a Mississippi steamer," an allusion to dangerous explosions on such boats (Ch. 48). Passing references are also made to the royal car on English railways as a metaphor for one digressive chapter (Ch. 90) and to "the mighty iron Leviathan of the modern railway" whose regular schedules are like the way "doctors time a baby's pulse" (Ch.134).

Edition used: New York: Norton Critical Edition, 1967.

## 29

**Author:** Herman Melville (1819-1891)

**Title:** Short stories

**Date:** 1850s

**Systems:** Train, steamboat, carriage

**Context:** Contemporary, New York City and New England

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Melville is less optimistic about the railroad's value as an agent of positive change, especially when economic class is taken into account. The poor can listen and watch, but they cannot ride.

"Cock-a-Doodle-Do! Or the Crowing of the Noble Cock Beneventano" (1853) attacks railroads and steamboats with some vigor. This sketch opens with a rant about the dangers of locomotives and steamers. Overlooking a panorama of rolling country, the narrator thinks about "What a horrid accident was that on the Ohio, where my good friend and thirty other good fellows were sloped into eternity at the bidding of a thick-headed engineer, who knew not a valve from a flue. And that crash on the railroad just over yon mountains there, where two infatuate trains ran pell-mell into each other, and climbed and clawed each other's backs; and one locomotive was found fairly shelled, like a chick, inside of a passenger car in the antagonist train; and near a score of noble hearts, a bride and her groom, and an innocent young infant, were all disembarked into the grim hulk of Charon, who ferried them over, all baggageless, to some clinkered iron-foundry or other."

This "miserable world" is run by "the thousand villains and asses" who manage the railroads and steamboats, whom he would hang, draw and quarter, and "set them to stoking in Tartarus." His grandfather saw no need to travel so fast, but the "gigantic gadfly of a Moloch... the character murderer, the death monopolizer!" just goes through the country crying "More, more, more!" This technological and economic conspiracy is compared to the narrator's single-minded creditor (he's bankrupt). The troubles mount: he got rheumatism in his shoulder when he gave up his sleeping berth on a crowded North River boat to a sick lady, and stayed in the drizzle all night.

The story has a couple of outsider's views of the railroad. While eating a breakfast, "Ah, here comes the down-train: white cars, flashing through the trees like a vein of silver. How cheerfully the steam-pipe chirps! Gay are the passengers. There waves a handkerchief - going down to the city to eat oysters, and see their friends, and drop in at the circus." Less favorable is a poor family which lives in a shanty near where the track passes close to a mountain and cuts a swamp. "Straight as a die the railroad cut it; many times a day tantalizing the wretched shanty with the sight of all the beauty, rank, fashion, health, trunks, silver and gold, drygoods and groceries, brides and grooms, happy wives and husbands, flying by the lonely door - no time to stop - flash! here they are - and there they go! - out of sight at both ends - as if that part of the world were only made to fly over, and not to settle upon. And this was about all the shanty saw of what people call 'life.'" For Melville, at the middle of the century the railroad was seen as exclusive and not as a democratic knitter of the country.

Other stories point out similar class distinctions amid the carriage trade. "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall

"Street" (1853) has the frustrated lawyer-narrator take a trip around New York City to gather his composure. He drives to the upper part of the town and through the suburbs in his "rockaway," then to Jersey City and Hoboken, New Jersey, and Manhattanville and Astoria, New York. "In fact, I almost lived in my rockaway for the time."

"The Two Temples" (Written 1854) is an allegorical story which finds more real charity in a London theater than in a New York church. Part of the contrast is between the "noble string of flashing carriages" of the wealthy and greedy church goers in New York and the "indescribable crowds" of London pedestrians, "the unscrupulous human whirlpools... dire suckings into oblivion."

"The Tartarus of Maids" (1855) has a narrator visiting a surrealistic paper factory in the "Woedolor" mountains of New England during the winter. In the opening scene, he turns from "the traveled highway, jingling with bells of numerous farmers - who, availing themselves of the fine sleighing, were dragging their wood to market - and frequently diversified with swift cutters, dashing from inn to inn of the scattered villages." He has to get through a narrow path through the mountains, "perilously grazing its rocky wall, I remembered being in a runaway London omnibus, which in much the same sort of style, though by no means at an equal rate, dashed through the ancient arch of Wren." He sees the factory at a distance he picks his way "down the dangerous declivity - horse and man both sliding now and then upon the icy ledges."

Edition used: *Great Short Works of Herman Melville*. New York: Harper & Row (Perennial Classic) 2nd ed., 1970.

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## 30

**Author:** Walt Whitman (1819-1892)

**Title:** *Leaves of Grass*

**Date:** 1890-91 edition Written: 1855-1891

**Systems:** Railroad, canal

**Context:** Contemporary, East coast

Four of Whitman's most famous poems celebrate ferry boats, interstate railroads, and the Suez canal as symbolic and psychological forces in nineteenth-century America. In most of his other poems, Whitman's visions of his world are chiefly of people walking in cities and in the countryside, even though he writes about that world from mid-century to the last decade.

"Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" (1856) presents visions of flags and sails, large and small steamers, the big steam-tug, and pilot boats in the harbor of "mast hemm'd Manhattan," a harbor which displays the "flags of all nations." The harbor is subject to the tides and currents and it is surrounded by the hills of Brooklyn with their foundries and chimneys. The ferry boat is both a vantage point and a refuge from the city. It carries crowds with their "usual costumes" from the city to their homes in the Brooklyn suburb, and it brings them together on the boat, furnishing "parts toward eternity" and "toward the soul."

"When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" (1865-6) is a memoir on the anniversary of Lincoln's assassination. Its central movement is the funeral procession, "Night and day journeys a coffin. / Coffin that passes through lanes and streets." Somewhat curiously, except for the word "depot," Whitman does not explicitly point out that the coffin moved by train from Washington to Illinois, a fact that his readers would have known and remembered. As with many of Whitman's poems, a central theme is the unity of the States ("long panoramas of visions") and the train's progress lets him give snapshots along the coffin's path. Lincoln's death is linked to the ghosts of the war dead, "the white skeletons of young men."

"Passage to India" (1871) is an enthusiastic picture of a technologically unified world. "In the Old World the east the Suez Canal, [1869] / The New by its mighty railroad spann'd, [1869] / The seas inlaid with eloquent gentle wires," i.e., the transatlantic cable [1866]. These three fulfill God's purpose to span the earth, "connected by network, / The races, neighbors, to marry and be given in marriage ... / The lands to be welded together." The railroad "surmounting every barrier" carries freight and passengers along the Platte, to the Laramie plains and Wahsatch mountains to the "clear waters of lake Tahoe," "Tying the Eastern to the Western sea, / The road between Europe and Asia." This realizes Columbus's and da Gama's dream of a passage to India. It will overcome the "unnatural" separation of peoples, and "Nature and Man shall be disjoin'd and diffused no more." Whitman's brief history of India from Alexander the Great's time shows how the passage unifies time as well as space; it is a "Passage to more than India," which heralds a new, spiritual world.

"To a Locomotive in Winter" (1876) is a centennial celebration of the railroad, "Type of the modern - emblem of motion and power - pulse of the continent." The short poem begins with a direct address to the locomotive, with its "black cylindrical body," which starts with the "great protruding head-light" and ends with the "pennants" of smoke at the rear. The personification expands to the "metrical, now swelling pant and roar" and its "lawless music"; it is a "Fierce-throated beauty," whose laughter is "like an earthquake, rousing all." Because the train is fixed on tracks, it has a "law of thyself complete" yet it has no "sweetness debonair." Despite these limits, it is headed across prairies and lakes "To the free skies unpent and glad and strong."

Aside from these poems, Whitman's early verse (1855-1860) has occasional references to railroads, urban drays and express wagons, sailing ships including clippers and the Great Eastern, Mississippi steamboats, and oarsmen on the lakes. Several of his later poems use sailing ships as metaphors for the state ("Thou Mother with Thy Equal Brood" 1876), and for his approaching death ("Old Age's Ship & Crafty Death's" 1890). In "Years of the Modern" (1865), the "average man ... colonizes the Pacific, the archipelagoes / With the steamship, the electric telegraph ..."

The word "road" in the middle of the century denotes where people walk rather than where vehicles go - see "Song of the Open Road" (1856) and "By the Roadside" (1854) for examples.

Edition used: New York: Norton Critical Edition, 1973.

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## 31

**Author:** Charles Chesnutt (1858-1932)

**Title:** "The Passing of Grandison"

**Date:** 1899

**Systems:** "Underground railroad," Steamboat

**Context:** Early 1850s, Kentucky, Boston, Canada

Young slave holder Dick Owens determines to impress his girlfriend by "running one of his father's Negro men off to Canada." He is sure that so gallant and dangerous a feat will win her affection; what he doesn't anticipate is that the slave in question, Grandison, will be annoyingly faithful and refuse to "escape," on a trip they take to Boston and Canada. Because Owens must seem not to assist Grandison in his getaway, nothing short of paying Canadian kidnappers can pry Grandison from his master's side. Once this arrangement is made, Owens returns home sans slave to be greeted by an angry father, and to win his bride. The narrator notes that Owens's return to Kentucky was "as rapidly as the conveyances of the day would permit." To Dick Owens's dismay however, Grandison escapes from freedom and drags himself from Canada back to Kentucky: "keeping his back steadily to the North Star, [he] made his way, back to the old plantation, back to his master, his friends, and his home." "It's as good as one of Scott's novels!" declares the elder

Owens, and the tearful master fetes Grandison as if he were the prodigal son.

And yet, the rejoicing slave holder comes "near to losing his belief in the fidelity of the negro to his master" when, three weeks later, Grandison is missing. And not only Grandison, but his wife, two brothers, a sister, and his father and mother. We learn that Grandison's time amongst the abolitionists has not been wasted; despite the "magnitude of the escaping party," they cannot be caught: "strangely enough the underground railroad seemed to have had its tracks cleared and signals set for this particular train." The "railroad" is metaphorical; most travel using it was by wagon or on foot. The pursuers catch their last glimpse of Grandison and his fugitive family as they wave from the stern of "a small steamboat which was receding rapidly from the wharf [at the south shore of Lake Erie], with her nose pointing toward Canada."

Edition used: *The Wife of His Youth, and Other Stories*. Ridgewood, NJ: Gregg, 1967.

## 32

**Author:** Herman Melville (1819-1891)

**Title:** *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade*

**Date:** 1857

**Systems:** Steamboat

**Context:** Contemporary, Mississippi valley

Melville uses the metaphor of the "captain of fools, in this ship of fools" to set up a Mississippi-river steamboat as a microcosm of the Mississippi valley and, to some degree, American society. The April Fool's Day setting, and a general atmosphere combining carnival and con game are the vehicle for allegory and social satire which are the main materials of the book.

"Though her voyage of twelve hundred miles extends from apple [the upper Midwest] to oranges [the South], from clime to clime, yet, like any small ferry-boat, to right and left, at every landing, the huge *Fidèle* still receives additional passengers in exchange for those that disembark; so that, though always full of strangers, she continually, in some degree, adds to, or replaces them with strangers still more strange..." As the boat moves down the river, "Those staring crowds on the shore were now left far behind, seen dimly clustering like swallows on eaves; while the passengers' attention was soon drawn away to the rapidly shooting high bluffs, and shot-towers on the Missouri..." The people (the men) on board are likened to Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims in a long list which begins, "Natives of all sorts, and foreigners; men of business and men of pleasure" and ends, "hard-shell Baptists and clay-eaters [poor white southerners]; grinning negroes, and Sioux chiefs solemn as high-priests. In short, a piebald parliament, an Anacharsis Cloots congress of all kinds of that multiform pilgrim species, man." This whole business is compared with the diversity of trees in the forest (Ch. 2).

In addition to establishing this metaphor, Melville gives various details about how the steamboat is constructed and used. The story opens with a man with no luggage and no porter moving from the St. Louis wharf to the lower deck where he sees a reward poster for an Eastern imposter, one of many confidence men seen or referred to in the novel. The lower deck has the barber's quarters under the smoking saloon and across from the bar, two doors down from the captain's office. The covered, top deck has "shop-like windowed spaces" which are like a "Constantinople arcade or bazaar" (Ch. 1). The boat has two tiers of small windows above the water line which seems like "some whitewashed fort on a floating isle." Once on board, the crowd of new passengers moves off into "quartettes, trios, and couples, or even solitaries" (Ch. 2). In the third chapter, a "grotesque negro cripple" comes on board and spends his time begging for pennies, even having people throw coins in his open mouth - in a way, this man is the oddest person among the crowd -

the rest spend most of their time talking and negotiating. In effect, Melville depicts a boat which is similar to the main street of a small town.

Melville turns a few details about the boat and its customs into social commentary. The steamboat is soot-streaked, but the negro body-servant makes sure that the gentleman's gloves can stay white and clean (Ch. 7). The ladies' saloon has elegant sofas, but men use it freely, so privacy is not respected (Ch. 8). One "cabin" has tables for card games like whist, but not gambling, but the more significant confidence games such as fraudulent investments are an ongoing motif (Ch. 10). Down a corridor is the "emigrant's quarters," which are nearly empty since they are going down river. The lighting is very poor, only skylights, but that's ok since the emigrants only spend their nights there, it's a "pine barren's dormitory, of knotty pine bunks, without bedding," with the bunks suspended from the ceiling, three high, on ropes. "They were beds devised by some sardonic foe of poor travelers, to deprive them of that tranquility which should precede, as well as accompany, slumber. - Procrustean beds, on whose hard grain humble worth and honesty writhed" (Ch. 15). Once the boat passes Cairo, Illinois, they are into Yellow fever country (a serious health risk) and where slavery exists on both banks. Melville sets this transit at nightfall and in the exact center of the book (Ch. 23). After that point, references to the boat itself fall far into the background.

Edition used: Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967.

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## 33

**Author:** Mark Twain [Samuel Langhorn Clemens] (1835-1910)

**Title:** *Life on the Mississippi*

**Date:** 1883 Written: Part in 1874-75 as "Old Times on the Mississippi"

**Systems:** Mississippi steamboat, railroad

**Context:** 1857-1861 as a pilot; contemporary visit in 1882

Twain brings together his early career as an apprentice and then pilot with a detailed analysis of the end of the steamboat era in the face of the railroads. He thus gives us a comprehensive, insider's history of the rise and fall of a significant, regional transportation system.

The bulk of the first half, and Twain's main narrative, concerns how he learned as a man in his early twenties to become a river pilot during the "flush times" of steamboating. From Cincinnati he pays \$16 to take the Paul Jones to New Orleans; after two weeks there he becomes an apprentice to Bixby, an experienced pilot. He will pay \$500 out of his first wages which should be \$150-\$200 a month. He assumes it will be easy to learn the route. Bixby calls out the landmarks and explains the crossovers, but Twain finds that everything looks the same, and he can't recall the details. He begins to understand the skills involved when the pilot finds a plantation landing in pitch dark (Ch. 6). Twain finds that the river seems completely different when they come downstream and thinks, "Now, if my ears hear aright, I have not only to get the names of all the towns and islands and bends, and so on, by heart. but I must even get up a warm personal acquaintanceship with every old snag and one-limbed cottonwood and obscure wood-pile that ornaments the banks of this river for twelve hundred miles..." (Ch. 7). He really has to know the river as well as "the front hall at home"; "in order to be a pilot a man had got to learn more than any one man ought to be allowed to know" (Ch. 8). As he gets the hang of it, he says "The face of the water, in time, became a wonderful book." But, by understanding so well, he loses something: "All the grace, the beauty, the poetry, had gone out of the majestic river!" (Ch. 9).

This was his favorite profession, because "a pilot, in those days, was the only unfettered and entirely independent human being that lived on earth." They got high pay - some up to \$900 a trip or \$1,800 a month on the Missouri (Ch. 14). They created a Pilot's Benevolent Association with retirement and burial benefits, minimum wages; they got exclusive control



of delivering the mail and shared proprietary information about the state of the river to create a monopoly. They fostered formal training and apprenticeships. Eventually insurance underwriters would only accept Association pilots, and they were able to drive up freight rates. Despite the success, the days of riverboating's glory were numbered in the face of railroads and barges "at the tail of a vulgar little towboat" (Ch. 15). Final chapters in this section cover fast runs up and down the river, and a slow boat, "the John J. Roe, was so slow that when she finally sunk in Madrid Bend it was five years before the owners heard of it" (Ch. 16); an account of plantation owners who cut ditches to rechannel the river, and the explosion of the *Pennsylvania* which lost four of eight boilers and sent at least 40 of the 300-400 passengers to Memphis hospitals (Ch. 20).

With the rise of professionalism in the third quarter of the nineteenth century, Twain found a reading public interested in how young men got into their trades. Since Twain was a famous literary person, *Life on the Mississippi* also appealed to an audience fascinated with the Artist's Life.

Twain's return to the river after twenty-one years' absence leads to a rather formal economic and cultural history of the valley in the early 1880s, filled with a lot of nostalgia. His first stop after getting off the train is St. Louis where only six boats were berthed next to the miles of empty wharfs. The waterfront is in bad repair, and muddy. Steamboating, he says, grew for thirty years after 1812 and dwindled to nearly nothing in the next thirty (i.e., to 1872). "It killed the old-fashioned keel-boating, by reducing the freight trip to New Orleans to less than a week. The railroads have killed the steamboat passenger traffic by doing in two or three days what the steamboats consumed a week in doing; and the towing fleets have killed the through-freight traffic by dragging six or seven steamer-loads of stuff down the river at a time, at an expense so trivial that steamboat competition was out of the question" (Ch. 22).

A couple of charming pictures. An old packet he takes was "a venerable rack-heap, and a fraud to boot; for she was playing herself for personal property, whereas the good honest dirt was so thickly caked all over that she was righteously taxable as real estate. There are places in New England where her hurricane-deck would be worth a hundred and fifty dollars an acre. The soil on her fore-castle was quite good - the new crop of wheat was already springing from the cracks in protected places... The soil of the boiler-deck was thin and rocky, but good enough for grazing purposes." He decides "to give up the novelty of sailing down the river on a farm" (Ch. 23).

Up the river, near Winona, Minnesota, he admires the tranquil beauty of the cliffs. "Until the unholy train comes tearing along - which it presently does, ripping the sacred solitude to rags and tatters with its devil's war-whoop and the roar and thunder of its rushing wheels - and straightaway you are back in this world." He remembers that this is the road "whose stock always goes down after you buy it, and always goes up again as soon as you sell it" (Ch. 58).

In Chapter 60 Twain reports that the St. Paul train station "seemed somewhat overdone" when built, but soon was seen as being too small; sixteen railroads meet in Minneapolis, and sixty-five passenger trains arrive and depart daily.

Edition used: New York: Hill and Wang, 1961.

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## 34

**Author:** Rebecca Harding Davis (1831-1910)

**Title:** "Life in the Iron Mills"

**Date:** 1861

**Systems:** Barges, railroad

**Context:** Contemporary and 1830s, Western Virginia

The frame narration, somewhat like the description of the English mill town in Dickens' *Hard Times*, describes the iron

works: "Smoke on the wharves, smoke on the dingy boats, on the yellow river... The long train of mules, dragging masses of pig-iron through the narrow street." The story itself takes place thirty years earlier, when the mill had "the great order for the Lower Virginia railroads there last winter; run usually with about a thousand men." Later in the story, when Hugh Wolfe is in jail for theft, he hears the rumble of carts on the market day, a symbol of both the freedom he misses and the ordinary commercial life which his poverty has excluded him from. The river valley brings together boat traffic, carriages and carts, and the railroad - a crucial combination for early American industrial expansion.

Edition used: Paul Lauter, et al., eds. *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, Vol. 2. Lexington, MA, D. C. Heath, 1990.

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## 35

**Author:** Willa Cather (1873-1947)

**Title:** *Death Comes for the Archbishop*

**Date:** 1927

**Systems:** Wagon, train

**Context:** 1848-1888, New Mexico

Cather charts nearly a half-century's history of the Roman Catholic Church in what became New Mexico, and she shows the railroad as exploiting and as bringing progress to the West. At the start there are "no wagon trails, no canals, no navigable rivers," and trade and travel are on horseback or by pack mules ("Prologue"). A rare wagon train arrives at Santa Fé from Galveston harbor or the eastern U.S. with special cargo such as furniture or fruit tree saplings, and the gradual development of wagon roads is mentioned occasionally. The Colorado gold rush leads Father Vaillant to construct a special wagon "capable of carrying a great deal, yet light enough and narrow enough to wind through the mountain gorges beyond Pueblo, - where there were no roads at all except the rocky ravines cut out by streams that flowed full in the spring but would be dry now in the autumn." Vaillant takes "his strange Episcopal carriage" on an extended mission to the gold camps and towns (Ch. 8). In the final scenes in 1888, the archbishop's open buggy (in which he gets a chill and cold which leads to his death) lets him see the completed cathedral - "he had come with the buffalo, and he had lived to see railway trains running into Santa Fé." When Vaillant, now a bishop, dies in Colorado, others in the church hierarchy take trains from Chicago and New Mexico for the funeral. An elderly Navajo takes the "cars" at Gallup and arrives in Santa Fé the same day, a trip that took two weeks in the old days (Ch. 9).

Edition used: New York: Modern Library, 1955.

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# The 1860s

Many of [Dickinson's](#) poems build on images from carriages, the railroads, and even balloons. [Reed](#) playfully treats the Underground Railroad as it might have been conducted by interstate bus and airplane. [Alger](#) pictures horse cars and ferry boats in New York as used by poor boys. The post-War construction of the transcontinental railroad is presented from the Chinese laborers' perspective by [Wong](#) and [Kingston](#), and in great detail from the construction engineer's point of view by [Grey](#). [Twain and Warner](#) also trace the construction of the post-War railroads with particular emphasis on the local and national corruption which accompanied land speculation. [Brock](#), in a retrospective, fantasy novel, depicts interstate and urban rail systems, while [Twain's stories](#) give other anecdotes of train travel. A character in a novel by [James](#) sees the streetcar as a sign of American progress, while [Alcott](#) uses English trains, and, especially, Continental carriage traffic as standards to which America might aspire. [Ridge](#) also applauds the long-distance railroad. [Ballads](#) from the nineteenth century variously extol and deplore the use and construction of canals, railroads, and carriages.

## 36

**Author:** Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)

**Title:** *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*

**Date:** A few before 1886 Written: 1860s-1880s

**Systems:** Carriage, train, boat, balloon

**Context:** Contemporary, Massachusetts

Dickinson's facility at producing vibrant images is occasionally used to describe carriages and roads. "My wheel is in the dark! / I cannot see a spoke/ Yet know its dripping feet/ Go round and round" (10) "No Man can compass a Despair - / As round a Goalless Road / No faster than a Mile at once / The Traveller proceed - " (477). Carriage traffic is affected by the weather: "After the Sun comes out / How it alters the World - / Waggons like messengers hurry about / Yesterday is old - / All men meet as if / Each foreclosed a news - / Fresh as a Cargo from Batize / Nature's qualities - " (1148).

A famous riddle-poem on the hummingbird uses the excitement of the carriage as its point of comparison:

### A Route of Evanescence

With a revolving Wheel -  
A Resonance of Emerald -  
A Rush of Cochineal -  
And every Blossom on the Bush  
Adjusts its tumbled Head -  
The mail from Tunis, probably,  
An easy Morning's Ride - (1463).

And a nice sleigh poem with (typically for Dickinson) rather cryptic images in the first stanza which are resolved in the second:

Glass was the Street - in tinsel Peril  
Tree and Traveller stood -  
Filled was the Air with merry venture  
Hearty with Boys the Road -  
  
Shot the lithe Sleds like shod vibrations  
Emphasized and gone  
It is the Past's supreme italic  
Makes this Present mean - (1498).

Dickinson builds a poem about separation around an ocean-going ship metaphor: "One port - suffices - for a Brig - like mine - / Ours be the tossing - wild through the sea - / Rather than a Mooring - unshared by thee. / Ours be the Cargo -

unladen - here - / Rather than the 'spicy isles - ' / And thou - not there - " (368). A description of sailing ship rigging: "And Frigates - in the Upper Floor / Extend Hempen Hands - " (520). And an off-shore wreck, described in terms similar to many newspaper accounts: "Glee - The great storm is over - / Four - have recovered the Land - Forty - gone down together - Into the boiling Sand - / Ring - for the Scant Salvation - Toll - for the bonnie Souls - / Neighbor - and friend - and Bridegroom - Spinning upon the Shoals - " (619).

Dickinson reflects the age's fascination with balloons, emphasized, perhaps, by their experimental use during the Civil War. This poem depicts a public exhibition, ending in a crash which meets with the audience's indifference and discourages the investors.

You've seen Balloons set - Haven't You?  
So stately they ascend -  
It is as Swans - discarded You,  
For Duties Diamond -

Their Liquid Feet go softly out  
Upon a Sea of Blonde -  
They spurn the Air, as 'twere too mean  
For Creatures so renowned -

Their Ribbons just beyond the eye -  
They struggle - some for Breath -  
And yet the Crowd applaud, below -  
They would not encore - Death -

The Gilded Creature strains - and spins -  
Trips frantic in a Tree -  
Tears open her imperial Veins -  
And tumbles in the Sea -

The Crowd - retire with an Oath -  
The Dust in Streets - go down -  
And Clerks in Counting Rooms

Observe - "'Twas only a Balloon" - (700).

A person (or God) who quietly "asked if I was his" is compared with the balloon: "And then He bore me on / Before this mortal noise / With swiftness, as of Chariots / And distance, as of Wheels. / This World did drop away / As Acres from the feet / Of one that leaneth from Balloon / Upon an Ether street." (1053).

In a later poem, from the 1880s:

As from the earth the light Balloon  
Asks nothing but release -  
Ascension that for which it was,  
Its soaring Residence.  
The spirit looks upon the Dust  
That fastened it so long  
With indignation,  
As a Bird  
Defrauded of its song. (1630).

Several stanzas and a couple of complete poems point to the railroad. "But Miles of Sparks - at Evening - / Reveal the Width that burned - / The Territory Argent - that / Never yet - consumed - " (469). The sound of freight trains near the "Brick Shoulders" of a house is captured in "Coals - from a Rolling Load - rattle - how - near - / To this very Square - His foot is passing - " (570). A poem on scheduling, where "cars" is shorthand for the railroad: "I think the longest Hour of all / Is when then Cars have come - / And we are waiting for the Coach - / It seems as though the Time / Indignant - that the Joy was come - / Did block the Gilded Hands - / And would not let the Seconds by - / But slowest instant - ends - " (635). Dickinson's comparisons go both ways, from human-made to nature "A Bee his burnished Carriage / Drove boldly to a Rose" (1338) or the other way, "Like Trains of Cars on Tracks of Plush / I hear the level Bee - " (1224). Waiting for the train and for spring: "I thought the Train would never come - / How slow the whistle sang - / I don't believe a peevish Bird / So whimpered for the Spring - " (1449).

The road bed:

The Brain, within its Groove  
Runs evenly - and true -  
But let a Splinter swerve -  
'Twere easier to You -

To put a Current back -  
When Floods have slit the Hills -  
And scooped a Turnpike for Themselves -  
And trodden out the Mills - (556).

And this famous riddle-poem which centers around the "iron horse" metaphor and makes passing comments on typical issues such as speed, noise, and scheduling:

I like to see it lap the Miles -  
And lick the Valleys up -  
And stop to feed itself at Tanks -  
And then - prodigious step  
  
Around a Pile of Mountains -  
And supercilious peer  
In Shanties - by the sides of Roads -  
And then a Quarry pare  
  
To fit its Ribs  
And crawl between  
Complaining all the while  
In horrid - hooting stanza -  
Then chase itself down Hill -  
  
And neigh like Boanerges -  
Then - punctual as a Star -  
Stop - docile and omnipotent  
At its own stable door - (585).

In an apparent reference to modern railroad construction, the suspension bridge: "Faith - is the Pierless Bridge ... / It bears the Soul as bold / As it were rocked in Steel / With Arms of Steel at either side - " (915).

Edition used: Thomas H. Johnson, ed. Boston: Little, Brown, 1960.

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## 37

**Author:** Ishmael Reed (b. 1938)

**Title:** *Flight to Canada*

**Date:** 1976

**Systems:** Airplane, steamboat, train, carriage

**Context:** 1861-1866, Virginia, Ohio, Canada

Reed's wonderfully anachronistic poem, "Flight to Canada," opens the novel of the same name. The poem's speaker, the fugitive slave Quickskill, uses the term "flight" in two senses. Like many fugitives in the antebellum years, he makes a run for Canada, but travels there by airplane to avoid his pursuers at the bus terminal:

Dear Massa Swille:

What it was?  
I have done my Liza Leap  
& am safe in the arms of  
Canada, so  
Ain't no use your Slave  
Catchers waitin on me  
At Trailways  
I won't be there

I flew in non-stop  
Jumbo jet this A.M. Had  
Champagne  
Compliments of the Cap'n  
Who announced that a  
Runaway Negro was on the  
Plane. Passengers came up  
And shook my hand  
& within 10 min. I had  
Signed up for 3 anti-slavery  
Lectures. Remind me to get an  
Agent

Traveling in style  
Beats craning your neck after  
The North Star and hiding in  
Bushes anytime, Massa  
Besides, your Negro dogs  
Of Hays & Allen stock can't  
Fly....

The poem sets the tone and style for the novel which is a humorous, somewhat blasphemous treatment of anti-slavery activity during the Civil War. The poem combines references to Harriet Beecher Stowe's wildly popular *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 1852, ("my Liza Leap") with a version of twentieth-century celebrity (lecture invitations, champagne) in order to expose both abolitionism and contemporary "multi-culturalism" as rackets in their own right.

In a hilarious send-up of Abraham Lincoln (and others), the novel critiques collaboration between the north and the south during the Civil War. Lincoln has come to Virginia to borrow money from Arthur Swille, the wealthiest slave owner in the country, who drinks two-gallons of "slave mothers' milk" each morning. At the novel's end we learn that instead of slave mothers' milk, the obsequious house slave Uncle Robin has been serving Swille a double gallon of Coffee Mate each day: "They serve it on the airplanes. I'm an old hand at poisons, and so I'd venture a guess that if...whoever pushed him hadn't he'd of 'gone on' from the cumulative effects of the Coffee Mate." The book glosses this revelation with a list of ingredients: "Corn-syrup solids, vegetable fat, sodium caseinate, mono- and diglycerides, dipotassium phosphate, sodium silicoaluminate, artificial flavor, tricalcium phosphate, and artificial colors" (Ch. 29). So much for airplane food.

In his interview with Swille, Lincoln quickly drops his corn-pone manner when he sees that it is ineffective. He captures Swille's attention and earns his affection with an impassioned tribute to the railroads. Swille quickly agrees to fill the war chest of the Union as well as the Confederate army. Here's the speech; the author's tone here is one of high parody:

A train whistle is heard.

'Mr. Swille, listen to your train. That great locomotive that will soon be stretching across America, bumping cows, pursued by Indians, linking our Eastern cities with the West Coast. Who built your trains, Mr. Swille? The people did, Mr. Swille. Who made you what you are today, Mr. Swille? A swell titanic titan of ten continents, Mr. Swille. Who worked and sweated and tilled and toiled and travailed so that you could have your oil, your industry, Mr. Swille? Why, we did, Mr. Swille. Who toted and tarried and travestied themselves so that you could have your many homes, your ships and your buildings reaching the azure skies?...Yes, I know I'm a corn-bread and a catfish-eatin curmudgeon known to sup some scuppernong wine once in a while, but I will speak my mind, Mr. Swille. (Ch. 4).

This oration invokes the railroad in part to prove Lincoln's virility. The parody works here precisely because the association of railroads, masculinity, and patriotism is such a strong one in American letters. Here Ishmael Reed points to the exaggerated fervor and sly rhetoric of this tradition: Lincoln includes himself in a "we the people" of which he clearly is not part. The majority of those who will tarry and toil over the transcontinental railroad he envisions will be convicts, poor, Chinese or African American.

In another piece of anachronism, three slaves escape the Swille plantation. One of them, Stray Leechfield, had already shown an early aptitude in cunning. He slowly and methodically stole enough chickens to set up his own chicken farm in a nearby county. The proof of his wealth is, of course, his new 'carriage' which featured "factory climate-control air conditioning, vinyl top, AM/FM stereo radio, full leather interior, power-lock doors, six-way power seat, power windows, white-wall wheels, door-edge guards, bumper impact strips, rear defrost and soft-ray glass" (Ch. 4).

Edition used: New York: Atheneum, 1989.

**Author:** Horatio Alger (1834-1899)

**Title:** *Ragged Dick*

**Date:** 1867

**Systems:** Horse car**Context:** 1860s, perhaps before the Civil War, New York city

You can piece together key features of the New York horse-car system from Alger's books - costs, routes, and some of the social customs. The Third Avenue and Harlem line runs to the terminus at 103rd street; it costs 6¢ for "way-passengers" who go less than full distance, 7¢ for the whole route; it's rather crowded until 40th Street (Ch. 9). [Alger also tells you about the mechanics of savings banks and other institutions which a young lad might need to know about to survive in New York.] At the start we learn of a Johnny Nolan who hid on top of a freight car from Albany to get to the city, over a thousand miles, he claims.

Omnibuses, drays, and carriages make it difficult to cross Broadway at Astor House. Dick points out that you can sue for damages if you get run over, and points to a widow whose husband had been killed after waiting 6 hours to cross (Ch. 4). A newsboy, Johnny Mullen, was run over by an omnibus and his friends visited him in the hospital. (Dick exaggerates for humorous and ironic effect, especially in the early chapters.) On the way uptown Dick and a friend are unable to sit next to a woman since she spreads her dress to keep the scruffy lads away; she later falsely accuses them of stealing her purse, and the conductor (apparently a general-purpose problem-solver) has her find it in her pocket (Ch. 9).

The Brooklyn ferry takes five minutes and costs 2¢. In a late chapter Dick rescues a young kid who fell off and got a permanent desk job as the reward from the kid's father (Ch. 26).

Edition used: London: Collier-Macmillan, 1962.

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## 39

**Author:** Horatio Alger (1834-1899)**Title:** *Mark, the Match Boy***Date:** 1897**Systems:** Horse car, ferry**Context:** 1860s, perhaps before the Civil War, New York city

This book follows some of the same characters as Ragged Dick and adds more details about New York horse cars and ferries. The car from Astor Place to City Hall Park takes half an hour. Mark, down to his last dime, can sleep on the Fulton ferry for 2¢ since they don't force people to leave. The boat has gentlemen's and ladies' cabins, but men take all the seats in the latter, so the women must stand, while the men also pollute their own space with pipe and cigar smoke (Ch. 8).

Dick and his friends keep getting more and more money (hundreds, not thousands of dollars), so he can afford to hire a hack to take the sickly Mark to his boarding house (Ch. 13). In an excursion to Fort Hamilton, the boys take the Fulton Ferry to Brooklyn, and, since the train could be crowded, they hire a carriage (Ch. 24).

Dick telegraphs Mark's grandfather in Milwaukie [sic], as Mark turns out to be his lost grandson. The grandfather arrives on the next afternoon (Ch. 24).

Edition used: London: Collier-Macmillan, 1962.

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## 40

**Author:** Shawn Hsu Wong (b. 1949)

**Title:** "Each Year Grain"

**Date:** 1974

**Systems:** Railroad work

**Context:** 1850s & 60s, and 1970s, California, Chinese-American perspective

This fiction addresses the Gold Mountain legend that brought Chinese laborers to California mines and railroads in the mid-nineteenth century. Drawn to the Gold Mountain by its promise of wealth and hence social mobility, the narrator's great-grandfather, together with many other hopeful Chinese, finds illegal passage to San Francisco. The large ships carrying illegal immigrants would drop a lifeboat outside the Golden Gate before steaming into the harbor. The lifeboat, filled with Chinese, would come in quietly and unload. If it seemed they were about to be caught bringing in a boat load of illegals, those manning the boat would throw the Chinese overboard. This meant certain death because the Chinese were chained together and therefore unable to swim ashore.

The story shows the Gold Mountain legend to be more than a false promise; degradation in the land they gave their lives to becomes a proud and bitter irony for this great-grandfather and for some of the other Chinese. Many railroad workers and miners insisted that their bones be sent back to China upon their deaths - "at least that much of them would return home away from the land that humiliated them and the life they loathed." But the great-grandfather is different: "It was the work that broke him and the work that he desperately held on to - to make a little place in this country." The narrator tells us, "Since this land was important enough for him to give his life to, he should not leave and that his sons should follow him to this country, and his soul would protect them."

But even the ironic pride in self-sacrifice is eventually drained as great-grandfather loses total faith in the land: "The railroad was finished and the Chinese were chased out of the mines. They were allowed to live but not marry. The law was designed so that the Chinese would gradually die out, leaving no sons or daughters."

Edition used: Hans Ostrom, ed. *Lives and Moments: An Introduction to Short Fiction*. Chicago: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1991.

## 41

**Author:** Maxine Hong Kingston (b. 1940)

**Title:** "The Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains." In *China Men*.

**Date:** 1980

**Systems:** Railroad construction

**Context:** 1863-69, 1870s-1906; Northern California: Stockton and the Sierra Nevada mountains; Chinese-American perspective

"Grandfather left a railroad for his message: We had to go somewhere difficult. Ride a train. Go somewhere important. In case of danger, the train was to be ready for us."

With these words Kingston claims the railroad as a source of ethnic pride; for the China Men who picked and blasted

through granite, who dangled in baskets along sheer cliffs in order to lay bridges across the mountains, the Transcontinental railroad was their claim to legitimacy and their greatest legacy: "'The Greatest Feat in the History of Mankind,' [the white demon officials said.] 'Only Americans could have done it,' they said, which is true...He was an American for having built the railroad." Kingston recreates the perils and exhilaration of labor on the railroad through her grandfather's eyes. She shows that Chinese labor built the infrastructure of the nation:

They built railroads in every part of the country - the Alabama and Chattanooga Railroad, the Houston and Texas Railroad, the Southern Pacific, the railroads in Louisiana and Boston, the Pacific Northwest, and Alaska. After the Civil War, China Men banded the nation North and South, East and West, with crisscrossing steel. They were the binding and building ancestors of this place.

The chapter begins with the granddaughter's estimation of the power of her grandfather's gift. Stockton, California is "a special spot of the earth," the only Pacific coast city to be crossed by three railroads - the Santa Fe, Southern Pacific and Western Pacific. The tracks run just behind her house and prove a rich source for daydreams, games, and encounters with hoboes. To the young girl the trains are all thunder and sparks as they vault "godlike" "across the sky." Later, when the railroad is dismantled and the family carries off the abandoned materials, Kingston notes, "I am glad to know exactly the weight of the ties and the size of the nails."

Her grandfather, Ah Goong, was hired on sight - "chinamen had a natural talent for explosions." China Men first used gunpowder to blast tunnels and to bore pits into the sides of mountains. They were the first to test dynamite, which "added more accidents and ways of dying," but accomplished in three years what would otherwise have taken fifty. Kingston details the size and feel of the fragile baskets that dangled men above ravines, the spectacle of a man falling a long, long while to the bottom, the bitter living conditions in all seasons, the China Men's semi-successful nine day strike to maintain their \$30 dollar per month wage, the sight of a single prostitute, leashed and led down the line for the use of countless men. "There is no record of how many died building the railroad," Kingston remarks.

Through it all Kingston is fascinated by her grandfather's strange optimism, his pride in his body and in the efficiency of the Chinese teams, his pride in America. She concludes with an account of the Driving Out at the close of the century; the labor completed and the laborers useless, the Chinese are forced out of towns, massacred, deported.

Edition used: New York: Alfred Knopf, 1980.

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## 42

**Author:** Zane Grey (1872-1939)

**Title:** *The U. P. Trail*

**Date:** 1918

**Systems:** Railroad, especially construction

**Context:** 1866-1869, chiefly Wyoming

This "Western" is partly a celebration of the building of the eastern end of the Union Pacific after the Civil War, with an undercurrent of complaint about the corruption and greed of the railroad's managers, and a framing motif concerning the destruction of the West. The central character, Neale Warren, is a skilled and honest engineer, so the role of designing the roadbed and laying track is seen as being central to the enterprise.

The opening chapters lyrically describe the old St. Vrain and Laramie wagon trail which was the path taken by the "U. P. R."; lurking by the trail are the Sioux who will vex the railroad as it is being surveyed and built. Former Union General Lodge, leader of the construction effort, proclaims, "No Indians - nothing can stop us" (Ch. 4). Typically, later,



"the Indians could not be everywhere. Neale and King [his sidekick from Texas] took chances, as had all these travelers" who follow the old trail (Ch. 10).

The novel gives extensive detail on how the railroad was built, from Neale's initial surveying, to the grading gangs, laying of gravel, then ties and tracks, and finally driving spikes. "The drivers - the spikers - the men who nailed the rails - who riveted the last links - these brawny, half-naked wielders of the sledges, bronzed as Indians, seemed to embody both the romance and the achievement." "[T]he thousands of plodding, swearing, fighting, blaspheming, joking laborers on the field of action... here with the ties and the rails and the road-bed was the heart of that epical turmoil" (Ch. 33). Much of this is dramatized as Neale works directly on the line after his girl friend is taken East by her father (Ch. 33 and 35). The process ends at Promontory Point, where, just as the Golden Spike is driven, Allie Lee turns up after paying off her father's debts with the gold her mother companions buried just before they were killed by the Indians, etc., etc. (This is a Western, after all.)

Grey points out the role of the Irish, "In labor or fighting this Irishman [Casey] always gravitated to the fore" (Ch. 29). At Promontory Point, "Here mingled the Irish and negro laborers from the east with the Chinese and Mexican from the west" (Ch. 35), or, less charitably and more frequently, the "paddies" and the "coolies." Neale had earlier predicted the scene:

"Take thousands of soldiers - the riffraff of the war - and thousands of laborers of all classes, niggers, greasers, pigtailed chinks, and Irish. Take thousands of men who want to earn an honest dollar in trade, following the line. And thousands who want dollars, but not honestly. All the gamblers, outlaws, robbers, murderers, criminals, adventurers in the States, and perhaps many from abroad, will be on the trail. Think, man, of the money - the gold! Millions spilled out in these wild! ... And last and worst - the bad women!" (Ch. 9; Grey's suspension dots)

The process is plagued with ongoing corruption, chiefly through operations where a stretch of track is built then torn up and rebuilt since the owners are being paid by the government by the mile. It starts with the Credit Mobilier scandal which is analyzed in some detail (Ch. 10). Contractors pay kickbacks for ties, get paid double for workers' wages; commissioners gain from stock sales and also own the construction companies (Ch. 10). Even on the eve of Promontory Point, the word spread "that the grading gangs from east and west had passed each other in plain sight, working on, grading on for a hundred miles farther than necessary" (Ch. 33). One of the on-site managers sets out the case: "I know financiers, commissioners, Congressmen, and Senators - and I told you before the directors are all in on this U.P.R. pickings" (Ch. 23). Neale visits Washington where he meets Senators, Congressmen, and other government officials who are well informed about the U.P.R. This discussion covered "every phase of the work, from the Credit Mobilier to the Chinese coolies that were advancing from the west to meet the Paddies of his own division. How strange to realize that the great railroad had its nucleus, its impetus, and its completion in such a center as this!... These Easterners talked of money, of gold, as a grade foreman might have talked of gravel." He gets a glimpse into "labyrinthine plot built around the stock, the finance, the gold that was constructing the road" (Ch. 24).

The tale is told with some regret. Slingerland, the old trapper, whose mountain lodge is Neale's and Allie's refuge, sees "the result of civilization marching westward": "Before that survey the Indians had been peaceful and no dangerous men rode the trails. What right had the Government to steal land from the Indians, to break treaties, to run a steam track across the plains and mountains?" (Ch. 11). At the end of the book, "Every ringing sledge-hammer blow had sung out the death-knell of the trapper's calling. This railroad spelled the end of the wilderness." Buffalo and other wild animals are exterminated; "Progress was great, but nature undespoiled was greater." All Slingerland can see is "a gutted West" (Ch. 36). The final chapter shows a Sioux chief overlooking a train, "This beast that puffed smoke and spat fire and shrieked like a devil of an alien tribe... Those white men were many as the needles of the pines. They fought and died, but always others came." The train is "a symbol of the destiny of the Indian - vanishing - vanishing - vanishing - " (Ch. 37).

Edition used: New York: McKinlay, Stone & Mackenzie.

Authors: Samuel Langhorne Clemens [Mark Twain] (1835-1910) and Charles Dudley Warner (1829-1900)

**Title:** *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*

**Date:** 1873-1874

**Systems:** Railroad, steamboat, riverfront construction

**Context:** Pre Civil War, late 1860s to early 1870s; Midwest and east coast

This novel deals with the corruptions of post Civil War land speculation in the west and middlewest, with special emphasis in the first half on railroad and riverway-improvement schemes. Efforts to attract the railroads to a small, run-down town in Missouri are a central action. As Twain and Warner trace the sequence of events, the opening move involves land surveyors, who in the case of Philip Sterling and Henry Brierly are totally untrained - "I don't know an engine from a coal cart." "Field engineer, civil engineer. You can begin by carrying a rod, and putting down the figures" (Ch. 12). Soon, however, "Nobody dressed more like an engineer than Mr. Henry Brierly," and he quickly figures out that "the chief object of a preliminary survey was to get up an excitement about the road, to interest every town in that part of the state in it, under the belief that the road would run though it." Jeff Thompson is "the most popular engineer" for this work - he does lousy surveying, but generates lots of interest (Ch. 17). An earlier project, the "Salt Like Pacific Extension," further out west used the promise of \$40,000 per mile construction costs to fool hundreds of farmers into selling their land. "Slap down the rails and bring the land into the market" is the working guideline (Ch. 13). Philip becomes disenchanted with Salt Lick: "The railroad contractors held out large but rather indefinite promises" (Ch. 23).

When the surveyors get to Stone's Landing, they announce that "this is the railroad, all but the rails and the iron-horse." The leading citizen, Colonel Sellers, makes a speech of welcome where he outlines his plan - tear the town's few buildings, rename it "Napoleon," put up a Court House and a University, widen and straighten the river, dredge the harbor, raise a levee, and, of course, put in the train station. The Colonel happens to own the square mile where all of this will take place, but, as part of a series of kickbacks, he sells a partial share Jeff and offers shares to the other surveyors. They decide to petition Congress with their plan to improve Columbus River navigation (Ch. 17). Senator Abner Dilworthy visits the site, and advises the entrepreneurs to seek \$200,000 to \$300,000 rather than \$1 million from Congress; he also asks for his kickback (Ch. 20). A bill for \$200,000 eventually passes, and Harry goes to Stone's landing to supervise preliminary work on straightening the Columbus River, but the money to pay for the labor never arrives; the workers revolt and the project is, in effect, abandoned (Ch. 25). Despite the problem, Colonel Sellers lays out the railway route with silverware, shears, and china on the dining room table and speaks piously about how farm produce will be delivered to St. Louis: "...and there's your turnip country all around Doodleville - bless my life, what fortunes are going to be made...." (Ch. 27). When Harry gets to the Columbus River Slackwater Navigation Company headquarters in New York city, he finds out that nearly all of the money was used up in bribes to Congress and advertisements about the scheme (Ch. 28).

Aside from the various frauds which dominate the story, the main plot centers on Laura Van Brunt whose parents are lost in a steamboat accident. At a time before the War, we see the Hawkins family which has fairly large landholding in the "Knobs" district of eastern Tennessee. "Squire" Hawkins looks forward to the day when steamboats will come up the little Turkey river, and the "bigger wonder - the railroad," and coaches "that fly over the ground twenty miles an hour." As with the later events in the book, places isolated from transportation have little value (Ch. 1). After a scene where ignorant slaves treat the steamboat. "quivering athwart the dusky water," as the arrival of the Lord: "Well how dey's some folks says dey ain't no 'ficiency in prah," they take the Boreas to St. Louis to find another way to get rich (Ch. 3). The Boreas' captain spots the Amaranth and a race begins. With details about soundings to seek water too shallow for the other boat, and constant concern about the boiler pressure, the two are eventually "locked together tight and fast in the middle of the big river." "And then there was a booming roar, a thundering crash, and the riddled Amaranth dropped loose from her hold and drifted helplessly away!" After the explosion and ensuing fire, the Boreas picks up the survivors, including Laura; the badly burned are treated in the main saloon. Eventually 22 bodies are found,

39 are wounded, and 96 are missing. The inquest does not cite the irresponsibility of the boat race or overtaking the equipment - it is "the inevitable American verdict ... NOBODY TO BLAME" (Ch. 4).

In a curious episode, Philip is in a "drawing room car" on a train to "Ilium" Pennsylvania. The conductor asks a lady to leave her seat and forces her from the car. She stumbles and falls in the passageway between the cars and "would inevitably have gone down under the wheels" if Philip hadn't rescued her. He confronts the conductor who calls brakemen and they throw Philip and his carpet-bag off the train when it slows down. The other passengers do not protest, and the newspaper story from the next day takes the railway's side. Philip concludes that he can't sue because "a personal fight against a railway corporation was about the most hopeless in the world." A stranger at the station agrees; the railroad "'owns all these people along here, and the judges on the bench too'" (Ch. 29). Other train scenes are more ordinary, as in the account of Philip's ride from Washington to New York with a delay at Havre de Grace, a hot box near Baltimore, "Jersey, everlasting Jersey, stupid irritating Jersey," and on to "Newark, three or four Newarks apparently; then marshes, then long rock cuttings devoted to the advertisements of patent medicines and ready-made clothing," and finally the ferry-boat to New York (Ch. 46). Much later, as the plots converge, Philip is on the night train to Philadelphia: "At any other time the swing of the cars would have lulled him to sleep, and the rattle and clank of wheels and rails, the roar of the whirling iron, would have only been cheerful reminders of swift and safe travel" (Ch. 63).

Edition used: Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1972.

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## 44

**Author:** Darryl Brock

**Title:** *If I Never Get Back: A Novel*

**Date:** 1990

**Systems:** Train, carriage

**Context:** 1869; Cincinnati and East coast and San Francisco; 1980s, San Francisco

Self-consciously based on "historical rummagings" into the Cincinnati Red Stockings baseball team in 1869, Brock promises that "many events - even minor ones - occurred as I have shown them" ("Acknowledgments"). The story begins when the narrator is on the Amtrak from Cleveland, having just buried his father - an evening of emotional trauma and drink; he wakes up or time-travels to a nineteenth-century train and hooks up with the Red Stockings to join their eastern swing and return to Cincinnati. His (real) Grandpa's interest in both baseball and in Mark Twain who also plays a role, especially after Sam's mother had been killed in a car crash and his father deserted the family with the insurance settlement.

The historical reconstruction is rather detailed, so we read about the kinds of carriages, carts, and omnibuses the team uses during its tours, trains with their sleeping and dining cars, ferries across various rivers, and so on. Along the way we get episodes which were surely typical in the nineteenth century, but which are almost never mentioned outside of the daily newspapers - a crash between a brewer's wagon and butcher's cart (in Syracuse) (Ch. 4), one carriage with Sam in hot pursuit of another with the bad guys (Ch. 19), and brothels and gambling houses at the interchange between the Union and Central Pacific at Promontory Utah (Ch. 25). On a hot day in Cincinnati, "Dung in the streets flaked into particles and was swept up by sultry air currents off the river to mix with soot and form a toxic, eye-stinging dust... Horses collapsed on the cobblestones, unable to pull streetcars or buses up the steep hills even in double or triple teams" (Ch. 15).

For example: The narrator, Sam Fowler, happens to meet Mark Twain on a train near New York. Of course, Sam knows (and tells us he knows) how things turned out; nevertheless, he and Twain speculate about the possibility of flying

machines - Twain is seen thinking about transcontinental service. They get off at Jersey City and ferry across the Hudson on a small side-wheeler where baggage wagons take the luggage to the hotel. The new Ninth Avenue Elevated is pulled by cable, since steam trains are not allowed south of 48th Street because they cause too much noise and they pose a possible fire hazard (Twain explains). The paved sidewalks are covered by awnings; lots of wooden bicycles are on the streets, along with public minicoaches and swifter carriages and horsecars; the traffic is imperfectly controlled by cops. A new railway depot is being constructed in midtown (Ch. 7). Sam is temporarily separated from the team, but when it returns we learn that the anti-steam ordinance requires that trains be pulled by horses to the New Haven depot near Madison Square (Ch. 8).

Edition used: New York: Crown Publishers.

## 45

**Author:** Mark Twain [Samuel Langhorne Clemens] (1835-1910)

**Title:** The Complete Short Stories of Mark Twain

**Date:** 1865-1916

**Systems:** Railroad

**Context:** Contemporary, Middle west

"Cannibalism in the Cars" (1868) is set in December, 1853 on a train from St. Louis to Chicago. The train with twenty-five passengers, "no ladies and no children," gets stuck in a massive blizzard fifty miles from any house. Futile efforts of the passengers to dig the train out fail and the driving-wheel shaft breaks. After a week in the snowdrifts the passengers get hungry. Twain tracks this line out to its bizarre conclusion - the story is told by a man who knows the ins and outs of Washington, and the passengers engage in a formal, Robert's-Rules debate on who gets elected for breakfast. "I shall always remember Walker... [Morgan] was one of the finest man I ever sat down to... he was a perfect gentleman, and singularly juicy." A high-tech take on the Donner disaster.

"The Invalid's Story" (1882) takes place in a baggage car where the narrator was, he thought, accompanying a friend's coffin from Cleveland to his home in Wisconsin. Owing to a mistake in the baggage tags, the corpse got shipped to a rifle company in Peoria, and he and the expressman work through a grotesque evening sparked by a rotting Limburger cheese which they are persuaded is the corpse. It turns out that the expressman is used to transporting corpses: "I never did see one of 'em warm up to his work so, and take such a damnation interest in it... as long as I've ben on the road; and I've carried a many a one of 'em, as I was telling you." The railroad system, coupled with family mobility must have created a new attitude toward family burial.

"Playing Courier" (1891) traces a comic series of errors by an American who is guiding a tour group from Aix-les-Bains to Geneva. The complications include trying to buy tickets (he gets two-year-old lottery tickets by mistake), sending trunks from the French hotel to Zurich or Jericho, having three (horse-drawn) cabs with their meters running when he forgets his errands, and so on. Twain comments on the different customs in Europe: you can only buy through tickets in London and Paris; in Switzerland nothing goes free except hand luggage; the "lightning expresses are pretty fastidious about getting away some time during the advertised day." Twain clearly assumes that the logistics of upper-class rail travel are known well enough to entertain his audience.

A story from *Following the Equator* (1897) tells of a Presbyterian Sunday school teacher who goes courting in his buggy, decides to take off his clothes to go swimming, and, after having to chase the walk-away horse, winds up clad only in his lap-robe. His intended, her mother, and two women friends confront him, and the final scene is his intended reaching for the robe. "That was the end of the tale. The passenger who told it said that when he read the story twenty-

five years ago in a train, he was interrupted at that point - the train jumped off a bridge." If you've got access to wheels in the 1870s, you hire a buggy from the livery stable.

"Extract from Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven" (1907) mentions a balloon ride.

Edition used: New York: Bantam Classic, 1964.

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## 46

**Author:** Henry James (1843-1916)

**Title:** *The American*

**Date:** 1876 Written: 1875-6

**Systems:** Street car, Railroad

**Context:** 1868, Travel in Europe

Christopher Newman had come most recently from San Francisco, the western edge of the New World, to bring progressive ideas about life and civilization to the Old World. Early on he sees the presence of modern transportation, the street-car, in Brussels as "the reappearance of this familiar symbol of American civilisation." He carries his personal attitude toward modern travel with him as well: "He had always hated to hurry to catch railroad trains, and yet he always caught them" (Ch. 5). Throughout the novel, Newman's efforts at a kind of reverse colonization run into the effective resistance of European institutions. Europe just takes what it wants, as it symbolically had done with the streetcar.

Edition used: New York: Norton Critical Edition, 1978.

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## 47

**Author:** Louisa May Alcott (1832-1888)

**Title:** *Little Women*

**Date:** 1868-69

**Systems:** Carriages, train

**Context:** Contemporary, Boston area, London, Nice

Amy Marsh's travels to England and Europe become the occasion for her to describe various sorts of foreign behavior and customs for an American audience in a novel which became a famous and influential. In one of her letters she remarks with enthusiasm on riding a train in England where "we were whisking along at the rate of sixty miles an hour." She also describes ordering a Hansom cab to tour London, and notes that "Every one rides - old men, stout ladies, little children, and the young folks do a deal of flirting here." Presumably both the speed and the extent of carriage use, with the vague hint about sexual opportunity are all different from what one found in Boston (Ch. 31). A later portrait of the streets of Nice emphasizes the cosmopolitan nature of that city as well, again, as the carriages: "Many nations are represented ... [including] free-and-easy Americans, - all drive, sit, or saunter here.... The equipages are as varied as the

company, and attract as much attention, especially the low basket barouches in which ladies drive themselves, with a pair of dashing ponies, gay nets to keep their voluminous flounces from overflowing the diminutive vehicles, and little grooms on the perch behind." When she meets her old American friend, Theodore Laurence, "Amy who preferred to drive; for her parasol-whip and blue reigns, over the white ponies' backs, afforded her infinite satisfaction" (Ch. 37). Even at the end of the century, it is rare to see women driving.

The main scenes are at the Marches' home near Boston. They are able to hail an omnibus to go to Boston (e.g., Ch. 14), and, for special events such as taking six to eight people to an artistic fête in the countryside, they hire a carriage (Ch. 26). In contrast, their richer neighbors the Laurences have a "cherry-bounce." (Hannah's [a servant's] pronunciation of char-a-banc.)" - a carriage with benches. In a gently humorous scene, the German teacher Mr. Bhaer turns down the chance to flag down the passing "omniboos" on a muddy road, when he proposes to Jo Marsh, the central character, a scene which symbolizes how the world passes them by.

Taking the overnight train to Washington is not a major event. When a telegram comes about Mr. Marsh's illness, Mrs. Marsh travels the next morning. Similarly, when Beth is ill, the family telegraphs to Washington, and the only concern is that the snow might delay her arrival (Ch. 15 and 18). Incidentally, when Amy travels to Europe as Aunt Carrol's companion, it is on a steamer, but the travel is presented as being routine.

Edition used: New York: Viking Penguin, 1989.

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## 48

**Author:** John Rollin Ridge (1827-1867)

**Title:** "The Atlantic Cable"

**Date:** 1868

**Systems:** Train, horse car

**Context:** Contemporary

This short poem about mid-century progress covers the major events such as the transcontinental railroad - "And man is nearer to his brother brought." Ridge goes past a series of systems, the horse car ("beasts were tamed to drag the rolling car"), "winged ships" which "did skim the bosom of the bounding sea," steamships ("came next to wake the world from sleep"), and finally the train seen in its post-war perspective. "The thund'rous chariot pause in mid career. / Its crimsoned wheels no more through blood to steer... A throbbing heartstring of Humanity!" Celebratory poems like this must have been cranked out by the hundreds in American newspapers.

Edition used: Paul Lauter, et al., eds. *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, Vol. 1. Lexington, MA, D. C. Heath, 1990.

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## 49

**Author:** Various

**Title:** American Ballads: Naughty, Ribald, and Classic

**Date:** Middle to late nineteenth century



**Systems:** Canal, steamboat, train, carriage, streetcar

**Context:** Chiefly last half of the nineteenth century

Ballads from the second half of the nineteenth century give snapshots of the systems' construction, operations, as well as their periodic disasters. Along the way we find heroes, many criminals (petty and felonious), and sexual encounters of various sorts.

### **Canals:**

"The Erie Canal," rhymes with the mule's name, "Sal." The towing run is fifteen miles; the cargo is lumber, coal, and hay; the chorus talks of "Low bridge, everybody down." The second stanza is about getting to a lock at 6 o'clock and a return to Buffalo.

"Black Rock Pork," apparently a tough, unpalatable variant, is brought on board a Buffalo to New York canal boat. After three days the boat strikes a "rock of Lackawanna coal" (another black rock), gets a hole which has to be repaired with the driver's "crumbly undershirt." The cook, "six feet in her socks; / She had a bosom like a box-car, / And her breath would open the locks." In the final stanza, for no apparent reason, "the cooks is in the poor-house, / And the crew is all in jail."

"A Song of Panama" uses the "'Chuff! chuff! chuff!'" of the heavy equipment to glorify the great canal of the twentieth century: "We're a liftin' half creation, an' we're changin' it around." (Alfred Damon Runyon, 1880-1946.)

### **Steamboats:**

"Jim Bludso" is the engineer on a Mississippi steamboat with wives in Natchez and Pike (County) and no real home. His "religion" is "To treat his engines well; Never be passed on the river" and not lose a race to The Prairie Bell. In a race a fire "burst out" and Jim holds the boat's "nozzle agin the bank / Till the last galoot's ashore." Jim dies, doing his duty. (John Hay, 1838-1905, Pike County Ballads, 1871.)

In "Natchez Nan and her Gambling Man," the honest gambler is Derringer Dan; Nan is the captain's daughter. At Belle Bayou the boat takes on cotton and a dishonest gambler, Handsome Hank. Hank shoots Dan dead; Nan "Hopped into the Mississipp" in despair. Aside from the riverboat gambler stereotypes, this portrays a devoted woman. (C. H. Wheeler.)

"John Maynard" (1862) is an account of the Lake Erie steamer, Ocean Queen, which catches fire with 300 aboard. Maynard, the captain, calmly heads the boat for shore; the flames get to the wheelhouse, but the captain holds course and all but the brave captain are saved. "God rest him! Never hero had / A nobler funeral pyre!" One might expect that nearly every major boat disaster led to a ballad like this one, published regionally or nationally. Train, plane, and automobile rarely inspire such reactions, perhaps, in part, because they do not have names. (Horatio Alger, Jr., 1834-1899)

### **Trains:**

Railroad construction, in general, is the topic of "I've Been Workin' on the Railroad" - "All the livelong day"; the whistle blows early. "Just to pass the time away" ironically makes railroad work sound relaxing. This song was revised from an earlier one, "I've been working on the levee."

"What the Engines Said" celebrates the opening of the Union Pacific in 1869. The engines have "half a world behind each back," and they talk about their origins. The Western engine had struggled over the Sierras; the Eastern one about the Atlantic ocean and about "nursing in my iron breast / All his vivifying heat." In reply, the Western engine points to its East, "All the Orient, all Cathay." Finally, it is remarkable that the two engines "have met without collision." This is a popular version of the theme expressed in Whitman's "Passage to India." (Bret Harte, 1836-1902.)

"Casey Jones" (1900) was "a brave engineer" who rode to fame on "a heavy eight-wheeler." They leave the South



Memphis yards "on the fly" but run into track washed out by heavy rain and have a hard time catching up to their schedule. They are on the same track as a passenger train; the fireman jumps, but Casey stays and takes "his farewell journey to the Promised Land." As he nears death, he really wishes he were on the Southern Pacific or the Santa Fe, rather than "the old I.C.," the Illinois Central. (The accident occurred on April 30, 1900.)

"The Hell-Bound Train" depicts a dream of a Texas cowboy who "Had drunk so much he could hold no more." "The engine with human blood was damp, / And the headlight was a brimstone lamp; / An imp for fuel was shoveling bones, / And the furnace roared with a thousand groans." The devil, the conductor, says "So you've paid full fare and I'll carry you through." The cowboy wakes, prays, and is saved.

"The Boston Burglar" is convicted and put "on the passenger one cold, cold winter's day. / And every depot that I passed I heard the people say, / 'That man's the Boston Burglar, for prison he is bound, / All for his evil doings he's off to Charlestown.'"

"Sam Bass and How His Career Was Short" (1879) explains how Sam, from Indiana, with some friends from Texas "robbed the U. P. train" and three others ("all the passengers, mail, and express cars too"). All four robbers are shot or arrested. More notorious is "The Death of Jesse James" which begins with robbing the Glendale train on a Wednesday; he's shot in the back on a Saturday (April 3, 1882).

"In the Baggage Coach Ahead" features a young man with a babe in his arms; the child's cries annoy the others: "We have paid for our berths and want rest." The babe's mother is dead in the baggage coach ahead. The men console him and the women help with the child, "And soon was the little one sleeping in peace, / With no thought of sorrow or pain." The train, as a somewhat public space, can bring people together. (Gussie Davis.)

"The Charming Young Widow I Met on the Train": The narrator, on his way to his uncle's funeral and large legacy, can't find a first class seat so rides second class and meets the lovely widow and her young child. She asks what time it is, since he has a watch; she sobs when he asks the child's age. At a station near Boston she sees her husband's brother, asks the narrator to hold the child, gets off, and does not re-board the train. He finds his watch, purse, ticket, gold pencil case missing, and discovers that the child was a dummy. "And now I wish to counsel young men from the country... Beware of young widows you meet on the railway." You just can't tell.

Another traveller, "The Dying Hobo" expresses the man's final hope to go to a place "Where cops don't hound a hobo, or pinch a man on sight... where brakies ain't so mean." He hears the whistle (of death) and dies, and "His pardner swiped his shirt and coat and hopped the eastbound train," thus showing the indifference of the hobo world. (Bob Hughes.)

## Carriage

"The Dark Girl Dressed in Blue" is a story like that of the widow on the train, set on a "Broadway stage" going to Central Park. The girl seeks change from the narrator since she has only a \$10 bill. He makes change for her; they walk around for a couple of hours and stop at a bar. He uses the ten to pay for drinks; she leaves. The money is counterfeit. The lesson: "Be careful what you do, / When you make the acquaintance of ladies strange, / Especially a dark girl dressed in blue."

"The Deacon's Masterpiece, or the Wonderful 'One-Hoss Shay'" (1858) describes a carriage, built in 1755 and still working in 1855. The deal is that chaises break down but don't wear out, so the deacon picks his materials carefully; when the carriage fails it just turns into the pile of raw materials. The song points to the anniversary of Jonathan Edwards's Freedom of the Will, and is Holmes' allegorical commentary on the continuing influence of Puritan thought on New England. (Oliver Wendell Holmes, 1809-1894)

## Street car

"Punch, Brother, Punch" (1874) is a parody of a sign in the horse cars. Aside from rhyming "fare" with "passinjare," we get lines like "A buff trip-slip for a 6-cent fare / A pink trip-slip for a 3-cent fare," so he must "punch with care." (Isaac H. Bromley.)

"Gossip in a Street Car" by Con Carbon, the poet laureate of the Pennsylvania coal country. The car breaks down and, "while the men were fixing it," women talk about family and town news until the conductor says they are on their way. It's hard to know whether the stalled car is the occasion for the talk or for the narrator's listening to it.

Edition used: Charles O'Brien Kennedy, ed. New York: Fawcett (Gold Seal), 1952.

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# The 1870s

[Adams'](#) broad sweep through the 1800s includes an analysis of the economic and social effects of the railroads, and speculates on the possible impacts of the airplane and automobile as he saw them at the turn of the century. [Faulkner](#) shows the arrival of the railroad in Mississippi, while [Washington](#) describes travel across rural Virginia. [Wister](#) explains its effects on the Western cattle industry. [Rølvaag](#) depicts settlement by wagon caravan just ahead of the trains in the Dakotas. [Wilder's](#) novels first show the dependency on rural Wisconsin on carriages and sleighs, and then dramatizes how [small towns](#) came to depend on the railroad for survival. [Howells](#) shows the moral and material consequences of railroad investments. [James](#) gives detailed scenes of the multiple transportation systems in eastern cities - all matter of carriages, railways, omnibuses, and horse cars in Boston, and the elevated trains in New York. [Wharton](#) focuses on the private carriages available to the wealthy in New York, and shows how carriages and trains were linked.

## 50

**Author:** Henry Adams (1838-1918)

**Title:** *The Education of Henry Adams*

**Date:** 1918 Written: 1907

**Systems:** Railroad, automobile, steamboat

**Context:** 1850-1905 (Autobiography), Boston, London, Washington, New York

Adams's autobiography is an idiosyncratic survey of nineteenth-century life as told through the eyes of President John Quincy Adams's grandson, a Real Adams. The narrating voice is an ironically bewildered, highly intellectual observer of a world which starts (psychologically) in the eighteenth century and ends (literally) in the twentieth. Adams's chief interests in the middle chapters are economic and political trends at the national level; the early chapters are a personal memoir, and the final ones are a proposal for a theory of history. This theory brings together the dynamo, a symbol for the twentieth century, with the Middle Ages' veneration of the Virgin in a critique of the centrifugal effects of the modern world and its developing technologies.

Events from the "new world" of his childhood, known about later but not remembered, are the opening of the Boston and Albany Railroad in 1846 and the first Cunard steamers in 1838, and the telegraph (Ch. 1).

One early episode is a trip the twelve-year-old Henry took from Boston to Washington in 1850. He was already familiar with trains from family trips to New York. This time, they need an English carriage to the Camden and Amboy Railroad - then a steamer from Trenton to Philadelphia, boat to Chester, train to Havre de Grace, boat to Baltimore, and rail to the District of Columbia. "The railway, about the size and character of a modern tram, rambled through unfenced fields and woods, or through village streets..." Young Adams is shocked by being in slave territory, and finds the lack of pavements on DC streets a sign of the immorality of that system, "Bad roads meant bad morals" (Ch. 3).

After serving with his father, counsel to Britain during the Civil War, Adams returns in 1868 on a Cunard steamer after nearly seven years. As part of his assessment of the America he is re-entering, he comments, "From the moment that the railways were introduced, life took on extravagance." Europe, he notes, was only "habitable" along a few narrow stretches; "to fit out an entire continent with roads [railroads] and the decencies of life would exhaust the credit of the entire planet," a reference to the way American rail absorbed the capital of England, the Continent, as well as this country. Following the war, then, "society went back to its work, and threw itself on that which stood first - its roads...."

The generation between 1865 and 1895 was already mortgaged to the railways" (Ch. 16). Later, in the chapter dated 1892, Adams says, "Except for the railway system, the enormous wealth taken out of the ground since 1840, had disappeared." This new world "hurried on to its telephones, bicycles, and electric trams." Adams charts these changes also in the amount of coal produced and used (Ch. 21). In his international perspective, "The ocean steamer ran the surest line of triangulation into the future, because it was the nearest of man's products to a unity; railroads taught less because they seemed already finished except for mere increase in number" (Ch. 22).

Adams becomes fascinated by the Paris Exposition of 1900; Samuel Langley, the developer of the first American airplane (1896), was his guide. "Langley, with the ease of a great master of experiment, threw out of the field every exhibit that did not reveal a new application of force." He ignores the industrial exhibit; "his chief interest was in new motors to make his airship feasible, and he taught Adams the astonishing complexities of the new Daimler motor, and of the automobile, which, since 1893, had become a nightmare at a hundred kilometres an hour, almost as destructive as the electric tram which was only ten years older; and threatened to become as terrible as the locomotive steam-engine itself, which was almost exactly Adams's own age."

This chapter, "The Dynamo and the Virgin," also discusses the "moral" implications of new technologies, their inability to motivate ordinary peoples' spirits the way the medieval world was motivated by the Virgin Mary to build great cathedrals (Ch. 22). The railways and steamboats were centralized - the dynamo and the automobile promise to be more diffused: "The work of domestic progress is done by masses of mechanical power - steam, electric, furnace, or other - which have to be controlled by a score or two of individuals who have shown capacity to manage it" (Ch. 28). The "new America" of 1903-1904 "was the child of steam and the brother of the dynamo." "The automobile alone could unite them [the scattered monuments of the culture] in any reasonable sequence, and although the force of the automobile, for the commercial traveller, seemed to have no relation to the force that inspired a Gothic cathedral, the Virgin in the twelfth century would have guided and controlled both bag-man and architect, as she controlled the seeker of history" (Ch. 32). As before, Adams charts progress (partly) in terms of world energy output which doubled every ten years between 1840 and 1900, for example, "one might hire, in 1905, for a small sum of money, the use of 30,000 steam-horse-power to cross the ocean, and by halving this figure every ten years, he got back to 234 horse-power for 1835" (Ch. 34). Adams is especially concerned that these changes are not in sequence, in smooth progression from one technological era to another - the jumps are such that the underlying culture is liable to be torn apart and put into chaos and anarchy.

Edition used: New York: Modern Library, 1931.

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## 51

**Author:** William Faulkner (1897-1962)

**Title:** "An Odor of Verbena" In *The Unvanquished*

**Date:** 1938

**Systems:** Railroad

**Context:** 1870s, urban South

Most of *The Unvanquished* takes place during the Civil War, and, for our purposes, concentrates on wagons and horses used to convey soldiers and equipment during the Mississippi campaign. In the chapter "An Odor of Verbena," the narrator, Bayard, son of Colonel Sartoris, recounts the arrival of the railroad in the state in the early 1870s. The Colonel, with Redmond, a sometimes partner, "had put everything they could mortgage or borrow into it for Father to ride up and down the line, paying the workmen and the waybills on the rails at the last possible instant." After Redmond sells out, "seeing that he was going to finish it, some Northern people sold him a locomotive on credit which he named for Aunt

Jenny, with a silver oil can in the cab with her name engraved on it; and last summer the first train ran into Jefferson, the engine decorated with flowers and Father in the cab blowing blast after blast on the whistle when he passed Redmond's house." After that, "he stepped straight from the pilot of that engine into the race for the Legislature."

These passages point out themes that have appeared in literary (and political) discussions of the post-Civil-War railroads - financing from outside the region or the country in the face of extraordinary, and inter-state capital, the local and populist enthusiasm which accompanied the railroad's arrival, and the way railroad investors used their positions for political advantage.

Edition used: New York: Vintage, 1965.

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## 52

**Author:** Booker T. Washington (1856-1915)

**Title:** *Up from Slavery*

**Date:** 1901

**Systems:** Train

**Context:** 1860-1890s, South, African-American perspective

During Washington's childhood in Virginia, "the slaves on our far-off plantation, miles from any railroad or large city or daily news paper, knew what the issues involved [in Lincoln's 1860 campaign] were" (Ch. 1). After liberation (in 1872), Washington hears about Hampton college, 500 miles east, and sets out with his satchel of clothing. Trains go part of the way; stage coaches cover the rest, but he hasn't money enough to travel the whole way. At one stop he has his first experience in a segregated hotel - "In my ignorance I supposed that the little hotel existed for the purpose of accommodating the passengers who travelled on the stage-coach." He walks, begs rides in wagons and cars, and gets to Richmond where he finds an elevated place under the board sidewalk to sleep. He gets a job unloading a cargo of pig iron at the wharfs which continues for several days and gives him enough strength and money to get to Hampton (Ch. 3).

The most famous chapter is on the "Atlanta Exposition Address," 1895, much of which talks about African Americans' potential to contribute to southern agricultural economy. However, Washington does pay a little attention to industrialization, a "path that has led from these [agricultural exhibits] to the inventions to the inventions, and production of agricultural implements, buggies, steam-engines, newspapers, books" and so on. Washington returns from Atlanta to Tuskegee by train - at all the stations he finds crowds who want to shake his hand. At least for Washington, riding a train had become routine.

Edition used: Paul Lauter, et al., eds. *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, Vol. 2. Lexington, MA, D. C. Heath, 1990.

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## 53

**Author:** Owen Wister (1860-1938)

**Title:** *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains*

**Date:** 1902

**Systems:** Train, carriage

**Context:** 1874-1890, upper midwest, St. Louis

"The most famous Western novel ever written," *The Virginian* is as much a story of the railroad's impact on Wyoming as it is of horses and cows. The novel ends with the train coming into cattle country for the new-found coal (the end of an era), and it starts with the narrator's looking "through the window-glass of our Pullman car" at cow ponies in a corral (how the East sees the old west). The book is consciously retrospective, consciously romantic (Preface). Wister gives detailed pictures of the whole institution, from small-town farewell parties, to baggage handling and the inconvenience of botched schedules in the middle of the prairies.

The narrator gets off the train at Medicine Bow, Wyoming, "a stranger, into the great cattleland," but his baggage is lost, "adrift somewhere back in the two thousand miles that lay behind me. And by way of comfort, the baggage-man remarked that passengers often got astray from their trunks, but the trunks mostly found them after a while." He stands, angry and deserted among the crates and boxes, and can't see any antelope in the sage-brush or a glorious Western sunset. Here he overhears a conversation in which one Uncle Hurley is sent off by a Southerner on the East-bound train to get his bride, it turns out, in Laramie. When that train leaves, "I stared after it as it went its way to the far shores of civilization. It grew small in the unending gulf of space, until all sign of its presence was gone save a faint skein of smoke against the evening sky. And now my lost trunk came back into my thoughts, and Medicine Bow seems a lonely spot" (Ch. 1).

One problem in being left off the train is finding a place to sleep. The narrator is met by the Virginian, who will drive him over two hundred miles to his destination, Judge Henry's ranch, but they have to wait for the trunk. After negotiations and a bit of pistol packing, they wind up in a filled-up, five-bed hotel, nearly sharing beds with strangers. "In this public sleeping room they had done what ones does to secure a seat in a railroad train. Upon each bed, as notice of occupancy, lay some article of travel or dress" (Ch. 2). The next day, the Union Pacific train arrives "as if from distant shores. Its approach was silent and long drawn out. I easily reached town and the platform before it had finished watering at the tank." The narrator's trunk, and a fancy one tied with white ribbons belonging to Uncle Hurley's bride are there, along with a reception party for the couple, alerted "over the wires" about the marriage. As the narrator and the Virginian leave Medicine Bow they see a distant prospect of the train in the station, noting that the train has stopped before the sound of the whistle arrives (Ch. 4).

The ride to the ranch involves staying at cabins and farms where the Virginian is known. It also involves some rebelliousness on the horses' part (which gets the trunk tossed into a stream), but the travellers and the wagon manage to survive (Ch. 4).

Like other Western novels, this one has its love interest, embodied in Molly Stark Wood, a school teacher from Bennington, Vermont, who comes to teach in Wyoming. Wister gives a detailed account of her four days on trains and 30 hours on a stage coach to get there. At Bennington "some tearful people in petticoats waved handkerchiefs" see her off; she sees an engineer and conductor, "faces that she knew well," on the up-bound train at Hoosic Junction, and feels a strong sense of separation. At Rotterdam Junction, she's on the "through car," which gets to Ohio the next day, North Platte, Nebraska for breakfast two days after that, and off at Rock Creek, Wyoming that evening. At the first three stops she sends letters home, and dispatches a telegram upon arrival from Rock Creek. The non-stop coach ride, during which she is sort-of proposed to by the first driver and tries to sleep, also includes her being dumped in a stream when the drunken second coach driver loses control. She, her belongings, and the coach are rescued by... the hero (Ch. 9).

Aside from the schoolteacher's journey and some courtship scenes, the novel is built around episodes where the Easterner-narrator meets up with the Virginian. The second major one starts in Cyrus Jones's eating palace in Omaha, which is near the trains. "Our continent drained prismatically through Omaha once," and indeed that city in the 1880s was a place where people of various backgrounds came together. Judge Henry is shipping his cattle to Chicago in two "sections," i.e., two trains of 20 cars each, over the Burlington tracks, and the Virginian is in charge of the shipping. Because the Judge has been fighting the Elkhorn railroad, the trains are stuck on a siding: the immediate concern is to get food and water to the cattle since they hadn't been cared for since they had been loaded on board. The Virginian and

the crew are to return by St. Paul and the Northern Pacific so he can negotiate with that road's directors for better service to Sunk Creek. After a brief card game on top of the cattle car, the train gets underway and the narrator watches it along with another train, the "Christian Endeavor," filled with missionaries on their way to Pike's Peak (Ch. 13).

This adventure continues as the narrator is trying to get to a Montana hunting trip. He goes by rail to Fort Meade, then by horse, and then, with three passengers in a bumpy stage coach, "six legs in the jerky." A goal of one of these is the gold excitement at Rawhide (Nevada?). In the morning they rush to catch the Northern Pacific express at Medora, North Dakota, but it had changed its schedule and left early. One of the trio curses the Northern Pacific: "the whole thing was sired by a whole doggone Dutch syndicate," a reference to German bondholders of American railroads. Fortunately they meet up with the Virginian in the caboose of the mile-long empty cattle train, since his delivery had been successful (Ch. 14). The narrator and the other two are welcomed aboard, and explaining that they missed the express satisfies the freight's crew. They sleep on the "shelves" of the caboose as the train goes along the Yellowstone river (Ch. 15).

The next morning, each stop is announced by its distance to Portland (1291 miles), and it turns out that they are losing ground owing to a washed out bridge at the Big Horn four days ago. This starts a general "discussion of the Northern Pacific's recent policy as to betterments, as though they were the board of directors." They discuss easing the grades (on the mountain runs), especially whether it is cheaper to put the water tank at the bottom or pumping water to the top and getting the trains a down-hill start. At the Rawhide station they wait with four stalled expresses and several freights for at least two hours. Lots of people, milling around: "Travellers stood and sat about forlorn, near the cars, out in the sagebrush, anywhere. People in hats and spurs watched them, and Indian chiefs offered them painted bows and arrows and shiny horns." The crowd is hungry, and so, in a humorous scene the Virginian sets up a frog hunt in the nearby marshes and cooks up frog legs (following his inspiration in the Omaha restaurant). This leads to fantasies about a regular market for frog's legs in dining cars and Yellowstone Park restaurants (Ch. 16).

In the final chapter, the Virginian and his bride, Molly Wood, take the train to Vermont to see her family and friends - so the drift of the travel is to introduce the westerner to the east as the frontier closes in the 1890s (Ch. 35).

Edition used: New York: Pocket Books, 1956 [Second edition, 1911].

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## 54

**Author:** O. E. Rølvaag (1876-1931)

**Title:** *Giants in the Earth*

**Date:** 1924-25

**Systems:** Wagon caravan, train

**Context:** 1873-1877, Dakota territory, Minnesota

The opening trip from Fillmore County, Minnesota has Per Hansa and his family first on the slim trail going west to the Dakota territory guiding their two oxen-drawn wagons. While they lose the path temporarily they pick it up at a ford and then continue to 52 miles from Sioux Falls (Ch. 1: 1). Once they settle in at Spring Creek, they watch the occasional caravans of other settlers who are moving west, including some Irish Civil War veterans who had claims to their lands but abandoned them (Ch. 1: 4), and other Norwegians who push on toward Vermillion (Ch. 1: 5). "That [second] summer many land-seekers passed through the settlement on their way west. The arrival of a caravan was always an event of the greatest importance. How exciting they were, those little ships of the Great Plain!... Many queer races and costumes were to be seen in these caravans, and a babble of strange tongues shattered the air.... And the caravans would roll onward into the green stillness of the west" (Ch. 2: 2).



In the background is the advancing railroad. In Chapter 1: 5 it is at Worthington, Minnesota, and Hansa travels the ninety miles in the fall to stock provisions for the winter. At the end of that difficult season, he devises a scheme to buy pelts from the Indians at Flandreau and to take them to Worthington for sale (Ch. 2: 1). In the summer and fall of 1877 "many schooners sailed across the wide prairie." Also that year, "One fine day a strange monster came writhing westward over the prairie, from Worthington to Luverne [another 30 miles]; it was the greatest and most memorable event that had yet happened in these parts. The monster crawled along with a terrible speed; but when it came near, it did not crawl at all; it rushed forward in tortuous windings, with an awful roar, while black, curling smoke streaked out behind it in the air. People felt that day a joy that almost frightened them; for it seemed now that all their troubles were over, that there could be no more hardships to contend with." The continuation of the rail line to Sioux Falls is seen as confirming that this was "a place fit to live" (Ch. 2: 3).

Edition used: O. E. Rølvaag and Lincoln Colcord, trans. New York: Harper and Row, 1929.

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## 55

**Author:** Laura Ingalls Wilder (1867-1957)

**Title:** *Little House in the Big Woods*

**Date:** 1932

**Systems:** Wagon and sleigh

**Context:** Rural Wisconsin, "sixty years ago"

The family lives on an isolated farm which is treated about twice a year by visits from relatives in wagons or sleighs. One highlight is the big bobsled at Christmas with Aunt Eliza and Uncle Peter - lots of bells. Another is Laura's first wagon ride to town the following spring. Since this world is seen from young Laura's point of view it's hard to tell whether the comings and goings are frequent or not. Pa walks the seven miles to town with his winter's gathering of furs, even though he owns both wagon and sled, and resident horses.

Edition used: New York: Harper & Row, 1953.

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## 56

**Author:** Laura Ingalls Wilder (1867-1957)

**Title:** *These Happy Golden Years*

**Date:** 1943

**Systems:** Wagon and buggy, train

**Context:** Rural Wisconsin, 1883-5

The central events in the courtship between Almanzo Wilder and Laura Ingalls involve Wilder's sleds, wagons, and buggies, and the various horses he owns and trains to pull them. The first chapters involve Laura (age 15) teaching for a winter term at a rural school, and Almanzo's weekly (12-mile one way) sleigh ride to pick her up, so she can spend the

weekends with Ma and Pa. At -40° they have to stop every few miles to thaw the horses' nostrils; but, more picturesquely, "Prince tossed his head high and shook music from his bells" (Ch. 8). Almanzo starts to teach Laura to drive the horses, which is not typical for girls or women to do. A few months later she is accomplished enough to help break in a pair of unusually pesky colts (Ch. 21). The seasonal year is punctuated by the first buggy ride of the spring amid slushy and muddy roads (Ch. 13), the weekly events where the young men take the young women for rides up and down Main Street, special Fourth of July excursions, transferring the wagon box onto the bobsled runners in the fall, and closing the curtains and putting a rubber storm apron across the front of the buggy to protect Laura and Almanzo from a driving thunderstorm. The success of the courtship is emphasized when Almanzo's wagon arrives at the Ingalls' house to pick up her trunk of clothes and childhood memorabilia for the move to the house he has built for them.

One side tale, involving Uncle Tom's trip to the Black Hills gold rush in 1874, describes ox-drawn covered wagons. Another tells of sister Mary's returning home from college in Vinton, Iowa, by train with the attendant difficulties of getting her trunk from the station. An ongoing problem is for various families to control their claims outside the town by living on them for five summers in a row. Laura helps the McKees one summer, first by going with them and their furniture on the seven-mile train ride to Manchester and then transferring the goods to a wagon for the ride to the claim (Ch. 14), and the return process in October where the influx of children fills the school where Laura teaches. Mr. McKee commutes from town to the claim on the weekends.

Edition used: New York: Harper & Row, 1971.

## 57

**Author:** Laura Ingalls Wilder (1867-1957)

**Title:** *The Long Winter*

**Date:** 1940

**Systems:** Train, wagon

**Context:** 1877-78, eastern South Dakota

A striking illustration of the dependency on the railroad by settlers in southwestern Minnesota and eastern South Dakota, and the prairies in general during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. A devastating series of two-, three-, and four-day blizzards hits a town of a handful of buildings during a winter that goes from October to the end of April. The trains deliver coal, kerosene, flour [this in a grain-producing region], and sugar, along with clothing, Christmas gifts from out east, and other niceties and necessities. The railroad system is quite vulnerable at the thirty-foot deep cut at Tracy, Minnesota, which fills up with snow. The town's frustration is exacerbated because information about efforts to keep the tracks clear is constantly available (by telegraph or telephone? - it's never spelled out).

Various efforts are made by railway officials and people from town to clear the tracks. For example, early in the season, men from the town take a hand car to clear the tracks with shovels, and a work train but no supplies get through. Up to the first of January there is still hope that a supply train will get through. No luck. The railroad superintendent himself tried to ram two engines with plows through the ten-foot, iced drift at Tracy but got totally frozen in and decided to close the line until spring (Ch. 21). The work train and one regular one are stranded on the track. Meanwhile back in town, people are near starvation from Christmas until a very late spring thaw.

Even after the Chinook winds, the trains don't come. "The blizzard winds had blown earth from the fields where the sod was broken, and had mixed it with snow packed so tightly in the railroad cuts that snowplows could not move it. The icy snow could not melt because of the earth mixed with it, and men with picks were digging it out inch by inch. It was slow work because in many big cuts they must dig down twenty feet to the steel rails" (Ch. 31). Since the town is served

by a single track, they have to wait until the stranded work train goes through to Huron, South Dakota. The spring thaw puts all of the roads under water so wagons cannot get through - actually the only way in or out would be by walking the railroad track one hundred miles to Brookings. The train whistle and smoke cause much hope, but the first freight through had only a commercial load (telegraph poles, farm machinery, and one "emigrant car" with a few bags of potatoes, some flour and salt pork). The second freight finally had the provisions ordered by the stores as well as the Ingalls' "Christmas barrel," filled with fancy clothes and a (very frozen) turkey at the bottom, sent by relatives in Wisconsin.

By the way, the people in town build special-purpose sleds for carrying hay from near-by claims and for tracking down a farmer who had actually grown some wheat last year. They do this between blizzards presumably because existing gear was under the snow drifts or because they hadn't thought through the problems.

The whole story is striking for how poorly the town's people are prepared to shift from subsistence farming to community life which depends on regular shipments by rail.

Edition used: New York: Harper Trophy Books, 1971.

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## 58

**Author:** William Dean Howells (1837-1920)

**Title:** *The Rise of Silas Lapham*

**Date:** 1884/5 (Serial)

**Systems:** Railroad, carriage, horse car, ferry

**Context:** 1875, Boston

Much of the plot centers around the Laphams' new house which is being build on the Back Bay, even though their Nankeen Square address is "more convenient to the horse cars." Silas, a wealthy owner of a paint company, has several vehicles including a four-seated bench wagon, a sleigh, and (probably) a buggy; the horses are kept at the livery stable around the corner. He enjoys driving fast, as he does at a detailed scene of horse-drawn sleighs and "thousands of" cutters on the Boston Milldam (Ch. 2). Members of the family take "hacks," or hired carriages, when they are not using their own vehicles. The road congestion is matched by the heavy traffic at the wharf at Nantasket, a summer-home place with a view of the Bay: "Someday ... there's going to be an awful accident on those boats," the steamboat ferry from Boston. Silas Lapham likes the ride because it gives him a "complete rest from business"; he likes the fresh air and he compares it with the rest he gets from driving his horse carriage (Ch. 6). The carriage is the site of a private talk between Silas and Persis, his wife, a place to get away from their daughters, servants, and visitors. This conversation is interrupted by a slight buggy crash (Ch. 18).

Lapham's financial problems and eventual bankruptcy are compounded by a property deal which shows the way railroads use their economic power and monopoly over freight hauling to drive down property prices. His former partner, Milton Rogers, owns a mill operation in the Midwest which is serviced by a small railroad, "the only road that runs within fifty miles of the mills, and you can't get a foot of lumber nor a pound of flour to market any other way." The local railroad, "P.Y. & X.," is leased to a bigger one, the G.L. & P. (the "Great Lacustrine & Polar") which plans to build car works next to the mills. [Persis Lapham falls "helplessly into his alphabetical parlance" in talking about the deal (Ch. 20).] While Foster might get a decent price for the property from the local road, he will surely lose money under the current arrangement. Rogers has given his ownership of the mills to Lapham to pay old debts, but his has not been honest about the impending devaluation of the property, so Lapham, properly, calls him a thief (Ch. 21). Eventually British investors show an interest in buying the property; Rogers strings them along, but Lapham will not be

dishonest and the deal falls through, even though he is ruined.

Along the way trains are routinely used by Silas and his family. Persis and Irene, one of their daughters, take the Pullman train to Vermont - to get away from emotional entanglements in Boston (Ch. 19). Silas, after a business trip, where he finds that he will probably lose his business, is "sleepbroken, from the sleeping car in the Albany depot at Boston" (Ch. 25).

Edition used: New York: Signet Classic, 1980.

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## 59

**Author:** Henry James (1843-1916)

**Title:** *The Bostonians*

**Date:** 1886

**Systems:** Carriage, street car, train, elevated train

**Context:** 1870s, Boston, New York city, Cape Cod

The opening chapters describe Boston's feminist leadership while the second half of the novel focuses on Basil Ransom's courtship of Verena Tarrant and the opposition by Olive Chancellor to their union. Basil is a cousin of Olive from Mississippi. James moves his comments from the political to the personal as the book unfolds.

Accordingly, James starts out with passages on the politics and economics of Boston's architecture and transportation. After Olive and Basil finish dinner at a restaurant, Olive orders a hackney ("one of the advantages of living in Charles Street [was] that stables were near") so they can go to the South End of Boston. Olive herself would have taken the streetcar, not for economy and not for safety, but to "mingle in the common life," even though she loathes the public conveyance. She sympathizes with the poor girls from South Boston who have to squeeze into horsecars every night. The carriage is symbolically inappropriate for the way the roadway is designed: "As they rolled toward the South End, in a good deal of silence, bouncing and bumping over the railway tracks very little less, after all, than if their wheels had been fitted to them" (Ch. 3). Some chapters later, Verena takes a crowded streetcar from Cambridge to Charles Street, although the "direct connection" hardly seems direct since she "had to stand up all the way, half suspended by a leathern strap from the glazed room of the stifling vehicle, like some blooming cluster dangling in a hothouse. She was used, however, to these perpendicular journeys" (Ch. 10).

The unnamed narrator gives a panoramic view of Boston in winter from Olive's drawing room. "There was something inexorable in the poverty of the scene, shameful in the meanness of its details, which gave a collective impression of boards and tin and frozen earth, sheds and rotting piles, railwaylines striding flat across a thoroughfare of puddles, and tracks of the humbler, the universal horsecar, traversing obliquely this path of danger; loose fences, vacant lots, mounds of refuse, yards bestrewn with iron pipes, telegraph poles, and bare wooden backs of places." Verena finds this "lovely" - she sees "pink flushes on snow" and hears the car-bells, "no longer vulgar, but almost silvery, on the long bridge" (Ch. 20).

This scene, from the wealthy part of Boston, is contrasted with Basil's two-room apartment in New York, "rather far to the eastward, and in the upper reaches of the town." He overlooks a grocer's, smells smoked fish and molasses, and sees "a smart, bright wagon, with the horse detached from the shafts, drawn up on the edge of the abominable road (it contained holes and ruts a foot deep, and immemorial accumulations of stagnant mud), imparted an idle, rural, pastoral air to a scene otherwise perhaps expressive of a rank civilization." He also has a view, "at the end of the truncated vista, of the fantastic skeleton of the Elevated Railway, overhanging the transverse longitudinal street, which it darkened and smothered with the immeasurable spinal column and myriad clutching paws of an antediluvian monster" (Ch. 21)

Basil returns to Boston and meets Miss Birdseye, a Bostonian who had carried her belief in the abolitionist cause to the South before the Civil War, outside Olive's house. She "looked vaguely about her, in the manner of a person waiting for an omnibus or a streetcar." As an entry for a conversation, he offers to signal the car for her, "the big party-colored human van which now jingled toward them." The conductor recognizes Birdseye as a frequent passenger. Basil accompanies her home in the nearly-empty car. Ransome defends his Southern, conservative position, and, pointedly, finds out about where Verena lives. When they arrive at the change place, he helps her out with a "certain amount of propulsion from the conductor," and they wait for the blue car, "the oblong receptacle." The scene points out that, in some ways, it is easier to corner a person you want to talk with in a public vehicle than in a private carriage or car (Ch. 23).

The initial stages of Basil's courtship take place in New York. The events start when his rival, Henry Burrage, takes Verena for a drive in Central Park, to the Museum of Art, and Delmonico's for dinner in his private carriage - "the wonder of the young man's acquaintance with everything [the Museum] contained, the swiftness of his horses, the softness of his English cart, the pleasure of rolling at that pace over roads as firm as marble..." (in contrast to Basil's street) (Ch. 30). This drive is contrasted with Basil's expedition, where he and Verena leave where she's staying at Tenth Street and take advantage of the train: "The beauty of the 'elevated' was that it took you up to the Park and brought you back in a few minutes, and you had all the rest of the hour to walk about and see the place." The narrator reflects her thoughts: "It was very different from her drive yesterday with Mr. Burrage, but it was more free, more intense, more full of amusing incident and opportunity.... she could feel as if she were out for the day" (Ch. 33). After exploring the Park, sitting on a bench and flirting, they wind up at the southern border at Sixth Avenue, "The glow of the splendid afternoon was over everything... the streetcars rattled in the foreground, changing horses while the horses steamed, and absorbing and emitting passengers... Groups of the unemployed, the children of disappointment from beyond the seas, propped themselves against the low, sunny wall of the park." Basil offers to put her on a (street)car but she chooses to walk in order to think about his overtures (Ch. 34).

Private versus public transportation points out the difference between the two men and highlights Verena's choice.

Olivia takes Verena to Cape Cod to exercise her control, to give her time to prepare for an important public lecture she will deliver, and to get her away from Basil. He goes by train from Boston to "the small, lonely, hut-like station" near the village of Marmion on the Cape. There's no room on the carriage (a "carryall") for the hotel so Basil has his valise put on the rear and walks. The Cape is, for Basil, an isolated, quiet setting, and, as with other places in the novel, James describes the streets: "The road wandered among [the houses] with a kind of accommodating sinuosity, and there were even cross-streets, and an oil-lamp on a corner, and here and there the small sign of a closed shop, with an indistinctly countrified lettering" (Ch. 35). Eventually Basil meets up again with Verena on the Cape and their courting continues until, again, Olive gets her on the Cape Cod train, back to Boston (Ch. 39).

In the final chapter, Verena quits on the verge of giving her big Boston lecture to run away with Basil, on the night-train to New York where they will get married (Ch. 41).

Edition used: New York: Modern Library, 1956.

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## 60

**Author:** Edith Wharton (1862-1937)

**Title:** *The Age of Innocence*

**Date:** 1920

**Systems:** Carriage, train



**Context:** Late 1870s, New York City, Newport

Wharton looks back half a century to the time of her youth (she was born in 1862) and portrays the upper-class world of New York City. The central story involves Newland Archer, May, his wife for the second half of the novel, and Ellen Countess Olenska, the woman he Really Loves. The logistics of Ellen and Newland's meetings involve trains, boats, and, chiefly, carriages of various sorts.

"Everybody" here has a private carriage - a brougham, landau, or barouche - equipped with a driver and available nearly all the time. May's parents give her a brougham for her wedding, and Newland and she select two horses in the months after the event (Ch. 21). When Newland's mother was a girl (in the 1820s?) their family knew "everybody between the Battery and Canal Street; and only the people one knew had carriages" (Ch. 12). Now the newly rich also have private transportation, but we see that it is restricted to the very well to do.

The coupé is almost as "honorable" as a private carriage for the opera, and they are at the front of the line while others have to wait for their coachmen to arrive (Ch. 1). At various times Newland hires a "runabout" with a pair of livery stable trotters at Newport, (Ch. 22), hires a cab with Ellen in Boston, where the "clatter of the loose windows" makes conversation impossible, (Ch. 23), and takes a crowded horse car from Wall Street and transfers to one of the "huge, staggering omnibuses of the Fifth Avenue line" at 14th Street for a long trip uptown to his house (Ch. 27).

A possible tryst between Newland and Ellen is ended with the approaching trot of the horses, which she had arranged for ten o'clock (Ch. 18); that sound echoes in his mind soon after he marries May, and he recalls an image of Ellen driving behind a friend's horses at Newport while he lies next to his wife in bed (Ch. 20).

The Archers have a reserved train compartment for their honeymoon to upstate New York, the train, "shaking off the endless wooden suburbs, had pushed out into the pale landscape of spring" (Ch. 19). While the Archers are at Newport, he takes the Fall River train to Boston: "The streets near the station were full of the smell of beer and coffee and decaying fruit, and a shirt-sleeved populace moved through them with the intimate abandon of boarders going down the passage to the bathroom," a nice line on the location of urban railroad stations. A French visitor comments that there are few porters in American depots. (Ch. 24).

When Ellen's grandmother has a mild stroke, the family telegraphs her to catch the next train from Washington D. C. (Ch. 27).

Ellen's arrival is a major event in the novel. There are "material difficulties," since she has to be met in Jersey City and the Archers have to meet her there with a carriage. "[O]ne could not ask May, at the close of a winter afternoon, to go alone [the driver doesn't count] across the ferry to Jersey City, even in her own carriage.... It might appear inhospitable... if Madame Olenska were allowed to arrive without any of the family being at the station to receive her." So Newland goes in his wife's brougham, ironically "with the wedding varnish still on it," to the Pennsylvania Railroad terminus. The carriage emerges from the "coil about the station" and then crawls down the snow-slickened incline to the wharf where they see coal carts, "dishevelled express wagons" and, symbolically, an empty hearse. They stay in the carriage for the ferry ride and the bump when the boat comes to the New York wharf throws them together and he steals a kiss. The impossibility of their romance and the "searching illumination of Fifth Avenue" ends the contact (Ch. 29).

In a curious passage, as he waits for the Washington express, Newland "remembered that there were people who thought there would one day be a tunnel under the Hudson through which the trains of the Pennsylvania railway would run right into New York. They were of the brotherhood of visionaries who likewise predicted the building of ships that would cross the Atlantic in five days, the invention of a flying machine, lighting by electricity, telephonic communication without wires, and other Arabian Night marvels" (Ch. 29).

Early in the book, on an impulse, Newland takes a boat to St. Augustine, Florida to settle on his wedding date (Ch. 15); a stock speculator is reputed to have bought a "new steam yacht" with tiled bathrooms and other extravagances for half a million dollars (Ch. 21). The final chapter, moving forward by 26 years to the first decade of the new century lets Wharton do a "where are they now" with the characters, and also lets us see the prophesied long-distance telephone, electric lights, and the five-day voyage of the *Mauritania* to Europe (Ch. 34).

Edition used: New York: Signet Classic, 1962.

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# The 1880s

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[Howells](#) elaborates on the picture of New York city's competing rail-based Systems, and has a street car strike as a central event. [Cather](#) depicts midwesterners' excitement upon arriving in New York by train, and shows a woman's freedom to travel alone. [Bellamy](#) analyzes the growth of monopolies with railroads as his example and as the source of metaphors. [Freeman's](#) rural New England is shown to be still dependent on carriages. [Zitkala-Sa](#) tells of a Native American girl's ride between the Yankton Sioux reservation and a boarding school in Indiana. [Garland](#) gives a series of pictures of the railroad in western Wisconsin, while [Faulkner](#) charts the effects of the railroad and, decades later, the automobile on rural Mississippi. [Hurston](#) and [Reed](#) tell of railroad construction through the myths of John Henry and Railroad Bill, "the conjure man."

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## 61

**Author:** William Dean Howells (1837-1920)

**Title:** *A Hazard of New Fortunes*

**Date:** 1890

**Systems:** Elevated train, horse-drawn street car

**Context:** 1880s, New York City

The novel gives complex pictures of the complementary and competing Systems in New York City in the 1880s. For example, the main event of the book is a strike against the street-car company which is broken by police and scabs, and by the fact that the elevated trains keep running (Ch. 5: 4). The city is a "turmoil of cars, trucks, and teams of every sort, intershot with foot-passengers going and coming to and from the crowded pavements, under the web of the railroad tracks overhead," (Ch. 2: 11). This "turmoil," visible down the side streets, ends with a view of "the chimneys and masts of shipping, and final gleams of dancing water" (Ch. 4: 2).

The central characters, the Marches, leave from the Albany Station, Boston, for New York - the trip takes 7 hours and covers 200 miles. The parlor-like station has mahogany rocking chairs, cozy walls, although the fireplaces are not used. The dining car is later attached to the train. Basil March comments on the passing scene, noting that it's impossible to keep the visual middle ground in view while watching the foreground next to the train and the rushing background (Ch. 1: 6). Later an older widow goes to Florida by a "Pullman vestibulated train," the "usual conveyance." (Ch. 2: 1). We are later reminded that having Pullmans doesn't let us pretend that there aren't first-class cars (Ch. 3: 9).

In New York, the Marches recall Broadway of five, ten, and twenty years ago, "a tide of gayly painted omnibuses and of picturesque traffic" now replaced by horse cars with grinding wheels and harsh bells. Now it's safe to cross the street by Grace Church because police direct traffic; the "processional, barbaric gayety of the place is now gone" (Ch. 1: 8). The modern omnibus allows passengers to travel on the roof, an exciting difference from what is possible in Boston (Ch. 4: 2). As a minor comment, one of the characters has his coupé (taxi) move to asphalt-covered Madison Avenue because it's impossible to talk when they are riding over cobble stones.

The "L" is described in considerable detail, starting in Ch. 1: 8, where Basil proposes to take the train to the end of the line, into the country side, for relaxation after a hard day of apartment hunting. A long paragraph gives the Marches' view of New Yorkers' lives from the second and third floor level of the train - it is a theatre, a drama. Looking down the track gives a long view of the city lights. The waiting night trains evoke "What forces, what fates, slept in these bulks"

(Ch. 1: 10). Basil and Isabel March agree that "the flame-shot" of the approaching train is "the most beautiful thing in New York" (Ch. 2: 9). Later in the book, the view from the "L" gives an odd but interesting glimpse at the city's ornamental architecture, e.g., the Corinthian front of an old theatre (Ch. 2: 11).

Another long passage describes Basil's preference for the East Side to the West Side "L." The East Side draws from the city's many "nationalities, conditions, and characters." Howells, through Basil, comments on the immigrants' escape from Europe, their national customs, their facial characteristics, and thinks about "the future economy of our heterogeneous commonwealth" (Ch. 2: 11). When Isabel and Basil do ride to the end of the West Side line, they see "the city pushing its way by regular advances into the country," thus defining the social and psychological limits of urbanization by the reaches of its fixed-rail transportation system (Ch. 4:3).

The new Systems contribute importantly to the country's economy. Metaphorically, Basil's boss describes great wealth as "dollars enough to construct a silver railroad, double track, from this office to the moon" (Ch. 3: 2). Back home in the Dryfooses' Indiana, the legislature is wasting public money by selling a local canal to the railroad, thereby killing "that fine old State work" (Ch 3: 8). As noted, the central dramatic events in the novel surround the strike by street car workers, events based on Howells' reaction to the 1886 Haymarket riot in Chicago (Ch. 5: 2-5). Basil argues for a public interest in ending the strike, separate from the rights of the "roads" and the workers. The strike leads to silence "where a jangle and clatter of horse-car bells and hoofs had been" but the noise of the "L" would drown out that of the surface cars anyhow (Ch. 5: 3). The novel's capitalist, Dryfoos, "heard nothing of the strike in the lobby of the Stock Exchange" (Ch. 5: 4), but even March has some trouble finding the strike's activities, so it is generally far from most peoples' daily lives. When the strike does show up on stage, it is almost accidental - rioters try to stop a street car but the driver lashes the horses to escape: a cop and the conductor lead the way through the mob (Ch. 5: 5).

Howells' 1909 retrospective "Preface" notes (poetically) that "mildly tinkling horsecars" are now replaced by "clanging trolleys, in honking and whirring motors; the Elevated road which was the last word of speed is undermined by the Subway, shooting its swift shuttles through the subterranean woof of the city's haste."

Edition used: New York: Bantam Classic, 1960.

Critical comment: Amy Kaplan, "'The Knowledge of the Line': Realism and the City in Howells' A Hazard of New Fortunes," *PMLA* 101 (1986): 72-3, 77.

## 62

**Author:** Willa Cather (1876-1947)

**Title:** *My Mortal Enemy*

**Date:** 1926 Written: 1925

**Systems:** Train, carriage, cab

**Context:** 1880 in New York city and 20 years later in San Francisco

The eloping of Myra and Oswald Henshawe had become a romantic legend in the small midwestern town where the narrator lived. They left by sleigh and the 2 AM express to Chicago in the face of her father's threat to give her inheritance to the Church (Ch. 1: 2). The fifteen-year-old narrator, Nellie Birdseye, visits them once in New York when they are fairly rich and then a decade later, by chance, when they are poor and she is a beginning teacher.

The New York trip involves being met by Myra at the Jersey City station, walking to the ferry which goes to the 23rd Street Station, then riding the crosstown car to the Henshawes' hotel. During the visit Nellie and Myra ride home from Central Park in a hansom, and Myra expresses what Nellie calls "insane ambition.... here Mrs. Myra was wishing for a

carriage - with stables and a house and servants, and all that went with a carriage!" (Ch. 1: 5). On the Pullman ride back west Nellie (and her aunt) are joined by Myra, who had left her husband and was going as far as Pittsburgh on the same train (Ch. 1: 6). Part of Myra's mystique is her freedom to travel independently.

In San Francisco, the Henshawes are reunited, but in financially reduced circumstances and Myra has become quite ill. On an April afternoon Nellie hires "a low carriage with a kindly Negro driver" for a drive along the shore. Nellie and "this nice darky man" help her get out, cover her in a blanket, so she can spend a pleasant hour looking at the sea with a few steamers below (Ch. 2: 2). After her illness worsens and she is given the Last Rites, she manages to signal the cab, which drove her to the same site, where she gets out and sends the cab away. "She must have died peacefully and painlessly. There was every reason to believe she had lived to see the dawn" (Ch. 2: 6).

Oswald has various jobs during the novel. At the start he has "a position" in the New York offices of an Eastern railroad; he and his wife may have traveled from Chicago to Parthia, Ill. on different trains (Ch. 1: 1). The railroad had gone into receivership and Oswald was let go after a brief time - this causes their financial problems, so he works for the city's "traction company" (Ch. 2: 2). At the end, he is going to work for an Alaskan steamship company (Ch. 2: 7).

Edition used: New York: Vintage, 1954.

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## 63

**Author:** Edward Bellamy (1850-1898)

**Title:** *Looking Backward: 2000-1887*

**Date:** 1887

**Systems:** Coach

**Context:** 1887 and a mythical East coast in the year 2000

This utopian novel puts a fantasy about the future next to a critique of Bellamy's own world. The basic idea is that state (federal) ownership of "mills, machinery, railroads, farms, mines, and capital in general" (Ch. 6) will overcome the bad effects of growing monopolies in the late nineteenth century. Dr. Leete, the main spokesman for the new (2000 AD) age, uses the "history" of railroads as his example; they "had gone on combining till a few great syndicates controlled every rail in the land" (Ch. 5). Partly because the dream/time-machine format restricts the future traveler to interior locales, the most detailed and rather fascinating technological advance in the late twentieth century is a nifty hi-fi system.

The first chapter has a detailed analogy between the sorry economy and "a prodigious coach which the masses of humanity were harnessed to and dragged toilsomely along a very hilly and sandy road. The driver was hunger, and permitted no lagging, though the pace was necessarily very slow.... the top was covered with passengers who never got down, even at the steepest ascents." The seats inside, for the movers and shakers, are insecure, so people keep falling out of them and others take their place. This system breeds very little compassion for the people on top and a lot of competition among those inside.

Edition used: New York: Regent Press, 1887.

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## 64

**Author:** Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (1852-1930)

**Title:** "On the Walpole Road" In *A Humble Romance*

**Date:** 1884

**Systems:** Carriage

**Context:** Contemporary, New England

The first part of the story tells of two women who drive on a New England country road. They start from Walpole, "a lively little rural emporium of trade; thither the villagers from the small country hamlets thereabouts went to make the bulk of their modest purchases. One summer afternoon two women were driving slowly along a road therefrom, in a dusty old-fashioned chaise, whose bottom was heaped up with brown-paper parcels." The couple has to attend both to the road conditions and the character of the horse, "a heavy, hard-worked farm animal" who isn't afraid of lightning. "This road was not much traveled, and grass was growing between the wheel-ruts; but the soil flew up like smoke from the horse's hoofs and the wheels." A thunderstorm comes up, and the horse's reluctance to move faster than his easy pace reminds Mis' Green of a funeral she attended twenty years ago. For our purposes, the relevant details concern a similar carriage ride in the middle of a thunderstorm in an effort to get to her aunt's funeral service on time. During the storm Green and her companion, Israel, get under the shay top, pull the blanket up, but still get dripping wet. These details emphasize the stability of this part of New England.

Edition used: Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse, eds. *American Women Regionalists: 1850-1910*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1992.

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## 65

**Author:** Zitkala-Sa (Gertrude Simmons Bonnin) (1876-1938)

**Title:** *The School Days of an Indian Girl*

**Date:** 1900

**Systems:** Train

**Context:** 1884, South Dakota and Indiana

At the age of eight, Zitkala-Sa is sent by train from her home on the Yankton Sioux reservation in South Dakota to a Quaker school in Indiana. The first chapter describes the expectations and fears of the eight young people on the "iron horse." The "staring palefaces disturbed and troubled us"; women notice the absent mothers, men rivet their "glassy blue eyes" on them, and little kids point at their moccasins. Zitkala-Sa is "breathless" at seeing the telegraph pole, "which strode by at short paces. Very near my mother's dwelling, along the edge of a road thickly bordered with wild sunflowers, some poles like these had been planted by white men.... Now I sat watching for each pole that glided by to be the last one." This unhappy ride is compared with buckboard rides back in Yankton during the summer. "Seizing the reins and bracing my feet against the dashboard, I wheeled around in an instant. The pony was ever ready to try his speed.... There was nothing moving within that great circular horizon of the Dakota prairies save the tall grasses, over which the wind blew and rolled off in long, shadowy waves. Within this vast wigwam of blue and green I rode reckless and insignificant. It satisfied my small consciousness to see the white foam fly from the pony's mouth" (Ch. 6).

Edition used: Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse, eds. *American Women Regionalists: 1850-1910*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1992.

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**Author:** Hamlin Garland (1860-1940)

**Title:** *Main-Travelled Roads*

**Date:** 1930 Written: 1888-1930

**Systems:** Carriage, railroad

**Context:** Chiefly 1880s, western Wisconsin

The preface: "The main-travelled road in the West (as everywhere) is hot and dusty in summer, and desolate and drear with mud in fall and spring, and in winter the winds sweep the snow across it.... Mainly it is long and wearyful, and has a dull little town at one end and a home of toil at the other. Like the main-travelled road of life it is traversed by many classes of people, but the poor and the weary predominate."

The stories represent two, parallel transportation Systems - horse-drawn and trains. Wagons change from being used on occasion to being part of scheduled work. The trains are for special trips, starting with demobilization after the Civil War through a series of disappointing train rides home to a town in the midst of a long slide toward depression.

"The Return of a Private" (set in 1865 or 1866) tells of a group of Civil War veterans returning to La Crosse from New Orleans in the caboose of a freight. "The station was deserted, chill, and dark, as they came into it at exactly a quarter to two in the morning. Lit by the oil lamps that flared a dull red light over the dingy benches, the waiting room was not an inviting place." The shell-shocked Smith "was attended to tenderly by the other men, who spread their blankets on the bench for him, and, by robbing themselves, made quite a comfortable bed, though the narrowness of the bench made his sleeping precarious." This group of veterans has missed the first wave who had been greeted at the stations with "banks of gayly dressed ladies waving handkerchiefs and shouting 'Bravo!'" He now begins and resumes "his daily running fight with nature and against the injustice of his fellowmen."

"The Creamery Man" tells of the time when the tin-peddlers' red wagons had gone out west, and were replaced by the battered, muddy wagon of Claude Williams, the creamery man. His courtship of Lucinda and later of Nina features "his newly painted buggy flashing in the sun, and the extra dozen ivory rings he had purchased for his harnesses clashing together, [as] he drove up the road as a man of leisure and a resolved lover." The story points out a shift to scheduled, daily use of horse-drawn commercial vehicles.

Uncle Ethan Ripley in the story bearing his name "had a theory that a man's character could be told by the way he sat in a wagon seat. 'A mean man sets right plumb in the middle o' the seat, as much as to say, "Walk, gol darn yeh, who cares!" But a man that sets in the corner o' the seat, much as to say, "Jump in - cheaper t' ride 'n to walk," you can jest tie to.'"

"A Branch Road" (1891) focuses on an accident involving a "top-buggy, in which to take his sweetheart to the neighboring town" for the county fair. Even though the demand for such buggies at the livery stable is high, Will can borrow his brother's rig which he washes and dusts with care. On the way to his date, the right fore-wheel falls off, and the two-hour delay to get a replacement part, the axle-burr, means that he misses his date and decides to leave town to avoid the shame and an explanation. Seven years later in 1887, Will returns to Rock River and finds Agnes has married, but quite unhappily. He tries to lure her away with the promise of a standing offer to be a conductor on the Santa Fe Railroad, or a trip to Europe, to "sit with me on the deck of the steamer." She accepts and with her daughter, "the world lay before them."

"Up the Coulé: A Story of Wisconsin" (1891) begins with the "fine ride" from Milwaukee to the Mississippi in the reclining chair (living-room comfort) as the summer fields and La Crosse valley pass by the train. Howard, the main

character, returning to his childhood home, gets off at the "grimy little station" with its "boiling hot splintery planks." The few idlers at the station are compared to people "standing before the Brooklyn Bridge." In the town, "The one main street ended at the hillside at his left, and stretched away to the north, between two rows of usual village stores, unrelieved by a tree or a touch of beauty"; the street is unpaved. His uncle, who happens to be in town, offers him a lift in his covered buggy whose top is lowered, as he goes to visit his mother and brother after being away for ten years. As part of his settling in for the visit a neighbor brings his trunk up from the freight station. He is accepted by his mother and, by the end of the story, reconciled with his brother. The elegant, modern train ride is the path back to his youth and to a collapsing rural society - where the four to one ratio of young women to young men highlights the lack of opportunity.

The same theme is articulated in "God's Ravens," a later story. Garland describes the escape from Chicago, "the great grimy terrible city.... With clanging bell the train moved away piercing the ragged gray formless mob of houses and streets (through which railways always run in a city)." The couple reaches the Wisconsin prairie within an hour, but the small town is getting old, "Here they sit while sidewalks rot and teams mire in the streets."

After 23 years of marriage, Mrs. Ripley, age 60, takes the train to New York, since she never had a day alone. The round trip ticket is \$55, but she must ride in an old-fashioned car, not a sleeper "where there ain't no half-dressed men runnin' around." On the way to the station, "There is no ride quite so desolate and uncomfortable as a ride in a lumber-wagon on a cold day in autumn, when the ground is frozen, and the wind is strong and raw with threatening snow. The wagon-wheels grind along in the snow, the cold gets under the seat at the calves of one's legs, and the ceaseless bumping of the bottom of the box on the feet is almost intolerable." To Mr. Ripley's relief, his wife returns to pick up the chores he had let lapse ("Mrs. Ripley's Trip" [1888 in Harpers, 1891]). The train ride out of town (§ 3) and then the return from New York (§ 6) frames the story of Jim Sanford's adventure as a bank investor who gets into carelessness or embezzlement in "A 'Good Fellow's' Wife."

"Among the Corn-Rows" (1891) begins with an account of "railroad schemes," which control the prairies. Rob is to go east from the Dakota prairie to Wisconsin on the night train to find a wife. The 11:00 PM rendezvous, with Rob standing by his team, is successful, and he and Julia Peterson leave amid the sounds of the "dull tread of swift horses" and "the rising of a silent train of dust" - another couple getting away from the countryside.

Edition used: New York: Harper & Bros., 1956.

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## 67

**Author:** William Faulkner (1897-1962)

**Title:** *Go Down, Moses*

**Dates:** 1940, 1941, 1942

**Systems:** Wagon, train, automobile

**Context:** 1880s and 1940, Mississippi and Memphis

Faulkner uses the rituals and realities of hunting to dramatize the impact of the automobile on the rural South. Further, he extends the early hunts into a timeless, mythical past through the figure of Sam Fathers, a Native American.

The central story is "The Bear," set in the 1878 and years following with young Ike McCaslin as its central character learning the rituals of tracking deer and, the ultimate, a particular bear, Old Ben, with "the ruthless and irresistible deliberation of a locomotive, the shaggy tremendous shape." Each year Ike watches the procession of wagons with the gear, dogs, and ordinary hunters, and the ex-generals and ex-majors on horseback leaving Jefferson for the wilderness:



"no fixed path the wagons followed but a channel non-existent ten yards ahead of it and ceasing to exist ten yards after it had passed" (§ 1). The bear's path "rushed through rather than across the tangle of trunks and branches as a locomotive would" (§ 2). The train image portends the next phase of the hunt where it is broken up by side trips to Memphis. Now they are at the "log-line," the border of the logging operations which will destroy the wilderness, and they ride a warm caboose on the logging train. Old Ben becomes just a legend, like the boxer Sullivan and, later, Dempsey. They go to Memphis with its "high buildings and the hard pavements, the fine carriages and the horse cars." Now they are on schedules, missing the 1:00 and getting the 3:00 - and they take in the zoo where the bears eat ice cream and lady fingers (§3).

Major de Spain has sold the hunting camp to the loggers, and the logs look like miles of stacked rails. Faulkner sets up a personified train: "the little locomotive shrieked and began to move; a rapid churning of exhaust, a lethargic deliberate clashing of slack couplings traveling backward along the train, the exhaust changing to the deep slow clapping bites of power as the caboose too began to move." This train, "dragging its length of train behind it ... resembled a small dingy harmless snake vanishing into weeds," a Satan in what's left of Eden. The hunters shoot deer from the moving caboose; the whistle chases the bear up small trees. Previously the train had been "harmless," just a sound in the distance, but "it was different now," the wilderness is "doomed" by the train. Old Ben's foot is kept in an axle-grease tin, and the final scene is of Boon, one of the old hunters, hammering the barrel of his broken rifle against a railroad iron to drive away a swarm of squirrels (§5).

"Delta Autumn," set in 1940, captures the next stage of change, the automobile. "Now they went in cars, driving faster and faster each year because the roads were better and they had farther and farther to drive, the territory in which the game still existed drawing yearly inward. The sons and grandsons of men who rode 24 hours "behind the steaming mules" take Ike, nearly eighty years old, 200 miles for what's left. Ike "would look ahead past the jerking arc of the windshield wiper and see the land flatten suddenly and swoop, dissolving away beneath the rain as the sea itself would dissolve." The brake brings the car "to a skidding halt on the greasy pavement without warning," and tosses two passengers forward against the dash.

Faulkner carries the issue back to the prehistoric past: "The paths made by deer and bear became roads and then highways, with towns in turn springing up along them and along the rivers..." This new land is one "in which neon flashed past them from the little countless towns and countless shining this-year's automobiles sped past them on the broad plumb-ruled highways, yet in which the only permanent mark of man's occupation seemed to be the tremendous [cotton] gins...." Further, "the land across which there came no scream of panther but instead the long hooting of locomotives: trains of incredible length and drawn by a single engine, since there was no gradient anywhere and no elevation save those raised by forgotten aboriginal hands." And the automobile takes them to "the last little Indian-named town at the end of pavement they waited until the other car and the two trucks" carrying the hunting gear. They leave the gravel road and then grind on "with skid-chains on the wheels now, lurching and splashing and sliding among the ruts, until presently it seemed to him that the retrograde of his remembering had gained an inverse velocity from their own slow progress, that the land had retreated not in minutes from the last spread of gravel but in years, decades, back toward what it had been when he first knew it." Clearly, Faulkner turns motor vehicles into symbols of psychological, ecological, and cultural change over the centuries. "This land which man has deswamped and denuded and derivered in two generations so that white men can own plantations and commute every night to Memphis and black men own plantations and ride in jim crow cars to Chicago to live in millionaires' mansions on Lakeshore Drive..."

But, in the final story, "Go Down, Moses," it is a black man, executed for shooting a policeman in the back, whose body is brought home to Jefferson at his mother's request and with the white lawyer's funds and efforts. The casket is transferred from the train to a hearse with an audience of half a hundred Negroes, and we hear it go up the hill from the station, "going fast in a whining lower gear until it reached the crest, going pretty fast still but with an unctuous, an almost bishoplike purr until it slowed into the square." It reaches the city limit, "and the pavement vanished, slanting away into another long hill, becoming gravel." The parallels with the hunt and the symbolic retreat backward into the past bring the novel to a symmetrical close.

Somewhat incidentally, Carothers McCaslin farmed in the old style, "refusing to let a tractor so much as cross the land which his McCaslin forbears had given him without recourse for life, refusing even to allow the pilot who dusted the rest of the cotton with weevil poison, even fly his laden aeroplane through the air above it" ("The Fire and the Hearth").



Edition used: New York: Modern Library, 1942.

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## 68

**Author:** Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960)

**Title:** *Mules and Men*

**Date:** 1935

**Systems:** Railroad construction, train

**Context:** 1920s, rural Florida, African-American perspective

Hurston's collection of folklore includes words and music to "John Henry," an old railroad ballad, and her glossary contains a description of the John Henry legend. Hurston tells us the song is "suited to the spiking rhythm, though it is, like all the other work songs, sung in the jook and other social places." The ballad celebrates the strength and bravery of John Henry, a renowned steel-driver who pits his ability with a nine-pound hammer against the company's new steam drill. John Henry beats the drill at driving spikes for "nearly an hour, then his heart fails him and he drops dead from exhaustion."

While the legend captures the contest between man and machine, the song lyrics suggest that John Henry's struggle is broadly representative of African American survival under white dominance: "[John Henry] Says, 'fore I'll let your steam drill beat me down / I'll hammer my fool self to death," Other lines - "Man ain't nothing but a man ... I'll die with this hammer in my hand" - suggest the will to die fighting in the face of impossible odds. John Henry's perseverance is larger than life and for that reason constitutes an inspirational moral victory.

"The Goat that Flagged a Train," is of interest for the common knowledge it assumes. As the story goes, a goat spies his owner's best red silk shirt drying on the laundry line and, of course, eats it. The furious owner ties the goat to the railroad track, but the train-wise goat - when he sees the engine bearing down on him - coughs up the red shirt and waves the train down. The humor derives from two clichéd images about railroads that have achieved broad circulation: one - the use of a red flag to signal a train to halt; two - the betrayed young hero/heroine tied fast to the rails and only narrowly escaping death beneath the oncoming train. Here the goat proves himself "a smart varmint" by being villain, victim and his own rescuer.

Edition used: Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana UP, 1978.

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## 69

**Author:** Ishmael Reed (b. 1938)

**Title:** "Railroad Bill, The Conjure Man" In *Chattanooga*

**Date:** 1972

**Systems:** Railroad

**Context:** Southern

Railroad Bill, the conjure man, is what a good academic multiculturalist would call "the trickster figure." The poem, subtitled "A HooDoo Suite," has little to say about railroads per se. But it's hard to avoid the conclusion that Railroad Bill is so-named to evoke the railroad man's knack for getaway - that is, his legendary will to escape.

Railroad Bill can conjure himself into any shape - animal, vegetable or mineral - tree, film star, deceptive slave. Bill embodies a spirit of self-definition: "Let me be whatever I please." The poem shows that determined self-definition is the equivalent of anti-authoritarianism. He kills a policeman who attempts to disarm him. As a consequence, Bill takes various shapes in order "to outwit the chase and throw / Off the scent he didn't care what / They sent." The ending lines: "Railroad Bill was a conjure man ... Railroad Bill was free," underscore this poem's debt to the blues tradition in which the railroad and railroad men were the very spirit of resistance, transformation, freedom.

Edition used: New York: Random House, 1973.

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# The 1890s

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[Dreiser](#) shows a young woman's progress from rural Wisconsin, through Chicago to the New York theater as a series of train rides, and compares Chicago's open network of tracks with the physical limits of Manhattan island. [Jewett](#) points to the expansion of railroads into rural New England. [Cooper](#) and [DuBois](#) describe the effects of segregated trains on blacks in the South; [Brown's](#) poem is a chain-gang song. The stories by [Chopin](#) cover the range of carriage and boat systems in rural Louisiana, while [Dunbar-Nelson](#) pictures the New Orleans docks. [Crane's](#) scenes range from New York's noisy congestion to a small Texas town where the railroad brings in the trappings of eastern culture. [Anderson](#) presents the train as a young man's path out of rural Ohio to Chicago while also outlining carriage and buggy activities within the town; [Cather](#) covers similar themes and events in Nebraska; while [Wharton](#) shows fairly extensive reliance on the railroad between Massachusetts towns. Norris' portrait of San Francisco in [McTeague](#) includes the cable car as well as long-distance railways up the coast, while [The Octopus](#) is a detailed history and exposé of political corruption and social tragedy created by the railroad monopoly in the Central Valley and its links to the San Francisco street railways. [Cather](#) evokes the charm of the buckboard's slow pace across Nebraska, in contrast with the train and automobile which had arrived by the 1920s.

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## 70

**Author:** Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945)

**Title:** *Sister Carrie*

**Date:** 1900

**Systems:** Train, carriage

**Context:** 1889-mid 1890s, Chicago and New York city

Two train rides punctuate Carrie's run on fame and riches, one into Chicago as an eighteen-year-old kid from Wisconsin, and one into New York as the mistress of a married embezzler. Even though she is on the train, "To be sure there was always the next station" (Ch. 1) and, later, "I want you to go away from me. I am going to get out at the very next station" (Ch. 28).

The parallels and differences in Carrie's relationships with her "sponsors," Charles Drouet in Chicago and Mr. Hurstwood in New York, are a major part of the novel, and they are echoed on a minor scale in the details with which Dreiser draws the settings. In Chicago, the railroad companies "had seized upon vast tracks of land for transfer and shipping purposes. Street-car lines had been extended far out into the open country in anticipation of rapid growth" (Ch. 2). New York, or, more precisely, Manhattan, is narrow and constrained: "After her experience with Chicago, she expected long lines of cars - a great highway of tracks - and noted the difference. The sight of a few boats in the Harlem and more in the East River tickled her young heart. It was the first sign of the great sea. Next came a plain street with five-story brick flats, and then the train plunged into the tunnel." She asks, "'Where is the residential part?'" (Ch. 29).

In Chicago, before she is set up in an apartment with Drouet, her wages are so low that she cannot afford the 60¢ a week fare for the horse-car. After her first successes on the New York stage, the manager arranges for her to have a carriage between the theater and the Waldorf.

After Hurstwood embezzles \$10,000 from his company, he tricks Carrie into getting on the train to Montreal with him. She first thinks he is just taking her across town, but then is amazed to find them on the way to Detroit, a place she seems not to have heard about (Ch. 28). "To the untravelled, territory other than their own familiar heath is invariably

fascinating. Next to love, it is the one thing which solaces and delights.... There is a world of accumulated feeling back of the trite dramatic expression - 'I am going away'" (Ch. 29).

In New York, after Hurstwood loses his job, runs through his cash, and fails (often) to get new work, he does a three-day stint as a scab during a Knights of Labor strike against the Brooklyn trolley line. Dreiser gives his typically generous amount of detail on the reasons for the strike. The wages had changed from \$2 a day to a system whereby "trippers" were hired during peak hours at 25¢ a run and the total number of drivers went down. Hurstwood is given a day's training to run the electric car, then goes out with police protection which fails in the face of a mob. He is beaten up, shot (Ch. 40). Carrie leaves him in the next chapter.

A final train ride involves Hurstwood's ex-wife, daughter, and her husband on the way from Chicago to the young couple's two-week steamboat trip to Rome, "On an incoming vestibuled Pullman, speeding at forty miles an hour through the snow of the evening." They wait comfortably to take a meal in the dining car, in a scene placed between those of Mr. Hurstwood stumbling on the Bowery streets from settlement house to soup kitchen (Ch. 47).

Although he makes nothing of it, Dreiser gives one of the rare scenes where a someone actually learns how to operate a carriage. Hurstwood teaches Carrie how to drive through the streets of Chicago (Ch. 13).

Edition used: New York: Library of America, 1987.

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## 71

**Author:** Sarah Orne Jewett (1849-1909)

**Title:** "The Courting of Sister Wisby" In Tales of New England

**Date:** 1894

**Systems:** Trains

**Context:** Probably contemporary, New England

Mrs. Goodsoe, an elderly herbalist, talks about her mother's knowledge of herbal healing, much of which had died with her. She says that folk were meant to be "doctored with the stuff that grew right about 'em.... That was before the whole population took to livin' on wheels, the way they do now." Living on wheels is parallel to the telegraph, so Goodsoe's perspective may go back to her youth in the 1840s or so. The narrator claims, in defense of her generation, that "the cars [trains?] and telegraph have given people more to interest them." In the framed story about Wisby, the deacon has a wagon to carry him around the region, or he rides in another man's "hoss-cart."

Edition used: Eugene Current-Garcia and Bert Hitchcock, eds. *American Short Stories*, 5th ed. Glenview: Scott, Foresman, 1990.

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## 72

**Author:** Anna Julia Cooper (1858-1964)

**Title:** "Woman vs. The Indian" In *A Voice from the South*

**Date:** 1892

**Systems: Railroad****Context: Contemporary, Washington D. C., African-American perspective**

"There can be no true test of national courtesy without travel... Moreover, the weaker and less influential the experimenter, the more exact and scientific the deductions."

Anna Julia Cooper hereby transforms scientific method into rhetorical strategy, even as she declares rail travel the surest means of testing the character of the American people. Because she, "The Black Woman of the South," is the least prone to receive preferential treatment on board a train (treatment owing to great financial or political influence, that is), she herself is the perfect "touchstone of American courtesy."

Like a good student of science, Cooper records her observations and experiences on the railroad and carefully draws conclusions that invert the contemporary meanings of "primitive" and "civilized." Her argument opens by contrasting the experiences of white and black female travelers. She notes that "some American girls ... in search of novelty and adventure, were taking an extended trip through our country unattended by gentleman friends; their wish was to write up for a periodical or lecture the ease and facility, the comfort and safety of American travel, even for the weak and unprotected, under our well-nigh perfect railroad Systems and our gentlemanly and efficient corps of officials and public servants."

She counters with her own experience of watching "woman after woman" assisted from train to platform, only to see the "gentlemanly and efficient" conductors "deliberately fold their arms and turn round when the Black Woman's turn came to alight." So too she records her perplexity when confronting the "two dingy little rooms" at the station "with 'FOR LADIES' swinging over one and 'FOR COLORED PEOPLE' over the other; while wondering under which head I come." At another point, while being hustled from one car into the colored car by a surly conductor, she observes chain-gangs with "squad of boys aged 14 through 18" working outside, along the rails ("not in 1850, but in 1890, and 91 and 92").

"What a field for the missionary woman!" she declares, noting on the flyleaf of her memorandum, "The women in this section should organize a Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Human Beings, and disseminate civilizing tracts." This ironic play with the rhetoric of the period turns more serious as she writes, "I forbear to mention instances of personal violence to colored women travelling in less civilized sections of our country, where women have been forcibly ejected from cars, thrown out of seats, their garments rudely torn, their person wantonly and cruelly injured."

Edition used: Schomburg Library Edition, New York: Oxford UP, 1988.

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## 73

**Author:** William Edward Burghardt DuBois (1868-1963)

**Title:** *The Souls of Black Folk*

**Date:** 1903

**Systems:** Train, buggy

**Context:** 1890s, Georgia, African-American perspective

The chapter DuBois devotes to a train ride from Atlanta to Albany, Georgia amply demonstrates the poetic and rhetorical force of this landmark work. In this study of the post-Civil War South, W.E.B. DuBois departs from his earlier scientific work on the American Negro; here he imbues his historical and sociological data with a lyrical fervor.

For instance he precedes the demographic and economic statistics of Chapter 6, with a long meditation on the Georgia landscape in Chapter 5. Using the progress of a train to frame the rhetorical movement of his essay, DuBois creates a view of the American landscape that blends the picturesque with the ethnographic, historical and speculative. Here's a representative rhetorical moment:

Out of the North the train thundered, and we woke to see the crimson soil of Georgia stretching away bare and monotonous right and left. Here and there lay straggling, unlovely villages ... yet we did not nod, nor weary of the scene; for this is historic ground. Right across our track, three hundred years ago, wandered the cavalcade of Hernando de Soto, looking for gold...(Ch. 7).

DuBois goes on to rework travelogue, making the view from the train a view of America's present and past. Thus he weaves a history of the land into his description, rehearsing the legacy of competing Amerindian, African American and Anglo claims to that same land.

DuBois here borrows a tactic used by Anna Julia Cooper, and Harriet Jacobs before her. All these writers make the train ride into a tool of social criticism. For all of them, the train becomes some sort of standard by which to measure American society. DuBois is less concerned than Cooper and Jacobs with the treatment of African Americans (particularly women) on board a train. His emphasis is more ethnographic; watching from within the train, and later from within a buggy, he takes notes on all he observes: "I remember wheeling around a bend in the road beside a graceful bit of forest and a singing brook. A long low house faced us, with porch and flying pillars, great oaken door, and a broad lawn shining in the evening sun. But the window-panes were gone, the pillars were worm-eaten..." (Ch. 7).

However, he is careful to set himself in opposition to a less knowledgeable sort of observer:

To the car-window sociologist, to the man who seeks to understand and know the South by devoting the few leisure hours of a holiday trip to unravelling the snarl of centuries, - to such men very often the whole trouble with the black field-hand may be summed up by Aunt Ophelia's word, 'Shiftless!' (Ch. 8).

DuBois's object is to go beyond the surface interpretation, the immediate judgment. Rather he reinterprets the familiar signs of rural poverty by exploring the economic, historical and cultural sources of that poverty.

Edition used: In *Three Negro Classics*. New York: Avon, 1965.

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## 74

**Author:** Sterling Brown (1901-1989)

**Title:** "Southern Road" In *Southern Road*

**Date:** 1932

**Systems:** Roadway

**Context:** Late 19th century, African-American perspective

The title poem falls in the middle of Brown's volume and lends significance to the collection which is in keeping with the artistic renaissance of the 20s and 30s in which "new negro" literati (many in Northern urban centers) were quite consciously journeying back to their historical and spiritual roots in Southern slave and farm culture. Whereas other Harlem Renaissance poets experimented with blues rhythm, dialect, and the spiritual, Brown here does he the poet calls attention to the history of that sentimentalized southern roads. Quite literally as well as figuratively, the forced labor of black persons laid the foundation for the "new Negro" and his or her northern migration.

The poem becomes the song of the chain gang. Though it never mentions the road itself, the southern road is the implied occasion of the song, and it symbolizes an eternal occupation:

Swing dat hammer - hunh -  
Steady, bo';  
Ain't no rush, bebbby,  
Long ways to go.

So too, the road and the work symbolize a relationship between white and black that is just as eternal, a relationship which, for the singer, is a hell of its own.

Doubleshackled - hunh - Chain gang  
nevah - hunh -  
Guard behin' Let me go;  
Doubleshackled - hunh - Chain gang  
nevah - hunh -  
Guard behin'; Let me go;  
Ball an' chain, bebbby, Po' los' boy, bebbby,  
On my min'. Evahmo'....  
...  
White man tell me - hunh -  
Damn yo' soul;  
Got no need, bebbby,  
To be tole.

Edition used: Boston: Beacon, 1974.

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## 75

**Author:** Kate Chopin (1851-1904)

**Title:** Short stories

**Date:** 1890s

**Systems:** Carriage road, packet and steam boat, railroad

**Context:** Contemporary, Louisiana

Chopin's stories depict, in a matter-of-fact manner, the many ways people can get around in the complex Louisiana environment.

The title character of "Ozème's Holiday" (1896) has his standard week off from his job on the plantation. In October he borrows one man's buckboard, another's old gray mare, and a harness from "the negro Sévérin." He sets out to realize a plan to visit friends and relations along the Cane River. At his first contemplated stop he learns that the people he'd like to see are out, so, "he turned away from the river, and entered the road that led between two fields back to the woods and into the heart of the country." Mistake - his Aunt Tildy has her arm in a sling and is hobbling, yet her cotton is ready to be picked - so Ozème spends his time in the cotton field, and he lies to his boss that he had decided against following the river and went camping in the woods instead. There seems to be a contrast between following the river valleys as a path with some freedom or going across the countryside and being caught in family obligations.

"Athénaïse" (1895) charts a series of separations between the title character and her new husband, Cazeau. The first escape on horseback is ten miles away to her parents' house. After a brief return, Cazeau tolerates her visit to New Orleans, since he cannot be the "keeper of a dungeon" (Ch. 5). To get there her brother sees her on the St. Louis and Shreveport packet to the mouth of the Red River where she catches the first south-bound steamer for the city (Ch. 6). After a month she decides to return home; Mr. Gouvernail, her New Orleans acquaintance hires a carriage to take her to the railway station, buys her ticket and makes sure she gets into a "comfortable section" for the ride. "The fair sight of the country unfolding itself before her was balm to her vision and to her soul. She was charmed with the rather unfamiliar, broad, clean sweep of the sugar plantations.... There were sudden glimpses of a bayou curling between



sunny, grassy banks..." (Ch. 11). When she reaches the station at night, her brother picks her up in his buggy, the rural counterpart of the urban carriage. The boat ride is appropriate for the escape, while the train is proper for her return to her husband's welcoming arms.

"Charlie" (1900) opens with a striking image of a "little stern-wheeler," moving past the Labordes' house, "puffing and sputtering, making more commotion than a man-o'-war as she rounded the bend. The river was almost under the window - just on the other side of the high green levee." The levee system is presented as an ordinary part of the Louisiana landscape. This boat delivers Charlotte's (Charlie's) new bicycle, "the wheel," which is unpacked and adjusted under the live oak, while "Charlie had traded her old wheel with Uncle Ruben for an afflicted pony" (Ch. 1). The bicycle is a sign of Charlie's independent spirit, an attitude which leads her father to sending her to boarding school, on the stern-wheeler (Ch. 3). As with "Athénaïse," when really efficient travel is needed - in this case, for Charlie to get home after her father is hurt in an industrial accident - people take the train (Ch. 5).

In the beginning of "The Story of an Hour" (1894), Mrs. Mallard is brought word from the local newspaper office that her husband has been killed in a "railroad disaster." While she is at first distraught, as she sits alone in her room she slowly comes to realize the freedom she will now have, and rejoices in the thought of the many days ahead which will be entirely "her own." But as she comes downstairs, carrying herself "like a goddess of Victory," her husband (who "had been far from the scene of the accident, and did not even know there had been one") opens the front door, a "little travel-stained" but quite alive. Mrs. Mallard, who we have learned has "heart trouble," is struck dead by the sight.

Editions used: "Ozème's Holiday," Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse, eds. *American Women Regionalists: 1850-1910*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1992; "The Story of an Hour," "Athénaïse" and "Charlie," *The Awakening and Selected Stories of Kate Chopin*. New York, New American Library, 1976.

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## 76

**Author:** Alice Dunbar-Nelson (1875-1935)

**Title:** "Mr. Baptiste" In *The Goodness of St. Rocque*

**Date:** 1899

**Systems:** Shipping docks

**Context:** Contemporary, New Orleans

Mr. Baptiste, an old Creole, hangs around the levee, especially the Texas and Pacific warehouses where the Morgan-line steamships dock. These ships do the major part of the fruit trade between New Orleans and Central and South America. Baptiste collects over-ripe baskets of fruit which cannot be sold to dealers and sells them locally. At one time, he gets in the middle of a strike by longshoremen, cotton-yardmen, and stevedores. Ships are backed up in the harbor, mules and cotton-drays wait on the levee. A White Star steamer has hired black scabs to load cotton. When the strikers throw a machine which compresses the bales into the hold of the ship, the strike-breakers are "infuriated at their loss, for those costly machines belong to the laborers and not to the ship-owners." The Negroes throw bricks and pieces of iron at the strikers, Baptiste cheers them on and is killed by a brick. This short story gives a glimpse of labor unions and agitation, racism, and consequences when people take sides.

Edition used: Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse, eds. *American Women Regionalists: 1850-1910*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1992.

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**Author:** Stephen Crane (1871-1900)

**Title:** Short works

**Date:** 1893-1900

**Systems:** Street car - horse-drawn, elevated train, electric street car

**Context:** Contemporary, New York City, Florida, Texas, Nebraska

"Maggie: A Girl of the Streets" (1893) has a chapter which describes brother Jimmie's job as a truck driver. We hear about his defiance of the police, his noisy negotiation through traffic, and the madness of pedestrians ("pestering flies") who dash in front of his truck. The front platform of street cars need special attention as do the rushing horse-drawn fire engine (Ch. 4). The chapter is pure background or local color, since Jimmie's trade has no apparent effect on his character or on the plot.

Most of Crane's New York stories begin with a couple of setting paragraphs on the weather, the crowds, and the city streets. And, especially, sounds. In "George's Mother" (1896) we hear, lyrically, that "A roar of wheels and a clangor of bells came from this point, interwoven into a sound emblematic of the life of the city." This is the poorer part of New York City where the elevated trains run overhead and the horse cars below. Noise is always present, the rattle of wheels over cobbles ("Maggie"), the thundering and roaring "L" ("A Great Mistake" 1898), the "musical rumble" of carriages on asphalt in contrast to a truck wagon which "roared thunderously" ("An Ominous Baby" 1894). In the winter snowstorms the street car horses slip "in the spongy brown mess that lay between the rails," the manure, which is augmented by water dripping from the "L" ("The Men in the Storm" 1894).

In "Maggie" we get a scene of the theater letting out in the rain. Two rows of cars are on either side of the street with a dozen cabs also waiting. These are hailed by some of the men, while the rest of the crowd go to the "L" station. As Maggie walks toward the river, and her suicide, "the street cars jingled with a sound of merriment" (Ch. 17).

In January 1897 a gun running boat, the *Commodore*, sank off the Florida coast and Crane and three others were at sea in a small boat for several days until they were rescued. Crane's newspaper account, "Stephen Crane's Own Story" lies in the background of his famous story, "The Open Boat" (1898). It emphasizes the irony of the modern, oil-fueled steamer which flounders and sinks within sight of a lighthouse. In "The Open Boat" version the men wish for and then jerry-rig a sail, a regression to an older technology. Men on the shore, one riding a bicycle, wave to the four who mistake a hotel omnibus for a rescue boat in their confusion. The retreat from the modern ends where, later, a man on the shore swims out to help; he is "naked - naked as a tree in winter; but a halo was about his head, and he shone like a saint."

"The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" (1898) is a parody of the classic Western gunfight where the (alcoholic) bad guy backs down from his ritualistic, ineffective shootout with the (strong, taciturn) marshall, here because the marshall got himself married. The bride heralds the arrival of East coast civilization to Yellow Sky, Texas. To emphasize the portability of that civilization, the opening scene is on the Pullman from San Antonio with the young couple uncomfortable in their formal, city clothes. The thousand mile trip across Texas stops only four times; Yellow Sky is a water stop. They marvel at the parlor car, then on to the dining car with the "finest meal in the world" for one dollar (a day's wages for a working man). The coach has "dazzling fittings" - "sea-green figured velvet" and frescoes in olive and silver on the ceiling. The black porter views them "with an amused and superior grin." The train's schedule is exact - due in at 3:42; in town, the men in the bar know that the California express on the Southern Railway is due in 21 minutes. If the town had known about the marriage they would have had the brass band out to greet the bride and marshal when he arrived. The tale thus links domesticity, modernity, and the train all settling the West and moving it from its gun totin' past.

"The Blue Hotel" (1899) starts with the arrival of three men at the Palace Hotel, Fort Ranger, Nebraska, in a winter

story. The train has a "snow-cruised engine" which pulls many freight cars and one coach. This traveller's hotel with the pretentious name stands between the station and the town. The alighting passengers are a Swede, a bronzed cowboy from the Dakota line, and a "little silent man from the East"; they are escorted to the hotel by its Irish owner - these ethnic lines are emphasized frequently, so the story illustrates the facility of the railroads to bring peoples together in the middle of the country. Another railside industry shows up during a bar scene at the end of the story where a professional gambler found unwary rail travelers (and reckless farmers) to be his source of income.

"The Monster" (1899) starts with Little Jimmie Trescott playing as engine number 36 between Syracuse and Rochester until the wheel of his cart runs into the flower bed (Ch. 1). His sometime companion is Henry Johnson, the black hostler who cares for Dr. Trescott's horses and buggy, the vehicle used for his medical visits. Along the way in the story we briefly meet a railway brakeman and an engineer, whose roles echo the symbolism from the opening scene. The town boasts a "shrill electric street-car, the motor singing like a cageful of grasshoppers" (Ch. 3), but, curiously, the fire engines are pulled by groups of four men, not by horse or machine (Ch. 5).

Johnson is mistaken for a Pullman-car porter by whites in the barber shop (Ch. 3); in another story, "The Knife" (1900), porters are presented as being the pinnacle of black success.

Crane occasionally uses these Systems metaphorically. The "whirling snows acted as drivers, as men with whips" ("The Men in the Storm"). The elevated train station has pillars like "some monstrous kind of crab squatting over the street" ("An Experiment in Misery" 1894). The general conceit of men is explained in "The Blue Hotel" to be "the very engine of life" (Ch. 8). A black minor character in "The Monster" has his weekly fee for tending the badly scarred Johnson increased from \$5 to \$6, and his "mind seemed to be a balloon" (Ch. 15).

Edition used: New York: Viking Portable, 1969.

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## 78

**Author:** Sherwood Anderson (1876-1941)

**Title:** *Winesburg, Ohio*

**Date:** 1919 Written: 1915

**Systems:** Railroad, carriages and wagons

**Context:** 1890s, rural Ohio

Anderson creates a small town in northern Ohio where George Willard, the local reporter, hears about the secret lives of many of the townsfolk. The final chapter shows Willard catching the 7:45 AM train (from Cleveland) to Chicago to start his adult life. Tom Winton, the conductor, has seen "a thousand George Willards go out of the towns to the city," since his long career has let him know people in towns along the road quite well.

Partly to anticipate this conclusion, we are made aware of the railroad's presence in at least three quarters of the score of tales in the book. We learn about the train's schedules and whether the Cleveland train is late or not, and we hear the whistle blast from a passenger train. Virginia Richmond ("The Thinker") commutes daily to the county seat where she is a court stenographer. Her son and two other boys hop a freight to a town fair 40 miles away and don't return for a week. The berry harvest is taken by wagon to two "express cars" parked on a siding. A man, who was a painter for the "Big Four" RR lived in a box car, committed suicide by lying on the tracks ("The Philosopher"); another man got drunk and drove his horse carriage down the tracks and was killed ("The Untold Lie"). Enoch Robinson as an art student in New York City was hit and injured by a streetcar there ("Loneliness").

Within the town which George Willard leaves, the main way to get around is by wagon. The Presbyterian minister and a

large landowner, Jesse Bentley, own their own; Elizabeth Willard keeps her buggy and pony at a livery stable. Two young couples rent carriages from the livery stable - Ned Curry and Alice Hindman have sex in a field after a drive in the country ("Adventure"), but Ed Handby is not successful in seducing Belle Carpenter on a similar occasion ("An Awakening"). Wagons are sometimes dangerous. A frightened team of horses threw and killed a little girl ("The Philosopher"). When the mud roads freeze in the winter, there's good sleighing ("The Teacher").

The narrator, while commenting infrequently on most of the events, gives an occasional historical perspective. "Godliness" traces a family back to before the Civil War when Ohio highways were mud in spring and most of the winter. The Bentleys drive their three-seated wagon to town to buy goods and get drunk; later Jesse gets a bicycle to go to town. Changes in peoples' lives in the past fifty years (up to 1915?) included trains, the "interurban car" and the automobile, along with the growth of cities, migration, and industrialization. "In those days," we are told in "A Man of Ideas," "the Standard Oil Company did not deliver oil to the consumer in big wagons and motor trucks as it does now." No autos or trucks appear in the stories though.

Edition used: New York: Viking Critical Library, 1966.

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## 79

**Author:** Willa Cather (1876-1947)

**Title:** *O Pioneers!*

**Date:** 1913

**Systems:** Wagon, train

**Context:** 1880-1900, Nebraska

The novel starts thirty years ago, i.e., about 1883, on the deeply-rutted main street of Hanover, Nebraska which runs from the "squat red railway station" and grain elevator to the lumber yard and horse pond. The street itself has two rows of wooden buildings and board sidewalks; there are many work horses hitched to farm wagons while people shop in town. Near dusk the farm people, including the main character, Alexandra, head home - she uses a lantern for the final push after nightfall, "a moving point of light along the highway." Out of town, "the roads were but faint tracks in the grass" (Ch. 1: 1, 2).

Most of the book takes place around the turn of the century. Hanover now has telephones, painted (not sod) farm houses, big red barns with windows, and wind mills. The region is clearly relaxed and prosperous. Despite these changes the pattern of horse-driven use is the same, and the train is still a remote part of peoples' lives. One scene which illustrates the prosperity is Carl Lindstrom, Alexandra's admirer, who arrives in a buggy with a driver from the station. He had left his trunk at the Hanover station, since he only stays a few days (Ch. 2: 3).

The train is seen chiefly as a way to escape, in reality or dreams. In the early chapters during an economic depression one farmer sells his land for \$400 and a ticket to Chicago (Ch. 1: 4). Marie Tovesky, having been put in a convent by her father, meets Frank Shabata in the Union Station, St. Louis, to get married (Ch. 2: 7). After Frank shoots Marie and her possible lover, Emil, he steals Emil's horse since he guesses he might be able to catch the train, and he has enough money to get to Omaha. Later, in his panic, he rehearses his dream that, if he gets rich, he will take his wife to California in a Pullman car (Ch. 4: 7, 8). The train is presented, then, as being extraordinary. Cather does not talk in this book about its commercial value to the farmers, even though Alexandra is aware of the role of "Wall Street" in farm prices.

Edition used: Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941.

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## 80

**Author:** Edith Wharton (1862-1937)

**Title:** *Summer*

**Date:** 1917

**Systems:** Buggy, train, streetcar

**Context:** Turn of the century, Rural Massachusetts

Between "the Mountain" where Charity Royall is born, North Dormer, where she is raised by her guardian, and the nearest "big" town, Nettleton we see the gradual progress toward modern values and institutions. Charity's first train ride is with a group of "the dozen girls and boys who represented the future of North Dormer [who] had been piled into a farmwaggon, driven over the hills to Hepburn, put into a way-train and carried to Nettleton." North Dormer is "a weather-beaten sunburnt village of the hills, abandoned of men, left apart by railway, trolley, telegraph, and all the forces that link life to life in modern communities" (Ch. 1). On several occasions, Mr. Royall, a lawyer and Charity's guardian, hires out his buggy to Lucius who turns out to be her lover - he actually doesn't know how to drive at the start (Ch. 6). At the Nettleton train station is a square "thronged with seedy 'hacks' and long curtained omnibuses drawn by horses with tasseled fly-nets over their withers." On this Fourth of July, Charity and Lucius take the cool trolley run to the lake. After the festivities, "the trolleys roaring out from Nettleton became great luminous serpents coiling in and out among the trees" (Ch. 9). Charity borrows a bicycle for her sexual trysts with Lucius on the outskirts of North Dormer. At the Mountain in a vain effort to be with her mother before she dies, she is picked up by a relative in a buggy, and the horse's pace is slowed to a walk because of the steep roads. (Ch. 16).

Edition used: New York: Collier Books, 1981.

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## 81

**Author:** Frank Norris (1870-1902)

**Title:** *McTeague: A Story of San Francisco*

**Date:** 1899

**Systems:** Cable car, train

**Context:** Contemporary, San Francisco

McTeague is a dentist - well, not an official one; he pulls teeth for profit until the authorities close him down for not having a license. He marries Trina Sieppe after visits to her family home near Berkeley, and, after abusing and killing her, he returns to the life of a miner which he had left.

The uniquely San Francisco flavor of the urban scene is created partly by the insistent presence of the cable car: "The big market opposite the flat, the delivery carts rattling up and down, the great ladies from the avenue at their morning shopping, the cable cars trundling past, loaded with passengers" (Ch. 16). This echoes Ch. 1 where McTeague notices the daily commuter rhythm of empty and full cars, Ch. 9 where the rumble is present during the wedding, Ch. 10 where

Trina watches the scene. The novel opens in a Polk Street car conductors' "coffee-joint" and McTeague's office/apartment is within hearing distance of the power house (Ch. 1).

The poor of the city, including McTeague, take the local train to the "B station" to visit friends and to have picnics, the chief Sunday activity. This is the path for his courtship. But the people are also aware of long-distance railways - McTeague's neighbor, Marcus knows when the Sacramento train is due (Ch. 5); Trina's family worries about fares and tips when they plan to remove to Los Angeles (Ch. 9); the Overland express, "with its flaming headlight, on its way across the continent" interrupts the couple's first kiss (Ch. 5). That same train takes McTeague away from the city to the mining town of Colfax after the murder (Ch. 20), and he follows the tracks to Reno as part of his escape (Ch. 21). Expecting that conductors would be able to spot him, he books passage on the caboose of a freight to the southern part of the state, since the irregular schedule will help - "At times it stopped whole half days on sidings or by water tanks, and the engineer and fireman came back to the caboose." The crew does have to fight off a gang of tramps who try to ride the brake beams (Ch. 21). After getting to the end of the railroad at Keeler, despite apparently finding gold in the hills, McTeague's effort to ride a mule across Death Valley proves fatal.

Edition used: New York: The Library of America, 1986.

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## 82

**Author:** Frank Norris (1870-1902)

**Title:** *The Octopus: A Story of California*

**Date:** 1901

**Systems:** Railroad

**Context:** Contemporary, San Joaquin valley and San Francisco, California

Norris dramatizes the elaborate schemes by which the Railroad Trust gets hold of the Central Valley wheat lands and drives the ranchers out. Toward the end, he rationalizes what first seemed to be the plotting of greedy, clever men as an instance of two natural forces essentially independent of human agency.

Here's the deal. The railroad ("Pacific and Southwestern") sets the rates for shipping the harvest based, allegedly or apparently, on international markets - as Behrman, the railroad's chief operative in the Tulare ("Bonneville") region puts it, the rate is "All - the - traffic - will - bear." They promise one price before the growing season; farmers budget and borrow based on that figure. During the season they raise the shipping price and the farmers go broke (Ch. 2: 2).

The railroad monopoly seems to be under control of the elected State Railroad Commission, but Shelgrim, the rail's president controls the elections by proposing candidates. Magnus Derrick, the local political leader, with the help of a rancher's League, tries to get an honestly-elected Commission, but they are corrupted once in office (Ch. 1: 3). The corruption extends to Derrick's son, Lyman, who had sold the valley out - in the face of a mandate that all rates be cut by 10%, the reductions went to places with no grain to ship (Ch. 2: 4). Other regulations work to disadvantage the ranchers - in the opening chapters we see three cars filled with Magnus' plows absurdly moved from Guadalajara (California, not Mexico) into San Francisco and back because there's a rule that shipments can't come directly from the east - so the low Federally-set, long-haul rate is increased significantly by the short-haul rate controlled by the Pacific and Southwestern (Ch. 1: 2).

The other part of the deal involves railroad ownership and purchase of farm lands. On the grounds that the Railroad opened up new wheat lands to markets (Ch. 1: 2), it got all the odd-numbered sections (one square-mile parcels) along the route, while the Federal government retained the other half. Farmers were "invited" on the railroad's lands (Ch. 1: 3)



and charged rent - at first \$2.50 an acre, but, once the land became profitable, the rents went up to \$27.00 for the million acres in the valley (Ch. 1: 6). This, with the rate increases drives the farmers to sell out to dummy buyers actually under Railroad control (Ch. 2: 1). By harvest time, Behrman owns most of the ranches. In the most dramatic scenes in the novel, while the locals are on their annual drive to herd all the rabbits into a corral by chasing them in front of their wagons, buggies, and buckboards, Behrman and the marshall are throwing the families out of their houses. A few members of the League, but not the mass movement hoped for, tries to ambush the marshalls, but many leaders are killed in the gunfight, thus breaking the resistance (Ch. 2: 6).

Norris sets out the issues of turn-of-the-century efforts to regulate the railroad monopoly by state and federal commissions, with corruption from both the railroad and the shipper-farmer sides through rigged elections at the state level and influence peddling at the federal level. The State government is corrupted - Trusts thrive because, in the words of Cedarquist, a San Francisco investor in ocean-going shipping, "the People allow it" through their indifference (Ch. 2: 1).

But this is a novel not a piece of economic analysis, and Norris fills the pages with characters who are variously affected, and ruined by the Trust and with images of the trains. Presley, the poet, is in a way the novel's hero, as well as its observer and commentator. The first scene shows him on a bicycle riding the bumpy roads near the Bonneville depot, and talking with Dyke, the railroad engineer. He walks near an embankment, "when, with a quivering of all the earth, a locomotive, single, unattached, shot by him with a roar, filling the air with the reek of hot oil, vomiting smoke and sparks; its enormous eye, cyclopean, red, throwing a glare far in advance, shooting by in a sudden crash of confused thunder; filling the night with the terrific clamour of its iron hoofs." This train runs down and slaughters a herd of sheep owned by one of Presley's friends, thus foreshadowing the conflict of forces (Ch. 1: 1).

Annixter's courtship of Hilma Tree takes place by a creek literally under the shadow of the Long Trestle. "From time to time, the incessant murmur of the creek, pouring over and around the larger stones, was interrupted by the thunder of trains roaring out upon the trestle overhead, passing on with the furious gallop of their hundred iron wheels, leaving in the air a taint of hot oil, acrid smoke, and reek of escaping steam." As the two realize they are in love, the Bakersfield-Fresno Overland passes, with its "chocolate coloured Pullmans, grimy with the dust of the great deserts of the Southwest" (Ch. 2: 2). After their San Francisco marriage, their special treat will be to take the Overland from the Oakland "mole" to Bonneville, even though it's due in at 5 AM. They settle in to the Pullman car and the bunk is made up, although he can't sleep. In the middle of the night the train grinds to a stop from the emergency brake, "the Westinghouse appliance," since a robber drives away the engine and express car (with the Wells Fargo box and registered mail). "Helpless, bereft of its engine, a huge, decapitated monster it lay, halfway-way around a curve, rained upon, abandoned." The engine is hooked up, and, forty minutes late, they arrive at Bonneville in the middle of a curious crowd which had heard by telegraph of the robbery (Ch. 2: 4).

The robber was Dyke, the former engineer and now failed farmer, ruined by rate changes. He escapes from the posse and other pursuers, eventually commandeering a freight engine at gunpoint in Guadalajara: "Smoke, black and boiling, shot skyward from the stack; not a joint that did not shudder with the mighty strain of the steam; but the great iron brute - one of Baldwin's newest and best - came to call, obedient and docile as soon as ever the great pulsing heart of it felt a master hand upon its levers." The sheriff wires ahead to set the switches to derail the train; Dyke spots the problem, but backs next to his pursuers and thus is finally caught (Ch. 2: 5).

The streets in Bonneville show the convergence of modern and traditional systems.

Annixter, arriving at the Post Office, found himself involved in a scene of swiftly shifting sights and sounds. Saddle horses, farm wagons - the inevitable Studebakers - buggies grey with the dust of country roads, buckboards with squashes and grocery packages stowed under the seat, two-wheeled sulkies and training carts, were hitched to the gnawed railings and zinc-sheathed telegraph poles along the curb. Here and there, on the edge of the sidewalk, were bicycles, wedged into bicycle racks painted with cigar advertisements. Upon the asphalt sidewalk itself, soft and sticky with the morning's heat, was a continuous movement.... The Yosemite 'bus and City 'bus passed up the street, on the way from the morning train... The electric car line, the city's boast, did a brisk business, its cars whirring from end to end of the street, with a jangling of bells and a moaning plaint of gearing (Ch. 1: 5).



Ultimately Presley sees that "The Railroad will prevail. The Trust will overpower us. Here in this corner of a great nation, here, on the edge of the continent, here in this valley of the West, far from the great centres, isolated, remote, lost, the great iron hand crushes life from us, crushes liberty and the pursuit of happiness from us, and our little struggles, our moment's convulsion of death agony causes not one jar in the vast, clashing machinery of the nation's life; a fleck of grit in the wheels, perhaps, a grain of sand in the cogs - the momentary creak of the axle is the mother's wail of bereavement, the wife's cry of anguish - and the great wheel turns, spinning smooth again, even again, and the tiny impediment of a second, scarce noticed, is forgotten." The train both is and symbolizes the monopoly. After the gun battle, to enforce its control over Bonneville, the Pacific and Southwestern cuts off service and prevents telegraph messages from getting in. Even though there's talk about a strike or armed resistance, and Presley's plea "to ignore our cry too long is to wake the Red Terror," the League collapses when Magnus' bribes are revealed (Ch. 2: 7). He later goes quite insane, and, in the final humiliation, is offered a low-paying clerk's job by the pervasive Behrman (Ch. 2: 9).

Many displaced ranch families are forced to move to San Francisco; the daughter of one (who eventually goes into prostitution) notices that "upon the street-railway cars, upon the ferryboats, on the locomotives and way-coaches of the local trains, she was reminded of her father's death, and of the giant power that had reduced her to her present straits, by the letters, P. and S. W. R. R." Monopoly, the "long arms of the monster," is everywhere (Ch. 2: 8).

Shelgrim, the railroad president, explains: "try to believe this - to begin with - that Railroads build themselves. Where there is a demand sooner or later there will be a supply... Do I build the Railroad? You are dealing with forces, young man, when you speak of Wheat and the Railroads, not with men... the Wheat will be carried to feed the people as inevitably as it will grow" (Ch. 2: 8). Presley accepts this explanation, leaves the Valley, and ships aboard one of Cedarquist's freighters with a full load of Behrman's wheat which had been bought by a group of city women for the Indian Famine Relief Committee (Ch. 2: 9). He figures that, in the big picture, it evens out since starving people will be fed ("Conclusion").

Ironically, Behrman is also on the steamer. While the wheat was being loaded from the grain elevator he bought at Port Costa, his leg got caught in a coil of rope (like Melville's Ahab) and he is smothered, unnoticed in the hold. The ship-filling machinery is on its own, "No human agency seemed to be back of the movement of the wheat" (Ch. 2: 9).

Edition used: New York: The Library of America, 1986.

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## 83

**Author:** Willa Cather (1876-1947)

**Title:** "The Best Years"

**Date:** 1948 Written: 1945

**Systems:** Buckboard, automobile

**Context:** 1899 and twenty years later, Nebraska

The story starts with a lovely buckboard ride through rural Nebraska where Miss Knightly, a county school board official does the rounds of rural schools. Her old mare, Molly, takes a leisurely pace which is quite satisfactory, since it lets Knightly enjoy the countryside. "Miss Knightly was thinking, as Molly jogged along, that the barbed-wire fences, though ugly in themselves, had their advantages. They did not cut the country into patterns as did the rail fences and stone walls of her native New England. They were, broadly regarded, invisible - did not impose themselves upon the eye. She seemed to be driving through a fineless land." She arrives at the Wild Rose school (five horses tethered in front, a boy comes out to take care of her mule) to visit the one-room class (Ch. 1). The geography lesson, naming the borders of the states, resonates off the image of the fences rather nicely (Ch. 2).

Knightly offers to take the fifteen-year-old teacher, Lesley Ferguesson, home to her parents for the weekend. The fourteen-mile (three hour) trip takes them to MacAlpin which is signaled by the 80-foot tall "standpipe" (water tower). They have telephones and electricity, but still rely totally on horse-drawn vehicles; Lesley's father uses the buckboard between their house in town and the farm; he knows Knightly's mule's name. We get an inside view of the Ferguesson's household, ending with their bedtime at ten o'clock, "the sweetest morsel of the night. At that hour Number Seventeen, the westbound passenger, whistled in. The station and the engine house were perhaps an eighth of a mile down the hill, and from far away across the meadows the children could hear that whistle. Then came the heavy pants of the locomotive in the frosty air. Then a hissing - then silence: she was taking water" (Ch. 3).

The turning moment of the story is a blizzard. Knightly is in Lincoln at a professional convention. The Chicago passenger train is stuck in a deep cut for three days - the dining car has to feed the people throughout the storm. Knightly rather welcomes the delay since she can enjoy an extra week in the city, rather than rushing to MacAlpin for her county duties. She does get on the train ("it was two hours late, travel was still disorganized") but hears from the conductor, who knows her, first that the regular conductor had his leg broken in trying to dig the train out, and, second, that Lesley had died from pneumonia after the storm. The snow at the rural school had been overwhelming; Lesley, finally with the heroic help of a nearby farmer had gotten the students to a safe place even though the horses could not move owing to the depth of the snow. The irony is obviously of Knightly enjoying the effects of the bad weather while it paralyzes travel and causes death at the same time (Ch. 6).

Twenty years later, roughly 1920, Miss Knightly returns to MacAlpin by "the fast eastbound passenger." She is recognized by the station master, who asks, "'You like me to telephone for an otto [automobile] to take you up?'" [Cather's brackets]. In a sentimental visit she would like to go to the schools she had supervised up to fifteen years ago - she notes that with a car, she could get to nearly all of them in one day. She is, of course, welcomed by the Ferguessons, and leaves flowers at Lesley's grave. Lesley's mother notes that "I can still hear the trains whistle in. Sometimes, when I can't sleep, I lie and listen for them." The trains become more a symbol of the past than their previous role as a part of daily life (Ch. 7).

Edition used: Five Stories. New York: Vintage, 1956.

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# The 1900s

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Two retrospective novels trace the introduction of the automobile through the transitional first decade of the twentieth century. [Marquand](#) chronicles a Boston aristocratic family's replacement of their private carriages with motor cars in the 1910s. [Steinbeck](#) highlights the impact of the auto on the Salinas Valley in California, where it complemented the fairly new railroads and replaced much of the wagon trade. [Sinclair](#) outlines the control exercised by the Railroad Trust over the beef industry and even over trolley lines in Chicago. Intra-urban networks are treated from riders' points of view by [Doctorow](#) for the East coast, in [London's](#) *Martin Eden* for San Francisco, and by [Wharton](#) for Manhattan and [Schwartz](#) for Brooklyn. A short story by [London](#) describes how the cable-car line divides rich and poor parts of the city. Train travel between East coast cities is dramatized by [Cather](#) in "Paul's Case," and in the midwest in other of her [short stories](#); [Carver](#) gives a brief picture of long-distance travel in Europe. [Morrison](#) describes segregated trains under Jim Crow laws in the South. [Wharton](#) shows the interactions between buggy and sleigh traffic and the railroad in rural Massachusetts. Faulkner's *The Reivers* describes an early introduction of the automobile into the rural South, while *The Hamlet* focuses on the variety of horse-drawn vehicles in a similar setting.

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## 84

**Author:** John P. Marquand (1893-1960)

**Title:** *The Late George Apley: A Novel in the Form of a Memoir*

**Date:** 1936

**Systems:** Carriage, automobile

**Context:** 1870s-1920s, esp. 1900-1920, Boston and New York City

Marquand traces the history of Apley, an upper-end Boston aristocrat, through one of his peers who assembles Apley's letters and those of his relatives and friends. While most of the book concerns Apley's relations with his family, Marquand places them in a general, albeit rarified, social context.

The Boston aristocracy is always out of date. In the early 1870s they keep mudscrapers in front of Beacon Hill houses, and even some of the hitching posts as reminders of the "day of the horse" (Ch. 4). One of Apley's school mates becomes famous for imitating the Irish conductor on the Brookline car (Ch. 5); at Harvard in the 80s, he kept his horse and trap at a livery stable near campus (Ch. 7). After scolding George for campus pranks and getting an apology, his father offers the use of "either of my two trotting horses, any of my carriages or sleighs" (Ch. 10). This plurality of vehicles is exceptional; the Apleys have lots of money.

During his trip to Europe in the mid 80s he enjoyed seeing England out of the train windows - much better than direct contact with non-Bostonians (Ch. 9). The 1890s in Boston were the "days of the horse-drawn vehicle, the trolley car and the bicycle" (Ch. 12). We learn about the Belmont hotel in New York which is where proper Bostonians stay in 1910 - they can get from the train station to the hotel and then to the theater with short cab rides and have minimal contact with "the nervous excitement of New York City." "There are very few horses left on the streets; their place is taken by taxicabs and private automobiles with shining brasswork that pant beside the curbs. There is a pandemonium of motor horns and policemen.... I wonder if the time will ever come when we shall hear only motor horns instead of the rattle of wheels and the slip-slap of horses' hoofs on Beacon Street" (Ch. 18). Among the changes which deeply disturb George is the subway between Boston and Cambridge, which will reduce travel time from one hour to 12 minutes (Ch. 19).

The car does come to Boston. The Apleys get a Packard in 1916. George's daughter in a moderately scandalous episode is slated to take the motor to the North Station 5:00 train; instead she shows up in a young man's motor, and had gone "without chaperonage to a certain roadhouse.... frequented by stenographers and worse" (Ch. 22). Just after the War, "The craze for purchasing automobiles which they cannot afford to run is driving many [factory workers] into debt, and several families in Apley Falls [where the family-owned mill is] are doing without wholesome nourishment in order to own a car" (Ch. 24). By the 1920s the "increasing motor traffic" on Beacon Street is agitating the vintage Madeira in Apley's cellar. (Ch. 25), and Apley hears vague tales about "necking" and "petting" and people drinking out of pocket flasks in automobiles (no longer "motors") and he asks his son to explain what's going on (Ch. 26).

The Apleys had been fighting causes and changes in Boston for over half a century - why put up local parks when the poor children have the Common? As final acts in these crusades, George protests having a motor speedway along the Esplanade, and he tries to stop "a large electric sign, advertising a certain inexpensive variety of motor car" over the Common. The narrator tells us, sympathetically, "He justly called this sign, to the end of his days, 'Our Badge of Shame.'" (Ch. 28).

Edition used: New York: Grosset and Dunlap, Grosset's Universal Library 1937.

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## 85

**Author:** John Steinbeck (1902-1968)

**Title:** *East of Eden*

**Date:** 1952

**Systems:** Buggy, train, automobile, railroad building and road gangs

**Context:** Before 1900 to 1917, Salinas Valley, California

This multi-family saga traces changes in the Salinas Valley in northern California from the time when the 'Americans' bought out the Spanish, and "wheel tracks of buckboards replaced the trails"; and yet, "within fifteen years the valley was two-deep in Fords and Will [Hamilton] was a rich man driving a Marmon" (Ch. 1).

Adam Trask (born in Connecticut in 1862) becomes an "expert tramp" during the 1890s, "tacking it" all over the country until he is arrested near Tallahassee and serves on a road gang: "that's how the roads were built." He escapes and eventually gets out through the Valdosta, Georgia train station back home (Ch. 7). His future wife, Cathy, drops out of school, buys a train ticket to Boston, only to be retrieved by her father the same day (Ch. 8).

They leave in 1900, with "monstrous changes taking place in the world," and they wind up in Salinas, because, "In that day the railroads - growing, fighting among themselves, striving to increase and to dominate - used every means to increase their traffic. The companies not only advertised in the newspapers, they issued booklets and broadsides describing and picturing the beauty and richness of the West.... The Southern Pacific Railroad, headed by the wild energy of Leland Stanford, had begun to dominate the Pacific Coast not only in transportation but in politics. Its rails extended down the valleys. New towns sprung up, new sections were opened and populated, for the company had to create customers to get custom. The long Salinas Valley was part of the exploitation." Adam buys a rig to find their home (Ch. 13). The sense that the whole West is preoccupied by the future is conveyed by an image of a family, down from its hill ranch, in a "drag - a big box nailed on oaken runners" bouncing into town, waiting for "When the roads come in" and they will sit "high and happy in a surrey," and, later, "when the railroad puts a branch out here" and they can ship oak logs by the Southern Pacific (Ch. 15).

Before the first Ford is delivered to the Trasks, we get an extended reminder from Lee, the Chinese man who raises

Adam's children and provides the intellectual and philosophical base for the novel, of the horrors of Chinese building of the railroad. Lee recounts his father and pregnant mother's passage in the black hold of a ship from Canton - she must dress as a man to avoid the Federal ban on importing women. They are taken by cattle car to the construction site in the California mountains. Their effort to escape to the mountains for Lee's birth is foiled by the father's broken leg, and the birth becomes a grotesque Caesarean section after his mother is raped to death by other workers (Ch. 28).

The more elaborate, modern infrastructure of the East is contrasted with the rural West by descriptions of two warehouse operations. In the East Mr. Edwards rotates the women among brothels by train (so they won't be identified by local authorities) - at one time a train wreck killed two "units of four girls each" (Ch. 8). In the "Row" in Salinas, the road is mud in winter and "hard as rutted iron in summer." Customers are driven up in a horse-drawn hack; the driver waits for them. This is a fixed institution, in the town, accepted and ignored by the officials (Ch. 19). By 1911, train travel is fairly routine from King City to Salinas, and even to San Francisco by the "Lark" from Los Angeles. But progress comes to the service of womanizing: Uncle Tom Hamilton goes to San Francisco to "roll and wallow in women." His father and mother go by train to the Chautauqua season in Salinas (Ch. 23).

In the middle of the 1910s, Adam and his family move to Salinas, and they invest in a new railroad venture. Lee buys an icebox and Adam gets the idea of using ice to keep lettuce fresh for winter shipment to New York. He buys an ice house which becomes the base for his venture. Six freight cars are filled with iced lettuce and shipped out, but a snow slide in the Sierras causes a two-day delay; warm weather in the midwest and a confusion of orders in Chicago leads to tons of rotten vegetables in New York, a \$15,000 loss, and considerable embarrassment. He does not repeat the experiment, even though he winds up with enough cash to try (Ch. 37).

The automobile will radically change the Valley - possibly even more than had the railroad. In the early 1910s, surreys and buggies drive to the father's funeral. In this setting, and at this time, Adam buys an automobile from Will Hamilton's garage - although there are lots of orders, he gets to the top of the list, and he refuses to use the installment plan but pays cash (Ch. 26).

In a charming chapter, Lee, and Adam and his sons learn about the Ford. Steinbeck, writing from the 1950s, says, "It is hard now to imagine the difficulty of learning to start, drive, and maintain an automobile. Not only was the whole process complicated, but one had to start from scratch. Today's children breathe in the theory, habits, and idiosyncrasies of the internal combustion engine in their cradles, but then you started with the blank belief that it would not run at all, and sometimes you were right." The old starter involves much more than turning the key. "It required not only a good memory, a strong arm, an angelic temper, and a blind hope, but also a certain amount of practice of magic...." The mechanic comes out after the car is delivered and Will gives up on a one-shot training session; he explains the four-cycle internal combustion engine, planetary transmission, external crank shaft and wire choke; and he unsuccessfully refers the family to the user's manual. The eleven-year-old kids do pick up on the drill, and they recite the succession of commands, "retard the spark and advance the gas," et cetera each time Adam gets the Ford going (Ch. 29). That he learns to drive is accepted by the town as being a "miracle" (Ch. 30).

In the final chapters, centering around the First World War, the train is a routine part of peoples' lives, as it is when one of Adam's sons comes back from Stanford University for Thanksgiving break, and when the same son ships out to be in the army (Ch. 49).

Edition used: New York: Viking, 1983.

**Author:** Upton Sinclair (1878-1968)

**Title:** *The Jungle*

**Date:** 1905 (Serial), 1906

**Systems:** Carriage, automobile

**Context:** Contemporary, Chicago

The novel shows the extent of isolation which poor, immigrant workers experienced in the middle of Chicago. While the book is famed for having made the Congress worry and individuals ill through its descriptions of how livestock is killed and butchered, the general drift is toward Jurgis Rudkus's conversion to socialism. Thus, in the concluding chapters, various socialist stump speakers analyze what's wrong with America. Rich people, says one, "spend millions for horses and automobiles and yachts" (Ch. 28). In contrast, the poor are trapped by the Coal, Steel, Oil, and Beef Trusts (this latter of special concern for the book), and "the power which really governs the United States today is the Railroad Trust. It is the Railroad Trust that runs your state government, wherever you live, and that runs the United States Senate. And all of the trusts that I have named are railroad trusts - save only the Beef Trust! The Beef Trust has defied the railroads - it is plundering them day by day through the Private Car" (Ch. 30). That is, it owns all refrigerator cars, and "it was reaching out for the control of other interests, railroads and trolley lines, gas and electric light franchises - it already owned the leather and the grain business of the country" (Ch. 29).

The Trust controls peoples' lives in subtle and complex ways. One episode, repeated twice for emphasis, involves various deals the trolley car companies use to make it hard for immigrants and other poor people to get transfers from one line to the next. The first requires that the passenger announce her need for a transfer when she gets on, no exceptions, as a response to a city ordinance (Ch. 7). In the latter, the companies arrange "a pretense of separate ownership" to avoid giving transfers (Ch. 20).

Jurgis spends most of his time trapped in the slums, where a trolley ride goes past thirty four blocks of side streets all looking the same, and "here and there would be a railroad crossing, with a tangle of switches, and locomotives puffing, and rattling freight cars filing by" (Ch. 2). The stockyards have 250 miles of track within them, and, later on, we are told that the butchers' hourly schedules are totally dependent on the rate at which animals are delivered to the lines (Ch. 8). While track-bound Systems are growing rapidly, the streets themselves remain so narrow that snow piles up to the first floor windows in the winter (Ch. 7). Later, Jurgis's infant son drowns by falling off the sidewalk, "a platform made of half-rotten boards, about five feet above the level of the sunken street" (Ch. 22).

In despair, Jurgis escapes from the city for one summer, first by holding onto the bottom of a freight car to escape the security guards (Ch. 22). This is his first time outside the city in three years, since his arrival from Lithuania. At the end of the summer he returns to the city and gets hired on an odd scheme which uses a contract to construct tunnels for the telephones to build a secret, underground freight railway network to break the teamster's union (Ch. 23).

The alternative of the automobile may be beyond the reach of the trusts, although it will be of little help to Jurgis and the workers. In one other brief escape, he meets a drunk rich man in a bar who gives him a \$100 bill and takes him home, by cab, to Lake Shore Drive. This gives Sinclair an opportunity to dazzle Jurgis with the incredible wealth of the capitalists, in this case, ironically, of a packing house owner. The man's brother had gone away in his automobile in a dispute about whether he should marry an actress - one of the few autos in the novel, set in 1904 (Ch. 24).

Edition used: Toronto: Bantam, 1981.

**Author:** E. L. Doctorow (b. 1931)

**Title:** *Ragtime*



**Date:** 1975

**Systems:** Interurban railroad, train, subway, auto

**Context:** 1902-1914, New Rochelle, NY

Looking back over half a century, Doctorow articulates some of the enthusiasm which many people must have felt about the railway networks. "Tracks! Tracks! It seemed to the visionaries who wrote for the popular magazines that the future lay at the end of parallel rails. There were long-distance locomotive railroads and interurban electric railroads and street railways and elevated railroads, all laying their steel stripes on the land, crisscrossing like the texture of an indefatigable civilization. And in Boston and New York there were even railroads under the streets, new rapid-transit subway Systems transporting thousands of people every day." Doctorow follows this lyric with a description of how the subway tunnel was being dug from Manhattan to Brooklyn, ending with a freak accident which puts a sandhog in the hospital to be visited by Houdini, the escape artist (Ch. 13). A nice scene at the end of a chapter shows the main family's departure from the New Rochelle station to Atlantic City, giving details on their wicker trunks, the architecture of Penn Station, and "the encouched locomotives waiting in an impatience of steam and shouts and tolling bells to be released on their journeys" (Ch. 31).

Doctorow also dramatizes the fact (or myth) that it was possible (in 1909) for a person to take a series of intraurban trolley and street car lines to their termini, walk a short distance and catch the next line, and thereby move from New York to Boston. Aside from giving the details of how this was possible, the total cost in fares was \$2.40 for an adult and \$1.00 for a child (Ch. 12).

Chapter 18 gives a capsule history of the Ford Model-T assembly line as part of general background. We then see one of these cars driven by a black musician, Coalhouse Walker, near a firehouse manned by white bigots who taunt Walker, box in his car, and (eventually) send him on a path of revenge and revolution which is his triumph and his tragedy (Ch. 23).

As part of Doctorow's effort to create a turn-of-century atmosphere, he uses brand names, model numbers, and the like. For example, the young boy sees a 45 horsepower Pope-Toledo Runabout, and the family sees Father off for a Polar expedition with Peary on a five-car train pulled by a Baldwin 4-4-0 with spoked engine truck wheels (Ch. 1, 2). These details are lightly sprinkled throughout the book. Ordinary people, "Father," "Mother," "Mother's Younger Brother," come into professional and personal contact with famous, historical figures with curious regularity. For example, we witness Sigmund Freud's brief trip to the United States during which he is oppressed by the "clatter of horses and wagons, the clanking and screeching of streetcars, the horns of automobiles" (Ch. 6).

Edition used: New York: Bantam Books, 1975.

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## 88

**Author:** Jack London (1876-1916)

**Title:** *Martin Eden*

**Date:** 1909

**Systems:** Urban rail, steamship, bicycle

**Context:** Contemporary, San Francisco area

Martin Eden comes to the Berkeley/Oakland area after a career on commercial, Pacific-coast cargo ships to get an education and write poetry and fiction. Until his literary career takes off, he struggles with poverty and disappointment.



This leads to rides on his "wheels" (bicycle) until he has to pawn them, and the urban "electric car" (trolley) from which "he watched the houses and cross-streets slipping by." The 5¢ fare is often a problem - when payment of \$300 for one of his manuscripts finally comes in he can retire all of his debts and help his landlady buy her house.

Throughout the story Eden has fantasies of escaping to Tahiti; at one point in the midst of extreme poverty and hunger he has an elaborate, dream-like fantasy of exotic life there (Ch. 40). At the end of the novel he books passage on the steamer *Mariposa*, not on a deck stateroom but below, on the "weather-side, the port-side," a bit of technical knowledge which reminds us of his former career and brings the setting full circle (Ch. 45). Since he is now a famous and rich author, he gets to eat at the captain's table and sit on a deck chair. His walk to the forecastle with the sailors recalls his former days: "On ships at sea he had always been in the forecastle, the steerage, or in the black depths of the coal-hold, passing coal. In those days, climbing up the iron ladders from out the pit of stifling heat, he had often caught glimpses of the passengers, in cool white, doing nothing but enjoying themselves, under awnings spread to keep the sun and wind away from them, with subservient stewards taking care of their every want and whim, and it had seemed to him that the realm in which they moved and had their being was nothing else than Paradise" (Ch. 45).

Edition used: Baltimore: Penguin, 1968.

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## 89

**Author:** Edith Wharton (1862-1937)

**Title:** "The Other Two" In *The Descent of Man and Other Stories*

**Date:** 1904

**Systems:** Elevated train

**Context:** Contemporary, New York city

Waythorn, the husband, catches the elevated at the "employees' hour" and finds himself "crushed between two layers of pendulous humanity." He sees his wife's ex-husband at 8th Street and they talk about "the perennial grievance of the congested trains," and a business colleague's gout. Public transportation and restaurants often put people awkwardly together in ways that private carriages and private clubs do not.

Edition used: Eugene Current-Garcia and Bert Hitchcock, eds. *American Short Stories*, 5th ed. Glenview: Scott, Foresman, 1990.

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## 90

**Author:** Delmore Schwartz (1913-1966)

**Title:** "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities"

**Date:** 1948

**Systems:** Streetcar

**Context:** 1909, Brooklyn

The story is of the narrator's parents' courtship in Brooklyn. It begins with an image of the narrator's father walking through tree-lined streets and "once in a while coming to an avenue on which a street-car skates and gnaws, slowly progressing. The conductor, who has a handle-bar mustache, helps a young lady wearing a hat like a bowl with feathers onto the car.... He leisurely makes change and rings his bell. It is obviously Sunday..." We also hear an occasional horse-drawn carriage, and once in a while, "an automobile, looking like an enormous upholstered sofa." The young couple takes the street-car to the end of the line at Coney Island where they spend the day.

Edition used: Charles Kaplan, ed. *Literature in America: The Modern Age*. New York: The Free Press, 1971.

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## 91

**Author:** Jack London (1876-1916)

**Title:** "South of the Slot"

**Date:** 1909

**Systems:** Cable car

**Context:** Contemporary, San Francisco

The central character develops two personalities. He is both Freddie Drummond, a conservative professor of sociology and Bill Totts, a "workman" who takes a major role in various strikes, including one against the streetcar industry. Whole editions of his book, "The Unskilled Laborer," are bought up by "Presidents of great railway Systems" to the workers in an effort to quell their discontent. The two personæ, and the whole city of San Francisco are symbolically divided by a transportation corridor:

The Slot was an iron crack that ran along the center of Market street, and from the Slot arose the burr of the ceaseless, endless cable that was hitched at will to the cars it dragged up and down.... North of the Slot were the theaters, hotels, and shopping district, the banks and the staid, respectable business houses. South of the Slot were the factories, slums, laundries, machine-shops, boiler works, and the abodes of the working class. The Slot was the metaphor that expressed the class cleavage of Society...

Crane calls this a metaphor, and he does not speculate whether the division has created or resulted from the car line.

In a final scene, modern and old vehicles crash together. Professor Drummond is with his fiancée, Catherine Van Vorst, in her brother's chauffeur-driven limousine to visit one of her charities. They run into the Beef Strike where Kearny, Market, and Geary streets come together. A coal wagon, drawn by four huge horses, blocks an intersection. The auto tries to avoid a crash, but its wheels get tangled with those of a "rickety express wagon" which "Bill" had previously driven. "On the other side a brewery wagon was locking with the coal wagon, and an east-bound Kearny-Street car, wildly clanging its gong, the motorman shouting defiance at the crossing policeman, was dashing forward to complete the blockade." In the confusion of labor agitators, frightened horses, and embattled policemen, "Bill" leaves Catherine's car to join the dispute; he eventually becomes a professional labor leader.

Edition used: Paul Lauter, et al., ed. *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, 2nd ed. Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1994.

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## 92

**Author:** Willa Cather (1876-1947)

**Title:** "Paul's Case" In *The Troll Garden*

**Date:** 1905

**Systems:** Train

**Context:** Contemporary, Pittsburgh and New York City

The title character of this short story is a teen-age boy who is miserably unhappy with his lower middle-class life, with his gray and unimaginative teachers at school, and with his (to him) squalid neighborhood in Pittsburgh. His unhappiness translates to a general "bad attitude" that is excoriated by his teachers and his father, and ridiculed by his peers. The only solace Paul finds is in his job as an usher for the symphony and, more importantly, in the time he spends hanging out at a theater, with a group of actors led by Charley Edwards. In both situations he feels more "at home," among people whom he considers to be like himself, people who don't scorn him. But when "matters [go] steadily worse with Paul at school," his father forces him to quit his job as an usher and bans him from the theater; Paul is taken out of school and put to work.

His response is to embezzle a thousand dollars from his firm and head for New York and the Waldorf Hotel, where for eight days he lives as a wealthy and fashionable young man, an existence that provides satisfaction and comfort. The train is his escape to a better life, but a transitional stage; that is, he makes the journey in the lower-cost "day coach" rather than the Pullman, because he is afraid of being seen by some businessman who will recognize him from his office. The trip is made in the midst of a grey snowstorm, and the only description of the scenery is of dead grass and weeds that protrude from the drifting snow. After his sojourn in New York, his money almost gone, his father on his trail, Paul makes another train trip, this time getting off in New Jersey. As he walks down a lonely stretch of track, preparing to throw himself before an oncoming train, he again sees "dead grass [and] dried weed stalks." Paul's two train trips bracket his time in New York, certainly the best eight days of his life. But from the beginning the trip is a sort of funeral voyage, a movement toward Paul's inevitable death, suggested by the desiccated landscape that he moves through. Near the end of his stay in New York Paul recognizes the undeniable necessity of money, and the utter impossibility of getting more money to continue on with what for him is the only appropriate and satisfying way to live. Among his many purchases he has even bought a gun, supposedly with the unconscious intention of shooting himself; but in the end he opts for the train. Like the train out of Pittsburgh, the train that kills him takes him away also, from the intolerable life that would await him on a ignominious return to his home. The train, as a means of attaining freedom in the story, provides a double escape for Paul, the first fleeting, the second permanent.

Edition used: Eugene Current-Garcia and Bert Hitchcock, eds. *American Short Stories*, 5th ed. Glenview: Scott, Foresman, 1990.

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## 93

**Author:** Willia Cather (1876-1947)

**Title:** *Collected Short Fiction, 1892-1912*

**Date:** 1892-1912

**Systems:** Train, wagon, motor car

**Context:** Contemporary; chiefly in Nebraska and Wyoming

Several of Cather's early stories use a train ride into a town to set up interactions among characters. In "The Treasure of Far Island" (1902) an image of the Silvery Beaches "were glistening in the sun like pounded glass" is echoed by the

sun's beating upon the windows the the passenger train that "swung into the Republican Valley from the uplands." Doug recognizes landscape features that he knew as a boy - a cliff over which Indians drove buffalo, the Far Island, and so on - he is returning home to Empire City after twelve years. His father meets him at the station and they take the "shabby little street car which ever since he could remember had been drawn by mules that wore jingling bells on their collars." "A Death in the Desert" (1903) has Everett Hilgarde becoming conscious of the man across the aisle on the "High Line Flyer" "jerking along through the hot afternoon over the monotonous country between Holdrege and Cheyenne." "The four uncomfortable passengers [in the car] were covered with a sediment of fine, yellow dust... [which] blew up in clouds from the bleak, lifeless country through which they passed." The other three get off at a Colorado way station and Everett goes on alone to arrive four hours late in Cheyenne; only the station agent seems to notice. A woman in a phaeton is waiting, gets startled, apparently at the sight of Everett who settles the horse down and then walks on to the hotel. (She used to be one of Everett's brother's music pupils; he knew her as a girl; she sang with the brother in Europe.) Two days later, he's back on the west-bound train where an opera company descends and one person mistakes him for his brother. In "Flavia and Her Artists" (1905) the train nears Tarrytown from the New York to let Imogen Willard attend Flavia's house party; Flavia drives her home in a "high tilbury" carriage. After the party, it's back on the train.

In "The Sculptor's Funeral" (1905), a "group of townspeople stood on the station siding of a little Kansas town, awaiting the coming of the night train, which was already twenty minutes overdue." They fuss with their overcoats to keep out the cold and speculate about when the train will arrive. "The night express shot, red as a rocket, from out the eastward marsh lands..." The G.A.R. man's coffin is put on the the horse-drawn hearse and taken to the family's home. "The Affair at Grover Station" (1900) also uses delays in train schedules to motivate the story. The narrator heard the story "sitting on the rear platform of an accommodation freight" crawling between Grover Station and Cheyenne. As the train leaves, "The telegraph poles scored the sky like a musical staff as they flashed by, and the stars, seen between the wires, looked like the notes of some erratic symphony." The story which Rodgers tells is about a murdered station agent and the details involve trying to get the last train for Cheyenne at 5:45 for the governor's inaugural ball, the agent's duties for the 7:30 AM eastbound, and the failure of the agent to turn up as planned. The next, snowy day, Rodgers and his horse go to Grover on the 151 passenger to see what happened. An apparent ghost leaves an apparent clue, the number of a box car - it is tracked down in Omaha and the agent's body is found on board.

The short story in the form of a comic play, "The Westbound Train" (1899), is set in the Cheyenne Union Pacific depot. Mrs. Sybil Johnston arrives from the east and has a two-hour layover before the 28-hour ride to San Francisco to meet her husband, Reggie. It is her first travel alone and she has extended written instructions from Reggie. When she asks the station agent, her passes have been taken already by another person who claimed to be her. This apparent imposter, Mrs. Sally Johnson (no "t") writes an explanatory letter from a hotel near the station at the agent's suggestion. Sybil fears that her husband has two wives and decides to take the eastbound to Chicago. In steps Reggie who had decided to meet her at Cheyenne, but whose telegram didn't get through. All is forgiven.

"The Bohemian Girl" (1912) has the transcontinental express running along the Sand River, with Nile Ericson sitting in the rear seat of the observation car. Nils is returning home after several years; since he's not sure of his reception he checks his trunk at the station. His mother has an automobile which she drives to town daily for the mail as well as going "over the whole country" - it is, the old farmer says, one of fourteen motors in all. At one point in the story, Old Lady Ericson's car runs off the road and has to be pulled out by horses. For the barn raising, a major event in the story, the helpers arrive in buggies and wagons (not motors).

"A Resurrection" (1897) includes a brief history of Brownville, Nebraska on the Missouri river. It had been the head of river navigation for the old steamboat trade soon after statehood (1867), but the old Hannibal brought up the rails for the Union Pacific, and the channel became uncertain and narrower; it no longer remembered when it led to "the great aorta of the continent, or the throb of the wheels of commerce that used to beat up the white foam on its dark waters." The village became "a little Pompeii buried in bonded indebtedness." The focal character, Martin Dempster, now runs one of the old ferry boats. Years earlier, at 16, he ran away as a cabin boy, settled in St. Louis - he came back after his job and his marriage failed.

Edition used: Virginia Faulkner, ed. Revised ed. Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1970.

## 94

**Author:** Raymond Carver (1939-1988)

**Title:** "Errand"

**Date:** 1988

**Systems:** Railroad

**Context:** 1904, travel in Europe

This fictional account of Anton Chekhov's dying from tuberculosis includes a carriage ride to a clinic, Chekhov's train ride from Moscow to Berlin; he is seen off by friends at the Potsdam station. At one point, Chekhov's (false) optimism about being cured symbolically leads him to study railroad time tables, a playful gesture toward the conflict between those schedules and the reality of train travel.

Edition used: Eugene Current-Garcia and Bert Hitchcock, eds. *American Short Stories*, 5th ed. Glenview: Scott, Foresman, 1990.

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## 95

**Author:** Toni Morrison (b. 1931)

**Title:** *Jazz*

**Date:** 1992

**Systems:** Train

**Context:** 1906, Virginia to New York City, African-American perspective

Morrison's recent novel recreates New York at the turn of the century: a city pumping with violent, erotic energy, a city that draws people to it and transforms human desire. She uses a train to anticipate the motion of New York itself and to demonstrate the way a city works upon the body.

Joe and Violet Trace leave Vesper County, Virginia on the "colored section of the Southern Sky." This "young, country couple" enter the City "dancing," that is, standing close together in the aisle and clinging to the baggage rack above their heads: "When the train trembles approaching the water surrounding the City, they thought it was like them: nervous at having gotten there at last, but terrified of what was on the other side... The train shivered with them at the thought but went on and sure enough there was ground up ahead and the trembling became the dancing under their feet." They enter "laughing, tapping back at the tracks," "her hip bones rubbed his thigh,... and like a million others, chests pounding, tracks controlling their feet, they stared out the windows for the first sight of the City that danced with them, proving already how much it loved them" (Ch. 2).

With Joe and Violet, Morrison makes literal the sexual energy of a high speed train. But their entrance into New York also represents a desire so big it can bring "a million others." Morrison's characters carry the weight of the historical moment, these two represent the vast urban migration of the late nineteenth century: "The wave of black people running from want and violence crested in the 1870s; the '80s; the '90s but was a steady stream in 1906 when Joe and Violet joined it" (Ch. 2).

The author offers some details on segregated rail travel in this period. Late in the book, Joe Trace recalls, "they moved us five times in four different cars to abide by the Jim Crow law" (Ch. 5). Entering New York, the train attendants are shown inviting the colored coach to take breakfast in the dining car "now that they could." Once the train has gotten well away from Maryland and out of Delaware, there was no longer a "green-as-poison curtain separating the colored people eating from the rest of the diners." The cooks and attendants enjoy the change, because they are no longer required to show extra courtesy or bestow extra helpings on the white passengers. To this particular attendant's continuing dismay however, the colored travelers always refuse the dining car; they persist in bringing boxes, baskets, and paper bags of "bacon-stuffed biscuits" and other home-cooked fare.

The train initiates a transformation that will be completed by the brash excess of the City with its "wide streets and wasteful lamps lighting them." Yet Morrison carefully notes that the change a body undergoes is almost a recovery; one recaptures another self in order to indulge it. Once dancing in on the train or moving through the city, these people "are not so much new as themselves: their stronger, riskier selves" (Ch. 2). Joe and Violet Trace are both trackers, ones who hunt and roust out their hidden pasts or secret longings. First it is the train and then the City that emboldens them to do so.

Edition used: New York: Alfred Knopf, 1992.

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## 96

**Author:** Edith Wharton (1862-1937)

**Title:** *Ethan Frome*

**Date:** 1911

**Systems:** Buggy, train, sleigh

**Context:** Contemporary and 20 years ago, rural Massachusetts

The frame tale has the narrator being driven by buggy for a daily commute by train from the town of Starkfield, Massachusetts to his job at the power-house. This is a new world, "Yet I had come in the degenerate day of trolley, bicycles and rural delivery, when communication was easy among the scattered mountain villages." Another daily routine was Ethan Frome's coming to town by buggy to get the mail. One winter day all the horses in town get ill, so the narrator gets a ride in Ethan's sleigh, but the snows are too heavy, and Ethan has heard that the passenger train is behind a freight which got stalled in the drifts. The narrator stays over at Ethan's house and pieces together Ethan's life story, especially the events from two decades before (Prefatory chapter). Ethan's story is of his love for Mattie, a house servant, a cousin of his wife's. On one occasion, his wife takes the train to Bettsbridge for a doctor's visit, although in winter the trains are "slow and infrequent" (Ch. 3). Ethan and his townspeople use sleighs for grocery shopping, sledges to haul lumber. The near seduction is apparently sensed by Mrs. Frome who sets things up so Mattie will have to leave town. Ethan has an extended fantasy that he and Mattie will go West (Ch. 8), but the final day is an extended series of maneuvers which involve getting Mattie's trunk in the sleigh, a ride to the station by way of one of their trysting spots, and her missing the 5:00 train in favor of a sled ride down the big hill in town (Ch. 9). Transportation in this town is basically unchanged; actually it's not much different from what we saw from before the middle of the nineteenth century.

Edition used: New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939.

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**Author:** William Faulkner (1897-1962)

**Title:** *The Hamlet*

**Date:** 1931, 1936, 1940

**Systems:** Carriage, train

**Context:** Circa 1902 to 1920, rural Mississippi

The major characters are consistently identified with their vehicles, and that identification helps fix their social standing and class in the town of Frenchman's Bend, Mississippi. Ratliff, the itinerant sewing-machine salesman, has a beat-up buckboard. The Varners, the original founding family of the town, have a surrey. The upstart Snopeses arrive in a wagon. When Flem Snopes takes over most of the Varners' town operations he gets a new buggy ("Flem," 3: 2). Owning or at least driving a vehicle is a token of maturity: As the farm boys grow up "the trace-galled mules had given way to the trotting horses and buggies" ("Eula" 2: 1). When Flem agrees to marry Eula Varner after she has another man's baby, part of the settlement, in addition to a sort-of honeymoon by train to Texas, is a "new buggy with somebody to do the driving," well beyond anything else in the story ("The Long Summer" 1: 1). When Flem and the Texas hustler return from Texas it is in "a covered wagon drawn by mules and followed by a considerable string of obviously alive objects which in the leveling sun resembled vari-sized and -colored tatters torn at random from large billboards...." the wild horses later to be sold in the town. At the auction, the Armstids, the chief victims of the scam, have a wagon, "It was battered and paintless. One wheel had been repaired by crossing planks bound to the spokes with bailing wire and two underfed mules wore a battered harness patched with bits of cotton rope; the reins were ordinary cotton plow-lines, not new" ("The Peasants" 1: 1).

The book is punctuated by scenes where many horse-drawn vehicles assemble in one place. During the courtship of Eula Varner, four buggies swarm outside her house. A buggy ride lets a suitor or seducer be alone with her. In the final section, "The Peasants," wagons pull into town for the horse auction and the trial. The town's cotton gin is shown through Ratliff's eyes: "He could see the wagons too, the long motionless line of them behind the patient, droop-headed mules, waiting to advance a wagon-length at a time, onto the scales and then beneath the suction-pipe where Jody Varner would now be again..." ("The Long Summer" 1: 1).

Escape from Frenchman's Bend, usually in disgrace, but sometimes in triumph, is "to Jefferson and the railroad" ("The Long Summer" 2: 2). Near the end of the book Faulkner traces changes in the rural roads: "That road was no longer a fading and almost healed scar. It was rutted now, because there had been rain a week ago, and now the untroubled grass and weeds of almost thirty years bore four distinct paths: the two outer ones where the harnessed teams had walked daily since that first afternoon when the first ones had turned into it - the weathered and creaking wagons, the plow-galled horses and mules, the men and women and children entering another world, traversing another land, moving into another time, another afternoon without time or name" ("The Peasants" 2: 2).

Edition used: New York: Modern Library Paperback, 1940.

**Author:** William Faulkner (1897-1962)

**Title:** *The Reivers*

**Date:** 1962



**Systems: Automobile****Context: 1904, Mississippi, Memphis**

Faulkner's last novel is narrated by Lucius Priest, an old man telling his grandson about an incident that happened in 1904, when he was eleven. The impetus for the coming of age episode he retells is the purchase of an automobile, a Winton Flyer, by his grandfather. Boon Hogganbeck, an employee at Lucius's father's livery stable and a sort of family retainer, had two years before been mesmerized by the first automobile to visit Jefferson, and he immediately takes over the care and driving of the Winton Flyer. (Boon had appeared in *Go Down, Moses* as a representative of the older generation in the bear hunt.) In the car Boon finds "his soul's lily maid, the virgin's love of his rough and innocent heart." But unfortunately Boss Priest (the grandfather) is satisfied with simply owning the car, and has no interest in using it (he bought in defiance of a city ordinance, sponsored by the town's other and junior banker, outlawing cars within city limits). Boon begins a somewhat successful campaign to keep the car in circulation, recruiting through their curiosity other family members, particularly Lucius. When Lucius's grandparents and parents are called out of town by a funeral, Boon sees his chance and convinces Lucius (who doesn't need convincing) to accompany him and the car to Memphis. They are joined by a stowaway, Ned McCaslin, Boss's black carriage driver. In Memphis Ned swaps the car for a horse and most of the book is taken up with their convoluted attempt, through the agency of a horse race, to reacquire the car.

The landscape of turn of the century Mississippi is decidedly unmarked by automobiles. The story is told at a time when the car has taken over the country, profoundly effected geography and culture, but the elderly Lucius harkens back to an age that predates the changes that have occurred. His own youth and the youth of the automobile are closely linked, and in part romanticized as a better and less corrupt time. More specifically, the story is about the movement from childhood into the relatively seamy world of adults. Lucius, in retrospect sees the whole episode as a significant turning point in his life, a moment of revelation that largely shut him off from the innocence of his childhood. Similarly, Boss Priest foresees the future the car will bring, predicts that the livery stable will become a garage, and that soon cars will overrun the town, roads will be paved, and the bank will buy bonds to finance the roads; "people will pay any price for motion," he says, "They will even work for it... We don't know why." Boss Priest is against the automobile and the changes it will bring, but he is also a banker and willing to go where the money goes. But he doesn't understand the phenomenon. He doesn't understand Boon's obsession with cars. Lucius is caught in-between, fascinated by the automobile (Boon teaches him to drive it) but also interested in the values his grandfather advocates, a gentlemanly honor code that seems at odds with the noisy, smelly and too fast moving automobile. *The Reivers* is in part a very nostalgic book, inscribing a yearning for not only a youth but a culture that has been lost; the car is not the only culprit in terms of the vast changes, but it certainly shares a large part of the responsibility. The incident Lucius recalls, precipitated by the purchase of the Winton Flyer, marks the beginning of those changes both in his own life and in the culture of small town Mississippi.

Edition used: New York: Random House, 1962.

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# The 1910s

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[Wolfe](#) begins by depicting the social impacts of the South's railroad system and then dramatizes the introduction of the automobile in a small city in North Carolina. [Fitzgerald](#) presents an old Ford as the symbol of a stable, conservative Georgia culture. [Lewis](#) portrays well-developed railroad travel from rural Minnesota to the East coast while he captures a town's fascination and obsession with new automobiles and trucks. [Porter](#) gives glimpses of train and car travel in Texas. [Gray](#) shows both the widespread availability of cars in agricultural regions of Washington state, and that region's dependency on the railroad, along with the Westerners' fascination with the New York City street scenes and sounds. [Frost](#) gives anecdotes of Pullman-car travellers, and reflects some New Englanders' hostility to modern progress. [Lardner](#) describes a vacation trip by train from Chicago to Florida, and then local travel at the resort towns. [Colón](#) depicts a Puerto Rican stowaway's migration by steamship to New York.

In New York city, the infrastructure has become quite complex. [Norris](#) traces the accumulation of options as the taxi and the subway become available and commuting becomes routine. [Dos Passos](#) describes a city with layers on land from the elevated trains to the subway, and various types and sizes of ships on the rivers. [Sandburg's](#) images include railroads, wagons, and motorized vehicles in Chicago, and trains across the midwestern countryside. [Pound](#) gives poetic images of the Parisian "Metro."

Finally, boys' (and girls') books by [Stratemeyer and his "Syndicate"](#) dramatize the development and use of nearly every new way to travel from the early 1910s, and focus on airplane adventures, especially after Lindbergh's flight to Paris in 1926

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## 99

**Author:** Thomas Wolfe (1900-1938)

**Title:** *Look Homeward, Angel: A Story of the Buried Life*

**Date:** 1929

**Systems:** Train, auto

**Context:** 1910s and earlier, North Carolina

Throughout the novel, Wolfe's elaborated, impressionistic descriptions of train rides, like his descriptions of nature, symbolically bring setting and character together. Oliver Gant, father of the main character, Eugene, arrives at Altamont, North Carolina in 1886, "The train rattled on over the reeking earth. Rain fell steadily. A brakeman came draftily into the dirty plush coach and emptied a scuttle of coal into the big stove at the end. High empty laughter shook a group of yokels sprawled on two turned seats. The bell tolled mournfully about the clacking wheels. There was a droning interminable wait at a junction-town near the foot-hills. Then the train moved on again across the vast rolling South" (Ch. 1). Tom Cline, the engineer on 36 which "bucked helplessly like a goat, her wheels spun furiously on the rails" in the spring damp, notices that "the starlight glimmered faintly on the rails" (Ch. 14). In 1912, Eugene becomes aware of a "weird combination of fixity and change" which is highlighted by his memories: "There was one moment of timeless suspension when the land did not move, the train did not move, the slattern in the doorway did not move, he did not move." He imagines the woman's actions after the train had passed and recognizes that the passing landscape exists after he has moved on (Ch. 15).

Adventures and escapes by rail are frequent in the early chapters. Brother Steve made a two-day fling in Knoxville after he flunked out of school (Ch. 5). Eugene's mother, Eliza, and the kids went to the St. Louis Fair in 1904, taking the

street-car in Altamont to get the train. They see the locomotive exhibition, "the greatest monsters he had ever seen, whose wheels spun terrifically in groves, whose blazing furnaces, raining hot red coals into the pit beneath, were fed incessantly by two grimed fire-painted stokers" (Ch. 5). Oliver takes his "last great voyage" to California for seven weeks (Ch. 7). Eugene and his father visit his sister and her new husband, passing through the "sleepy junction of Spartansburg, the ride in the dilapidated daycoaches that ran to Augusta" (Ch. 12). He takes the night train with his mother who seeks a cure for her Bright's disease, in his berth "watching the shadowy and phantom South flash by" (Ch. 13). Both generations of the Gant family move freely by rail throughout the South; even though they are middle class, they are by no means wealthy.

Upon Oliver's return to Altamont we get a luxurious account of riding the street car, which has "a warm electric smell and one of hot burnt steel." Wolfe combines a booster's litany on the modernity of the city with flashbacks of Oliver's youth in the Civil War: "The car paused briefly at the car-shed, in sight of its stabled brothers. Then it moved reluctantly past the dynamic atmosphere of the Power and Light Company, wheeling bluntly into the gray frozen ribbon of Hatton Avenue, running gently up hill near its end into the fore silence of the Square" (Ch. 7).

One of Eugene's childhood memories is of the grocery wagon horse which ran along the alley ruts at 11:03 each day; once he fell and it stepped on his head "drawing the wagon beyond Eugene's body, and stopping." It left the "mark of the centaur" (Ch. 4).

Automobiles arrive. "A 1910 model, four-cylinder, seven-passenger Hudson, with mounting steady roar, shot drunkenly out from the station curbing, lurched into the level negro-sleeping stretch of South End Avenue." One M.D. has a Buick roadster, the other a Hudson. The judge watches as, "Bouncing tinnily down the coiling road that came through the Gap from the town, a flivver glinted momentarily through the trees" (Ch. 14). The town's millionaire has a Packard (Ch. 15). Older brother Luke drives his father's 1913, five-passenger Ford, "purchase of an inspired hour of madness, occupant now of half Gant's conversation, object of abuse, boast, and anathema. It was before every one owned a car. Gant was awed and terrified by his rash act, exalted at the splendor of his chariot, appalled at its expense. Each bill for gasoline, repairs, or equipment brought a howl of anguish from him; a puncture, a breakdown, a minor disorder caused him to circle about in maddened strides, cursing, praying, weeping." [Still sounds familiar.] The father envies his son's sexuality: "How do you feel when she gets out of an automobile at two o'clock in the morning after grunting in the dark with some damned travelling-man" (Ch. 18).

At fifteen, Eugene and school mates travel to Charleston: "Now, by night, he was riding once more into the South. The day-coach was hot, full of the weary smell of old red plush.... The boys, bored, paraded restlessly to the car-end for water. There was a crushed litter of sanitary drinking-cups upon the floor, and the stale odor from the toilets" (Ch. 26). At sixteen he courts a twenty-one year old woman whom he sees off for what turns out to be the last time: "He went with her to the station on a hot mid-afternoon. There was a smell of melted tar in the streets. She held his hand beside her in the rattling trolley.... He passed the old one-legged gateman on the station platform very easily, carrying his baggage. Then he sat beside her in the close green heat of the pullman until the train should go. A little electric fan droned uselessly above the aisle" (Ch. 31).

In the final chapter, the ghost of his recently-deceased brother asks, "'Do you know why you are going or are you just taking a ride on the train?'" (Ch. 40).

Edition used: New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957.

Critical comments: Richard Walser, "Thomas Wolfe's Train as Symbol," *Southern Literary Journal*, 21:1 (Fall 1988): 3-14.

**Title:** "The Ice Palace"

**Date:** 1920

**Systems:** Automobile, street-car, train

**Context:** Contemporary, Georgia and Minnesota

The opening scene in Tarleton, "in southernmost Georgia," has Sally Carrol Happer looking at Clark Darrow's "ancient Ford."

The car was hot - being partly metallic it retained all the heat it absorbed or evolved - and Clark Darrow sitting bolt upright at the wheel wore a pained, strained expression as though he considered himself a spare part, rather likely to break. He laboriously crossed two dust ruts, the wheels squeaking indignantly at the encounter, and then with a terrifying expression he gave the steering-gear a final wrench and deposited self and car approximately in front of the Happer step. There was a plaintive heaving sound, a death-rattle, followed by a short silence; and then the air was rent by a startling whistle.

The drive to the local swimming hole goes through the town "where the dusty road became a pavement." Aside from walking shoppers, the way is hindered by "a drove of low-moaning oxen [which] were being urged along in front of a placid street-car." Sally Carrol is engaged to Harry Bellamy who invites her up to Minneapolis for the winter carnival. The all night Pullman is very cold, a premonition of the social atmosphere which will drive her back to Tarleton. On the Pullman she orders an extra blanket from the porter, and tries unsuccessfully to get warm. On the way to the diner for coffee she notes that the snow filtered into the vestibules: "It was intriguing, this cold, it crept in everywhere." She notices the white landscape and solitary farmhouses; as the train nears the city, "The long wires of the telegraph-poles doubled; two tracks ran up beside the train - three - four; came a succession of white-roofed houses, a glimpse of a trolley-car with frosted windows, streets - more streets - the city." Once in St. Paul, Sally Carrol rides in the Bellamy's chauffeur-driven sedan, and wishes to follow the small boys who are "hitching sleds behind grocery wagons and automobiles." The ride to the ice palace is by sleigh, and Sally Carrol worries that the horse is cold, but Harry claims that he likes it. Sally Carrol gets lost and bewildered in the ice palace and decides not to stay in the North. The final scene echoes the first, as she watches "a very ancient Ford" again, back home.

Edition used: James M. Mellard, ed. *Four Modes: A Rhetoric of Modern Fiction*. New York: Macmillan, 1973.

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## 101

**Author:** Sinclair Lewis (1885-1951)

**Title:** *Main Street*

**Date:** 1920

**Systems:** Train, motor car, boat

**Context:** 1911 to 1920, Minnesota

Lewis' ironic brief Preface sets the tone for how the setting is presented in the novel. "Main Street is the climax of civilization. That this Ford car might stand in front of the Bon Ton Store, Hannibal invaded Rome and Erasmus wrote in Oxford cloisters.... Our railway station is the final aspiration of architecture." This tone is picked up in Dr. Will Kennicott's speeches when he is using the wonders of his home town, Gopher Prairie, Minnesota, as part of his courting of Carol Milford: "And we've got seven miles of cement walks already, and building more every day! Course a lot of

these towns still put up with plank walks, but not for us, you bet!" (Ch. 2). It turns out that Gopher Prairie has unpaved streets which, in the rain, "become a muddy expanse from concrete walk to walk" and nearly impossible to cross (Ch. 4). The wonderful world features "cheap automobiles, dollar watches, and safety razors" (Ch. 22).

The narrator, Will, and other citizens are absurdly enthusiastic about the automobile. "A Ford or Overland goes to the movies faster than the St. Paul trolley"; the Paige which the Kennicotts take from the Gopher Prairie train station is as fast as those Marmons in Minneapolis (Ch. 3). The Ford and Buick garages are "the most energetic and vital places in town" (Ch. 4). Throughout the novel we hear of Ford delivery wagons, lumber wagons, and so on. Will's car, clearly an important part of his ability to get to his patients, is rhapsodized:

The car was a monster at rest after furious adventures. The headlights blazed on the clots of ice in the road so that the tiniest lumps gave mountainous shadows, and the taillight cast a circle of ruby on the snow behind. Kennicott was opening the door, crying, "Here we are, old girl! Got stuck couple times, but we made it, by golly, we made it, and here we be!..." (Ch. 15).

After a trip to California to preserve the Kennicotts' marriage, Will returns with babble about car models, dealerships, and "the advantages of the ball-gear-shift" (Ch. 34). In addition to riding in motor cars, Will and others are involved in the technical details of their maintenance. Will gets a new piston (Ch. 5) and worries that poor performance is caused by carbon build up so he needs new rings (Ch. 33). Motoring is one of Will's five "hobbies" (others include Carol and hunting), and he "nursed his two-year-old Buick even in winter, when it was stored in the stable-garage behind the house. He filled the grease-cups, varnished a fender, removed from beneath the back seat the débris of gloves, copper washers, crumpled maps, dust, and greasy rags" (Ch. 16). In the winter, in Minnesota, however, the town becomes "motor-paralyzed" so the doctor must often rely on his sleigh (cutter) (Ch. 7) or a "clumsy high carriage" (Ch. 8). At one point twenty people take a bob sled ride to the lake for an outing (Ch. 17).

In a short-lived moment of boosterism, just after the end of the First World War, Gopher Prairie tries to attract businesses from the outside world. They get one taker - a factory which makes wooden automobile wheels (Ch. 35).

Carol, the city person, (with some help from the narrator) soon grows disenchanted with this zeal, as she does with the personal and general politics of the small town. Main Street is "cluttered with electric light poles, telephone poles, gasoline pumps for motor cars, boxes of goods" (Ch. 4). When her marriage is nearly on the rocks she fantasizes about his car running off a slippery road while he is making house calls (Ch. 24). Later she walks out of town with a poetic young man she vaguely flirts with but they are caught in the lights of her husband's car and given a ride back home; she becomes acutely aware of "riding in a squeaking old car" (Ch. 33).

The railroad is the pathway into and out of Gopher Prairie. After their honeymoon, the newly-married Kennicotts, "an obviously prosperous man and a black-haired, fine-skinned girl whose pumps rested on an immaculate horsehide bag," ride from Chicago:

Under the rolling clouds of the prairie a moving mass of steel. An irritable clank and rattle beneath a prolonged roar. The sharp scent of oranges cutting the soggy smell of unbathed people and ancient baggage. This is a way train, and there is no smug Pullman attached to the train, and the day coaches of the East are replaced by free chair cars, with each seat cut into two adjustable plush chairs, the head-rests covered with doubtful linen towels.... There is no porter, no pillows, no provision for beds, but all today and all tonight they will ride this long steel box... they go to sleep curled in distorted attitudes, heads against the window-panes or propped on rolled coats on seat-arms, and legs thrust into the aisle.... The smell grows constantly thicker, more stale.

They arrive (after several pages of similar descriptions) "at a squat red frame station, the platform crowded with unshaven farmers and with loafers - unadventurous people with dead eyes." There's a welcoming party and the brakeman helps her down to the platform (Ch. 3). Much later, after the California trip, they are not met and have to wait in the station "among huddled German women with shawls and umbrellas, and ragged-bearded farmers in corduroy coats... the stench of sawdust boxes which served as cuspidors"; they miss the hotel bus and, after the Ford taxi they call spins out on the ice, they have to walk to town (Ch. 34).

The railroad tracks are "the natural highway for pedestrians on the plains," and Carol walks along them to nearby Plover

Lake and admires the wild flowers (Ch. 12). She walks with her young son on the same path and meets up with her erstwhile lover, Erik, where they sit, symbolically, "on a heap of discarded railroad ties, oak logs spotted with cinnamon-colored dry-rot and marked with metallic brown streaks where iron plates had rested" (Ch. 29).

Trains are the way out of town:

Trains! At the lake cottage she missed the passing of the trains. She realized that in town she had depended upon them for assurance that there remained a world beyond. The railroad was more than a means of transportation to Gopher Prairie. It was a new god; a monster of steel limbs, oak ribs, flesh of gravel, and a stupendous hunger for freight; a deity created by man that he might keep himself respectful to Property, as elsewhere he had elevated and served as tribal gods the mines, cotton-mills, motor-factories, colleges, army.

It's not the same in the East, where people can't remember a time before the railroad, while in the midwest in the 1860s and 1870s investors made great profits by knowing where the stations would be, and where the railroad could ignore a town and slay it. Young kids know "whether No. 32 had a hot-box last Tuesday, whether No. 7 was going to put on an extra day coach," and they know the company's president's name. The trains, not the motor car, was "their romance, their only mystery besides mass at the Catholic Church." Previously Gopher Prairie had been more important as a division point with a roundhouse and repair shops; now all they have left are two resident conductors with fancy uniforms and, "the most melodramatic figure in town," the telegraph man. Will, but not Carol, knows when trains are on time or late - she just notices their passing out of town to somewhere else (Ch. 19). She looks over railroad folders when she begins to become anxious about her psychological isolation (Ch. 20). The disgraced school teacher whom she had supported (Ch. 32), and Erik leave on the train; his banishment is punctuated by the whistle which told her "it was all over" (Ch. 33).

Early in the book Carol imagined the past history of boats on the Mississippi river valley, as "she heard again the startled bells and thick puffing of high-stacked river steamers wrecked on sand-reefs sixty years ago. Along the decks she saw missionaries, gamblers in tall pot hats, and Dakota chiefs with scarlet blankets.... Far off whistles at night, round the river bend, plunking paddlers reechoing by the pines, and a glow on black sliding waters" (Ch. 1). Incidentally, Carol and Will take a rowboat ferry across the Minnesota river at Mendota, near where the High Bridge crosses the Mississippi (Ch. 2).

Lewis makes sure we understand how general are these circumstances. "Nine-tenths of the American towns are so alike that it is the completest boredom to wander from one to the other. Always, west of Pittsburgh, and often east of it, there is the same lumber yard, the same railroad station, the same Ford garage, the same creamery, the same box-like houses and two-story shops" (Ch. 22).

Edition used: New York: Signet Classic, 1961.

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## 102

**Author:** Katherine Ann Porter (1890-1980)

**Title:** "Old Mortality" In *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*

**Date:** 1936

**Systems:** Carriage, train, automobile

**Context:** 1885 to 1912, Texas

As the main character, Miranda, grows up, she sees the changes in her world and her family until she can gain independence and distance. Incidentally, Porter uses travel as part of the setting. In "Part I: 1885-1902," Aunt Amy



elopes by carriage; Uncle Gabriel's courtship is conducted by train and stage. "Part II: 1904" has a cab ride when Miranda visits Uncle Gabriel and his second wife in New Orleans. The central scene in "Part III: 1912" starts in "the stuffy aisle of the sleeping-car" where Miranda meets her older cousin, Eva. The intimacy of the setting and the length of the trip let them converse for the whole evening, longer than they had ever before. Eva, a politically active suffragette, challenges Miranda to expand her horizon, to put some substance behind her vague aspirations such as wanting to become an "air pilot," an unlikely trade for a woman. When they arrive at the station the next morning, Miranda's father picks them up in his car. The final scene has her older relatives telling old family stories, but Miranda can't hear above the "noisy motor," and she uses the tension between being present yet absent to decide that she "did not want any more ties to this house."

Edition used: New York: Signet, 1962.

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## 103

**Author:** Zane Grey (1872-1939)

**Title:** *The Desert of Wheat*

**Date:** 1919

**Systems:** Automobile, train, airplane

**Context:** 1917-1918, Washington state, New York city

The war against the "Wobblies," the I.W.W., comes to the Columbia River valley during the First World War, and the patriots assemble anti-union vigilantes and help defeat the Hun. After opening with an appreciation of the beauty and bounty of Washington wheat country, Kurt Dorn, the hero, sees the dust from a big, closed motor car owned by Mr. Anderson to whom he owes a lot of money. Throughout the novel, the named characters use drivers rather than driving themselves about. Cars are surprisingly available; the country roads are smooth, while Spokane's streets have asphalt (Ch. 4, 5). A federal agent motors through "the Bend," where Kurt's farm is, looking for I.W.W. operatives (Ch. 5). Anderson, his daughter Lenore, son Jake, and Nash, an I.W.W. person, go through the Bend country, "the big car hummed like a droning bee and seemed to cover the miles as if by magic" (Ch. 7).

The I.W.W.'s main tactics are sabotage and arson. In a pretty good car-and-train chase, a car passes Anderson's and throws phosphorous bombs into the dry wheat fields. The effort to pursue is stopped when Nash uses some kind of device which leads to "a violent shaking of the car, followed by sharp explosions, and silence" (Ch. 7). Nash later kidnaps Lenore and takes her to Wheatley. Kurt pursues - hiring a car and driver at Glencoe for a rapid trip to the Wheatley railroad station where, among other things he steals his father's cash from the I.W.W.s (his father is selling out) and hops a freight to Adrian (Ch. 9). The open boxcar he gets on is filled with I.W.W. men, so he hops out to hire another car which finally catches up with Nash and Lenore in Anderson's car. He shoots out a tire, wrecks the car he's driving, fixes Anderson's tire and drives the rescued woman to her home (Ch. 10).

A general motif in the book is an attempt to keep the West morally pure, and to keep the corrupting East at bay. The railroad is a conduit for this effort. A major scene in the middle of the book involves harvesting Kurt's wheat in the face of field fires. Wagons, following the 24-horse combines, take the grain to a warehouse by the railroad (Ch. 13). At the rail yard, Kurt's allies and the I.W.W. gang fight after the grain is torched; the I.W.W. people escape on a freight (Ch. 14). Grey spots the story with technical details, particularly about economic conditions: "The loss of wheat would fall upon Kurt. In the haste of that great harvest and its transportation to the village no provision had been made for loss. The railroad company had not accepted his wheat for transportation, and was not liable" (Ch. 15). The defeat of the I.W.W. by Anderson's vigilantes also takes place in a rail yard. They capture the I.W.W. leader, Glidden, hang him over the tracks, and herd the rest of the I.W.W. gang into an empty cattle train for exile to the east - that train goes under



Glidden's swinging body. Another conspirator, a ranch owner, is ushered into Anderson's car, also driven by the body, and then forced to sell his ranch (Ch. 22).

Kurt and Lenore fall in love and resolve to marry. But he resolves to join the army to fight the Germans. [Pro-German leanings of the I.W.W., and Kurt's German background are ongoing motifs in the story.] He takes the train for army duty, and writes back with a Westerner's impressions: "New York is an awful place - endless, narrow, torn-up streets crowded with hurrying throngs, taxicabs, cars, and full of noise and dust. I am always choked for air" (Ch. 25). Father Anderson, bringing the severely wounded Kurt back home, also portrays the city to his neighbors:

I rode down Fifth Avenue on one of them high-topped buses with seats on. Talk about your old stagecoach - why, these 'buses had 'em beat a mile! I rode some in my day, but this was the ride of my life. I couldn't hear myself think. Music at full blast, roar of traffic, voices like whisperin' without end, flash of red an' white an' blue, shine of a thousand automobiles down that wonderful street that's like a canyon! An' up overhead a huge cigar-shaped balloon, an' then an airplane sailin' swift an' buzzin' like a bee. Then [sic] was the first airships I ever seen (Ch. 30).

Earlier in the book, Lenore's wish to see the Washington landscape is such that "nothing but an airplane would satisfy me today" (Ch. 6). If her father has never seen one, her fascination must have come from magazines and newspapers.

Edition used: New York: Harper Collins, 1991.

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## 104

**Author:** Robert Frost (1874-1963)

**Title:** Selected Poems

**Date:** 1913-1947

**Systems:** Pullman, auto, airplane

**Context:** 1910s to 1930s, New England

Frost plays with the perspectives of being inside trains and trying to make sense of the passing scene. In "A Passing Glimpse" (1928), "I often see flowers from a passing car / That are gone before I can tell what they are." The poet names what the flowers aren't, and then concludes that "Heaven gives its glimpses only to those / Not in position to look too close," there's an advantage in not being able to stop the train. "On the Heart's Beginning to Cloud the Mind: or, From Sight to Insight" (1936), he looks from his "lower berth" at the midnight Utah desert and this "surface flight" lets him see through the "wreaths of engine smoke" to the "human pathetic light / That was maintained against the night."

The other point of view appears in the companion poem, "The Figure in the Doorway: or, On Being Looked at in a Train" (1936). Here a man who collapsed in his isolated cabin watched the passing train, especially the dining car, as his only entertainment aside from tending his garden. In an earlier poem, "New Hampshire" (1923) an Arkansas traveller is amazed that the Pullman porter turns down the bed.

"The Egg and the Machine" (1928) shows a frustrated rural man who kicks the tracks and imagines that "His hate had roused an engine up the road." He wishes he had sabotaged a switch to wreck the train, but it is too late. After the train passes, with its "scalding squirts" (of oil or steam) and "a roar that drowned the cries / He raised against the gods in the machine." He follows the tracks of a turtle to her nest where he imagines tossing her eggs at the next train engine which "will get this plasm in its goggle glass." A related criticism, in "The Grindstone" (1923) a "Father-Time-like man" puts a slowing load on the grindstone, a metaphor for the earth in orbit, is "like coming to a sudden railroad station."

Frost playfully allegorizes America as the result of an overheated car in "A Serious Step Lightly Taken" (1942). Travelling between "two burs on the map" with "the dot in front of a name" in search of a house advertised for a dollar down. "With two wheels low in the ditch / We left our boiling car / And we knocked at the door of a house we found, / And here today we are." The final stanzas point to the three hundred year history of the country. "The Middleness of the Road" (1947) points out that "the mineral drops that explode / To drive my ton of car / Are limited to the road," and have no way to explain "the universal blue / And local green" of nature.

Many of Frost's poems look wistfully to a rural past. "Directive" (1947) takes us up a deserted road where "the wear of iron wagon wheels" is likened to glacial tracks. The speaker imagines the owner from twenty years ago who went on the path with a "buggy load" of grain over a "ladder road," or corduroy.

"The Wright's Biplane" (1936) is the only airplane poem we could find. The plane should be called the First Motor Kite, and the pun on right/Wright is suggestive.

Edition used: Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955.

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## 105

**Author:** Ring Lardner (1885-1933)

**Title:** "Gullible's Travels"

**Date:** 1916

**Systems:** Train, boat

**Context:** Contemporary, Chicago to Florida

This humorous account of a trip Mr. Gullible and his wife take from Chicago to Palm Beach, Florida is dominated by Gullible's cynicism about the quality of hotels, beaches, and trains, and the ever-increasing cost of the trip. The first morning on the train gets the couple to Cairo, Illinois, which he thinks is Venice because the bridge is so close to the river - they speculate on whether the bridge is safe, whether the train has slowed down to give "the fish a chance to get off the track... It's against the law to spear fish with a cowcatcher this time o' year." After breakfast they go to the car called the "sun parlor. It was a glassed-in room on the tail-end o' the rear coach and it must of been a pleasant place to set and watch the scenery." Unfortunately it's filled with a "gang o' missionaries" who toss Bibles out the back at every crossroads, "for the southern heathen to pick up and read." The engineer stops at a station "every few minutes"; "if he run past it without stoppin' the inhabitants wouldn't never forgive him." Gullible speculates that people in these towns turn out in force for a contest to count the number of passengers: "The losers has to promise to work one day the followin' month. If one fella loses three times in the same month he generally always kills himself."

While his wife is napping in "our apartment," Gullible talks with a man from St. Louis about whether it has rained ("or else the sprinklin' wagon run shy o' the streets"), about friends in the railroad business (one "generally stands on the fourth or fifth car behind the engine"), and about the exclusiveness of Palm Beach ("They leave everybody in now"). His anxious wife becomes nervous when the train goes around curves, but "As long as the track curves, the best thing the train can do is curve with it." They arrive late at St. Augustine, but still get a train to Palm Beach. Gullible speculates that there are more stations between those two cities than between New York and San Francisco, "And our train stoppedped twice and started twice at every one"; even so, by fudging the time table they arrive ten minutes early.

The street-car from the hotel to the beach "was part bicycle, part go-cart and part African," later called an "Afromobile." Like the other ways of getting around in this story, the Gullibles talk almost constantly about perceived dangers and genuine costs.

At the end of the vacation, they take an overnight boat trip to Fort Pierce and Rockledge for the train to Daytona. The boat frequently runs aground; the stay at Fort Pierce is expensive and discouraging, partly because the town has no sidewalks but only sand between the boat dock to the hotel.

Edition used: *Gullible's Travels, Etc.* Univ. of Chicago Press, 1965.

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## 106

**Author:** Jesús Colón (b. 1901)

**Title:** "Stowaway," In *A Puerto Rican in New York*.

**Date:** 1961

**Systems:** Ship

**Setting:** 1916, San Juan, Puerto Rico to Sandy Hook, Latino perspective

Colón's memoir recalls his unpaid passage to New York. As a sixteen-year-old stowaway, Colón must spend his voyage on the S.S. Carolina below decks, so his story provides an effective counterpoint to travel writing from a tourist's point of view. For instance, Colón plans his passage with a friend on the crew. He must sneak on board, carry no luggage, and sequester himself "uncomfortably" inside one of the linen closets.

Sensory perception of travel changes depending on one's status: paying passenger, crew member, illegal immigrant. Where the tourist relates what is seen, Colón can tell us only what he hears. Packed in with the linen, he can hardly see, let alone rhapsodize. As the ship departs San Juan harbor, he hears "the clanking of chains as the anchor was hoisted. After a little while I listened to the metallic noise of the propellers as they started their enormous metal four leaf clovers circling in the waters of San Juan Bay. The third shrill whistle of the ship gave me the sign that we were finally getting away from the dock."

Colón does imagine what the view might be like from on deck. But the fantasy view of his native island incorporates a historical view as well:

In my mind I could see that the Door of San Juan, centuries old with its gate surrounded by old granite blocks that had grown indefinite in color, would now be looking at the ship. This very door had also seen the wooden vessels of Ponce de León, one of Puerto Rico's first Governors, passing by and the powerful galleons of pirates like Drake, Morgan and Cumberland, about whom I so fondly read in my childhood.

Colón's voyage fuses with these earlier voyages and the colonial history of his island. His trip, however, reverses the direction of conquest; he is the contemporary Puerto Rican colonial taking New York by stealth.

Once roused out of the linen closet, Colón is put to work washing dishes. He comments on the rapid pace he must keep - "it was simply a question of quantity against quality in dishwashing...it took me a few days to get my skin accustomed to the pain produced by the steam they called warm water, used on ships to wash dishes in those days." He is promoted "into the class of overworked bus boy," and eventually the steward offers him a permanent job on the ship - "thirty dollars a month, room and board. One day off when we come to port." But Colón has other plans. Once the ship drops anchor, he slips gratefully off the S.S. Carolina. He informs us that this same vessel was eventually "sent to the bottom of the Caribbean by a German submarine."

Edition used: New York: Mainstream, 1961. Reprinted in *American Mosaic: Multicultural Readings in Context*. Barbara Roche Rico and Sandra Mano, editors. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991.

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**Author:** Charles Norris (1881-1945)

**Title:** *Bread*

**Date:** 1923

**Systems:** Train, automobile

**Context:** 1900 to contemporary, New York city

Norris traces a quarter of a century's changes in New York city's transportation Systems, and emphasizes the effects on business, social, and family life - all from a professional woman's perspective.

After taking a stenography course near the turn of the century, Jeanette Sturgis rides the elevated train from her mother's flat at 93rd street to downtown for her first job. The spring brings out horse buses, the reappearance of hansom cabs, and open automobiles. An "electric hansom cab" had been stuck in the snow for four days. The main public system is the green omnibus drawn by three horses abreast (Book I, Ch. 3).

Book II is set in the 1910s. Jeanette takes her first ride on the newly opened subway. Her suitor wows her mother and herself by hiring a taxi, "an unexpected luxury," for an evening at a fancy restaurant and then a show. Her boss in the publishing business has a Pope-Toledo, which goes along with his extravagant life style at Riverside Drive (Ch. 2). After she marries Martin Devlin they visit the commuter town of Cohasset, Long Island, by taking the trolley to the 34th Street ferry, and then the train. "It was indeed hot, but the vistas up and down the river as the ferry-boat blunted its way toward the Long Island shore were all of cool pinks, palest greens and lavenders in the late summer afternoon..." (Ch. 4). They eventually move to Cohasset from which Martin commutes to Manhattan. At one point, it takes Jeanette two uncomfortable hours to go across Long Island to visit her sister in Freeport by steam train to Jamaica where she has to change trains (Ch. 6). The wealthier Cohasset people, such as the doctor, have automobiles which they use to go to the yacht club and to social events (Ch. 5); another acquaintance has a "brass-fitted motor car" with "flickery acetylene lamps" (Ch. 7).

The final Book takes place in the early 1920s after Jeanette and her husband had been estranged for nearly a decade. She has returned to the publishing company and is now the executive in charge of the Mail Order Department. One anchor in her life is her sister, husband, and kids whom she visits at Cohasset on many Sundays. The 5:00 train back to Pennsylvania Station is packed: "Even the outbound trains during the morning, which were never more than comfortably filled, stopped at every station along the line, no matter how insignificant. It took ten minutes longer to get to Cohasset Beach on Sundays than on any other day of the week..." so the regular 19-minute trip takes 45. In the intervening years, Cohasset has paved roads, and the dilapidated wooden station is replaced with a concrete one; a successful real estate developer has a limousine and chauffeur. At the station are "shabby, waiting Fords," the taxis. The automobile has come to the suburbs, so on the quiet Sunday, "every now and then there came the vibrant hum of a passing motor car." Jeanette's niece, in high school, talks admiringly about her boyfriend's Stutz and another girl's Marmon (Ch. 2).

Jeanette and her niece take the "thundering subway" to visit Miss Holland, a former co-worker of hers, who lives near the Brooklyn Navy Yard. During the visit Holland articulates the case for equal pay for equal work between women and men; as part of her argument, she refers to the hundred thousand women during World War I who "were employed by the railroads to perform the work which men formerly did before they went into the army. Women cleaned locomotives, tended stock-rooms of repair shops, sold tickets, took charge of signal stations, worked as carpenters, machinists, and electricians" (Ch. 3).

Jeanette's husband is reported to have a motor-car agency in Philadelphia which "indicated success" (Ch. 2). In an effort

to see if the conflicts she feels about whether her career has been as valuable as the marriage and family she didn't stay with, she goes to visit him over Thanksgiving. She gets a chair-car reservation from Penn Station; at Manhattan Transfer she considers turning back, but stays on. She gets out of the overheated parlor car at Broad Street Station, Philadelphia, where she takes a taxi to the Bellvue-Stratford hotel. A brief walk and she's at Martin Devlin Motor Cars where he sells "Parrotts." The salesman gives her the pitch: "Shift here is automatic ... cylinders ... compression ... hundred-and-eighteen-inch wheel-base ... equipment just as you see it, ... rear tire extra ... rides like a gazelle..." He's still going on while she is trying to find out where Martin is. After he shows up and recognizes her, he even begins a pitch, "This is a fine car you handle; its lines are really very beautiful." Jeanette, being quite level-headed, notices that she "never heard of the Parrott before" (Ch. 4). Her treat is to meet his wife and kids; he picks her up in a Parrott with a liveried chauffeur for the drive to his suburban, Jenkintown home, talking up the car along the way. "Their own vehicle was but one link in a long chain of nimble bugs with glowing antennæ which crawled hard upon one another along the winding course." Talk at dinner includes a lot of gossip about the Cohasset families, praise of his children, motor cars, the future of the automobile industry, and traffic laws - in short, issues that Martin is concerned about (Ch. 5).

Unlike the comfortable ride to Philadelphia, the train ride home is crowded; she has to sit in the coach, not the chair-car; her hatbox is in the aisle and people stumble into it; "There were cinders embedded in the plush covering of the seat, the car was badly ventilated and smelled of warm, crowded humanity"; she can't get into the dining car. At Newark a driving rain puts streaks of water down the "dirty window-panes," and the train has a long wait in the tube under the Hudson river. Once in Manhattan the taxi she takes skids on the wet pavement (Ch. 5). Presumably the discomforts, both emotional and logistical, that accompany leaving Manhattan complement some of her other reasons for staying in Manhattan and pursuing her career.

Edition used: New York: E. P. Dutton.

## 108

**Author:** John Dos Passos (1896-1970)

**Title:** *Manhattan Transfer*

**Date:** 1925

**Systems:** Automobile, train, subway, steamboat, trolley, and others

**Context:** 1910s, New York city

Dos Passos' New York cityscape is filled with details, precise locations in time and space, quoted newspaper headlines, brand names, characters from most of the social scale. He gives a fine sense of the layered city - the "clatter of L trains overhead" (Ch. 1: 1) and the subway beneath: "[e]lbows, packages, shoulders, buttocks, jiggled closer with every lurch of the screeching express" (Ch. 2: 2). On the ground the "grinding rattle of wheels and scrape of hoofs on the cobblestones" (Ch. 1: 2), "[a] few rattling sounds of cabs and trolley cars squirmed in brokenly through the closed windows" of a hotel (Ch. 1: 4), the "two endless bands of automobiles that passed along the road in front of the station" (Ch. 2:3) and buses "crowded into line like elephants in a circus parade" (Ch. 2: 4). "Glowworm trains shuttle in the gloaming through the foggy looms of spiderweb bridges, elevators soar and drop in their shafts, harbor lights wink" (Ch. 3: 3). Even further above: "Drifts across the sky a dirigible, bright tinfoil cigar misted with height, gently prodding the rainwashed sky and the soft clouds" (Ch. 3: 4).

We find the same layered effect on the water as well. Two returning veterans "passed under Brooklyn Bridge. There is a humming whine of electric trains over their heads, an occasional violet flash from the wet rails. Behind them beyond barges tugboats carferries the tall buildings, streaked white with ships of steam and mist, tower gray into sagged clouds." The Mauretania's "relentless hull" comes into the harbor "like a skyscraper" (Ch. 3: 1); from the boat deck of

the Volendam a band below is playing "O Titin-e Titin-e," and on the surface "Red ferryboats, carferries, tugs, sandscows, lumberschooners, tramp steamers drifted between him and the steaming towering city that gathered itself into a pyramid" (Ch. 3: 5). Harbor specialists and people in the shipping industry recognize the boats as they come in and leave (e.g., Ch. 1: 3, 2: 2).

While sights and sounds dominate these descriptions, odors also come through. Ellen, one of the main characters, walks through Central Park and is noticed by a young man in a straw hat in a red Stutz roadster. On the Washington Square bus, "It smelled of gasoline and asphalt, of spearmint and talcumpowder and perfume from the couples that jiggled closer and closer together on the seats of the bus" (Ch. 2: 1). Later a rowdy group mills near Columbus Circle: "A smell of rainy pavements mingled with the exhausts of cars and occasionally there was a whiff of wet earth and sprouting grass from the Park" (Ch. 3: 4).

The novel starts with a young man arriving by "ferryship" in New York, "the plank walls of the ship closed in, cracked as the ferry lurched against them." He walks between coal wagons toward yellow streetcars" (Ch. 1: 1). Later another arrival who isn't quite sure it's New York after avoiding danger from the freight car he was on looks "Southward beyond the tracks" and thinks of the image of "'The Gay White Way'" (Ch. 1:4). After World War I., several characters are financially ruined and escape, one couple by boat to Europe, another by train to Calgary (Ch. 3: 5). The final chapter follows a disillusioned young man on empty streets (no trolley cars) to a ferry with only a horse and wagon aboard. The dawn rises on Brooklyn "rubbishpiles" - "The sun shines redly through the mist on rusty donkeyengines, skeleton trucks, wishbones of Fords, shapeless masses of corroding metal." He gets a lift in a huge furniture truck, going only "'Pretty far'" (Ch. 3: 5).

(Manhattan Transfer, by the way, is on the way to Penn station - in this story a married couple changes trains there on their way to an Atlantic City honeymoon.)

Edition used: Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1953.

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## 109

**Author:** Carl Sandburg (1878-1967)

**Title:** "Chicago" and other poems

**Date:** 1916

**Systems:** Railroad, urban street

**Context:** Contemporary, Chicago

"Chicago" (1916): The famous opening lines, echoed at the end, describe the city as "Player with Railroads and the Nation's Freight Handler."

"Limited" (1916)

I am riding on a limited express, one of the crack trains of the nation,  
Hurtling across the prairie into blue haze and dark air go fifteen all-steel  
coaches holding a thousand people.  
(All the coaches shall be scrap and rust and all the men and women laughing in  
the diners and sleepers shall pass to ashes.)  
I ask a man in the smoker where he is going and he answers: "Omaha."

Somewhat condescending in the middlewestern perspective of the traveler - the opening lines sound like phrases from advertisements.

"Jazz Fantasia" is spoken to the musicians who should, among other images, "cry like a racing car slipping away from



the motorcycle-cops, bang-bang!" The final line evokes the roots of jazz, "Now a Mississippi steamboat pushes up the night river with a hoo-hoo-hoo-oo ... and the green lanterns calling to the high soft stars ... a red moon rides on the humps of the low river hills.... Go to it, O jazzmen."

### "Blue Island Intersection"

Six street-ends come together here.  
They feed people and wagons into the center.  
In and out all day horses with thoughts of nose-bags,  
Men with shovels, women with baskets and baby buggies.  
Six ends of streets and no sleep for them all day.  
The people and wagons come and go, out and in.  
Triangles of banks and drug stores watch.  
The policemen whistle, the trolley cars bump:  
Wheels, wheels, feet, feet, all day.

In the false dawn where the chickens blink  
And the east shakes a lazy baby toe at tomorrow,  
And the east fixes a pink half eye this way,  
In the time when only one milk wagon crosses  
These three streets, these six street-ends  
It is the sleep time and they rest.  
The triangle banks and drug stores rest.  
The policeman is gone, his star and gun sleep.  
The owl car blutters along in a sleep-walk.

In "They Have Yarns" from *The People, Yes*, (1936) Sandburg says that the people have yarns "Of a mountain railroad curve where the engineer in his cab can touch the caboose and spit in the conductor's eye" which is echoed in "Of the man who killed a snake by putting its tail in its mouth so it swallowed itself, / Of railroad trains whizzing along so fast they reach the station before the whistle."

Edition used: Louis Untermeyer, ed. *Modern American Poetry: Mid-Century Edition*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1950.

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## 110

**Author:** Ezra Pound (1885-1972)

**Title:** "In a Station of the Metro"

**Date:** 1916

**Systems:** Subway

**Context:** Contemporary, Paris

Pound's most famous "Imagist" poem depends on the title for its **Context:**

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;  
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Impressions of the Parisian subway are captured by suggesting a parallel between the passengers and the image from nature. The influence of Japanese poetry, e.g., haiku, shows in both the poem's brevity and the striking juxtaposition of images.

Edition used: Louis Untermeyer, ed. *Modern American Poetry: Mid-Century Edition*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1950.

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## 111

**Author:** Edward Stratemeyer (as "Victor Appleton" and others) (1862-1930)



**Title:** Boys' and girls' book series

**Date:** 1910-1930 and beyond

**Systems:** Motorcycle, motorboat, ship, airplane, dirigible

**Context:** Contemporary, East coast

Bibliographical note:

Stratemeyer and others in the "Stratemeyer Syndicate" developed a major industry of series fiction in the Horatio Alger tradition. While many hundreds of titles and a couple hundred million books were printed, libraries tended not to include them in their collections, and relatively few titles are in rare book rooms scattered across the country. Two still-famous series, the detective stories about Nancy Drew by "Carolyn Keene" (from 1929) and the Hardy Boys by "F. W. Dixon" (from 1927) continue to be produced, updated, and reprinted.

The series of most interest for this study include Motor Boys by "Clarence Young" (1906-1924), Motor Girls by "Margaret Penrose," Tom Swift by "Victor Appleton," and Ted Scott by "Franklin W. Dixon" (1927-1943). The detective stories routinely use all modes of travel, as the notes on *Don Sturdy and the Port of Lost Ships* illustrate. While the Tom Swift series became speculative fiction about space travel in their post World War II manifestation (e.g., *Tom Swift [Jr.] and his Rocket Ship*, 1977), in the 1910s and 1920s, they showed Tom adapting or inventing existing technologies from the motor cycle and the electric runabout ("the speediest car on the road") in 1910, to the electric locomotive ("two miles a minute on the rails") in 1922. The attitude in these books is of distanced admiration; we do not often go under the hood to see details either of how it's made or how it's operated.

Tom Swift's early airplane stories tend to focus on stunt and exhibition flying, based partly on the exploits of Glenn Curtiss. However, especially after the Lindbergh flight (May, 1927), more attention was paid to commercial passenger, air mail, and cargo flights across America, the world's oceans, and, in the Ted Scott stories, across every continent. Tom Swift's machines seem to be cobbled together fancifully. Dizer's account of the machine in *Airline Express* notes that, "Since no plane could reliably fly across the country in a day, Tom came up with a unique solution. The passengers took their places in a pullman-type coach which was fastened to an airplane by clamps.... [In Chicago] a fresh plane was attached to the coach and the plane continued to Denver." The Sky Train system uses a powerful plane to haul gliders which are dropped off at various locations across the country. As the series titles show, there's an occasional dirigible thrown in. The plots of nearly all these novels involve rather wealthy lads whose inventing, detecting, and touring are hobbies, not a way to earn a living; most take place or at least start in upstate New York or nearby states.

Don Sturdy in the *Port of Lost Ships* by "Victor Appleton" (1926) is a typical, early novel. Don is a wealthy lad who, through a network of family and friends, becomes involved in an almost endless chain of adventures. In this novel the first chapter leaves Don and Fred Turner in mid-air when their motorcycle's brakes fail and they are plunged over a cliff ... into the sea, where they are rescued by a nineteen-year old in a passing motorboat. Sturdy recites some of his biographical highlights including the one where he went over the North Pole in an airship (Ch. 2). Then, the motorboat is run over by a drifting coal barge; it does not sink, and the lads are able to drag the motorcycle up from the sea floor, dry it off and ride away (Ch. 3). Once the major adventure, to explore the Sargasso Sea, is set up, they take the train to Washington (Ch. 5), then board a clear-bottomed, scientific vessel. "[T]he moment of starting off on a voyage had not lost its thrill for [Don]. He loved the crowds on the dock, the deep note of the whistle, the first shudder of the boat beneath his feet as the engine at the heart of it began to throb the prelude to the journey" (Ch. 8).

Thrills, crashes, and escapes end every chapter. Many involve new vehicles, driven by teenagers. Even after this installment is over, "This Isn't All! Would you like not know what became of the good friends you have made in this book? ... On the reverse side of the wrapper which comes with this book, you will find a wonderful list of stories which you can buy at the same store where you got this book."

Of more recent vintage (and available in public libraries) is the Nancy Drew mystery, *The Clue in the Old Stagecoach* by "Carolyn Keene" (1950). Nancy gets hold of a letter from a nineteenth-century relation who took his stage coach out

West in the face of the railroads in the 1870s. We get some historical notes on the Concord [Massachusetts] Stage, built during the War of 1812, and on the toll collection on turnpikes and bridges in that era. Nancy drives a convertible, and gets into minor automotive adventures such as asking directions at a gas station and becoming stuck in the mud. The stagecoach is eventually dug up to become part of a historical exhibit. The Hardy Boys' *Mystery of the Flying Express* by "Franklin W. Dixon" (1970) deals with a commuter hydrofoil on its maiden run between Bayport and Providence. The hydrofoil service is new competition for small boat owners, railroads, and bus companies, so the boys are hired to help protect the boat. Frank Hardy, the older brother, briefly rehearses the history and physics of hydrofoil travel (invented by Enrico Forlanini in 1906). On the path of the saboteurs, the boys and their allies use their own fancy motorboat, their chum's old jalopy, a rented four-seat airplane which Frank pilots, and a rented motorcycle. Perhaps significantly, one of the opponents drives a foreign sports car. As with other series, close calls and minor mishaps punctuate the chase.

#### THE TOM SWIFT SERIES by Victor Appleton (selected titles)

"Tom Swift, known to millions of boys of this generation, is a bright ingenious youth whose inventions, discoveries and thrilling adventures are described in these spirited tales that tell of the wonderful advances in modern science"  
(Promotional page, ca. 1926)

- Tom Swift and his Motor Cycle, or, Fun and Adventures on the Road (1910)
- Tom Swift and his Motor Boat, or, The Rivals of Lake Carlopa (1910)
- Tom Swift and his Airship, or, The Stirring Cruise of the Red Cloud (1910)
- Tom Swift and his Submarine Boat, or, Under the Ocean for Sunken Treasure (1910)
- Tom Swift and his Electric Runabout, or, The Speediest Car on the Road (1910)
- Tom Swift and his Sky Racer, or, The Swiftest Flight on Record (1911)
- Tom Swift and his Air Glider, or, Seeking the Platinum Treasure (1912)
- Tom Swift in Captivity, or, A Daring Escape by Air Ship (1912)
- Tom Swift and his Electric Locomotive, or, Two Miles a Minute on the Rails (1922)
- Tom Swift and his Flying Boat, or, The Castaways of the Giant Iceberg (1923)
- Tom Swift and his Airline Express, or, From Ocean to Ocean by Daylight (1926)
- Tom Swift Circling the Globe, or, The Daring Cruise of the Air Monarch (1927)
- Tom Swift and his House on Wheels, or, A Trip to the Mountain of Mysteries (1929)
- Tom Swift and his Big Dirigible, or, Adventures over the Forest of Fire (1930)
- Tom Swift and his Sky Train, or, Overland through the Clouds (1931)
- Tom Swift and his Ocean Airport, or, Foiling the Haargolandiers (1934)

#### TED SCOTT FLYING STORIES by Franklin W. Dixon

"No subject has so thoroughly caught the imagination of young America as aviation. This series has been inspired by recent daring feats of the air, and is dedicated to Lindbergh, Byrd, Chamberlin and other heroes of the skies"  
(Promotional page, ca. 1926).

- Over the Ocean to Paris; or, Ted Scott's Daring Long Distance Flight (1927)
- Rescued in the Clouds; or, Ted Scott Hero of the Air (1927)
- Over the Rockies with the Air Mail; or, Ted Scott Lost in the Wilderness (1927)
- First Stop Honolulu; or, Ted Scott Over the Pacific (1927)
- The Search for the Lost Flyers; or, Ted Scott Over the West Indies (1928)
- South of the Rio Grande; or, Ted Scott on a Secret Mission (1928)
- Across the Pacific; or, Ted Scott's Hop to Australia (1928)
- The Lone Eagle of the Border; or, Ted Scott and the Diamond Smugglers (1929)
- Flying Against Time; or, Breaking the Ocean to Ocean Record (1929)
- Over the Jungle Trails; or, Ted Scott and the Missing Explorers (1929)
- Lost at the South Pole; or, Ted Scott in Blizzard Land (1930)
- Through the Air to Alaska; or, Ted Scott's Search in Nugget Valley (1930)
- Flying to the Rescue; or, Ted Scott and the Big Dirigible (1930)

- Danger Trails of the Sky; or, Ted Scott's Great Mountain Climb (1931)
- Following the Sun Shadow; or, Ted Scott and the Great Eclipse (1932)
- Battling the Wind; or, Ted Scott Flying Around Cape Horn (1933)
- Brushing the Mountain Top, or, Aiding the Lost Traveler (1934)
- Castaways of the Stratosphere, or, Hunting the Vanished Balloonists (1935)
- Hunting the Sky Spies, or, Testing the Invisible Plane (1941)
- The Pursuit Patrol (1943)

### THE AVIATION SERIES by John Prentice Langely

"Here is an intensely exciting series on a topic of world-wide interest - Aviation. Every day one hears of new stunts accomplished by pilots. With the passing of each year new records in altitude and long distance are made. In these stories Amos Green and his chum, Danny Cooper, accomplish all the thrilling deeds of the air that have been done before only by hardened veterans. Moreover, backed by the mysterious 'Mr. Carstairs' they succeed in doing stunts new to the history of aviation. You'll find them vastly exciting" (Promotional page, ca. 1926).

- Trail Blazers of the Skies. or, Across the Paris and Back (1927)
- Spanning the Pacific, or, Non-stop to Japan (1927)
- Masters the Air-Lanes, or, Round the World in Fourteen Days (1928)
- The "Pathfinder's" Great Flight, or, Cloud Chasers over Amazon Jungles (1928)
- Air Voyagers of the Arctic, or, Sky Pilots' Dash Across the Pole (1929)
- Desert Hawks on the Wing, or, Headed South Algiers to Cape Town (1929)
- Chasing the Setting Sun, or, A Hop, Skip and Jump to Australia (1930)
- Bridging the Seven Seas, or, On the Air-Lane to Singapore (1930)

Editions used: New York: Grosset & Dunlap.

Critical comments: John T. Dizer, Jr. *Tom Swift® & Company: "Boys' Books" by Stratemeyer and Others*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1982; Carol Billman. *Secret of the Stratemeyer Syndicate: Nancy Drew, The Hardy Boys, and the Million Dollar Fiction Factor*The Sy. New York: Ungar, 1986.

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# The 1920s

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[Crane's](#) poems express enthusiasm for bridges, highways, the "Twentieth-Century Limited," the Wright brothers and the dirigible, and the subway. For [Tate](#), the subway seems a place for religious contemplation. In [Aiken's](#) poem, taxis intrude on solitude, while [Lowell](#) gives a vision of the city from within a taxi cab. [Toomer](#) presents trains and cars as pushing hard against African-Americans, while [Thurber](#) sees them as sources of humorous confusion, both in New York city and Columbus, Ohio. [cummings'](#) wit links a new car with a sexual fantasy. [Fitzgerald](#) sets a tragic, fatal automobile accident in the midst of New York's various commuter Systems, and contrasts that waste land with a recuperative train ride back to the middle west. [Lewis's \*Babbitt\*](#) also depicts long-distance train travel to the East and then back to Minnesota, while the novel explains how courtship in a midwestern city has changed with the automobile. One of [Lewis' stories](#) goes to comic lengths about the logistics of driving from Minnesota to North Dakota. [Dreiser](#) points to the very end of the horse-drawn era in Kansas City and upstate New York, with young men (and women) driving on joy rides and to dances; the plot turns partly on the logistics of train travel among small, New York towns. [Cather](#) portrays of an older midwesterner who is little touched by the automobile age around him. [Jeffers](#) shows part of rural California which still depends on horse-drawn vehicles, while [Faulkner](#) dramatizes an epic wagon ride across Mississippi. [Wolfe](#) describes the intrusion of the auto into North Carolina.

African-American perspectives in the rural South are given by several writers. [Brown](#) writes of chain gangs, the lure of riding trains to unknown destinations, and the status of automobile ownership. In one story [Hurston](#) shows a town in Florida where the poor can only watch trains with wonder as they go by; [in another](#), the horse and buckboard are being replaced by the automobile. [Hughes'](#) poems also give snapshots of rail travel out of the South and the homesickness which ensues, the porter's life, along with several scenes about the excitement of cars and subways in New York's Harlem. A chapter by [Morrison](#) presents another example of segregation on the trains, in the North but more viciously in the South.

[Hemingway](#) develops symbolic events around Americans in Parisian taxis, and in Spanish trains and busses. [Cather](#) depicts an elderly lady in a bumpy limousine ride in France. [Hemingway's stories](#) include African safaris by auto, one with a too-late rescue attempt by airplane, as well as several centering around post-War train travel and taxi rides in the Midwest, and some peculiarities of auto travel in Mussolini's Italy, and of train rides on the Continent.

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## 112

**Author:** Hart Crane (1899-1932)

**Title:** "The Bridge" In *The Complete Poems of Hart Crane*

**Date:** 1933 Written: 1926-1930

**Systems:** Roadway (Brooklyn Bridge), airplane, clipper ship, subway

**Context:** Contemporary, New York city

"Macadam, gun grey as the tunny's [tuna's] belt, / Leaps from Far Rockaway to Golden Gate.... / Keep hold of that nickel for car-change, Rip, - / Have you got your 'Times'?" Crane's poem on Brooklyn Bridge involves a series of visions which celebrate the national Systems of communication and transportation that the modern Rip Van Winkle is waking up to: "a Ediford - and whistling down the tracks / a headlight rushing with the sound - can you / imagine - while an EXpress makes time like / SCIENCE - COMMERCE AND THE HOLYGHOST / RADIO ROARS IN EVERY HOME..." It is a "world of whistles, wires and steam"

The sounds of the harbor, when "winch engines begin throbbing on some deck," show the new world's vitality. From his vantage point under the arches of the Bridge he sees roads "Down Wall [Street], from girder into street leaks, / A rip-tooth of the sky's acetylene; / All afternoon the cloud-down derricks turn.... / Thy cables breathe the North Atlantic still."

At the Mississippi river, "So the 20th Century - so / whizzed the Limited - roared by and left / three men, still hungry on the tracks, ploddingly / watching the tail lights wizen and converge slip- / ping gimleted and neatly out of sight." The "rail-squatters" and "hobo-trekkers" hang around behind his father's cannery, hopping the freights, while "Pullman breakfasters glide glistening steel / From tunnel into field - iron strides the dew - " ("The River"). These scenes have replaced Indiana's "dim turnpike to the river's edge," as the modern harbor has replaced the clipper-ship days, which an old sailor recalls: "Perennial-Cutty-trophied-Sark!" He also recalls building the Panama Canal where he ran a "donkey engine" ("Cutty Sark").

Crane is also excited by the airplane, "Man hears himself an engine in a cloud!" The "Wright worldwrestlers veered / Capeward, then blading the wind's flank, banked and spun / What ciphers risen from the prophetic script." Further, "Wheeled swiftly, wings emerge from larval-steel hangars. / Taught motors surge, space gnawing, into flight / Through sparkling visibility, outspreading, unsleeping, / Wings clip the last peripheries of light..." He even appreciates the Zeppelin, "While Cetus-like, O thou Dirigible, enormous Lounger / Of pendulous auroral beaches, - satellited wide / By convoy planes, moonferrets that rejoin thee." As these "vast engines... on clarion cylinders pass out of sight," Hart sees a new version of Whitman's Open Road ("Cape Hatteras").

"The Tunnel" takes us to the subway, "Performances, assortments, résumés - / Up Times Square to Columbus Circle lights / Channel the congresses, nightly sessions, / Refractions of the thousand theatres, faces - " The circle and the square images resonate throughout the poem, as does the concept of time and the figure of Christopher Columbus. "The subway yawns the quickest promise home," but one must "Avoid the glass doors gyring at your right." The underworld has its ugly side: "The phonographs of hades in the brain / Are tunnels that re-wind themselves, and love / A burnt match skating in a urinal - " After the change at Chambers Street, "The platform hurries along to a dead stop." Overhead while under the river, the tugboat goes with "wheezing wreaths of steam."

Few poets of this century are so clearly enthusiastic and lyrical about urban life.

Edition used: Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1958.

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## 113

**Author:** Allen Tate (b. 1899)

**Title:** "Subway"

**Date:** 1928

**Systems:** Subway

**Context:** Contemporary, New York City

The short poem treats the "geometries" of the subway as it goes "down the successive knell / Of arch on arch, where ogives burst a red / Reverberance." The image links the tunnel to a Gothic cathedral, and its religious message becomes a "musical steel shell / Of angry worship." The speaker is "tangential of your steel" as he stands in the car while contemplating how "the worldless heavens bulge and reel." The subway becomes a sanctuary where one can think about the spiritual world.

Edition used: Lynn Altenbernd and Leslie L. Lewis. *Introduction to Literature: Poems*, 3rd ed. New York: Macmillan, 1975.

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## 114

**Author:** Conrad Aiken (1889-1973)

**Title:** "Cloister" In *Preludes for Memnon*

**Date:** 1930, 1931

**Systems:** Taxi

**Context:** Contemporary

In describing an apartment refuge, Aiken says, "The door is closed: The furies of the city howl behind you: The last bell plunges rock-like to the sea: The horns of taxis wail in vain."

Edition used: Louis Untermeyer, ed. *Modern American Poetry: Mid-Century Edition*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1950).

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## 115

**Author:** Amy Lowell (1874-1925)

**Title:** "The Taxi"

**Date:**

**Systems:** Taxi

**Context:** Contemporary, New York City

When I go away from you  
The world beats dead  
Like a slackened drum.  
I call out for you against the jugged stars  
And shout into the ridges of the wind.  
Streets coming fast,  
One after the other,  
Wedge you away from me,  
And lamps of the city prick my eyes  
So that I can no longer see your face,  
Why should I leave you,  
To wound myself upon the sharp edges of the night?

The poem gives the perspective of seeing the nighttime city from the back seat and, unlike several other backseat scenes, the couple is driven apart rather than thrown together.

Edition used: Louis Untermeyer, ed. *Modern American Poetry: Mid-Century Edition*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1950.

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## 116

**Author:** Jean Toomer (1894-1967)

**Title:** *Cane*

**Date:** 1923

**Systems:** Railroad, elevated trains, car, buggy

**Context:** 1920s, South, Washington D.C., and Chicago, African-American perspective

In "Becky" a white woman with negro children is forced to live on the "narrow strip of land between the railroad and the road." Ironically the outcast becomes the center of attention because of her location: "Six trains each day rumbled past... Fords, and horse- and mule-drawn buggies went back and forth along the road."

"7th Street": "zooming Cadillacs,/ Whizzing, whizzing down the street-car tracks" establish the sound and feel of Seventh Street, Washington DC, "bastard of Prohibition and the War": An urban-primitive sketch of Jazz Age "nigger life."

"Bona and Paul": The windows of Paul's South-Side Chicago apartment are "cut in two" by the "hurtling Loop-jammed L trains." Paul, a high yellow college man, is himself "cut in two," torn between white and black, North and South. The L trains and stock-yard stench provide the stark contrast for Paul's nostalgic reminiscence of a "pine-matted hillock in Georgia" and chanting "Negress."

Edition used: New York: Liveright, 1975.

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## 117

**Author:** James Thurber (1894-1961)

**Title:** *The Thurber Carnival*

**Date:** 1931-1945

**Systems:** Automobiles, train, airplane

**Context:** Contemporary, New York City and Columbus, Ohio

Thurber created many short humorous sketches of contemporary and remembered life, chiefly for *The New Yorker*. Most involve shifts in focus and topic, digressions in an ordinary context, but with Thurber often the central story line is impossible to ferret out.

"The Lady on 142" begins with the Thurber narrator and his wife waiting at the Cornwell Bridge station for a twenty-minute late train to Gaylordsville, "the third stop down the line, twenty-two minutes away. The stationmaster had told us that our tickets were the first tickets to Gaylordsville he had ever sold." The narrator overhears the station agent refer to the lady on (train number) 142, which triggers off, first a conjecture that the woman is ill. Then, after they get on board, a more elaborate fantasy about spies and kidnapping explicitly inspired by Alfred Hitchcock movies and "The Maltese Falcon." Moral: A major part of the romance and adventure of riding the train in the 1930s and 1940s was affected by films.

"Recollections of the Gas Buggy: Footnotes to An Era for the Future Historian" is told in the late 1930s, but its first episode involves the narrator's great aunt, years ago. "She enjoyed the hallucination, among others, that she was able to drive a car. I was riding with her one December day when I discovered, to my horror, that she thought the red and green lights on the traffic signals had been put up by the municipality as a gay and expansive manifestation of the Yuletide



spirit. Although we finally reached home safely, I never completely recovered from the adventure, and could not be induced, after that day, to ride in a car on holidays." Thurber's own problems with cars include his sense while driving in Scotland in 1938 that his gas gauge was moving toward "Full." Later, in Connecticut, when the red fluid in the engine gauge gets to "Danger" he pulls into a service station and gestures toward another dial which registers 1560 - not the temperature, but the setting on the radio dial. "Whenever I tried to put chains on a tire, the car would maliciously wrap them around a rear axle. If I parked it ten feet from a fire plug and went into a store, it would be only five feet from the plug when I came out." The sketch picks up on the tone of the bemused New Yorker's studied scorn for cars and driving. "A Ride with Olympy" has a Russian emigre who is driving "one of those bastard agglomerations of wheels, motor and superstructure that one saw only in France. It looked at first glance like the cockpit of a cracked-up plane. Then you saw that there were two wheels in front and a single wheel in back." Olympy and Thurber try to communicate with little success in French and fail even to get close to technical terms needed to avoid a series of near accidents.

"Sex Ex Machina" quotes a Freudian Dr. Bisch on how "An automobile bearing down upon you may be a sex symbol at that, you know, especially if you dream it." Thurber then absurdly applies this to squirrels who run into a car's path, "except that he is awfully fast on his feet and that I always hurriedly put on the brakes of the 1935 Sex Symbol that I drive." In a later episode, he talks of apparent fiends who materialize in his barn at the middle of the night. He tries to comfort his dogs until the car's horn shrieks. "Everybody has heard a klaxon on a car suddenly begin to sound; I understand it is a short circuit that causes it. But very few people have heard one scream behind them while they were quieting six or eight alarmed poodles in the middle of the night in an old barn." The final anecdote involves an old friend in Ohio who had the steering bar of an electric runabout break off in his hand, "causing the machine to carry him through a fence and into the grounds of the Columbus School for Girls. He developed a fear of automobiles, trains, and every other kind of vehicle that was not pulled by a horse."

In *My Life and Hard Times*, Thurber looks back to his childhood in the first two decades of the century. Cars and other vehicles appear periodically, as do the army trucks which warn people of the dam that didn't break. "The Car We Had to Push" was "an old Reo we had that wouldn't go unless you pushed it for quite a way and suddenly let the clutch out.... Of course, it took more than one person to do this; it took sometimes as many as five or six, depending on the grade of the roadway and conditions underfoot." This domestic dilemma exemplifies the problems faced by people in Columbus in contrast to the more exotic natural catastrophes reported in autobiographies by Lincoln Steffens and Gertrude Atherton.

A scene in "University Days" features Bolenciewicz, the Ohio State tackle, who is asked by the economics professor to name a means of transportation: "I might suggest the one which we commonly take in making long journeys across land" The professor continues his prompting, "'Choo-choo-choo'"; the students "shared Mr. Bassum's desire that Bolenciewicz should stay abreast of the class in economics, for the Illinois game, one of the hardest and most important of the season." "'How did you come to college this year, Mr. Bolenciewicz?'" asked the professor. 'Chuffa chuffa, chuffa chuffa.' 'M'father sent me,' said the football player."

Finally, in "Draft Board Nights," Thurber reports on his grandfather, "A famous horseman, he approached [driving] as he might have approached a wild colt.... He always leaped into it quickly, as if it might pull out from under him if he didn't get into the seat fast enough." He has trouble persuading the car to stop going around in a circle since he holds on too tight to the guiding-bar. "And a man who (or so he often told us) had driven a four-horse McCormick reaper when he was five years old did not intend to be thrown by an electric runabout."

Edition used: New York: Modern Library, 1957.

**Date:** 1959 **Written:** 1923-1954

**Systems:** Motor car, elevated train

**Context:** Contemporary

Written as a first person narrative, "she being Brand" describes a "first ride" in a new car, but in terms that link the experience to having sex with a virgin:

```
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 flooded-the-carburetor cranked her
up,slipped the
clutch(and then somehow got into reverse she
kicked what
the hell)next
minute i was back in neutral tried and
again slo-wly;bare,ly nudg. ing(my
lev-er Right-
oh and her gears being in
A l shape passed
from low through
second-in-to-high like
greasedlightning)just as we turned the corner of Divinity
avenue i touched the accelerator and gave
her the juice, good
(it
was the first ride and believe i we was
happy to see how nice she acted right up to
the last minute coming back down by the Public
Gardens i slammed on
the
internalexpanding
&
externalcontracting
brakes Bothatonce and
brought allofher tremB
-ling
to a:dead.
stand-
:Still) [1926]
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Though written early in the history of U.S. car culture, this notion of the car as "she," as female, has survived and flourished to the present. (Ocean-going ships, of course, had been feminized for centuries.) This conceit plays on two important aspects of cars and male/female relationships: first, the notion of ownership of the female is transferred to the car, which becomes another prized possession, another marker of male competence and superiority; the next step is for the car to eclipse the woman, the human, and become the man's most valued object, his most important relationship. Cummings' poem exaggerates and parodies just that tendency not only to overvalue the car but actually to sexualize it, both in the sense that it is an extension of the male's sexuality, and the male's - the driver's - sexual partner.

#72 "plato told"

After a series of missed messages (Plato told him, Jesus told him... but he didn't believe it), "it took a nipponized bit of the old sixth avenue el on top of his head to tell him." But why "Nipponized"? Because, allegedly, scrap metal from the salvaged elevated train tracks were used by the Japanese in the Second World War.

Edition used: New York: Grove Press, 1959.

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**Author:** F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940)

**Title:** *The Great Gatsby*

**Date:** 1925

**Systems:** Automobile, train

**Context:** Contemporary, New York city, Long Island, Middle West

Near the end of the novel Nick Carraway, the narrator says of the Buchanans: "They were careless people, Tom and Daisy - they smashed up things and creatures and 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..." (Ch. 9). Carraway opens the novel with a discussion of the importance of being "decent," honest, caring, and compassionate, and these attributes, their presence, or more commonly their absence, inform the action of *The Great Gatsby*. "Carelessness" is often dramatized by reckless driving. Tom Buchanan had once been in an accident with one of his mistresses - the day before Daisy gave birth to their daughter (Ch. 4). Jordan Baker, Nick's girl friend is aggressive about her poor driving. She rationalizes nearly flicking the button off a road worker's coat with her fender by maintaining that others just have to keep out of her way (Ch. 3).

In the key scene Tom's lover, Myrtle Wilson, tries to flag down the yellow Rolls Royce that she thinks Tom is driving; when she runs out into the road she is run over and "her life violently extinguished, [she] knelt in the road and mingled her thick dark blood with the dust." As it turns out, Daisy, accompanied by Gatsby, was actually behind the wheel of the Rolls. Since the car is identified with its owner, Tom tells Myrtle's distraught husband, George Wilson, that the car will be at Gatsby's. George proceeds to find and murder Gatsby, thinking him responsible for Myrtle's death (Ch. 7).

Gatsby is a careful driver; he tries to grab the wheel before Daisy runs over Myrtle and then tries to get her to stop. But his attempts to insinuate himself into a world of money and privilege make him vulnerable to the sort of carelessness symbolized by the Buchanans' and Jordan's driving. It's his Rolls Royce that becomes the "death car," not only for Myrtle, but also for himself. The Rolls is an important vehicle in Gatsby's quest for Daisy's love and all that he imagines that love includes. On one hand it represents his notion of wealth, luxurious evidence: "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 wind-shields that mirrored a dozen suns. Sitting down behind many layers of glass in a sort green leather conservatory, we started to town." The car is a rolling mansion, protecting and separating the passengers from the outside world; but the car is also "swollen" and "monstrous," capable of destruction (Ch. 4). In the end Gatsby proves inept at maneuvering through the wealthy world that the Buchanans are able to negotiate unscathed. He's not careless enough; as Nick tells him, "They're a rotten crowd ... You're worth the whole damn bunch of them" (Ch. 8).

Fitzgerald's novel is clearly focused on the wealthy, yet the characters occasionally descend into "the valley of the ashes," a grey and rundown area between Long Island (where the rich live) and New York City. Here is the confluence of commuter trains, cars, and barge traffic. It is here that Myrtle Wilson and her husband live. Though Wilson owns a garage and ostensibly buys and sells cars, there are no cars in his except for a "dust-covered wreck of a Ford which crouched in a dim corner" (Ch. 2). Tom Buchanan has promised to sell him a car, but the promise is always deferred, despite Wilson's pleas for action and need for money which reselling it will bring. Cars mostly function as a leisure time conveyance, and then chiefly for the rich. For commuting the train or taxi is the means of transportation. Manhattan is, of course, a place of excitement and beauty: "The city seen from the Queensboro bridge is always the city seen for the first time" (Ch. 4). In Manhattan at 8 PM, "the dark lanes of the Forties were five deep with throbbing taxicabs, bound for the theater district" (Ch. 3).

But when Nick decides to go home at the end of the novel, to leave the East, sell his car, and return to the Midwest, he does so by train (cars, it seems, were not yet a convenient means of long-distance travel). That decision evokes "vivid

memories" of his train rides from prep school and college, the repeated "coming back West." He describes the sense of exciting and satisfying familiarity he experienced on snowy winter nights on "the murky yellow cars of the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul railroad," moving through "real snow, our snow, [which] began to stretch out beside us and twinkle against the windows, and the dim lights of small Wisconsin stations moved by" as he neared home. Nick decides that for a midwesterner like himself, the East has "a quality of distortion" - everything seems just a bit strange, dream-like (Ch. 9). The train will take him back where feels more comfortable, soothe away the uneasiness he felt in the East.

Edition used: New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925.

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## 120

**Author:** Sinclair Lewis (1885-1951)

**Title:** *Babbitt*

**Date:** 1922

**Systems:** Train, automobile

**Context:** Contemporary, Midwest

Like others of Lewis' works, this novel gives a broad panorama of United States society which goes well beyond just telling the basic story, so we get a chapter on baseball, another on buying a bottle of bootleg gin, and so on. The basic story line is real-estate executive George Babbitt's drifting away from his oppressively ordinary life and then back again in the final chapters.

Babbitt's first escape is by train for a vacation in Maine. A long chapter describing the smoking compartment of the Pullman shows the fellowship and male bonding which that setting affords. The outside is discussed poetically - "a glaze of darkness stippled with the gold of infrequent mysterious lights." A steel mill on the outside of a city they are passing "flared in scarlet and orange flame that licked at the cadaverous stacks... 'My Lord, look at that - beautiful!' said Paul." The compartment has but four seats; the first people there become the "Old Families," a "council"; a newcomer is the "Outsider" who has to stand and smoke. The men talk about the schedule to guess where they are; they ask the porter, "a negro in white jacket with brass buttons," who thinks they are on time - this exchange leads Babbitt and his pals to exchange racist remarks about how "the old-fashioned coon" should stay in his place, and so on. After talk about prices and models of motor-cars, they start up with "expansive and virile" dirty jokes. When the train stops at "an important station" they get out to walk up and down the platform. At the end of the evening, Babbitt, in "the close hot tomb of his Pullman berth," fondly recalls the punch lines and looks out at the "village lamps like exclamation-points." For Babbitt and his middle-class pals, this smoker is a gentlemen's club, isolated from business and from women (Ch. 10: 3). When he travels to Chicago with his son, they join "the other sages of the Pullman smoking-compartment" (Ch. 19: 3).

The enormous waiting room of the Union Station has frescoes depicting the early French explorers of the region, benches of "ponderous mahogany," a marble newsstand with a brass grill, and other decorations which are almost identical to the hotel lobby (Ch. 13: 3, cf. 24: 2). Along with Babbitt and his friends who are going to a convention, are "The patient poor people waiting for the midnight train [who] stared in unenvious wonder - Italian women with shawls, old weary men with broken shoes, roving road-wise boys in suits which had been flashy when they were new but which were faded now and wrinkled." This is one of the few times we see working-class people in the novel (Ch. 13: 3). Despite all the splendor, the "voluptuous thing" of having his suit pressed on the train, Babbitt is forced to join other men in the smoking-compartment in the morning, no longer splendid as "it was jammed with fat men in woolen undershirts, every hook filled with wrinkled cottony shorts, the leather seat piled with dingy toilet-kits, and the air

nauseating with the smell of soap and toothpaste" (Ch. 13: 4).

At home, the automobile allows him to have an affair and to run with a fast crowd, while Mrs. Babbitt is on an extended trip to the east. George hooks up with Tanis Judique, to whom he had rented an apartment. Cars are constantly in the background of this fling. On their first night together, as they draw up to the radiator in her flat and fantasize about being in front of a fireplace in an old-fashioned cottage, "There was no sound from the street save the whir or motor-tires, the rumble of a distant freight-train" - the urban getaway (Ch. 28). Babbitt then joins his "sporting" neighbor, Sam Dapplebrau, and a group of "Bohemian" partying friends, eventually called the "Bunch": "life was dominated by suburban bacchanalia of alcohol, nicotine, gasoline, and kisses." The weekend parties "usually included an extremely rapid motor expedition to nowhere in particular." Babbitt experiments with drunk driving: "With his other faculties blurred he yet had the motorist's gift of being able to drive when he could scarce walk; of slowing down at corners and allowing for approaching cars. He came wambling into the house." One close call on an icy pavement: "Even with skid chains on all four wheels, Babbitt was afraid of sliding, and when he came to the long slide of a hill he crawled down, both brakes on. Slewing round a corner came a less cautious car. It skidded, it almost raked them with its rear fenders" (Ch. 29: 4).

Babbitt is replete with others images of middle-class automobile culture - ritual repairs, sexual freedom, and investment opportunity. "To George F. Babbitt, as to most prosperous citizens of Zenith, his motor car was poetry and tragedy, love and heroism. The office was his pirate ship but the car his perilous excursion ashore." Starting the engine is a daily crisis, "the long, anxious whirr of the starter." He's always happy not to graze the garage (Ch. 3: 1). When he contemplates buying a new car, the Babbitts "went, with ardor and some thoroughness, into the matters of streamline bodies, hill-climbing power, wire wheels, chrome steel, ignition Systems, and body colors. It was much more than a study of transportation. It was an aspiration for knightly rank" (Ch. 6: 3). As he tries to sleep he imagines his neighbor's car running without a driver, in an image of a real automobile: "The car insultingly cheerful on the driveway.... The motor raced for the climb up into the garage and raced once more, explosively, before it was shut off. A final opening and slamming of the car door...." (Ch. 7: 3). In moments of disillusion and loneliness, George goes out to the garage to work on his car, to clean the drip-pan at one point, to examine a cracked hose-connection at another (Ch. 22: 1, 31: 1).

Babbitt's son, Theodore Roosevelt B., is "motor-mad." "[H]e was tireless in tinkering. With three other boys he bought a rheumatic Ford chassis, built an amazing racer-body out of tin and pine, went skidding round corners in the perilous craft, and sold it at a profit. Babbitt gave him a motor-cycle..." (Ch. 18: 1). When grandmother Babbitt comes to visit, she rejoices at how he greases the differential (Ch. 18: 5). The Babbitts debate about who gets the car - Ted complains that his sister wants "to grab it off, right after dinner, and leave it in front of some skirt's house all evening while you sit and gas about lite'ature and the highbrows you're going to marry" (Ch. 2: 2).

George is acutely aware of the public role of the automobile. For one thing, as a real estate investor, he uses his involvement in a political campaign to get "advance information about the extension of paved highways" to buy land. In a speech to the Chamber of Commerce he characterizes the kind of person "that's ruling America today," a man who, after work, gets into "the little old 'bus, and maybe cusses his carburetor, and shoots out home" to his bungalow (Ch. 14: 3). Later, he declares that the proposed symphony orchestra is as necessary "as pavements and bank-clearances" (Ch. 21: 1). With the other "Boosters" from his crowd George celebrate in slogans - the city of Monarch is the "Mighty Motor Mart" - and ads - "TRY LIFE'S ZIPPINGEST ZEST - THE ZEECO!" (That line was written by T. Cholmondely Frink, "a Famous Poet and a distinguished advertizing agent.") The Zeeco is "above the Javelin class." (Ch. 13: 5, 8: 3, 9: 2). Unfortunately, America is "hustling, for hustling's sake" - to get trolleys, "with another trolley a minute behind"; even people making \$20,000 a year are hustling to catch trains (Ch. 12: 2).

Edition used: New York: Signet Classic, 1980.

**Title:** "Travel is So Broadening" In *The Man Who Knew Coolidge*

**Date:** 1928

**Systems:** Auto

**Context:** Contemporary, Minnesota

The narrator, Mr. Schultz, talks with Mrs. and George Babbitt about his recent trip to Yellowstone; well, he actually didn't quite get that far; actually, it's the first installment of an endlessly detailed account of the trip Schultz and the little woman took a couple of hundred miles west of Zenith, Minnesota, maybe to the Black Hills. Babbitt is praised as "an old trained, long-distance motorist," having driven 316 miles in one day. One goal of their trip is a visit to his wife's brother-in-law, who started a radiator factory in Tomahawk City, North Dakota - a town with no iron, coal, or railroad connection - but failed because he couldn't "compete with the trust." Schultz gives the beginning of a list of what one needs for a long distance drive, starting with a khaki coat and pants, a "Pull-U-Out" to get out of mud holes and even muddy places in concrete highways. The "editor" intervenes to say that he has suppressed 37 articles that Schultz also rehearsed. The Schultzes left at 12:03 exactly - he knows because he kept a full schedule of time, mileage, oil and gas consumption (better mileage with Dainty Daisy than Samson, despite the latter's claims for "power-plus").

You're better off, Schultz advises, going fewer than 300 miles; otherwise "you don't really see all the scenery as thoroughly and study the agriculture and other features of the country as closely as you might if you just jogged along at a nice steady forty-five or fifty miles an hour instead of speeding." The scenery fascinates: "now every mile or so you'd find a dandy up-to-date hot-dog stand - some like log cabins and some like Chinese pagodas or Indian wigwams or little small imitations of Mount Vernon about ten feet high... and, of course, up-to-date billboards all along the road to diversify it..., and in every town a dandy free auto camp providing free water and wood for the tourists." Schultz stops by a hobo and lectures him on how, if he gets a job and a car, he won't need to hitchhike.

They had stopped at a roadside restaurant for lunch, a place where for "Ma," the cook, "the only thing she didn't burn was the drinking water." At the Red Ball Grocery Store in New Paris he rear-ends a parked car, manages to bluff the "great big rube" off from calling the cops, and then enjoys the fact that he had smashed up the valve stem on his spare; it "served him right for the way he'd talked to me." At 5:00 they stop for dinner in a "nice burg, right up to date [familiar phrase], all brick pavement." Instead of going to the hotel, they use the campground, "just the least little bit dirty with forty to sixty people camping there every night." The travelers spontaneously start a camp fire and spend the evening in talk and "old ancient songs," unlike the "modern songs [that] haven't got the melody and sentiment." Even though "hardly more'n 40 per cent were up to the Chevrolet class," Schultz condescends to chat with many of them, among whom was a veterinarian who had met a guy from Zenith - "pretty doggone small world after all, isn't it."

No one (probably) picks up, strings together, or puts down clichés from the automobility craze of the 1920s better than Lewis. This story, like others, uses the booster from Zenith to voice not just midwestern but national provincialism, racism, and sexism.

Edition used: James Moffett and Kenneth E. McElheny, eds. *Points of View: An Anthology of Short Stories*.. New York: Signet Classic, 1966.

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## 122

**Author:** Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945)

**Title:** *An American Tragedy*

**Date:** 1925

**Systems:** Automobile, train



**Context:** Contemporary, Kansas City and New York state

*An American Tragedy*, set around 1920, is explicitly placed at the end of the horse-drawn age, where automobiles are ubiquitous both in a mid-size city, Kansas City (population 400,000) and a smaller town, Lycurgus, New York (population 20,000).

Kansas City, the setting for the first third of the novel, has a "great street" where "The handsome automobiles that sped by, the loitering pedestrians moving off to what interests and comforts he [Clyde Griffiths, then in his teens] could only imagine." (Ch. 1: 1). Later, "Taxis spun and honked and two old-time closed carriages still in use rolled here and there, their curtains drawn" (Ch. 1: 9; italics added). Horses are ridden on bridal paths by the well to do in Lycurgus; also hansom cabs are out front at one fancy dance (Ch. 2: 25). When Clyde arrives in Lycurgus, he sees the two bridges, one with a car line, the "traffic, pedestrians and automobiles," and "various automobile showrooms." The rich part of town has "expensive and handsome automobiles either beneath porte-cochères within or speeding along the broad thoroughfare without" (Ch. 2: 5). The rich uncle has at least two cars. When Clyde is courting Sondra Finchley, one of the upper set, their excursions are always by automobile; at least once, she picks him up in her car for a New Years party in Schenectady (Ch. 2: 32).

In the poor, farm country near Lycurgus, Clyde's girlfriend's father drives a horse and buggy, the "old family conveyance," on the rough roads "at a time when excellent automobile roads were a commonplace elsewhere" (Ch. 2: 29). Clyde's wealthy, Lycurgus aunt comments on the implications of "too much dancing, cabaretting, automobiling to one city and another, without due social supervision" (Ch. 2: 1). At the trial in Book Three, "hundreds of farmers, woodsmen, traders, [were] entering in Fords and Buicks" - all autos, no wagons (Ch. 3: 19).

Book One ends with a hit-and-run car accident which drives Clyde from Kansas City. One of his teenage friends 'borrows' a Packard from his employer for a ride to Excelsior Springs. They rehearse the route, worry about snow-packed roads. The girl Clyde has been courting is attracted to Sparser, the driver, which is part of her gold-digging personality and shows the attractiveness of driving. This ride is the first time Clyde gets out of Kansas City (Ch. 1: 17). [A generation earlier escape and adventure would have been by train.] After the expedition, the kids are worried about getting back to work on time, but run into a traffic jam. In their effort to find a better route, Sparser runs down and kills an eleven-year-old girl. He drives away, is followed by the police, and eventually crashes at a construction site where two of the young people are injured. Clyde is not hurt and runs away (Ch. 1: 19). Later, we learn, he took a box car to St. Louis. Sparser was charged for car theft and avoiding arrest, but not for manslaughter (Ch. 2: 3). He drove a Chicago delivery wagon (horse-drawn) for a year or so before coming to Lycurgus.

In Lycurgus, Clyde tries to keep two romances going at the same time with ultimately tragic results. Trysts with Roberta Alden, a woman of his own social class, require much planning and logistics involving the railroads to near-by towns. For various reasons they do not want to be seen together in town, so they set up cover stories at their separate rooming houses, settle on a common destination (e.g., Homer, New York), get on the morning train but sit in separate cars, and worry if their co-workers or roommates see them (Ch. 2: 18). Roberta gets pregnant, and they set up similar arrangements when they go to the abortionist, (Ch. 2: 36) and when they are on the trip to an isolated lake where Clyde plans to drown her, they worry about buying tickets, take separate cars, and so on (Ch. 2: 44, 46). Clyde does drown her, but he is captured; during the trial many functionaries from the trolley and rail lines testify about seeing them - thus proving that his general fears are well grounded (Ch. 3: 21).

Edition used: Cambridge, MA: Robert Bentley, 1978.

**Author:** Willa Cather (1876-1947)

**Title:** "Neighbour Rosicky"



**Date:** 1932 **Written:** 1928

**Systems:** Wagon, automobile

**Context:** Contemporary, Middlewest (Nebraska)

This is a gentle tale of Rosicky's aging and death which sets the contrast, among other things, between the wagon and the automobile. When Rosicky is first diagnosed with heart problems, the doctor asks if he's in town with the family car or wagon: "When you got five boys, you ain't got much chance to ride round in de Ford. I ain't got much for cars, noway." At the end of his eight-mile ride home he stops at the graveyard at the edge of his land. "There he stopped his horses and sat still on his wagon seat, looking about at the snowfall... The fine snow, settling into this red grass and upon the few little evergreens and the headstones, looked very pretty" (Ch. 2).

After showing us Rosicky's interactions with his family and memoirs about his migrating from Czechoslovakia through London, we witness his death. His son had taken the car to town; he hitched up the work team, "with guilty caution" because of the doctor's warning, rakes up thistles, but has a heart attack in the barn. The doctor had been out of town; on his return he drives to Rosicky's house, stops his car and looks over the same prospect that the old man had earlier. "For the first time it struck Doctor Ed that this was really a beautiful graveyard" (Ch. 6).

Edition used: *Five Stories*. New York: Vintage, 1956.

## 124

**Author:** Robinson Jeffers (1887-1962)

**Title:** "Roan Stallion"

**Date:** 1925

**Systems:** Carriage

**Context:** Contemporary, California

This long, narrative poem is a reminder that much of rural America in the 1920s still depended on horse-drawn vehicles. Johnny brings the stallion to his family behind their carriage: "She [California, Johnny's wife] heard the hooves and wheels come nearer ... He sat twisted / On the seat of the old buggy..." Later, California drives to Monterey, but must cross a ford at night: "Noise of wheels on stones, plashing of hooves in water, a world / Of sounds; no sights; the gentle thunder of water; the mare snorting, dipping her head, one knew, / To look for footing, in the blackness, under the stream...." The mare gets turned sidewise in the stream, which adds to the danger. She eventually has to rescue the toys and groceries from the wagon and ride the mule out of the torrent and then home - the "miracle of the ford." The whole scene points out the dependence among wagon, mule, and driver, and the way the working partnership gets thrown off by darkness, scenes echoed later in the poem as California and the stallion interact.

Edition used: William J. Martz, ed. *The Distinctive Voice: Twentieth-Century Poetry*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1966.

## 125

**Author:** William Faulkner (1897-1962)

**Title:** *As I Lay Dying*

**Date:** 1930

**Systems:** Wagon

**Context:** Contemporary, Mississippi

Faulkner's story of the Bundren family and their long and tortuous journey by wagon along the roads of Yoknapatawpha county, carrying the body of Addie Bundren, is in part about people who are not used to being on the move and who are not especially adept at traveling. Anse Bundren, in particular, the father, though he is determined to get Addie to Jefferson, where she wanted to be buried, distrusts roads and travel. He thinks that when God "aims for something to be always a-moving, He makes it long ways, like a road or a horse or a wagon, but when he aims for something to stay put, He makes it up-and-down ways, like a tree or a man." It follows then that God didn't mean for people to be "always a-moving and going somewheres else," but meant them to stay at home.

It takes a major event - Addie's death - to get Anse moving; but once he starts, he won't quit until he gets to where he's going. Anse's motivation actually seems to stem more from his desire for a set of teeth and a new wife than a commitment to fulfill Addie's last wish. But these too are reasons significant enough to get him out on the road. Anse's has been pining for teeth for awhile, and his laziness is legendary - a wife is necessary to take care of the children and house. Though Faulkner's story has an element of absurdity not shared by John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, *As I Lay Dying* does depict the same kind of uprooting of a family that has not been out on the road - an unfriendly road - before. The road proves dangerous, fraught with peril for the inexperienced: Cash breaks his leg, Darl finally goes over the edge into insanity, Dewey Dell tries to get an abortion. The family slowly disintegrates as the days and troubles on the road multiply, disintegrates as Addie's body decomposes, the stench growing ever stronger. In the end the journey, despite the many tribulations, is completed. But the price for leaving home has been high for many in the family (though ironically not for Anse); staying home is no solution in the novel, but going out on the road so ill-prepared is disastrous.

Edition used: New York: Vintage International, 1990.

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## 126

**Author:** Thomas Wolfe (1900-1938)

**Title:** "The Return of the Prodigal: The Thing Imagined" In *The Hills Beyond*

**Date:** 1941

**Systems:** Automobile

**Context:** 1920s, North Carolina

The section has Eugene Gant returning to "Altamont," North Carolina, a town in general poverty but with the jarring presence of expensive automobiles. Accessory shops and a garage are on the main street, along with "the most pretentious of the lot, a salesroom for a motor car agency... [where] the powerful and perfect shapes of the new automobiles glittered splendidly, but in this splendor there was, curiously, a kind of terrible, cold, and desolate bleakness." An older woman comments that "'The better class all have their automobiles an' want to get out in the mountains.'" While some parts of the country had seen automobiles as being widely available, such is not true in this setting.

Edition used: Charles Kaplan, ed. *Literature in America: The Modern Age*. New York: The Free Press, 1971.

**Author:** Sterling Brown (1901-1989)

**Title:** *Southern Road*

**Date:** 1932

**Systems:** Roadway, train, car

**Context:** Contemporary, Rural South and unspecified city; African-American perspective

"Strong Men" provides an excellent example of how transportation Systems are marked by social relationships. In this case the "meaning" of a particular form of transportation or a particular system varies depending upon whether one owns, operates or builds that system and under what conditions.

This poem incorporates the work song but more experimentally than does Brown's "Southern Road." The poem is both tribute and angry vision; it intersperses quotations from actual work songs with longer stanzas which enumerate abuse against American blacks. The result is close to call and response - litany, then work song:

They point with pride to the roads you built for them,  
They ride in comfort over the rails you laid for them.  
They put hammers in your hands  
And said - Drive so much before sun down.

Each such verse is answered by a work song. The repetitive use of an already repetitive form (the work song) builds an ominous insistence:

You sang:  
Ain't no hammah  
In dis lan',  
Strikes lak mine, bebbby,  
Strikes lak mine.

The militant meaning of Brown's formal experiment is explained in the refrain (borrowed, by the way, from Carl Sandburg): "The strong men keep a-comin' on / the strong men git stronger..."

In "Convict," yet another variation on the chain-gang/road construction theme, Sterling Brown focuses on a single convict sentenced to three months on the gang. This poem highlights the shantytown conditions Jim lived in before he was imprisoned in "a dingy cell," sentenced to "daytime on the highways, / Nights in hell." Unspecified trucks roll Jim past Shantytown in his daily shuttle between highway and jail. Thus he daily "sees what he's used to," the very conditions, we are told ironically, which "brought him to handcuffs": namely, "Sleeping hounds everywhere, / Flies crawling thick, / Grown ups drunken / and children sick." This picture of "filth and squalor" is the "longed for heaven / He's returning to." In other words, the poem emphasizes that in the routine of work on the chain-gang, Jim can see all the possibilities of his life. Whether in freedom or in jail - and we are lead to believe he will see plenty of both, Jim will live out his life between Shantytown, highway, and dingy cell.

"Long Gone" reworks the "rambling man" theme from blues and folk ballads. One might read the poem to suggest that with the accessibility of rail travel arises a new kind of man. (Accessible, in these songs or ballads, means accessible to those daring enough to jump free rides or to work the kitchen - almost always men.) For Long Gone and other "railroad men," it "jes' ain' nachal / Fo' to stay here long" - "Jes' my name and my habit / To be Long Gone." The poem is addressed to Long Gone's female lover; his natural impulse will always draw him away from the stability of love relationships "though it's homelike and happy." The allure of a "sweet woman" and social stability cannot compete with the "itch" and allure of "travelin'" by train - "I'se jes' dataway."

Significantly, the appeal of the machine itself is equal to that of travel to new places; Long Gone is drawn to the look of

the rails and ties, the sound of "an ole freight / Puffin' up de rise" or of "de empties / Bumpin' up de hill." He speaks of the itch "Fo' to hear de whistle blow / Fo' de crossin' or de switch." So too, a chief pleasure is in the lack of concrete destination and the variety of people he'll meet and the newness of the country he's "gotta highball thu."

"Tin Roof Blues" is another poem about riding the trains. Brown provides a speaker whose dissatisfaction with his life and the people around him push him on. This speaker's itch, in contrast to Long Gone's of the earlier poem, is not to travel, but to leave. Here the destination is a vague elsewhere - "where de people stacks up mo' lak friends." This mental geography of escape and therefore of a better world is mapped only by train lines: "I'm goin' where de Southern crosses top de C & O."... or .. "Goin' where de Norfolk Western curves jes' lak de river bends."

"Mister Samuel and Sam" compares Mr. Samuel and Sam by examining the property and community memberships held by each. Despite the gulf in economic status and cultural refinement between the two, each spends according to the same proportions and their lives are qualitatively the same. For instance, it's no matter that one drinks "Canadian Rye" and the other "bootleg gin," "Both gits as high as a Georgia pine / And both calls de doctor in."

Notably, one of the first properties used to mark social station is the car.

Mister Samuel ride in a Cadillac,  
Sam ride in a Tin Lizzie Fo'd;  
Both spend their jack fo' gas an' oil,  
An both git stuck on de road.

As is the case with Canadian Rye and bootleg gin, the car may mark a certain level of status, but it cannot erase the fact that both machines and men have the same basic requirements and are prone to similar malfunctions.

Edition used: Boston: Beacon, 1974.

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## 128

**Author:** Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960)

**Title:** "The Way of a Man with a Train"

**Date:** 1927

**Systems:** Train

**Context:** Contemporary, rural Florida, African-American perspective

"The Way of a Man with a Train" gives some indication of the role trains played in the rural South of the 1920s. Old Man Anderson lives "seven or eight miles" outside of Eatonville, Florida, a town of "five lakes, three croquet courts, three hundred brown skins, three hundred good swimmers, plenty guavas, two schools and no jail-house." Old Man Anderson is somewhat extraordinary because, unlike "citybred folks," he's never seen a train. For citizens of Eatonville, trains are common enough that even "the smallest child" had been to see one go by, and yet these machines retain aspects of the marvelous. For this rural community, locomotives remain a spectacle - a phenomenon one watches rather than a vehicle one rides. The viewing of a train is a weekly ritual and social event to Eatonville youth: "On Sunday afternoons all of the young people of the village would go over to Maitland, a mile away to see Number 35 whizz southward on its way to Tampa and wave at the passengers."

The story suggests a social restructuring coincident with the arrival of railroad technology. Trains offer the children of Eatonville an edge over their hardworking and otherwise respectable elder, Anderson. A spectator's knowledge of trains constitutes a form of "worldly knowledge" that can vie with the wisdom of age: "Even we children felt superior in the presence of someone so lacking in worldly knowledge."

The tale's humor presupposes an audience of the "train-wise" willing to laugh at Anderson's ignorance. The town's "patronage and ridicule" eventually have their effect on Anderson, and he drives in one morning to watch Number 78 go north to Jacksonville at 10:20. As he waits in the woods along the tracks, Anderson recalls stories he's heard of train noise. Worrying that his horse will scare and bolt with his wagon, he secures the nervous animal deep in the woods. Then recalling reports that the engine "belched fire and smoke," he begins to draw his wagon to a safer location. As he does so, the 78 thunders past "spouting smoke" and "blowing for Maitland." Anderson himself bolts in terror, wagon and all, tearing up the equipment "worse than the horse ever could have done." The narrator concludes, "He doesn't know yet what a train looks like, and says he doesn't care."

Edition used: *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Vol. 2, 2nd Edition, New York: W.W. Norton, 1985.

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## 129

**Author:** Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960)

**Title:** "Sweat"

**Date:** 1926

**Systems:** Horse and buckboard, automobile

**Context:** Contemporary, rural Florida, African-American perspective

The few brief references to transportation in this story structure the narrative and serve as important indices to moral character. The women here own the horses and wagons, while a man's access to his vehicles defines his relationship with each woman and his position in the community.

Washerwoman Delia Jones collects and delivers laundry each Sunday. For the townsfolk, her body-breaking labor and dependability are synonymous with her vehicle, a "rusty buckboard" which comes and goes through the small town "ez reg'lar ez de weeks." Delia's earnings support her two-timing husband, Sykes. She is almost totally indifferent to his movements; her concern for his whereabouts amounts only to "wondering where Sykes...had gone with her horse and buckboard."

That the town gossips approve of Delia and disapprove of Sykes in equal measure is clear as they trace his depravity to two distinctly Northern dangers - white women and cars: "He allus wuz uh ovahbearin' niggah, but since dat white 'oman from up north done teachd 'im how to run a automobile, he done got too biggety to live - an' we oughta kill 'im."

Edition used: Hans Ostrom, ed. *Lives and Moments: An Introduction to Short Fiction*. Chicago: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1991.

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## 130

**Author:** Langston Hughes (1902-1967)

**Title:** *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes*

**Date:** 1959

**Systems:** Railroad, road construction, automobile, subway

**Context:** 1920s to 1960s, South, northern cities, African-American perspective

Hughes touches on the complex and changing relations blacks have to Southern transportation Systems, and his poems go through civil rights era when equal access to public transportation (buses and trains) played an important symbolic and material part in the end of segregation.

"Bound No'th Blues" (1926), while talking about walking rather than riding, comes to the same conclusion: "These Mississippi towns ain't / Fit fer a hoppin' toad." Once in the North, "Homesick Blues" (1926), "A sad song in de air," articulates a dilemma: "Ever' time de trains pass / I wants to go somewhere. / ... / Lookin' for a box car / To roll me to de South."

A more detailed, social analysis comes in "One-Way Ticket" (1949):

```
I pick up my life I am fed up
And take it with me With Jim Crow laws,
And I put it down in People who are cruel
Chicago, Detroit, And afraid,
Buffalo, Scranton, Who lynch and run,
Any place that is Who are scared of me
North and East - And me of them.
And not Dixie.
I pick up my life
I pick up my life And take it away
And take it on the train On a one-way ticket -
To Los Angeles, Bakersfield, Gone up North,
Seattle, Oakland, Salt Lake, Gone out West,
Any place that is Gone!
North and West -
And not South.
```

"Porter" (1927) ends with "Rich old white man / Owns the world. / Gimme yo' shoes. / To shine. Yes sir!" which points to the subservience which is expected of black men in this role. A young child asks "Where is the Jim Crow section / On this merry-go-round," which is compared to being put in the back of bus ("Merry-go-Round"). "Dream Boogie: Variation" (1951) begins with a description of a blues performance and then associates the emotions from music with the "teasing pain" of being "A few minutes late / For the Freedom Train." In a longer, allegorical poem, entitled "Freedom Train" (1947-48), Hughes describes segregated trains, hiring, facilities going back to his grandmother's experience in 1883, through her grandson's death at Anzio. The Freedom Train of the civil rights movement offers hopes that, in addition to opening up the trains and ballot boxes, might even provide opportunities for "a coal black man [to] drive the Freedom Train," not just be a porter. A brief poem on the same topic, "Lunch in a Jim Crow Car" (1959): "Get out the lunch-box of your dreams, / Bite into the sandwich of your heart, / And ride the Jim Crow car until it screams / Then - like an atom bomb - it bursts apart."

The automobile is also a way out. In "West Texas" (1942), after a description of cotton fields, "we cranked up our old Ford / And we started down the road / Where we was goin' / We didn't know - / Nor which way." West Texas "Ain't no place / For a colored / Man to stay!"

"Florida Road Workers" (1931) suggests the general condition in which blacks cannot imagine participating in the automobile world they physically create. The final effort, to get the white folks' attention, also speaks of the poem's purpose.

```
I'm makin' a road
For the cars
To fly by on.
Makin' a road
Through the palmetto thicket
For light and civilization
To travel on.

Makin' a road
For the rich old white men
To sweep over in their big cars
And leave me standin' here.

Sure,
A road helps all of us!
White folks ride -
And I get to see 'em ride.
I ain't never seen nobody
Ride so fine before.
Hey buddy!
Look at me.
I'm making a road!
```



Several poems celebrate the excitement of Harlem culture. "Juke Box Love Song" (1950) invites the listener to "Take the neon lights and make a crown, / Take the Lenox Avenue busses, / Taxis, subways, / And for your love song tone their rumble down." "Projection" (1951) begins, "On the day when the Savoy / leaps clean over to Seventh Avenue / and starts jitterbugging / with the Renaissance." Further, "Lenox Avenue / by daylight / runs to dive in the Park / but faster... / faster... / after dark," plays on the contours of the roadway and on "dive" as a cheap restaurant ("Dive" 1951). Another poem quotes a father who "watched Harlem grow / until colored folks spread / from river to river / across the middle of Manhattan / out of Penn Station / dark tenth of a nation" who arrived "in buses marked New York / from Georgia Florida Louisiana / to Harlem Brooklyn the Bronx / but most of all to Harlem." Despite the opportunity, Hughes asks, "What happens / to a dream deferred?" ("Good Morning" 1951).

The texture of the subway is again characterized in "Subway Rush Hour" (1951):

Mingled  
breath and smell  
so close  
mingled  
black and white  
so near  
no room for fear.

The commuter's schedule is pointed to in "Blue Monday" (1959): "No use in my going / Downtown to work today. / It's eight, / I'm late - / And it's marked down that-a-way."

Hughes' songs have African roots which are brought "To sing on the Georgia roads," and thus part of the American experience ("Sun Song" 1927). In a similar reflection toward African-American history, he writes of John Henry, "with his hammer / Makes a little spark. / That little spark is love / Dying in the dark" ("Love" 1942). The work done by slaves is linked to nineteenth-century **Systems**: "Out of labor came the rowboats / And the sailboats and the steamboats, / Came the wagons, stage coaches" and the railroads ("Freedom's Plow" 1943).

A child is asked to link people passing by, airplanes in the sky, and birds flying home, since "Home's just around / the corner / there - / but not really / anywhere" ("Kid in the Park" 1950).

Edition used:

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## 131

**Author:** Toni Morrison (b. 1931)

**Title:** "1920" In *Sula*

**Date:** 1973

**Systems:** Train

**Context:** South, African-American perspective

This chapter is a classic, but retrospective account of the effects of Jim Crow rules, on train travel (both in the North and South) just after the end of the First World War. Helene Wright and her daughter travel from "a Northern town called Medallion" to visit her mother and ailing grandmother in New Orleans. (Her husband is a cook on a Great Lakes Line ship.)

At the Medallion depot, the colored porter directs them to the wrong carriage, even though it is marked COLORED ONLY. The conductor challenges them, calling her "gal," a word which triggers "All the old vulnerabilities, all the old fears of being somehow flawed." She thinks he wants to see her tickets, but he really is blaming her for having entered the wrong coach, "'We don't 'low no mistakes on this train. Now git your butt on in there.'" Helene looks to see if any



man, including two soldiers in uniform, will help her get the suitcases in the overhead rack. "It was that train, shuffling toward Cincinnati, that she resolved to be on her guard - always" - guard especially against men looking at her with lust, as well as being caught violating the segregation rules.

"For two days they rode; two days of watching sleet turn to rain, turn to purple sunsets, and one night knotted on the wooden seats (their heads on folded coats), trying not to hear the snoring soldiers." They change trains at Birmingham, "and discovered what luxury they had been in through Kentucky and Tennessee, where the rest stops had all had colored toilets. After Birmingham there were none." At Meridian, Mississippi, with the guidance of a black woman, they have to relieve themselves in an open field, a process they repeat at Ellisville, Hattiesburg, and Slidell, until they finally get to New Orleans. Despite the three days on the train and her fears, "she had gone on a real trip, and now she was different."

Edition used: Hans P. Guth and Gabriele L. Rico, eds. *Discovering Fiction*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Blair, 1993.

## 132

**Author:** Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961)

**Title:** *The Sun Also Rises*

**Date:** 1926

**Systems:** Train, taxi

**Context:** 1925, travel in France and Spain

The opening chapters in Paris have Jake Barnes traveling by horse cab and motorized taxi from his flat to various bars and restaurants. In a cab ride with a prostitute they kiss, but he moves her hand aside since he isn't interested in (or capable of) sex (Ch. 3). A roughly parallel scene occurs with "Lady" Brett Ashley in a taxi (Ch. 4). Somewhat in the background are the noises of night trains on street-car tracks which keep him awake, men working on urban car-tracks by acetylene flares (Ch. 4), and the "S bus." (Ch. 5). Jake contemplates taking a plane to Strasbourg on short notice (Ch. 1), and he's thinking about buying a car (Ch. 5). One of Brett's male friends has a chauffeur-driven limousine which appears periodically in these chapters.

In this novel about expatriated Americans, their efforts to escape keep them going further away from Paris streets and toward rural roads in the Spanish mountains.

The novel's main events surround the bull fight and fiesta in Pamplona, Spain. To get there, Jake and Bill take the train from Gare d'Orsay to Bayonne in southern France. On the train, there's much talk about booking a lunch seating - they can only get the fifth since the train is filled with seven cars of Americans from Dayton who are on a pilgrimage to Rome, Biarritz [sic], and Lourdes; these "Pilgrim Fathers" have cornered the dining car, so Jake and Bill don't get to eat until 4:15. Along the way they buy sandwiches and chablis from a vendor on the train and stop off to buy wine at Tours (Ch. 9). They had hoped to get a scheduled bus from Bayonne, but the service doesn't start until July 1, so they pay for a motor car at 400 Fr. [The hotel room costs 16 Fr. a night.] The passing Spanish countryside is given in detail as they go up mountains and eventually to the plateau of Pamplona. Once there, they wait for the 9:00 train from San Sebastian where they expect to meet Brett and another friend - no Brett, so they decide to go trout fishing instead (Ch. 10).

The bus ride from Pamplona to the fishing spot at Burgete puts Jake and Bill together with Basque peasants. As with the other events in the novel, everyone drinks fairly constantly, but now it's from wine skins. One Basque man imitates an automobile's klaxon horn while Jake is drinking; he jumps and dribbles, much to the group's amusement. The ride starts with people on top of the bus, sitting on the luggage - by the time they arrive at Burgete there's room for everyone to sit comfortably inside (Ch. 11). The insistent presence of railroad time, down to the minute, and always on schedule (in this

book) contrasts with the relaxed atmosphere of fishing and even of the bullfights. But these settings can only be for a vacation.

The travel back to France and to the trains is in big motor-cars, although not as big as the sight-seeing cars which wait after the fiesta, one of which carries twenty-five Englishwomen. Bill takes the train to Paris at 7:10. Jake goes to San Sebastian where he talks with bicycle racers in the hotel (the race is followed by motor-cars). He gets a telegram from Brett and takes the Sud Express (10:00 PM) to Madrid, which is the "end of the line," where all trains stop. A taxi ride to the Hotel Montana, a big meal with Brett. The final scene has Jake and Brett in another taxi which curves around a traffic policeman with a baton and pushes them closer thus emphasizing the inevitability of their separation. Hemingway is playing these frustrated encounters against the general promise that sexual events notoriously take place in the back seat.

Edition used: New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954.

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## 133

**Author:** Willa Cather (1876-1947)

**Title:** "The Old Beauty"

**Date:** 1936

**Systems:** Automobile

**Context:** 1922, Travel in France

The central event in the story is the death of an old woman, a great figure from the 1890s, who is bumped around and frightened after a near collision on a mountain road. The narrating consciousness, Henry Seabury, had befriended the woman and her companion, and had proposed the drive with his Savoyard driver to the Grande-Chartreuse. Earlier he had presented driving in chauffeur-driven limousines as being almost as intimate as having tea at the hotel. This time, the drive is "strangely impersonal. He and the two ladies were lost in a companionship much closer than any they could share with one another. The clean-cut mountain boy who drove them seemed lost in thoughts of his own." Coming down the mountain a "dirty little car" with two American women is in the wrong lane, so our group has a narrow escape. The famous old woman is shaken, but forgives the driver and suggests a generous tip; she dies in her sleep that night, though.

Edition used: *The Old Beauty and Other Stories*. New York: Viking, 1976.

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## 134

**Author:** Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961)

**Title:** Short stories

**Date:** 1923-1936

**Systems:** Automobile, train

**Context:** Generally contemporary, Michigan, Texas; travel in Africa, Europe

"The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" (1936) is an African safari story in which the motor car is incongruously a central part of the setting, the theme, and the irony. Francis and Margot Macomber and Wilson, the white hunter, chase and hunt lions and buffalo from a "doorless, box-bodied" two-seated car. Francis "knew about motor cycles - that was earliest - about motor cars... about sex in books, many books, too many books," but he doesn't know about people, or hunting. Throughout we are reminded about where the Macomers are seated as Wilson manages them. Wilson has the black guides shovel a path over a steep bank the day before so the hunting goes smoothly. In typical, Hemingway style, "The car stopped," a disembodied way of removing agency from the world.

There is a hunter's code: it is somewhat acceptable to chase buffalo in cars, but it is illegal to shoot from them. Chasing is, in Wilson's terms, "sport enough," a phrase which also points to his sexual pursuit of Mrs. Macomber. Margot complains about "chasing those big helpless things in a motor car"; it seems unfair, and telling the officials about it could put Wilson out of business. Francis worries about his fear and his masculinity: "Motor cars made [fear] familiar ... Made him into a man." Margot: "Just because you've chased some helpless animals in a motor car you talk like heroes." The final scenes include Wilson and Francis, on foot, popping away at a group of buffalos, killing some and wounding others. Margot, perhaps by accident, perhaps not, blows her husband away as she shoots, from the car, in the general direction of a wounded buffalo. Do you break the code if you murder your husband from a car, rather than getting out first?

The lives of characters in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" (1936) rely heavily on the success or failure of trucks and planes. This is also an African safari setting where technology is as much a feature as is nature. The unnamed central character has gangrene and incipient blood poisoning. He and his mistress cannot be evacuated - it would have been better to have hired a good mechanic instead of the kikuyu driver; he should have checked the oil so the bearing wouldn't burn out. Much later in the story he notices that he should have used iodine for the thorn scratch, so he wouldn't have gotten the gangrene.

The story is interspersed with the man's flashbacks to scenes from World War I and Paris, scenes he might have written about but now can only dream or imagine. There's the railway station at Karagatch where he saw the headlight of the Simplon-Orient express; later he looked out the train window during breakfast in Bulgaria. At the rue Mouffetard he had taken his bicycle up the hill on the only asphalted street in that quarter. That image becomes merged with his sense of death's physical approach: "It was not there. It must have gone around another street. It went in pairs, on bicycles, and moved absolutely silently on the pavements." Still later, he says to the woman that death is just as likely to be "two bicycle policemen" as a scythe and skull, or a hyena.

The plane should be the way out. The camp is set up with a reasonable landing strip and smudge pots to identify it. In a final dream the man imagines the plane circling twice and landing with the help of the fires. After a bumpy take off (you need to avoid the wart-hog holes) the pilot and the man fly over the hills and up to a vision of Mt. Kilimanjaro, echoing the opening image of a leopard unaccountably out of its regular range which got frozen in the mountain's snows.

Several stories trace the growth and travails of Nick Adams and other young men who grew up in the 1890s, participated in the First War, and came back or stayed in Europe thereafter. The series begins in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, with barges on Lake Michigan slowly moving on the horizon, and a blacksmith shop prominent in the small town ("Up In Michigan" 1923, set in 1884). The doctor makes house calls by rowboat ("Indian Camp" 1924). Lumber schooners carry both the cut wood and a portable lumber mill from site to site ("The End of Something" 1925).

As a young adult, Nick jumps freight trains and, in "The Battler" (1925) he is kicked off by the brakeman who seems to serve a policing function. In this story we get a technical description of the good quality of the track which "was well ballasted and made easy walking, sand and gravel packed between the ties, solid walking." This particular roadbed is surrounded by swamps on either side, and thus Hemingway sets up a fairly typical, symbolic landscape. In a famous story, set after the War, "The Big Two-Hearted River" (1925) Nick is left off the train at a now-deserted town surrounded by a fire-damaged forest to fish and to try to rebuild his life.

Other veterans come to a society where automobiles play an important role. The wounded major in "A Very Short Story" (1924) "got gonorrhoea from a sales girl in a [Chicago] loop department store while riding in a taxicab through

Lincoln Park." Mr. Krebs in "Soldier's Home" (1925) was not allowed to use the family motor car before the War since his father needed it in his real estate business to show farm properties. When Krebs returns to Oklahoma we are reminded that "it was still the same car." His mother says that he can use it to go out on dates, in a futile gesture to get him to out of his depression. A retrospective story, "Fathers and Sons" (1933) juxtaposes Nick's riding down a modern highway after getting through a road-repair detour in the center of a small town with his memories of his childhood and his conversations with his father.

"Che ti Dice la Patria" (1927) uses the state of Italian roads and a confrontation with a Fascist on a bicycle to characterize Mussolini's regime. Two Americans in a Ford coupé pick a person up on the way to Spezia; since the car is a two-seater, the hitchhiker has to ride on the outside, on the running board. On the outskirts of Spezia he gets off, since they could get into trouble (undefined) by carrying a passenger - thus, regulating how cars are used is one way that the Fascists show their power. Driving through the muddy streets near Genoa forces them to use their wind-shield cleaners and later a rag to clean off the wind-shield and licence plate. The Fascist on a bicycle with his revolver and the car stop at a railroad crossing - the Fascist claims that "Your number's dirty" and, even when it is cleaned off again, he fines them 25 lire, plus another 25 when the Americans complain about the roads. The Americans force the Fascist to enter the charges and fines in his coupon book and to give a receipt, thus trying to subvert the shakedown racket.

"A Canary for One" (1927) takes us on an express train run from Marsailles to Paris, and, along the way, gives details on how the compartments are configured, the views of cities and towns from the switch-yards, and passing glimpses of the country side, e.g., of a burning farm house. The central character, an American lady who owns the canary, can't sleep once the beds are turned down because she is afraid of speed at night. As the train gets close to the Paris station we see the brown wooden restaurant and sleeping cars ready for the return run to Italy at 5 PM, and the suburban commuting cars with their extra seats on the roof. They also pass three cars that had been in a wreck with their splintered sides and the roofs sagged in.

The main activity in "A Canary for One" is a conversation between the narrator's wife and the American lady who is deaf and must read lips. The narrator occasionally makes comments but they are not heard or responded to, which turns out to reflect the forthcoming break up of their marriage, and, indirectly to comment on the social dynamics of people who travel together in train compartments.

The train's breakfast schedule is well ahead of the city's preparation for morning activities, so Hemingway points out the nice distinction between travellers' time and on-the-ground time.

"Homage to Switzerland" (1933) shows the station room with its carved chairs and comfortable seats, and carved wooden clocks. The narrator tries to hire the waitress for sex while he is waiting for the train. Hemingway uses nearly identical language both the describe the station and the pick-up three times in three different towns, which points out the uniformity of the country. He thus invites us to see transportation Systems as reflecting (or stereotyping) national character, at least in Europe.

Cars, boats, planes, and trucks abound in Hemingway's war stories, but we have chosen not to detail the military use of these vehicles.

"After the Storm" (1932) is the account of a small-scale salvage operator who comes across a sunken ocean liner off the Florida coast. The man has only a wrench and cannot break through the port holes and thus gather the valuables. He depicts a female drowning victim grotesquely floating in the wreck up to a porthole. A large, professional company does get the safe out and gathers whatever valuables are around. The final section is the narrator's imaginative reconstruction of how the crew and passengers faced the disaster.

Edition used: *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938.

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# The 1930s

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[Porter](#) presents an ocean liner as a microcosm to dramatize American and European political forces which led to World War II. [Rey](#) also uses a liner in a children's story. [Wright](#) dramatizes the train as a young African-American boy's path from the south, while wandering by freight and passenger train and social dislocations from train travel are subjects for several [blues songs](#), and of [Hughes'](#) short story. [Wolfe's](#) "Far and Near" gives a sentimental picture of the engineer as a countryside hero. [MacLeish](#) sees the railroad as the prime example of uncaring capitalism; [Hurstun](#) points to the auto makers' fame. [Dove](#) surveys the arrival of various systems to Akron, Ohio, starting with a riverboat accident, going through a Zeppelin factory, to various aspects of the automobile and its infrastructure. Welty's [Losing Battles](#) focuses on a potentially serious car accident which brings out the best in people. [Taylor](#), also writing of the South, charts the effect of automobiles and improved roads on a small town, as [Welty](#) does in two stories about traveling salesmen. [Martz's](#) story shows a highway tunnel under construction in West Virginia. The highway and its construction are central to [Warren's](#) fictional treatment of Huey Long's Louisiana, where driving styles become indices of peoples' character. One of [McCullers'](#) stories, set in a Georgia town, shows the growing effect of car travel to larger cities; in other stories (set later in the century) she portrays commercial flights to France and a Southerner's commuting by bus in New York city.

In West's [Miss Lonelyhearts](#) the taxi is the superior way to get around New York, and it depicts an escape ride to the Connecticut countryside. [Doctorow's](#) novel about a criminal gang places their expensive cars in the midst of New York's other systems which still include horse-drawn wagons as well as private single-engine airplanes. [Schwartz](#) also shows the continued presence of wagons amid the trucks. In [Gardner's](#) detective story criminals' automobiles and garages, as well as a plane crash, become major sources of clues. [Ellison's](#) main character is first seen driving in the rural South, then on a train to the North; his New York scenes are heavily involved with the subways. [Wolfe's](#) story presents the Brooklyn subway as the gateway to an indefinitely complex urban world. [Wright's](#) *Native Son*, an African-American point of view, is set in Chicago where the envy of limousines is a motivating force, and driving one is the central character's job.

[Kennedy](#) and [Saroyan](#) pick up on the theme of the car as a place where casual sex occurs. The Greyhound bus is another way for young people to escape small town life as depicted by [Brautigan](#), while [Steinbeck's](#) California story, "Chrysanthemums," contrasts a traveling handyman's freedom to roam in his wagon with a farm couple's more restricted, but car-based life. His [Grapes of Wrath](#) depicts a broader social movement by car of share croppers from Oklahoma to California in the Dust Bowl era; [Guthrie](#) charts the same migration pattern, this time by train, and he also shows the hassle of poor peoples' owning and using cars in California. [Robinson](#) shows the impacts on a family of accidents where first a train and then a car plunge off cliffs; [Agee](#) focuses on the profound consequences and arbitrary nature of a car crash.

Hollywood's glamor and notoriety is the setting for [West's](#) *Day of the Locust* and [Fitzgerald's](#) *Last Tycoon*; West concentrates on the automobile as a site for sex and seduction, while Fitzgerald shows how the airplane brings hopefuls to the city. [Doctorow's](#) book on the New York World's Fair brings together the diversity of modern systems, including the Hindenberg's final flight and the General Motors "Futurama" display. [Stewart](#) goes into great detail on the effects of a major storm on trains, highways, and airplane travel, especially in California, but eventually across the country. Finally, [The Little Engine that Could](#) allegorically depicts the wonders of the train for young readers.

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**Author:** Katherine Anne Porter (1890-1980)

**Title:** *Ship of Fools*



**Date:** 1962 Written: 1945-1961

**Systems:** Steamship

**Context:** 1931, Veracruz to Bremerhaven

The ship *Vera* is self-consciously a microcosm highlighting attitudes about race and religion leading to the Second World War. As he walks around the deck, the Captain sees his role thus: "That was his true world, of unquestioned authority, clearly defined caste and carefully graded privilege, and it irked him grievously to be forced to concern himself with any other. He knew well what human trash his ship - all ships - carried to and from all the ports of the world: gamblers, thieves, smugglers, spies, political deportees and refugees, stowaways, drug peddlers, all the gutter-stuff of the steerage moving like plague rats from one country to another, swarming and ravaging and undermining the hard-won order of the cultures and civilizations of the whole world" (Part 3). The international group of named characters (Europeans and North Americans), listed before the story begins, travel first class. From the upper deck they can look down at steerage "feeding quarters," see the passengers eat in shifts at long tables. After the stopover in Havana, the formerly empty quarters are filled; on the first day out, we see the crew hosing the vomit off the seasick steerage passengers; they are "all starving, in rags, shipped like cattle." While a few have hammocks, most sleep on the floor. The Captain, concerned about a revolt, takes trouble to ensure there are no weapons; he turns out the lights when he finds the passengers are dancing and playing cards (Part 2). At the stop at Tenerife, they are herded off while the first-class passengers watch and gawk (Part 3).

Life in first class includes dining quite well at the Captain's table, lots of drinking, and extended conversation about race, religion, civilization, and so on. Prostitutes walk the decks. The general atmosphere is party - dances, games (ping-pong, shuffleboard, chess), a small canvas swimming pool, band music. This part of shipboard life is capped off in the long fiesta scene towards the end of the novel - Spanish and German dance music, noise-makers and paper hats, a lottery.

The quarters seem genuinely uncomfortable. The cabins have two or three berths with little room to stow luggage or toilet gear. In most cases, cabin mates are strangers who negotiate with more or less success in preserving privacy and getting along. After a few days, the new passengers who get on in Havana are seen as interlopers by those who have become used to each other's company (Part 1). In one scene a young boy watches his parents undress for the first time, and becomes acutely aware of their odors since the consensus is that the portholes must be kept closed to keep out the "dangerous" night air. Even so, the almost total lack of privacy means that sexual relations are nearly impossible to orchestrate, whether between pickups at a dance or an engaged couple. The purser is the ship's officer who should work all this out, but he has trouble finding matches to move one passenger out of his original cabin because he does not wish to share it with a Jew. The *Ship of Fools* is a modern effort to expand the theme, begun with the nineteenth-century steamboat, that the closed quarters of a boat forces a diversity of peoples to interact.

Edition used: New York: Signet, 1963.

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## 136

**Author:** H. A. Rey (b. 1898)

**Title:** *Curious George*

**Date:** 1941

**Systems:** Boat, traffic

**Context:** Contemporary



An illustrated book for very young children, part of a series; still in print and widely known. George, a monkey in Africa, is caught by a man who puts him in a bag and rows him to a big ship (an ocean liner); he jumps overboard but is rescued. Once at the man's house in the city, after other adventures, he grabs a bunch of helium balloons but finally lands on a traffic light and the "traffic got all mixed up." He climbs into the man's car and winds up in the zoo.

Edition used: Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1941.

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## 137

**Author:** Richard Wright (1908-1960)

**Title:** "The Man Who was Almost a Man"

**Date:** 1941

**Systems:** Train

**Context:** 1930s, South; African-American perspective

In this story, as in Wright's other works, trains are symbolically linked to masculinity, or rather, they represent the promise of a future masculinity - fully achieved and untroubled; thus the passage to manhood often entails an encounter with a train or with forces metaphorically associated with trains - power, danger or the urge to escape.

Seventeen-year-old Dave considers himself "almost a man." But his not-quite manhood has less to do with age and more to do with the power relationships in which he lives and works. Ignored by the men he works with, his earnings carefully guarded and spent by his mother, Dave comes to believe that only a gun can change his social position - with it he could command the respect he craves.

Ironically the gun only deepens his obligation and humiliation at work and at home: Dave's practice shoot ends up killing his boss's plow mule. Rather than face his father's beating and two years of labor to remunerate Boss Hawkins, Dave quite spontaneously decides to hop the Illinois Central, riding "away to somewhere, somewhere where he could be a man..."

The sudden appearance of a train at the end of the story offers an easy exit for Dave and the author both. The scene bears a dreamlike quality. Wright emphasizes the power of the train as it "thunder[s] past...rumbling and clinking." But the challenge after all is easily met and Dave seems to glide onto the top of a boxcar without sweat, bump or jolt. The story leaves him riding down moonlit tracks and staring into his future. Whereas the gun only disappointed as a means to manhood, the train in this story bears up under a heavy fantasy investment in a way that resonates better with the blues than with realist fiction.

Edition used: Charles Bohner, ed. *Short Fiction, Classic and Contemporary*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1989.

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## 138

**Author:** Various

**Title:** Blues

**Date:** Early twentieth century

**Systems:** Car, train

**Context:** African-American perspective

Big Joe Williams (1903-1982) "Overhauling Blues":

Drop down, baby, let me overhaul you little machine.  
I say, drop down, baby, let me overhaul you little machine.  
Well, you know, you got a loose carburettor, [sic]  
you been burning bad gasoline.

Well, I'm gonna race your motor, baby,  
I'm gonna heist your hood.  
Spark plugs getting old, generator ain't putting out good.  
But, oooh, yeah, let me overhaul you little machine.

Obviously these lyrics have nothing to do with car travel, yet have everything to do with technology and sexual pleasure. Often in blues, the handyman, mechanic or engineer possesses special, decidedly sexual, knowledge. But the handyman trope, like the expressions "get to work" or "gettin' busy," are more than just thinly veiled references to sexual activity. Like the lyrics above, the sexual idiom of the blues defines desire and the erotic in broad terms. Technology (and a mastery of technology) is erotic. The "Overhauling Blues" carry a double message: not only is technical skill necessary to erotic pleasure, but there is erotic pleasure latent in technical skill.

Blind Boy Fuller (1908-1941) in "Passenger Train Woman" also takes the machine [train] as a figure to describe sexual practice and sexual desire. "Passenger Train Woman" and the lines from "Seventy Four Blues" below suggest that our technologies redefine relationships between people imaginatively as well as logistically.

Well, the time I need you, mama that's the time you're gone,  
The time I need you, that's the time you're gone,  
I believe you got ways like a passenger train, when one's getting off,  
the other one's getting on.

In Blind Boy Fuller's lines, the woman is train-like; in "Seventy Four Blues" by Willie Love (1906-1953) the train is man-like. In both cases, the train meddles with the order of things and makes its presence felt in the most intimate of relationships.

74 is just a freight train, but it's got ways just like a man.  
The 74 is just a freight train, but it's got ways just like a man.  
it'll take your sweet little woman, boys, and let you down  
cold in hand.

"That Lonesome Train Took My Baby Away" by Charlie McCoy (1909-1950) presents trains as an unpredictable and (mischievously) destructive social force.

It ain't no telling what that train won't do,  
It'll take your baby and run right over you.  
Now that engineerman ought to be 'shamed of hisself.  
Take women from their husbands, babies from their mother's breast.

Travel and the "engineerman" himself come to represent aggressive sexual possibilities, more general and social than the lyrics of Willie Love or Blind Boy Fuller. The "Lonesome Train" title is not so much a personification as its opposite; this is not a train endowed with human characteristics and sentiments, but rather a human sentiment that can only be conveyed with reference to a train. In as much as the properties of trains and the realities of train travel have created new ways of being in the world, new ways of desiring and feeling. One cannot conceive of or describe certain states of mind without reference to that same technology.

Various students of the blues use rubrics like "Travel Blues" or "Songs of the Lonesome Road" to designate the large body of songs seemingly occasioned by travel or nomadic experience. Whether the singer is travel-weary, itching-to-travel, or wanting his/her baby back, the motif is a common one and has contributed to the clichéd image of the blues singer as the "rambling" or wandering drifter - typically male. A significant number of these blues take train travel as their subject. Robert Johnson (1912-1938) in "Love in Vain" suggests that the frequent comings and goings in "travel blues" might refer to psychological as well as physical displacements.

Well, the train has left the station with two lights on

behind,  
The train has left the station with two lights on behind,  
Well, the blue light was my blues and the red light was my mind.

Those with steady jobs on trains, working set routes, are apparently no less drifters than the ramblers who hop trains from point to point. Even the work on trains seems to defy routine - these blues depict the porter's life as one of continual interruption. Train life makes it impossible to count on fixed family and gender roles, marital expectations or hours for sleep. Sylvester Weaver, "Railroad Porter Blues" captures these themes.

Hear that bell ringing, keeps me 'wake all night long, (2x)  
Ain't no time for sleeping, something's always going on wrong.  
Folks keeps yelling, 'Rastus, pull the window down please.' (2x)  
With that snow a-falling, somebody surely going to freeze.'  
Shining shoes till morning, got no place to lay my head. (2x)  
When I get through slaving, Lord, I'm almost dead.  
Baby starts crying, then they takes me to be a nurse. (2x)  
I gets almost drownded, and what could be worse?  
Poor railroad porter, hates to leave his wife at home. (2x)  
'Cause she starts to cheating just as soon as he is gone.

Edition used: Cited from Paul Garon, *Blues and the Poetic Spirit*. New York: De Capo, 1975.

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## 139

**Author:** Langston Hughes (1902-1967)

**Title:** "On the Road"

**Date:** 1952

**Systems:** Railroad

**Context:** Depression era, Northern U.S.; African-American perspective

"On the road" for Sargeant, the protagonist of this brief story, means riding freights from town to town looking for food and shelter. The story opposes hobo culture to segregated American church culture and proposes that life on the rails better embodies egalitarian and Christian ideals.

Refused shelter and sent back out into the snow storm by the white Reverend Mr. Dorset, Sargeant attempts to break into the church next door. As the door gives beneath his weight, he is stopped by "two white cops" and Sargeant begins to hallucinate. Beset by white townspeople who would drag him from the church, Sargeant clings to the stone pillars supporting the huge edifice. Beaten furiously by the cops, Sargeant pulls down the church Samson-style, burying the white people beneath debris. This de facto reorganization of the white church brings Christ down to earth, literally, by dislodging him from the cross.

The emancipated Christ takes to the road with Sargeant. Together they hike down to a hobo jungle where Sargeant knows he'll be welcome; unlike the church, the jungle "ain't got no doors." Christ pushes on, catching a freight to Kansas City. The hallucination ends in nightmare as Sargeant imagines that even the freights are policed. In trying to hop a coal car he discovers the car holds more cops than coal. Just as he's being knocked from the car, Sargeant comes out of the hallucination to find himself in jail.

Edition used: Hans Ostrom, ed. *Lives and Moments: An Introduction to Short Fiction*. Chicago: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1991.

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## 140

**Author:** Thomas Wolfe (1900-1938)

**Title:** "The Far and the Near"

**Date:** 1935

**Systems:** Train

**Context:** Contemporary

The "limited express between two cities" passes a spot near a little town just after 2 PM each day. As the train gains speed after leaving the nearby town it goes past a "tidy little cottage" where a woman had waited to the engineer daily for twenty years. Over that time, the woman's daughter and the engineer's children had grown up. He had also had four near collisions - a light spring wagon, an automobile, a battered hobo on the rails, and a vague "form." which flew by the engine. The faithful woman had become a permanent fixture, "no matter what mishaps, grief or error might break the iron schedule of his days." When he retires he follows a promise he made to himself to visit the two women. As he walks from the station, the town is totally strange to him. At the house, "this place he loved turned unfamiliar as the landscape of some ugly dream." The real woman, with a "harsh and pinched and meager" face does not fit "the brave freedom" of her gesture. After an embarrassed, halting conversation with her and her daughter he leaves, realizing his age, and that the "vista of that shining line" was gone forever. By making the location anonymous and general, Wolfe emphasizes the ubiquitous role the railway system came to play in demarcating both daily time and life times in rural America for several generations.

Edition used: George McMichael, ed. *Anthology of American Literature*, 2nd ed. New York: Macmillan, 1980.

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## 141

**Author:** Archibald MacLeish (b. 1892)

**Title:** "Empire Builders"

**Date:** 1933

**Systems:** Trains

**Context:** Contemporary

A museum attendant gives the set piece on five panels depicting people who made America, including "Mister-Harriman-is-buying-the-Union-Pacific-at-Seventy: / The Santa Fe is shining in his hair," Commodore Vanderbilt, J. P. Morgan, Mellon, and the maker of Barton's "Deliciouest-Dentifrice." Most of the poem is a letter from M. Lewis (of Lewis and Clark fame) to Thomas Jefferson on the 1803 expedition. The economic irony of capitalism is picked up in the final lines: "You have just beheld the Makers making America: / They screwed her scrawny and gaunt with their seven-year panics: / They bought her back on their mortgages old-whore-cheap: / They fattened their bonds at her breasts till the thin blood ran from them..."

Edition used: Charles Kaplan, ed. *Literature in America: The Modern Age*. New York: The Free Press, 1971.

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## 142

**Author:** Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960)

**Title:** "The Gilded Six-Bits"

**Date:** 1933

**Systems:** Car manufacture

**Context:** 1930s, Small settlement in rural Florida, African-American perspective

This story turns on the sham display of wealth. One unfortunate evening, Joe comes home early from his night shift, only to find his wife Missie May in the sack with Mr. Otis D. Slemmons. Slemmons is from "up Chicago way" and wealthy - "a heavy-set man wid his mouth full of gold teethes." In Slemmons's scramble to escape the bedroom, he leaves behind some of the showy "gold pieces" he uses to attract the ladies - and these, of course, turn out to be nothing but "gilded six-bits."

Typically for the times, when the as-yet-happily married couple first discuss Slemmons's arrival in town, they refer to Henry Ford (and later "Mr. Packard and Mr. Cadillac") as the epitome of wealth and power. They quarrel over whether Ford is "puzzle-gutted" or "spare-built." These auto makers as identifiable personalities were the topic of popular speculation, fueled by Henry Ford's frequent presence in the news. Joe maintains that even Slemmons's distended gut makes him look like "a rich white man. All rich mens is got some belly on 'em."

Edition used: Martha Foley, editor. *200 Years of Great American Short Stories*. New York: Galahad Books, 1975.

## 143

**Author:** Rita Dove (b. 1952)

**Title:** *Thomas and Beulah*

**Date:** 1986

**Systems:** Riverboat, car, zeppelin, airplane, railroad

**Context:** 1919 to 1969, Akron, Ohio, African-American perspective

These poems "tell two sides of a story and are meant to be read in sequence."

The title characters meet and marry in Akron, a town dependent on all types of vehicle manufacture. Thomas's relationship to local industry is particularly interesting because he deeply fears the very machines by which he earns his living. His life is marked by freak transportation-related accidents; the series of poems suggests that, while boats, cars, planes and the like offer a heightened sense of power over the environment, these same technologies make life vulnerable in new ways.

"The Event": Significantly, the book of poems opens with a riverboat accident. Thomas and his best friend Lem leave the Tennessee ridge in 1919 for the "riverboat life." The poem connects the power and ease of steamboat travel to the cocky self-assurance of young manhood. They drink, play a mandolin and sing while the "wheel / churned mud and moonlight." The steamboat and the river are essential ingredients in the fantasy lifestyle these two have tried to capture: free, irresponsible travel for men who own only the "stinking rags" on their backs, men "with nothing to boast of but

good looks and a mandolin." The poem exposes the narcissism of the fantasy; in contrast to the power of the river, their own puny power - and that of the boat for that matter - means nothing. Each playing the part of rogue-adventurer to the hilt, Thomas dares Lem to swim to an island in the river. Lem never reappears, and Thomas is marked by the guilt of his dare for the rest of his life.

"Nothing Down" weaves together the purchase of Thomas and Beulah's first car with a memory of Thomas's childhood. They buy a car on "nothing down" for a trip back to Thomas's home in Tennessee. The car is important because it signals to Thomas's family, and to the white folks of Tennessee, that these Negroes have done well for themselves in the Northern economy. Again an accident deflates the narcissistic fantasy. En route to Tennessee, the car skids into a ditch - significantly derailing their triumphant return. Beulah calls after a carload of "hallooing" white men, "You and your South... Don't tell me this ain't what / you were hoping for."

The choice of a car is clearly an aesthetic one in this poem. Beulah "saunters along the gleaming fenders" and admires her reflection "in the headlamp casing of a Peerless." The car's color appears to have both a personal and social significance. Beulah doesn't even consider the red car; she passes it, mocking the voices of Southern whites and emphasizing the racial stereotypes the color would confirm: "'Nigger red,' she drawls, moving on." Beulah wants to choose the color she thinks her husband wants; she senses his eyes on a "sky blue Chandler!" For Thomas, blue is associated with a narrow escape from white pursuers in his boyhood. In effect, whether opting for one color or against another, the choice is intimately related to the couple's past or present standing in white society.

In 1928, the Goodyear Zeppelin Airdock was built in Akron; at that time it was the largest building in the world without interior supports. Thomas and many others found work in the factory. "The Zeppelin Factory" emphasizes Thomas's emotional reaction to working on airships so large: "standing in the cage of the whale's belly, sparks / flying off the joints / and noise thundering / Thomas wanted to sit right down and cry." These lines play on the guilt that has plagued Thomas since the accidental death of his friend Lem - Thomas is the sinner, the Jonah in the whale's belly, preserved again and again by sheer luck while those around him die.

In 1931, the "third largest airship was dubbed / the biggest joke / in town, though they all / turned out for the launch. / Wind caught, / 'The Akron' floated / out of control, / three men in tow - " Two men jump to safety, the third falls "clawing / six hundred feet." Thomas, "intact and faint-hearted," associates this accident with the early drowning of Lem; he will forever after whisper to the Goodyear blimp whenever he sees it - "Big boy I know you're in there."

The year 1922 marked the completion of a viaduct spanning the Little Cuyahoga River. One decade later, in "Under the Viaduct, 1932," Thomas has lost his sky-blue Chandler to the Depression, and he finds himself under the viaduct instead of driving across it. Here the viaduct makes literal the division between "upper" and "lower" classes; Thomas apparently likes the leveling effect of the times. The traffic above is ominous, "hissing" and "slithering" - but like the rest of the economy, "slithering to a halt."

Yet again, Thomas is spared disaster in "Lightnin' Blues." Thomas and Beulah's second car stalls, inexplicably, in a lightning storm, and "leaps backwards every time he turn[s] the key." The poem captures the annoyance of car trouble in bad weather (complete with kids bickering in the back seat). The sheriff eventually comes along to tell them that bad luck is good luck - they would have been struck down in the road by a falling tree if the engine hadn't stopped.

"Aircraft" explores a complicated gender insult to Black men who were hired as wartime workers in an aircraft factory. Declared "too frail for combat," Thomas is employed as a riveter by an aircraft manufacturer. Standing among "the robust women around him," he wonders, "Why frail? Why not simply / family man?" He also wonders at the racist division of labor - he blasts bolts into airplane wings thinking, "Why wings, when / women with fingers no smaller than his / dabble in the gnarled intelligence of an engine?" These thoughts mingle with his persistent mistrust of all vehicles. Hired to give each wing bolt a five second blast he panics - "And if he gave just a four second blast, or three?"

In "Thomas at the Wheel" Thomas of course dies in a car, but not in the manner he's dreaded. Arriving at a drugstore to fill a prescription for heart pills, he parks and suffers a heart attack while sitting behind the wheel. Unable to move, he dies "watch[ing] / the slit eye of the glove compartment, / the prescription inside."

"A Hill of Beans" is the only poem that shows Beulah's perspective. One spring during the Depression, she feeds the

hobos that follow the circus in and out of town: "Any two points/ make a line, they'd say, / and we're gonna ride them all." When the circus tents fold, her guests take off, leaving the field grass with "a path / torn waist-high to the railroad / where the hoboes jumped the slow curve / just outside Union Station."

Edition used: Pittsburgh, PA: Carnegie-Mellon Univ. Press.

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## 144

**Author:** Eudora Welty (b. 1909)

**Title:** *Losing Battles*

**Date:** 1970

**Systems:** Automobile

**Context:** 1930s, Mississippi

In Welty's novel, set in the hill country of northeast Mississippi, three generations of Granny Vaughn's family gather at her home to celebrate her ninetieth birthday. Over the two days of the reunion the various family members tell stories about one another, about their descendents, and about the different people in the community who have had an impact on the family. More than simply nostalgia, the narratives are connected to the present, impinging directly on the lives of the characters.

One of the main characters in the novel is Jack Renfro, a great-grandchild of Granny's who is nineteen and has just finished serving a year and a half in prison. While Granny is revered as the oldest member of the family, Jack is considered the leader and the hope of the Vaughn-Renfro-Beecham clan. The reunion is as much a celebration of his return as of Granny's birthday. But it turns out that the good-hearted Jack has, on his way home, helped a man driving a Buick get his car out of a ditch; unbeknownst to Jack the man was Judge Oscar Moody, who was responsible for sending Jack to prison. Jack's family discovers the identity of the distressed motorist and subsequently insists that Jack correct his error. Knowing the judge will have to take the road by the family house, Jack awaits him, planning to "shoo him back in a ditch just as good as he was in." But when the Buick comes along Jack's baby daughter, Lady Mae, runs out into the road, and his wife, Gloria, goes after her. The Buick swerves to avoid them and ends up hanging halfway over a cliff, barely balancing on a roadside sign that reads "Destruction Is At Hand!" After checking on his wife and baby, Jack rushes to the Judge's assistance, expressing his gratitude to Moody for not running over his loved ones. He immediately undertakes to rescue the Judge's car. Jack works throughout the Sunday reunion, attempting various methods of retrieval that are recounted throughout the novel, in-between the other stories and action. In the end he does manage to save the car, which is not in very good condition, but does still run.

The car accident - an accident which could have been much worse - is like the many tribulations that have confronted and continue to confront the family: debilitating but not fatal. The car does not go over the edge. Jack is a Good Samaritan who works to save the car, and though the Buick is a bit battered, finally there is salvation. Destruction might be at hand, but the car does swerve, missing Lady Mae and Gloria, and it is towed back from the edge. Human action - Judge Moody's and Jack's - can avert destruction, keep it at bay. The car is a machine well capable of violence, but the right kind of guidance and effort can control that threat.

Edition used: New York: Vintage, 1978.

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## 145

**Author:** Peter Taylor (b. 1917)

**Title:** "What Do You Hear from 'em?"

**Date:** 1951

**Systems:** Automobile

**Context:** Contemporary and 1930s. South

The central character is a black woman known to the small Southern town as Aunt Munsie. She is occasionally visited by the adult children of a medical doctor whom she had helped to raise. They come in a "big car"; one son has a Ford-and-Lincoln agency in Memphis, a symbol both of their modernity and the fracturing of the small town. The old doctor had been frightened of mules and horses, so "the happiest day of his life was the day he first learned that the horseless carriage was a reality."

The central plot involves Munsie's business, which is pulling a sloop wagon (to gather pig food) down the middle of the Thornton's streets, which was accepted thirty years ago. Now "the streets yet been broadened," and their macadam surface is barely wide enough to let two cars pass; teenagers and strangers honk at her, for, "in those days everyone had equal rights on the streets of Thornton." Aside from the slight inconvenience, white women claim to care about Munsie's safety, so the town government cooks up an ordinance that puts her out of business and destroys the way of life of a person who is about a century old.

Edition used: Eugene Current-Garcia and Bert Hitchcock, eds. *American Short Stories*, 5th ed. Glenview: Scott, Foresman, 1990.

## 146

**Author:** Eudora Welty (b. 1909)

**Title:** "Death of a Traveling Salesman."

**Date:** 1941

**Systems:** Car

**Context:** 1930s, Mississippi

The salesman of the story, R.J. Bowman, is a middle-aged man who has been on the road selling for fourteen years, and who has just spent a month in a hotel bed, sick with influenza. Not completely recovered, he becomes lost as he drives his Ford through Mississippi, ending up on a rutted dirt path. From the protection of his car he sees people working far across the fields, too distant to ask for directions. Suddenly and unexpectedly he comes to the end of the path, and before he can stop it, the car slides slowly into a ravine. He goes to a nearby house for help, and finds a woman who tells him he must wait for "Sonny" to return. Later, while Sonny retrieves the car, Bowman imagines being "somewhere on a good graveled road, driving his car past things that happened to people, quicker than their happening." But when night comes he suddenly wants to stay with the couple, to share their companionship; he thinks about his life and the isolation of the road and momentarily yearns for something different. But in the middle of the night he awakes and decides he must leave immediately. The car awaits him above the ravine, sitting "in the moonlight like a boat." But as he climbs the small hill to his car, he has a heart attack, and sinks "in fright onto the road," where he dies, alone.

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## 147

**Author:** Eudora Welty (b. 1909)

**Title:** "The Hitch-Hikers" In *Curtain of Green*

**Date:** 1941

**Systems:** Automobile

**Context:** Contemporary, Memphis area

In this short story a traveling salesman, Tom Harris, picks up two hitchhikers as he drives north towards Memphis. This trade is the modern version of the peddler in his wagon. The two men are "tramps," with no particular destination. Harris stops at a drive-in and buys them burgers, and then stops in the town of Dulcie, at a hotel. While he goes in to the hotel to talk to the proprietor, whom he knows from previous trips, one of the hitchhikers attempts to steal the car, but the other hitchhiker hits him over the head with a bottle, nearly killing him. Harris drives the injured man to the hospital and the other hitchhiker is arrested. When he returns to the hotel Harris receives a phone call from a woman he knows in the town and is invited over to a party. Harris is much different from the salesman in Welty's "Death of a Traveling Salesman"; he is younger, known and admired in towns all over the south, even considered a hero of sorts, if an enigmatic one. At the party, Ruth, the host, tells complimentary stories about him, and another woman calls him an "angel." It seems that he commonly goes in for "good deeds," such as picking up the hitchhikers: he also recently gave an eloping couple farther south a ride to the next town. And throughout the second half of the story his concern for the injured man is displayed again and again, as he repeatedly calls the hospital, hoping the man can survive, for the sake of both of the "tramps."

And yet Harris remains somewhat detached from the adulation of the people who know him, somewhat uncomfortable with their desire to know him better. He is gentle and caring with the two women in the story, Ruth and Carol, who obviously want to get closer to him, but he keeps them at a distance (though there is a suggestion that he has had fleeting relationships with both in the past). It seems the incident with the hitchhikers has made him even more solitary than usual, made him doubt the portrait others paint of him. In the final passage of the story, after he has learned the injured man has died, Harris prepares to leave town by getting a haircut and having his car "polished." The car is largely the means by which he has created his far flung reputation for sophistication and benevolence, and yet in the story that self-image has been tarnished: one of the hitchhikers he picked up is dead and the other faces a murder charge; we also learn that he had completely forgotten his relationship with Carol, which occurred five years before (and he has been lauded for "never forgetting"). Harris's self-confidence has been shaken, but the polished car indicates that he's going on with the life he has been leading for years, along the roads of the south. Whether his driving is an escape or a mission is left in doubt both for him and for the reader.

## 148

**Author:** Albert Maltz (b. 1908)

**Title:** "Man in a Road"

**Date:** 1936

**Systems:** Road construction, automobile

**Context:** Contemporary, West Virginia

The unnamed narrator nearly runs down a man at the entrance to a tunnel and then picks him up to drive him a hundred miles to Weston. The near miss is rather surrealistic - he slowed down to ten miles an hour on a "patched, macadam road [which] had been soaked through by an all-day rain, and now it was as slick as ice." A "big cream colored" truck in the tunnel crosses over into his lane, hits its brakes, and scrapes his car. The old man seems oblivious to the noises including a blast from the car's horn, or he may be a ghost. On the four hour drive to Weston, "The road twists like a snake on the run and for a good deal of it there is a jagged cliff on one side and a drop of a thousand feet or more on the other. The rain and the small rocks crumbling from the mountain sides and littering up the road made it very slow going."

It turns out that the passenger had been on the crew which built the tunnel; he and his co-workers got silicosis - many of them died. His disability means that coal mine operators won't hire him, so he has left his wife so he won't be a burden to her. This is one of the few stories where the dangers and disabilities of building modern highways is mentioned.

Edition used: Charles Kaplan, ed. *Literature in America: The Modern Age*. New York: The Free Press, 1971.

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## 149

**Author:** Robert Penn Warren (1905-1989)

**Title:** *All the King's Men*

**Date:** 1946

**Systems:** Automobile, highways

**Context:** 1930s, Louisiana and California

This novel opens with a lyrical passage to highways and accidents:

MASON CITY.

To get there you follow Highway 58, going northeast out of the city, and it is a good highway and new. Or was new, that day we went up it. You look up the highway and it is straight for miles, coming at you, with the black line down the center coming at and at you, black and slick and tarry-shining against the white of the slab, and the heat dazzles up from the white slab so that only the black line is clear, coming at you with the whine of the tires, and if you don't quit staring at that line and don't take a few deep breaths and slap yourself hard on the back of the neck you'll hypnotize yourself and you'll come to just at the moment when the right front wheel hooks over into the black dirt shoulder off the slab, and you'll try to jerk her back on but you can't because the slab is high like a curb, and maybe you'll try to reach to turn off the ignition just as she starts the dive. Then a nigger chopping cotton a mile away, he'll look up and see the little column of black smoke standing up above the vitriolic, arsenical green of the cotton rows, and up against the violent, metallic, throbbing blue of the sky, and he'll say, "Lawd God, hit's a-nudder one done done hit!" ... Then a few days later the boys from the Highway Department will mark the spot with a little metal square on a metal rod stuck in the black dirt off the shoulder, the metal square painted white and on it in black a skull and crossbones. Later on love vine will climb up it, out of the woods.

... For this is the country where the age of the internal combustion engine has come into its own. Where every boy is Barney Oldfield... Where the smell of gasoline and burning brake bands and red-eye is sweeter than myrrh.

The novel is narrated by Jack Burden, press aide to Governor Willie Stark, who is based on Huey Long, the master of machine politics in Louisiana. We first see them in the Boss's Cadillac, "reminiscent of a cross between a hearse and an ocean liner." Sugar-Boy, the chauffeur and body guard, is a pleasure to watch as a driver, "if you could detach your imagination from the picture of what near a couple of tons of expensive mechanism looks like after it's turned turtle three times at eighty"; he loves close calls, as the one when he passed a hay wagon in the face of a gasoline truck and came "close enough to give the truck driver heart failure with one rear fender and wipe the snot off a mule's nose with the other."

In 1937, Willie's son, Tom, wrapped his "expensive yellow sports car around a culvert on one of the new speedways that bore his father's name." The governor's public works are immediately associated with his power to deal with scandal. Tom's drinking is not reported by the Highway Patrol. His companion's injuries are compensated by a state contract to her father who puts him in the trucking business, noting that "truckers had a lot of contracts with certain state departments" (Ch. 6).

Burden's own driving becomes an index to his alienated character. He remarks about a 1933 trip away from his home, "There is nothing more alone than being in a car at night in the rain"; it makes him anonymous, "It is a vacation from being you. 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" (Ch. 3). After finding that the woman he has loved since childhood is having an affair with Stark, he takes an eight-day trip to Long Beach, "which is the essence of California." "I was headed out down a long bone-white road, straight as a string and smooth as glass and glittering and wavering in the heat and humming under the tires like a plucked nerve.... I was driving west. So I pulled the sun screen down and squinted and put the throttle to the floor." On the way, in New Mexico, "a land of total and magnificent emptiness with a little white filling station flung down on the sand like a sun-bleached cow skull by the trail" (Ch. 7).

Burden has other memories associated with driving. In 1922, on his first trip to Mason City in a Model T, he was "hanging on to the steering post to stay in the saddle while I sideslipped in the gray dust... or when I hit a section of gravel, holding my jaws clamped right to keep the vibration from the washboard from chipping the enamel off my teeth. You'll have to say this for the Boss: when he got through you could drive out for a breath of air and still keep your bridgework in place" (Ch. 2). Or, in the summer of 1919 when he borrows his mother's roadster to court Anne Stanton - "she knew you didn't sit in parked cars with boys to play checkers," but the regular whistle of the 11:45 train is the signal that he needs to take her home. He drives off angrily, scattering the shells in her driveway; a roadster is "as much hell-for-leather as was possible on the roads and with the mechanism of those days" (Ch. 7).

The image of the black smoke carries over to trains. As a young kid, at the train station, he looked up the rails but couldn't see the "little patch of black smoke yet" so he kneels down in his Sunday clothes to listen to the rails (Ch. 2). At the very end of the novel Burden's mother leaves for Reno to divorce her latest husband. At the station he "arranged all her nice, slick matched bags and valises and cases and hatboxes in a nice row on the cement of the platform." After she is aboard, "I saw the conductor who was beyond her look at his watch and flick it into his pocket with that contemptuous motion a conductor on a crack train has when he is getting ready to wind up the ninety-second stop at a hick town." He watches, first, the "dwindling train" and then the "last smudge of smoke fade to the west" (Ch. 10).

Warren's narration abounds with clever similes and metaphors. The springs on the Caddy are "soft as mamma's breast" (Ch. 1); it has an "expensive whisper" (Ch. 6). The car he drives to California has a sixty horsepower "mystery" which wines "like a wolfhound straining on leash." In confronting a judge with a scandalous past, "I lurched and ground on like a run-away streetcar charging downhill and the brakes busted" (Ch. 8). The tortured ride of Anne Stanton on the way to her brother's funeral in a rented limousine was "lifting the miles slowly off the concrete slab, slowly and fastidiously as though you were peeling an endless strip of skin off the live flesh" (Ch. 10).

Edition used: New York: Modern Library, 1953.

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## 150

**Author:** Carson McCullers (1917-1967)

**Title:** Short stories In Seven

**Date:** © 1936-1951

**Systems:** Automobile, international airplane, commuter bus

**Context:** 1930s, Rural Georgia and 1940s, New York City

"The Ballad of the Sad Café" (1951) is set in Georgia in the late 1930s. As part of her description of the "dreary" town with its "miserable main street only a hundred yards long," McCullers locates it by its distance from public transportation: "The nearest train stop is Society City, and the Greyhound and White Bus Lines use the Forks Falls Road which is three miles away." Even though the main character, Miss Amelia, had a crank-started Ford, she used it rarely, especially when the café was founded. Her husband, perhaps ironically, was put in jail for robbing three filling stations. Over the half dozen years when the café is operating, the main street is used more: "[I]t is not so rare to have a truck or an automobile pass along the road and through the town on the way from Cheehaw to somewhere else." The tax collector comes through; people from town "connive to get a car on credit," and cars hauling the chain gang which works on the Forks Falls Highway drives by. One day Amelia's husband shows up to change her life again. Aside from taking over and eventually destroying the café, her isolation is broken somewhat - "To begin with she had no patience with any traveling; those who had made the trip to Atlanta or traveled fifty miles from home to see the ocean - those restless people she despised." Now she goes with Cousin Lymon, a hunchback, "making exhausting trips to various spectacles being held in distant places, driving the automobile thirty miles to a Chautauqua, taking him to Forks Falls to watch a parade. All in all it was a distracting time for Miss Amelia." At the end, actually after the end, of the story McCullers gives an extended picture of the chain gang, its work and its songs - "Just twelve mortal men who are together."

"The Sojourner" is the story of a man, in New York city for his father's funeral, who is waiting for the Air France flight back to his home in Paris. He meets his ex-wife's children for the first time, and they exchange talk about whether the son wants to become a pilot. The idea of being in New York in the morning and midnight in Paris is part of the story's theme of the man's former and current families, as well as the title. We get one passage about the inspiring view from the plane: "The next day he looked down on the city from the air, burnished in sunlight, toylike, precise... The ocean was milky pale and placid beneath the clouds."

"A Domestic Dilemma" is the story of a man whose wife has become an alcoholic, apparently because he was relocated to New York city from Alabama. It starts with his leaving the office to catch the first express bus home. The ride home charts some of his emotions. He leaves "when the evening lilac glow was fading in the slushy streets" but the bright lights are on when he leaves the terminal. He hopes that no commuter will talk with him so he concentrates on his paper until they cross the George Washington Bridge. At the half-way point, before his wife's illness, he began to relax, but now he "kept his face close to the window and watched the barren fields and lonely lights of passing townships."

Edition used: *Seven* by Carson McCullers, New York: Bantam, 1954.

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## 151

**Author:** Nathaniel West (1903-1940)

**Title:** *Miss Lonelyhearts*

**Date:** 1933

**Systems:** Taxi

**Context:** Contemporary, New York City

The title character, a male personals-column writer, who uses the pseudonym "Miss Lonelyhearts," rides in taxicabs as his main way of traveling in New York city: "The bus takes too long, while the subway is always crowded." At one point Miss Lonelyhearts has an "insane sensitiveness to order" and finds chaos in the streets - "lamp-posts were badly placed" and he fears the "harsh clanging sound of street cars."

Miss Lonelyhearts and Betty borrow an old Ford touring car to get away to the country. "As soon as they reached the outskirts of the city, Betty began to act like an excited child, greeting the trees and grass with delight. After they had passed through New Haven, they came to Bramford and turned off the State highway on a dirt road that led to Monkstown. The road went through a wild-looking stretch of woods and they saw some red squirrels and a partridge." [The stove at the cabin "looked like a locomotive."] The drive back to the city goes through the Bronx slums, and so the depressing isolation of the city is confirmed.

Finally, one of the letters into the newspaper shows up economic class differences. The writer reads gas meters for \$22.50 a day, "while the bosses ride around in swell cars living off the fat of the land."

Edition used: New York: Avon Library, 1959.

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## 152

**Author:** E. L. Doctorow (b. 1931)

**Title:** *Billy Bathgate*

**Date:** 1989

**Systems:** Automobile, private airplane

**Context:** mid-1930s, New York city

Dutch Schultz and his gang in New York go around in big Packards, LaSalle coupés, and Buick Roadmasters. In several scenes, the mention of the car indicates the mob's presence. In contrast are everyone else's tin lizzies, Model A's and T's. Drew Preston, Schultz' mistress (and sometimes Billy's), owns a "beautiful dark green four-door convertible" of unspecified brand (Ch. 16).

Billy is a street kid from the Bronx who is a numbers runner and lookout. As part of his work he travels extensively around the city, giving Doctorow the chance to rehearse his routes: "I took the Third Avenue El to Manhattan, and the streetcar all the way crosstown to the West Twenty-third Street ferry slip, and then I stood on the deck of the beamiest bargiest boat in the world..." - this time to Jersey City where the gang contact waits in a yellow cab (Ch. 18). The Bronx scene at 149th Street is sound filled: "I ran faster than the cars were moving, and the horns of the buses and trucks, and the grinding gears, and the clop and rattle of horse-drawn wagons, the sound of all the traffic driving its way fiercely into the high hours of the business day, sounded like choir music in my breast" (Ch. 5). The middle chapters break to upstate, where Schultz is being tried on various charges. To this city lad, "The worst part was that country nights were the real ones, once you rolled across the Onondaga Bridge and your headlights picked up the white line of the country

road, you knew what a thin glimmering trail we made in that unmappable blackness" (Ch. 15). In this remote place, Schultz has food delivered daily from the city by truck and airplane (private, presumably); at the end of the country section, Drew and her husband escape in a single-engine plane, and the gang takes the green car in compensation (Ch. 16).

Edition used: New York: Random House.

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## 153

**Author:** Delmore Schwartz (1913-1966)

**Title:** "In the Naked Bed, in Plato's Cave"

**Date:** 1938

**Systems:** Car, truck, milk wagon

**Context:** Contemporary

In this brief poem, a modern version of Plato's cave is illuminated by reflected headlights, and all night long one hears "A fleet of trucks strained uphill, grinding, / Their freights covered as usual." Other sounds include the milk horse's "chop" and "the bottle's chink," as well as other "Shaking wagons, hooves' waterfalls," and in the morning, "A car coughed, starting." The images remind us that horse-drawn commercial vehicles continued to be used well after the introduction of their motorized counterparts.

Edition used: Lynn Altenbernd and Leslie L. Lewis. *Introduction to Literature: Poems*, 3rd ed. New York: Macmillan, 1975.

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## 154

**Author:** Erle Stanely Gardner (1889-1970)

**Title:** *The Case of the Curious Bride*

**Date:** 1934

**Systems:** Automobiles

**Context:** Contemporary, unnamed city in California

Cars are everywhere in this typical detective novel. They give a modern touch to a genre that started with Poe and continued famously with Doyle into the twentieth century, and they give some mobility to the detective, the baddies, and all manner of suspects which is lacking in the originating books. This one starts with police clues - keys to a Chevrolet and a Plymouth which can be checked against registrations, and "Because of the fact that the woman evidently had access to two cars, police are inclined to think she is a married woman whose husband maintains two cars for the use of his family" (Ch. 6). The clues include lots of eventually crucial facts and implications about a garage door - when it was opened and closed, where the car went, and so on. At least in the early chapters, and typically for the detective genre, the inferences are quickly confirmed by the cops, the newspapers, and the reader. Later on, especially in the final chapters, clues lead in directions which only Perry Mason can figure out.



Like the "money trail," what we might call a "travel trail" with registrations, receipts, hotel registries, and the like tells both the detective and the reader much about who people are, where they have been, and their motives.

Mason gets involved in several tracking expeditions, the most elaborate of which is following the lead suspect to the airport in a cab. Now-typical stuff - "There's a good tip if you get me there in a rush, buddy." After a near collision and spinout, the cabbie, rather than Mason, notices they are being followed; the cabbie says, "[T]hat's nothing. I have to see what's going on in this racker, or the wife and kids would starve to death. You've got to have eyes in the back of your head." This novel has about four different groups of detectives, including our hero, so when a person such as this woman tries to escape, "they're covering all exits out of town - airports, railway stations, bus depots and all of that" (Ch. 7). [Why people in this story don't drive out of town is curious.]

Criminals, suspicious family members, and detectives all take unusual trouble to park their cars away from where they are going. Implied in these moves is a society of rather curious neighbors: "There's just a chance some of her friends might be watching out of a window. If they saw the three of us get out of the same car, it might not be so hot." One wonders if watchful neighbors in these years were more attuned to strangers' cars than is now the case.

Aside from a passing reference to the "trimotor plane glistening in the sunlight," the "airship" plays a role in that the prime suspect's former husband was apparently killed in a crash, at least he was on a list of people who had booked passage but never got on board. One potential witness to some of the events is advised by Mason to take a "long ocean voyage."

Edition used: New York: Pocket Books, 1973 [33rd printing].

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## 155

**Author:** Ralph Ellison (b. 1914)

**Title:** *Invisible Man*

**Date:** 1952 Written: © 1947, 1948, 1952

**Systems:** Automobile, train, subway

**Context:** 20 years ago; South and New York city; African-American perspective

A couple of scenes illustrate and symbolize how African Americans were treated in their ability to get around. As a junior at a southern college, the unnamed ("invisible") narrator drives Mr. Norton, a white college benefactor, around campus and to the quarters where slaves had lived in the outskirts. He is very much aware of his youth, his race, and the enormous ability to get into social blunders. Norton's car "smells of mints and cigar smoke." He watches Norton closely through the rear-view mirror; more important, he keeps his eyes on the white line in the highway. Driving this car, which "leaped leisurely beneath the pressure of my foot," and which is a sign of his standing in the modern world, is contrasted to photographs at the college of black men and women in mule-driven wagons. As Norton asks him about the poverty they pass through, "It was hard not to turn my eyes from the highway and face him." When Norton asks the narrator to tell his fate, symbolically an insect "crushed itself into the windshield, leaving a yellow, mucous smear" (Ch. 2).

Later, a minister, Reverend Barbee, delivers a sermon at the college. He compares blacks' opportunities to a train starting up a steep grade in the winter. "The whistle of the train was long-drawn and lonely, a sign issuing from the depths of the mountain." The Leader of the college is sick "in the Pullman assigned him," but Barbee remembers how he looked "out of the frosted pane and saw the looming great Northern Star [an echo of the Underground Railroad's means of navigation] and lost it, as though the sky had shut its eye." The accommodating nature of this extended metaphor,

echoing Booker T. Washington's speech from Chapter 1, is brought home when Barbee is compared with a railroad porter, in contrast with the (white) conductor. With unconscious irony, this becomes a funeral train (Ch. 5).

In New York, evidence of discrimination is generally unstated and subtle. The narrator has consistent trouble hailing taxi cabs. Whites shun him on subway platforms; as a recent migrant from the South in a crowded car, where people are pushed "like chickens frozen at the sound of danger," he is pushed against a white woman and is amazed at the absence of reaction, just as he is amazed at seeing a black policeman (Ch. 11). A seminal event is the shooting of Tod Clifton, a "Brother" in a black liberation organization, by a cop at 42nd Street. The narrator witnesses it obscured through the "flashing cars," and hears the shot over "the dull roar of traffic and the subway vibrating underground." He escapes into the subway, which "was cool and I leaned against a pillar, hearing the roar of trains passing across on the other side, feeling the rushing roar of air." He likens Clifton's death to his being thrown in front of a subway. The platform includes three black boys whose proud, dance-like movement suggests that the politics he is involved in may not be relevant to younger people; the subway car itself has two nuns, one black and one white, who are absorbed in their prayers, and do not look at each other (Ch. 20).

The layers of New York are illustrated in a nice image: "Along the walk the buildings rose, uniform and close together... Out of the grounds and up the street I found the bridge by which I'd come, but the stairs leading back to the car that crossed the top were too dizzily steep to climb, swim or fly, and I found a subway instead... I dropped through the roar, giddy and vacuum-minded, sucked under and out into late afternoon Harlem" (Ch. 11).

Edition used: New York: Signet, 1960.

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## 156

**Author:** Thomas Wolfe (1900-1938)

**Title:** "Only the Dead Know Brooklyn"

**Date:** 1935

**Systems:** Subway

**Context:** Contemporary, New York City

The premise, articulated in the opening sentence, is that "Dere's no guy livin' dat knows Brooklyn t'roo an' t'roo, because it'd take a guy a lifetime just to find his way aroun' duh f - - town." The story begins with two men debating alternate subway routes: "'Sure,' I says, 'It's out in Bensonhoist. Yuh take duh Fourt' Avenoo express, get off at Fifty-nint' Street, change to a Sea Beach local deh, get off at Eighteen' Avenoo an' Sixty-toid, an' den walk down foeh blocks.'" A stranger pipes up, "'Duh guy is crazy!... Yuh change to duh West End line at Toity-sixt'" et cetera. After they board the train the stranger admits that he doesn't know anyone in Bensonhurst, he just wants to get a look at since he likes the name. He is proud because he has a map of Brooklyn, something the narrator never saw before, and which gives a new view of "the whole f - - place." The companion had, remarkably, been to Red Hook, New Jersey, last night - big fields with no houses, but with a comforting view of ships, elevators, and cranes in the harbor. The narrator then relates how his older brother threw him off a dock one day, so he would swim or drown. "'Duh only t'ing yuh need is confidence.'" This way of learning, he believes, is better than using a map, an approach he finally tells the reader is crazy. The outsider's sense that Brooklyn is somehow a limited universe is in contrast with both the multiplicity of specific parts of that borough, as well as the options available through the public transit system.

Edition used: George McMichael, ed. *Anthology of American Literature*, 2nd ed. New York: Macmillan, 1980.

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**Author:** Richard Wright (1908-1960)

**Title:** *Native Son*

**Date:** 1940

**Systems:** Airplane, car, street car

**Context:** Late 1930s, Chicago; African-American perspective

Wright's novel has become a touchstone for contemporary African American writers; it is widely cited, taught in courses on American literature, and has contributed to twentieth-century perceptions of urban black life. The relationship between the protagonist Bigger Thomas and his wealthy white employers, the Daltons, carries the symbolic weight of race relations in the U.S. That being the case, Wright makes a purposeful choice in selecting Bigger's form of employment. Bigger works for one disastrous day as the Dalton family chauffeur.

The Thomas family lives in the Chicago's Black Belt. Bigger, his mother, sister and brother all rent one rat-infested room at exorbitant rates; late in the novel, the reader learns the property is indirectly owned by the Daltons. Bigger, at age twenty, goes from job to job, and we learn at the beginning of the novel that he must take the Dalton job or the family will be thrown off "the Relief."

Anticipating his interview with the Daltons, Bigger walks the streets of his neighborhood, where every car represents the luxury of being white and the limitations of being black. "Long sleek black cars" become particularly symbolic in this regard:

A long sleek black car, its fenders glinting like glass in the sun, shot past them at high speed and turned a corner a few blocks away. Bigger pursed his lips and sang: "Zooooom!"

"They got everything," Gus said.

"They own the world," Bigger said.

"Aw, what the hell," Gus said. "Let's go to the poolroom." (25).

From the street, Bigger and Gus watch an airplane skywriting, ironically it spells out an ad for SPEED GASOLINE, fuel for vehicles they agree they'll never own. To boys caught in the poverty and boredom of the Black Belt, the plane, the plumes of vapor, the sky, the pilot in control, all represent a freedom and power well beyond their reach.

"Them white boys sure can fly," Gus said.

"Yeah," Bigger said, wistfully. "They get a chance to do everything."

Much later in the book, Bigger is in prison, accused of the rape and murder of Mary Dalton; he eventually receives the death penalty. In this setting, Bigger reveals that flying had been one of his first and only dreams: "I wanted to be an aviator once. But they wouldn't let me go to the school where I was suppose' to learn it. They built a big school and then drew a line around it... That kept all the colored boys out" (327).

Richard Wright uses the transportation color line as an example of the broader exclusion of blacks from U.S. economic and cultural institutions, especially the justice system. Whether depicting street cars, automobiles, or planes, the novel suggests that the relationship of black men and women to transportation is limited; they may ride, drive, or watch, but even this access is tightly regulated by the white capitalists who own those vehicles, as well as by Jim Crow statutes.

Bigger's brief tour of duty as a chauffeur illustrates this expertly. At first Bigger is excited at the prospect of driving a wealthy man's car: "He hoped it would be a Packard, or a Lincoln, or a Rolls Royce. Boy! Would he drive!" (61). Though Dalton's dark blue Buick is "not so expensive as he had hoped," Bigger finds driving an unprecedented rush: "He had a keen sense of power when driving; the feel of a car added something to him" (63). But what the car adds is immediately taken away. His first trip chauffeuring Mary Dalton turns into an anxious torment, and the evening spins out of control. Although trying his best to please his employers, he finds Mary's wishes in conflict with her father's. The white people act strangely; they shame him and have bizarre notions of what "his people" feel and think. Bigger ends up having to carry the drunken daughter up to her room. Attempting to keep her unconscious groans from calling attention to his presence in a white girl's room, he inadvertently smothers her with a pillow. His frantic attempts to dispose of the body and the eventual detection and distortion of his crime comprise the rest of the book.

Edition used: Perennial Classic, New York: Harper & Row, 1966.

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## 158

**Author:** William Kennedy (b. 1928)

**Title:** *Ironweed*

**Date:** 1983

**Systems:** Car

**Context:** 1938, New York state

Set in 1938, *Ironweed* tells the story of Francis Phelan, ex-baseball player and family man, now in his late fifties and long homeless and alcoholic. The novel, which won the Pulitzer Prize, is part of Kennedy's Albany cycle, which also includes *Legs* and *Billy Phelan's Greatest Game*. Francis has wandered around the country with his companion Helen for many years, repeatedly drawn back to Albany and his former life, but always compelled to move on again. In an important scene near the end of chapter three, Francis, on a bitterly cold winter night back in Albany, coaxes Helen into a 1930 black Oldsmobile, "dead and wheelless in an alley off John Street." The car is claimed by another "bum," Finney, who exacts sexual favors in return for letting Helen escape the cold. Francis leaves her in the car with Finney, abandoning her as he searches for a way to reconnect to his old life. That attempt fails when the local Legionnaires attack the hobo camp and Francis kills one of the raiders. In the last scene of the novel Francis imagines himself on a train, "the Delaware & Hudson freight," heading south out of town.

Edition used: New York: Penguin, 1984.

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## 159

**Author:** William Saroyan (1908-1981).

**Title:** "Harry" In *The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze and Other Stories*

**Date:** 1934, 1941

**Systems:** Automobile

**Context:** Late 1930s

"Harry" is about a man who makes lots of money in various schemes and scams. A couple have moral consequences on the small town where he lives; in one, he buys used cars, "Fords, Maxwells, Saxons, Chevrolets and other small cars." He gets them for \$15 to \$20, makes slight repairs and puts on bright paint, and sells them to high school boys for three or four times what he paid. The town is filled with boys "taking their girls to the country at night and on Sunday afternoons, and anybody knows what that means." This situation is acceptable for boys except that many of them had to get married before they got jobs; two or three girls had babies but didn't know who the other parent was. "In a haphazard way, though, a lot of girls got husbands for themselves."

The mystique of the car as a moving bedroom for teenagers is nicely illustrated by this story.

Edition used: New York: Bantam Classic, 1961.

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## 160

**Author:** Richard Brautigan (1937-1986)

**Title:** "Greyhound Tragedy"

**Date:** 1971

**Systems:** Bus

**Context:** 1930s, Oregon and California

This short story is about a young woman, three years out of high school, living in a small Oregon town in the 1930s. "Movies were the religion of her life" and for years she has dreamed of going to Hollywood. After many years of wishing, and because she is being pressured by her parents to marry a Ford salesman who has proposed, she decides to at least find out how much a bus ticket to Hollywood costs. But for several more months she can't bring herself to go down to the bus station. Finally she forces herself to drive to the terminal, but she is too nervous to ask about the fare, and after a short inner struggle returns home in tears. She subsequently marries the Ford salesman and has two children, Jean and Rudolph. The story ends with the remark that after thirty-one years "she still blushes when she passes the bus station." The bus in the story, rather than providing an escape for the young woman from small town life, offers only a mirage of freedom. The possibility that the bus holds out to her is actually worse than no opportunity at all. She blushes after so many years because she cannot forget or get over what she considers her own lack of nerve, her failure. The bus station is a constant reminder of the dreams she once had and her inability to realize those dreams or to even give them a try. In the young woman's case, the access to different places that the bus potentially offers only serves to call attention to her dissatisfaction and to her lack of courage.

Edition used: *Revenge of the Lawn: Stories 1962-1970*. New York: Pocket Books, 1972.

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## 161

**Author:** John Steinbeck (1902-1968)

**Title:** "The Chrysanthemums"

**Date:** 1938

**Systems:** Wagon, automobile

**Context:** Contemporary, California

Elisa Allen, a thirty-five year old woman, lives with her husband on a ranch near Salinas, California. Elisa is a competent woman, a good worker, but because of her gender her work is limited to the cultivation of chrysanthemums. These flowers are amazingly large and strong, a great source of pride for her. When a traveling handyman shows up at the ranch, driving a wagon and looking for something to fix, Elisa initially tells him she has nothing for him to do; but noticing the flowers, the man tells her he has a customer "down the road" who's been asking for some chrysanthemum plants. Elisa flies into action, replanting some cuttings in a pot and giving the man instructions on what to do with the flowers. Then she finds a little work for him to do. Elisa's husband returns and finds her "stronger" looking, her confidence almost palpable. They drive into town for dinner, Elisa exuding strength and satisfaction. But on the way, along the road, she spots the chrysanthemum cuttings, where they have been discarded by the handyman. She breaks down and, surreptitiously, so her husband can't see, cries "like an old woman."

The story is very much about what a woman, Elisa, is capable of doing versus what she has an opportunity to do. At one point she says to the handyman that traveling as he does must be "nice," and adds, "I wish women could do such things." But the man quickly says it's not a life for women, a comment Elisa resents. The road in the story fulfills an important role in emphasizing Elisa's lack of opportunity. She's stuck on the ranch, limited to the flower beds that surround the house; the road is reserved for men. And though she thinks she has transcended the limitations placed on her, in the end the car trip to town with her husband and the sight of the flowers along the road remind her of her place. Rather than an avenue of freedom, the road in Steinbeck's story signifies access denied, the social constraints placed on women.

Edition used: *The Long Valley*. New York: Viking, 1938.

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## 162

**Author:** John Steinbeck (1902-1968)

**Title:** *The Grapes of Wrath*

**Date:** 1939

**Systems:** Automobile

**Context:** Contemporary, Oklahoma, the Southwest, California

Steinbeck's famous novel of the Depression era tells the story of the Joad family, "Okie" sharecroppers forced from their Oklahoma land who head for California, hoping to find work. After selling all their possessions they, counseled by sixteen-year-old Al, the family car expert, buy an old Hudson Super-six sedan, which they turn into a "truck" by tearing off the back half of the roof and putting in a wooden bed and sides. The \$75 spent on the Hudson leaves them about \$150 for the trip to California. The oldest of the Joad children, Tom, who has been in prison for four years, shows up just days before the family plans to set off for the west. With Tom, his friend and ex-preacher Jim Casy, Ma and Pa Joad, the rest of the children, and Pa's parents and his brother, John, thirteen people are loaded in the truck when they pull out of Sallisaw, Oklahoma. The novel chronicles their laborious journey west, and the disappointment that awaits them in California; barely surviving as exploited migrant farm workers, the family slowly disintegrates as conditions become more and more intolerable. As Pa becomes discouraged, Ma takes over as head of the family and struggles unceasingly to keep them all going and together, despite their difficult existence.

The role of the Hudson, and of other cars, is of central symbolic and dramatic importance in the novel, crucial to many of the work's thematic concerns. The Hudson is the vehicle that takes the Joads west to a supposedly better life, to a place where there will be an chance for the family to regroup and reclaim a stable place in society. And though that opportunity proves illusory, the car continues to be an important buffer between them and absolute poverty and hopelessness. As long as they can keep looking, keep moving on in search of that elusive opportunity, there is still some hope.

Cars are also important as markers of class difference in the novel. In Oklahoma "owner men" show up at the farms in "closed cars," cars they remain in, only rolling down their windows to speak to the farmers, to tell them they must leave the land. New cars are reserved for the powerful - owners and cops mostly - and their appearance is usually ominous. On the other hand, most of the displaced farmers (the Joads included) have never owned cars, only mule teams, and must buy cheap "jalopies" to make the trip west. Chapter 7 is an account of a used car business on a lot somewhere in the Dust Bowl that sells ancient and decrepit cars to those who have lost their farms. Told from the point of view of the owner of the lot, the chapter details how the farmers are cheated and taken advantage of, and how the owner is making a fortune off their misfortunes. Cars, like the farms, provide an occasion for the rich - the banks and owners - to exploit the poor. Further, the junkers they drive identify the migrants as destitute, and mark them on the road west and in California, leaving them open to continual distrust and mistreatment.

In contrast to the idea that the car provides transportation toward opportunity is the suggestion in the novel that the car has cut off the Joads and people like them from the land. On the eve of their departure the Joads gather for a meeting: "The family met at the most important place, near the truck. The house was dead, and the fields were dead; but this truck was the active thing, the living principle. The ancient Hudson ... was the new hearth, the living center of the family." But this trade has not been an advantageous one, the swapping of the land for a machine: "That man who had been bound with acres [now] lived with narrow concrete miles. And his thought and worry were not anymore with rainfall, with wind and dust, with the thrust of the crops. Eyes watched the tires, ears listened to the clattering motors, and minds struggled with oil, with gasoline, with the thinning rubber between air and road." The lives of these people have been narrowed; they "were not farm men anymore, but migrant men" and that transformation has diminished their lives, forced them to exist mile by mile, "crawling" westward with the hope of something better, reliant on undependable machines, cars that many of them don't understand at all. And the migration west along Highway 66, is more a desperate than a heroic journey, though the courage necessary to keep moving in spite of that desperation is amazing. Chapter 12 describes 66, "the main migrant road," and tellingly it's a slow moving and difficult flight west: "Cars pulled up beside the road, engine heads off, tires mended. Cars limping along 66 like wounded things, panting and struggling. Too hot, loose connections, loose bearings, rattling bodies." Connections are unraveling and things are falling apart, not coming together, as these desperate people drive westward.

But again, though their lives are coming apart, these people know that the car is their last hope, that if the car goes they will be stranded, lost. They have traded in their farms for the cars, and though it's a trade they didn't want to make, there is no going back - the tractors have plowed over the Joads' old home and the land has been taken. Throughout the book the Joads and others struggle to keep their cars, in poor condition to begin with, on the road. Only in the direst straits is the car sacrificed: Tom meets some people who had to sell their car to keep from starving - and then typically they were swindled, the used car buyer taking advantage of their destitution and need. When the car is gone a family has hit bottom. But in the last chapter of the book, when the Joads are out of money, out of work, and have (at least temporarily) lost their truck to a flood, the family, led by Ma, does not give up. Miraculously they struggle on. The loss of the truck does mark a low point, but it also proves that even this long-dreaded catastrophe, coupled with the specter of starvation, is not enough to defeat them. It turns out that the car is not the final buffer, its loss the final blow; instead the Joads keep fighting and working, determined to stay together, to support one another, and to survive.

Edition used: New York: Penguin, 1976.



**Author:** Woody Guthrie (1912-1967)

**Title:** *Bound for Glory*

**Date:** 1943

**Systems:** Train, automobile

**Context:** 1910s-early 1940s, Oklahoma, the West, California

While Guthrie's book is usually described as an autobiography, it is more a chronicle of the people he meets in his travels all over the U.S. in the late 1930s, particularly hobos and migrant workers. The book does recount his childhood in Okemah, Oklahoma, but for most of the narrative Guthrie is on the road. One section of the book is devoted to his trip from the oil boom town of Pampa, Texas to Sonora, California, where he has relatives and the prospect of work. He first hitchhikes through Texas and into New Mexico, and then catches a freight train that takes him the rest of the way to California. Guthrie describes the lives of the men he meets on the train, especially how they must be careful to evade the cops who hound them from one place to another: "Morning. Men are scattered and gone. A hundred men and more, rolled in on that train last night, and it was cold. Now it's come morning, and men seem to be gone. They've learned how to keep out of the way. They've learned how to meet and talk about their hard traveling, and smoke each other's snipes in the moonlight, or boil a pot of coffee among the weeds like rabbits - hundreds of them, and when the sun comes out bright, they seem to be gone." Guthrie's book is a companion piece to *The Grapes of Wrath*, telling the same sort of story about the same sort of people. The strongest link between the two works is their shared emphasis on the sense of community among impoverished people during the Depression. Though there are certainly exceptions, Guthrie writes again and again of people helping each other out, sharing what little food they have. And, as in Steinbeck's novel, it is the poor who can be counted on for help; as Guthrie finds out in Tucson, asking for food in exchange for work in the wealthy part of town only brings the law down on him, but going down by the railroad tracks, and asking the same question at the wooden shacks clustered there will certainly get him a meal.

In another incident reminiscent of the Joads' experience, Guthrie and a bunch of other men just off a train are nabbed by the local police in Tracy, California. The cops' car is big and new and black and its headlights in the night are an ominous sign of trouble. After warning the men not to come back, the cops use the car to literally herd them out of town. "All of the cops were laughing and joking as their car drove along behind me. I heard a lot of lousy jokes. I walked with my head ducked into the rain, and heard cars of other people pass. They yelled smart cracks at me in the rain." The car reveals the gap between the men who are out of work and out on the road, and the people who live in towns and who can afford to own cars; it also seems to act in some cases as a buffer between the two groups, a sort of protective shell that separates the townspeople - and the cops - from the poor, and allows them to deride and despise those who must walk.

Though *Bound for Glory* contains other road stories, including a chapter on Guthrie's travels with a family of migrant farm workers, a train ride that begins and ends the book is the most telling account of life on the road during the Depression. The book opens in the packed boxcar of a freight train heading east through Minnesota, occupied by 69 men: "I set down with my back against the wall looking all through the troubled, tangled, messed-up men. Traveling the hard way. Dressed the hard way. Hitting the long old lonesome go. . . . A crazy boxcar on a wild track. Headed sixty miles an hour in a big cloud of poison dust due straight to nowhere." Talking and arguing and fighting, the men tell of the jobs they've lost, and of the work they hope to get. The last chapter returns to the train; Guthrie has struggled out to the top of the boxcar, where he is joined by two young boys and a black man. They have fled the roiling violence that has overtaken the men in the boxcar, but Guthrie sympathizes with the men's anger and frustration: "'These is good guys,'" he tells his companions. "'Just outta work. You know how a feller is.'" Soon after, the train stops in Freeport, Illinois and the cops show up and force the men off the train. While the head cop is lecturing them a man runs by, heading for a train going west, and yelling out that there's work in Seattle. The men from the boxcar, who had been going east, begin to slowly peel off and join the man running for the westbound train, drawn by the prospect of work. Guthrie joins them. On the new train, the men are singing: "This train don't carry no smoker, / Lyin' tongues or two-bit jokers; / This train is bound for glory / This train!" In the final passage of the book, Guthrie describes the ride: "Wet wind curled in the drift of the train and cinders stung against my eyelids, and I held them closed and sung out at the top

of my voice. Then I opened my eyes just a little slit, and a great big cloud of black engine smoke pushed down over the whole string of cars, like a blanket for the men through the storm." Though these men have been reduced to an illegal form of transportation, the freight train offers them protection and hope, a sort of salvation. The only way to weather the storm is to find work - or at least keep looking - and the train provides the means of searching. In the end they are all friendly once again, reinvigorated by the thought of work and the new train that is taking them towards that work, a train that is not going "nowhere," like the last one they rode, but one going someplace better.

Edition used: New York: Signet, 1970.

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## 164

**Author:** Marilynne Robinson (b. 1944)

**Title:** *Housekeeping*

**Date:** 1980

**Systems:** Train, automobile

**Context:** 1930s, Idaho

Set in the small town of Fingerbone, in the Rocky Mountains of Idaho (seemingly in the 1930s, but the time is unclear), Robinson's first novel tells the story of two sisters, Ruth (the narrator) and Lucille, and their aunt, Sylvie. After the sisters' mother's suicide and later the death of their grandmother, Sylvie becomes the girls' guardian; but she proves an unorthodox housekeeper and parent, and her habits alienate Lucille and the community until finally she and Ruth (a teen-ager) must flee the town.

In the opening chapter of the book we learn some of the Ruth's family background, particularly how her grandfather, after growing up on the plains, determined to move to the mountains. He travels west by train, settles in Fingerbone and secures a job with the railroad, marries and has two children, Helen (Ruth and Lucille's mother) and Sylvie. But coming home from a business trip the grandfather falls victim to a train accident, when the "Fireball," while crossing the bridge that straddles the lake next to which Fingerbone is built, plunges into the lake, disappearing with barely a trace. Many years later - but shortly thereafter in the narrative - Helen returns to the town with her two children, Ruth and Lucille, whom she drops off at her mother's house before proceeding "north almost to Tyler, where she sailed in [the] Ford from the top of a cliff named Whiskey Rock into the blackest depth of the lake." While in these two key events trains and cars are clearly linked with death and loss, trains are also indicative of transience and wandering. Sylvie, before she returns to Fingerbone, lives in no one place, but wanders across the west, usually traveling by freight train. As her housekeeping slowly deteriorates, driving Lucille away yet attracting Ruth, Sylvie begins to wander once again, though only short distances. Finally, she takes Ruth with her on a trip onto the lake, by boat; but when they return home by freight train, they are seen by some of the townspeople, who feel this incident is the last straw. Subsequently the sheriff comes to take Ruth away (Lucille has already moved in with a teacher); at this point the two decide to leave town, to become transients. They escape across the bridge at night, a dangerous route considering the long length of the bridge and the early morning incoming train. But though they are presumed dead, they do make it and take up a life of wandering, usually traveling by freight train. In this instance the train represents the only sort of transportation available to them, since they have refused to conform to their community's rules of conduct, particularly as they apply to women.

Edition used: New York: Bantam, 1989.

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## 165

**Author:** James Agee (1909-1955)

**Title:** *A Death in the Family*

**Date:** 1957

**Systems:** Automobile

**Context:** 1930s, Tennessee

The death in Agee's title is that of Jay Follet, who has left in the middle of the night to drive to his parents' farm, where his father is supposedly dying. But his father's condition turns out to be less serious than he was led to believe, and so Jay sets out on the drive home the next evening. But he doesn't make it, dying in an accident near the end of the drive. The novel focuses on this accident, taking place over a three day period, but utilizing flashbacks to tell the story of Jay and his family.

The accident is caused by a cotter pin's falling out and the subsequent failure of the steering mechanism. The wheel was jerked out of Jay's hands, throwing him forward against the steering wheel; the only blow was to his chin, but it killed him instantly, an injury which the doctor described as "a chance in a million." After he was knocked unconscious, he was thrown from the car (a "Tin Lizzie"), which then ran up an embankment and turned over. Other than a cut on his chin, Jay is unmarked, and the car is only slightly damaged.

In Agee's novel the idea of the car as something that provides mastery and control is turned on its head, and the car takes on an uncontrollable force of its own. A cotter pin inexplicably and unpredictably falls out and suddenly, while traveling at a high speed, control is lost. The machine is not entirely dependable, but on the contrary can fail the driver at any moment, with catastrophic consequences. As Jay's father-in-law says, "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; they kill us for their sport." The accident is a seemingly arbitrary event, beyond human control, both in the sense of the mechanical failure and the chance in a million injury that kills Jay. As in *The Great Gatsby* the car can in a moment precipitate a death that has monumental effects on the drivers and on those around them (in this case particularly affected are Mary, Jay's wife, and Rufus, their six-year-old son). The automobile, though it provides an extension of human capabilities, is not infallible. Like humans, cars are not perfectly controllable or dependable. Significantly, one of the family members, as the accident is being described to him, "thought of Thomas Hardy. There's a man, he thought, who knows what it's about." In other words, accidents are always hovering around all human endeavor, and the car, rather than protection from that sort of fate, actually offers more opportunities for tragedy.

Edition used: New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1957.

## 166

**Author:** Nathaniel West (1903-1940)

**Title:** *The Day of the Locust*

**Date:** 1939

**Systems:** Auto, truck

**Context:** Contemporary, Hollywood

The novel takes place in Hollywood during the 1930s, and we get passing glimpses of movie sets which depict, variously, Mississippi steamboats, trucks delivering sand for a desert scene and snow for another. In a ride back from one of the sets, the main character, Tod, has to ride on the running board of the studio car because the seats are filled with injured extras from the film "Waterloo," one of whom has a broken leg (Ch. 19).

While it is by no means central to the plot, West uses driving style (along with clothing, make-up, alcohol consumption patterns) as an element of characterization. The angry Faye, "She pulled into the curb and slammed on the brakes.... She slammed off the emergency brake and started the car again" (Ch. 11). This touch is plausible with privately-driven (and owned) vehicles; it's hard to create a world of trains or ocean liners where operating style is a significant variable (although some war stories use the device with fighter pilots).

Cars play a now-familiar role in the sexual lives of the characters. Faye starts out with a battered Ford touring car. When Homer takes her on as a mistress and protégé, he buys her an ermine coat and a "light blue Buick runabout" (Ch. 20). The story includes a call-girl (prostitute) operation where the manager, Mrs. Jennings delivers the women with a chauffeur (Ch. 5). Late in the novel Tod has a drunken fantasy of raping Faye. He would drive into a vacant lot and wait for her. "She would drive up, turn the motor off, look up at the stars, so that her breasts reared, then toss her head and sigh. She would throw the ignition keys into her purse and snap it shut, then get out of the car.... She would look like a deer on the edge of the road when a truck comes unexpectedly around the bend" (Ch. 26). Nature, cars, and sex are all merged in these images. The final image echoes the scene where headlights from Faye's coupé are used to illuminate an illegal cock fight in a barn (Ch. 21).

As one example of how people from the Midwest ultimately become bored in the fantasy life of Hollywood, "... after you've seen one [ocean] wave, you've seen them all. The same is true of the airplanes at Glendale. If only a plane would crash once in a while so that they could watch the passengers being consumed in a 'holocaust of flame,' as the newspapers put it. But the planes never crash" (Ch. 27).

Edition used: New York: Bantam, 1957.

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## 167

**Author:** F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940)

**Title:** *The Last Tycoon*

**Date:** 1941

**Systems:** Airplane, automobile

**Context:** Contemporary; cross-country flight, Hollywood

Celia Brady, the intermittent, first-person narrator takes a commercial flight back home to Hollywood from college at Bennington. Her father, a movie executive, had flown often with the kids, so she knows this world. The plane is "vaguely like a swanky restaurant at that twilight time between meals. It's a rough trip; the plane might be grounded in Nashville owing to the weather. Several people on board are involved in the movie industry, and they recognize Brady's name and talk like old friends. The plane does have to put down in Nashville, "the plane was unmistakably going down, down, down, like Alice in the rabbit hole. Cupping my hand against the window I saw the blur of the city far away on the left."

I suppose there has been nothing like the airport since the days of the stage-stops - nothing quite as lonely, as somber-silent. The old red-brick depots were built right into the towns they marked - -people didn't get off at those isolated stations unless they lived there. But airports lead you way back into history like oases, like the stops on the great trade routes. The sight of air travellers strolling in ones and twos in midnight

airports will draw a small crowd any night up to two. The young people look at the planes, the older ones look at the passengers with a watchful incredulity. In the big transcontinental planes we were the coastal rich, who casually alighted from our cloud in mid-America.

They get into a bind while waiting for the flight to resume, so some of the passengers take a bus to the hotel, while others a taxi to see Jackson's home, Hermitage, at dawn. Back at the airport, Brady tries to sleep on "one of those Iron Maidens they use for couches." The pilot is clearly in control of the plane - he refuses to let a drunk get on board, and he knows each of the passengers; he speculates with one of them on the topography of the railroad routes they are flying over. In California, they land at the Glendale airport. (Ch. 1)

Most of this unfinished novel takes place at the movie studio, or in the vicinity of Hollywood. Brady has a car which affords her social mobility. Fitzgerald gives several nice images of driving around - "the open car pulled the summer evening up close." "Ahead of him the stop-signal of a car winked violet" (Ch. 4). On a ride to Santa Monica, "The windshield wiper ticked domestically as a grandfather's clock" (Ch. 5).

Edition used: New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

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## 168

**Author:** E. L. Doctorow (b. 1931)

**Title:** *World's Fair*

**Date:** 1985

**Systems:** Airplane, car, zeppelin

**Context:** 1930s, Bronx New York

Using a format like *Ragtime* on the 1910s, Doctorow reconstructs the details of daily life from a previous era. Aside from incidental use of trolleys and taxis, and descriptions of service vehicles, like the Sanitation Department's water truck which washes down the streets in summer, there are a few set pieces. Among these are a 1936 trip from the Bronx to Coney Island by train via Penn Station ("High above was the vaulted roof of steel and translucent glass") (Ch. 7), a ride on the "W" streetcar and then the "A" trolley out to the suburbs ("It appealed to me that fast or slow, barreling along or creaking around corners, the trolley could go only as directed by the tracks; it was all planned") (Ch. 12), and a run to Manhattan on the Sixth Avenue subway which starts above ground at 174th Street (Ch. 14).

The narrator's older brother is an expert model airplane maker, although actual planes are not part of their lives. This leads to interest in airships or zeppelins, "the most amazing things in the sky. You saw them occasionally from a distance... They floated gently, like clouds. They moved so slowly they were visible for a long time, as airplanes were not." The Hindenberg passes over, quite close to the ground, prior to the disaster at Lakehurst. New Jersey (Ch. 17).

Automobiles are pretty much in the background; horse-drawn carts are still evident. An exception is when a Chevrolet coupe knocks a woman pedestrian into the school yard where Edgar, the narrator, attends primary school. The image of the dead woman's arm hanging over the edge of the stretcher, and the lingering blood stain on the playground produce nightmares for several days (Ch. 17).

The World's Fair scenes include an extended description of the General Motors Futurama exhibit: "That was everyone's first step." It uses models (a motif from the brother's hobby) to depict a streamlined city with fourteen-lane highways, services which mean that people rarely have to go out of doors, and airplanes flying directly downtown. The Railroads Building is a "scenic diorama of O-gage trains and locomotives rolling through hills and valleys" (Ch. 28).

## 169

**Author:** George R. Stewart (b. 1895)

**Title:** *Storm: A Novel*

**Date:** 1941 Written: 1937-41

**Systems:** Plane, train, automobile, ships

**Context:** Contemporary, California, Nevada, New York, Chicago, and others

This novel gives a comprehensive view of how transportation systems respond to a major storm. Stewart is consciously educational about cars, boats, trains, and planes, as he is about flood control, meteorology, and the physics of weather. The basic topic, and the main "character," is a storm which starts in the Pacific Ocean and moves across California (the main locale) and finally, twelve days later, to New York.

The amount of detail is overwhelming; one striking note that sounds through is the recognition that our responses to the impact of weather-related events - snow, rain, and wind - on transportation are basically unchanged since 1940. Also, Stewart points out the complex set of circumstances which lead to an "accident," ranging from just being at the wrong place in the road to incidental carelessness; by having other cars or trains pass safely by the accident site under roughly the same conditions, he suggests a genuinely random element in the event.

The storm is first noticed by the U. S. Weather Bureau from the routine weather observations of a ship south of Japan (First Day). As the storm crosses the Pacific other ships are affected - a freighter nearly sinks (Fourth Day), but is repaired (Fifth Day) - and others channel their weather data in periodically. When the storm hits New York a freighter breaks its moorings and a liner from South America is 4 hours late (Twelfth Day). Keeping schedules is an ongoing theme.

Planes come in two forms. "Great clipper airplanes" which go between Honolulu and San Francisco report on the forthcoming storm and are able to use tail winds to go 200 mph (Second Day). During the intensity of the storm they are grounded (Twelfth Day).

The second type of air service is scheduled transcontinental and Pacific coast airplanes. These have to work around all sorts of local variations in the weather, and use radio "beams [e.g., one from Oakland, followed by the next one at Reno], beacons, and constant radio communication" to negotiate their passage. "[M]ost men in the flying business ... are young." (Third Day). When weather is bad, flights are canceled, scheduled stops are bypassed - one flight has to go directly to Salt Lake City and miss Reno (Sixth Day). These planes cruise at 13,000 to 12,000 feet, fly 180 mph. The schedulers are shown to be taking a cautious position, so the only plane that comes near to being in trouble gets there partly by losing radio contact with the Bay airport on its flight from Salt Lake. The pilot flies by sheer instinct and manages to get through only a bit north and an hour late (Eleventh Day).

A focus of much attention is the Donner pass and the Humbolt river valley, which is the route of U. S. 40 and the transcontinental railroad, and which, we are reminded, was the site of an unfortunate event in wagon traffic in 1846. "The new wagon-road preceded the railroad; the telegraph came with it," and the valley is also where the Reno beam is channeled (Second Day). The General Manager of the railroad had heard his father's stories about coolie gangs building the original tracks, making the cuts, and so on; now the cuts are weathered back and grown up so washouts are less frequent (Third Day).

Keeping the railroad tracks clear of enormous heaps of snow is a complex system involving push plows on the front of



trains, rotary plows pulled and pushed by two engines, and a "flanger" which clears between the tracks (Eighth Day). The goal is to keep the tracks open for all rail traffic, but especially for the Transcontinental Streamliner from Chicago, which gets priority clearance. "Its departure, like the sailing of an ocean-liner, mingled festivity and solemnity." It takes 24 hours to get to Wyoming, 40 to travel the 2,200 miles to the coast (Ninth Day). The travelers are basically bored or asleep for most of the trip; they read the company's publicity flyer on how modern and nice the train is. At one point they worry about making the schedule, but the black porter (identified by dialect, but not by description) says "Dis train ah-ways on time, suh!" Not quite true - after getting through the pass the brakes slam on and they are a few yards short of a washout, spotted by a "trackwalker," which will take two to three hours to repair (Eleventh Day).

And they have to keep U. S. 40 clear. The main character is the Road Superintendent, a man who gets a child-like joy from noticing out-of-state license plates and the diversity of trucks and buses which use the highway (Second Day). Again, they use push and rotary plows and we get details on the difficulty of maintaining speed so the snow arcs nicely off the road, the extreme vibrations in the cab of the rotary, the fatigue of the men and equipment on 48-hours' work, the role of tall "road stakes" which delineate the side of the road. (Sixth and Seventh Days). On the eighth day, after noticing that no cars are coming from the east, the Superintendent investigates to find a long chain of cars backed up behind a truck which is sideways. The road is closed, with gates and the Highway Patrol, until the trucks and cars are cleared, and the need to enforce a requirement to use chains becomes clear. The next day the wind picks up and the snow drifts at 6 inches right behind the plows, so the men can only keep one lane open and have to convoy cars through, at one stage in lines three miles long, headed by an orange highway truck (Ninth Day). The Superintendent finally "loses the road" when a small avalanche buries his car and forces them to spend the night clearing out the drifts. The closing of Donner Pass makes the national newspapers (Tenth Day).

Accidents happen like this: On the fourth day a 2 x 4 falls off a truck; two days later a manure truck clips the board and drops a bit of its load on the highway; later that day a man going 50 mph hits the rain-soaked manure and goes off the road and rolls over twice. "With the shudder as of a dying animal, the car - its four wheels in the air - vibrated for a moment, and then was still." More elaborately: A sixteen-year-old boy takes a pot shot at an electric switch box on day four; it turns out, we are told on the eighth day, that the box controls an automatic pumping system for the highway underpass that goes beneath the railroad - when the water gets high a float trips the switch. "Accident, of course, was possible, as with all works of man." A long scene on the next day traces the effect of rising water at the site. Stewart lists the eight vehicles which are approaching the flooded underpass when the water blows the fuse. College students in a coupé make it through, a truck jackknives, a jalopy glides into the sedan, but the police car stops in time, sorts out everyone safely, replaces the fuse and the water is cleared away. In both cases, human agency and nature conspire; in one, the result is fatal, in the other, it is nearly comic.

Incidentally, Stewart reminds us of the interdependence of the transportation and communication infrastructure. Everyone uses cars or trucks to do their jobs - the phone company, the people responsible for the electric system's long lines, the flood control officers. Officials, including the Highway Patrol, communicate by telephone, telegram, and radio in dozens of settings. Also, when we focus on one system we hear from another - train whistles and the drone of airplane engines are heard while the crews are plowing the highways.

A couple of final comments. The world which Stewart describes is all male; one woman, a passenger in an ill-fated car, is the only major exception. Second, this is a world dominated by technologies: "[Modern man] expects much more of his civilization [than traditional religions]; he has spread it far and wide until it sprawls; he has given hostages. Therefore, he must sally forth about his flocks and herds; he must look to his roads and ditches, his levees and culverts, his wires and rails. To protect his machines he must invent other machines and with them labor against the storm. The honor of the battle is now not so much to skill and courage as to flawless steel and cool bearings" (Tenth Day).

Edition used: New York: Modern Library, 1947.



**Author:** Watty Piper (Pseudonym)

**Title:** *The Little Engine That Could*

**Date:** 1938

**Systems:** Train

**Context:** Contemporary

The title of this children's book and "I Think I Can" are, remarkably, trademarks. The story starts with a (female) engine rumbling over the tracks pulling a train filled with toys, including toy engines and airplanes. She stops - wheels won't go. A clown conductor flags down other engines, without trains, on their way to the roundhouse where they "live when they are not busy." The (male) Shiny New Engine is a Passenger Engine whose train "had sleeping cars, with comfortable berths; a dining-car where people bring whatever hungry people want to eat; and parlor cars in which people sit in soft arm-chairs and look out of big plate-glass windows." Too much class for the toy train. Next, the Big Strong Engine, a Freight Engine had just hauled machines to print "books and newspapers for grown-ups to read." Too important for the toy train. A (male) Kind, but Rusty Old Engine begs off; he is just too tired, and "I can not. I can not. I can not."

Finally, a (female) very little, blue engine shows - she had only been used to switch trains in the yard. She agrees and by repeating "I Think I Can" manages to get the toys over the mountain and into the valley.

Aside from the inspirational message, and the curious refusal by males to help kids out, this story shows the basic contrast between passenger and freight trains.

Edition used: New York: Platt and Munk, 1990.

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# The 1940s

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[Thurber's](#) Walter Mitty faces imaginary enemies and performs medical miracles in the midst of running errands by car. The young [Malcolm X](#) finds various railroad jobs during the War, while [Bissell](#) fills in as a Mississippi River towboat crew member which earns him a draft deferment. [Faulkner](#) shows stateside travel in Mississippi and Memphis by bus, train, and car. [Griffith](#) describes how a Los Angeles riot involving Mexican-Americans and troops spilled onto the streetcars. [Shapiro](#) juxtaposes the gruesome details of an auto wreck to the War. [Barth](#) describes a family's special holiday drives to the Ocean City amusement park. [Silko's](#) tale shows the train and car as paths for destructive escapes for the Laguna Pueblo servicemen and for others after the War, while [Phillips](#) charts changes in the ways automobiles are used and perceived in a small West Virginia town from the end of World War II to Vietnam.

The names of New Orleans streetcar lines have symbolic dimensions in Tennessee [Williams'](#) play, while [Moore](#) describes old people with their packages going home by streetcar. [Capote](#) takes his characters, starting on the train and eventually winding up on a wagon ride beyond the last road in rural areas of Louisiana. In [another story](#), he shows the reliance of a small town on the bus, which is a tenuous and symbolic link to, for example, Hollywood. [McCullers](#) ties a girl's isolation to her unsuccessful effort to take a car ride out of town and her ignorance of how to hop a freight. [Ferre](#) gives a view of the travel options in Puerto Rico, including DC3s and private airplanes. [Erdrich](#) also depicts possibilities for rural Native Americans, and includes a woman who takes off with a barnstorming pilot and children who take a freight to North Dakota. [Wilbur](#) celebrates a dining car waiter's grace, which he compares with Shakespeare and Nijinsky. [Gregory](#) captures the dilemma and the promise of an empty train station, while [Rukeyser](#) talks of the frustration and fear of tragedy as relatives wait for the plane to arrive while hearing weather reports on the radio.

New York City is the focus of several works throughout the 1940s. Two stories by [Baldwin](#) and one by [Ellison](#) give African-Americans' images of the subway system, and they reflect driving and train rides outside the City. [Bishop](#) also points to the limited perspective that the subway affords, even within the narrow confines of the City's streets, while William Carlos [Williams'](#) poem brings out more chaotic and violent images from those streets. [Payne](#) sees the simple fact of automobiles and trains as sufficient to represent a city, while [White's](#) story of a mouse who drives a miniature automobile conveys safe riding rules to young children.

Later in the decade, [Jackson's](#) stories turn missed train and bus connections between a New England city and more remote towns into nearly supernatural events, while [Nabokov](#) depicts a Russian immigrant couple's confusion about New York's apparently sentient subway and bus systems. [Agee](#) describes how the subway affects the mind of the urban commuter. In addition to several scenes involving taxis in New York and the night train from prep school to the City, [Salinger's \*Catcher in the Rye\*](#) explores many dimensions of how the automobile is a place for teenage sexual encounters. His [short stories](#) focus on commuting to and from the suburbs by train and car, as well as other events such as a bus trip for a boys' club and an ocean liner voyage. [Miller](#) shows how automobiles come to symbolize youth, middle age, and death for a traveling salesman.

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## 171

**Author:** James Thurber (1894-1961)

**Title:** "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty." In *My World - And Welcome to It*

**Date:** 1942

**Systems:** Car

**Context:** 1940s, New York City

In this famous story about Walter Mitty's fantasy life, several of the imagined adventures occur while Mitty is behind the wheel of his car. In the opening paragraph of the story Mitty imagines he is in the cockpit of a Navy hydroplane, on a particularly difficult mission - when he is stirred from his reverie by the complaints of his wife that he is driving too fast. Throughout the first half of the story Mitty's dreams of elaborate feats of competence are contrasted to his ineffectual driving. We learn that he can't take chains off the tires (the one time he tried he created a hopeless mess, wrapping the chains around the axle); he moves too slowly when a stoplight turns green; he drives the streets "aimlessly"; and he can't even correctly park the car in a parking lot - the attendant must do it for him. And yet the car ironically remains a vehicle for his power fantasies, as we see when he races the engine in response to his wife's admonition that he's "not a young man any longer."

Edition used: Eugene Current-Garcia and Bert Hitchcock, eds. *American Short Stories*, 5th ed. Glenview: Scott, Foresman, 1990.

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## 172

**Author:** El-Shabazz, El-Hajj Malik [Malcolm X] and Alex Haley (1925-1965)

**Title:** *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* as told to Alex Haley

**Date:** 1965

**Systems:** Railroad

**Context:** 1940s, Boston, Harlem, African-American perspective

By age seventeen, Malcolm Little had acquired the street skills that would serve him well the rest of his life. Hustling shoe shines, drugs, and women in Boston, he'd learned to estimate character at a glance, to take enormous risks, and to work most any situation for personal gain. He soon learns to work the railroads with equal success. He earns a name for himself hawking sandwiches on the "Yankee Clipper" line which connects Boston and New York (in fact, he's called 'Sandwich Red'). The fast pace of New York gives hustle a new meaning for Malcolm; he eventually uses his "in" with the rail workers to gain free travel around the country - a privilege that greatly expands his business "hustling reefer" and gets him out of town when the vice squad makes Harlem too hot.

In 1942, Malcolm's middle class relative and patron, Ella, gets him a job with the railroad through a friend, the "elderly Pullman porter," Old Man Rountree. With a world war "snatching away railroad men," and this kind of insider connection, Malcolm finds the job easy to get and easy to keep - despite the fact he's well below the age requirement of twenty-one. Promised the first available "fourth-cook" job (a post as an unglorified dishwasher), he is temporarily assigned a job on "The Colonial" to Washington D.C. On this line, the kitchen crew "worked with almost unbelievable efficiency in the cramped quarters. Against the sound of the train clacking along, the waiters were jabbering the customers' orders, the cooks operated like machines, and five hundred miles of dirty pots and dishes and silverware rattled back to me." On the overnight layovers, the workers go "sight-seeing" in D.C., though of course, after years on the railroad, they are regulars in this town and every other on the line.

Snatching the opportunity to fill in for an absent sandwich man on the line to New York City, Malcolm soon makes himself indispensable. Lugging his "shoulder-strap sandwich box and that heavy five-gallon aluminum coffee pot up and down the aisles of the 'Yankee Clipper,'" he sells "sandwiches, coffee, candy, cake, and ice cream as fast as the railroad's commissary department could supply them." He explains the secret of his unprecedented sandwich sales:

It didn't take me but one week to learn that all you had to do was give white people a show and they'd buy anything you offered them. It was like popping your shoeshine rag. The dining car waiters and Pullman

porters knew it too, and they faked their Uncle Tomming to get bigger tips. We were in that world of Negroes who are both servants and psychologists, aware that white people are so obsessed with their own importance that they will pay liberally, even dearly, for the impression of being catered to and entertained.

"Sandwich Red" increases his notoriety by swearing profusely and exhibiting a surly attitude that provokes complaints and at least one memorable "fight." Challenged to a fist fight by some "big, beefy, red-faced cracker soldier," Malcolm laughingly agrees, but tells the soldier, "you've got too many clothes on." The drunk-to-weaving bully begins a striptease that ends in humiliation as the "whole car" breaks with laughter. Says the wise servant-and-psychologist: "I couldn't have whipped that white man as badly with a club as I had with my mind."

Malcolm's smart mouth eventually gets him fired, but he still uses his railroad identification to win free travel from fellow rail workers and to gain entry to their "big blackjack and poker games." These went on around the clock in the locker room for Negro railroad men, beneath Grand Central Station. (In an aside on segregation, Malcolm tells us that though black men had been working in dining car service for thirty or forty years, in the early 1940s, there were no Negro stewards - at least not on the New York, New Haven, Hartford line).

Edition used: Ballantine Books. New York: Random House, 1965.

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## 173

**Author:** Richard Bissell (1913-1977)

**Title:** *A Stretch on the River: A Novel of Adventure in a Mississippi River Towboat*

**Date:** 1950

**Systems:** Mississippi River towboat

**Context:** 1943, Mississippi River

The Minnesota Historical Society republished this book as an "enduring historical source," which seems appropriate, given the fairly ponderous realism of Bissell's narrative. The book begins with an allusion to Twain's *Life on the Mississippi* to establish continuity with that account of the river in the last century.

The narrator, Bill Joyce, and his brother sit by the railroad tracks and watch the passing river steamers; they "smell the damp smell of steam and steam cylinder oil"; young Bill really is interested more in the calliope than the being on the boat crew. Their high school friends want roadsters; one got a phaeton, another a Marmon; at school in the mid 30s, he learned how to check his trunk on a through ticket; he later went to Europe on an "antique Cunard" - all signs of his sophistication as a traveler. It then boils down to his arrival at the Union Station in St. Louis in 1942 and his work on a diesel towboat to haul coal on the River, and, significantly, to get a deferment from the draft (Ch. 1).

After a year learning the trade, working on a tow boat becomes comfortable, "Then I began to forget I had ever lived any other way. Then I began to feel sorry for the people on the bank. When I got that far I was a river man." The upper River was "six hundred and forty miles of twisting bends, sand bars and crossings, channel lights, day marks, swing bridges, lift bridges, floating bridges, wing dams, landings, locks, rock riprap, willows silent in the summer heat ... and the river towns where the little girls stand in their pinafores on the limestone slab sidewalks watching the towboats go by." (Ch. 3). The main trip involves taking eight barges of central Illinois coal to Minnesota in the summer of 1943. We get all sort of details - on pumping the barges, on keeping the barges together with various ropes and chains, on cleaning the tug's pilot house, trimming the navigation lights, and on buying groceries and getting mail on shore. Passing through the lock at Keokuk, Iowa, comprises three chapters (10-12). In the one adventure, a crew member trips on a rope, falls under the barges and drowns; his body is found a week later and sent home by train (Ch. 17).

In a portrait of Jim Sargent, a pilot, we find that "In his head he had filed away a complete history of every bar, snag, and 'set' in the current from Cairo to the Falls of St. Anthony." Sargent had left home twenty years earlier to go by Wabash box car to St. Louis where he began his career. He advanced from mate to pilot after a decade, and we hear of his accumulating skills like learning to read a sounding stick, handling barges, fixing frozen pumps. He also exemplifies the loneliness of River life - he has a rather tenuous relation with his wife and young child (Ch. 7).

On a couple of occasions Bissell comments on the train tracks and highways which run parallel to the River. People on shore watch the towboat; automobiles slow down (Ch. 9). They see semi-trailers near Winona (Ch. 20); there also the Burlington tracks are on the east bank, the Milwaukee tracks on the west (Ch. 21). At Dayton Bluff, near St. Paul is the Chicago streamliner (Ch. 22).

Edition used: St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1987.

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## 174

**Author:** William Faulkner (1897-1962)

**Title:** "Two Soldiers"

**Date:** 1942

**Systems:** Bus, train, car

**Context:** 1942, Mississippi, Tennessee

This story, set in 1942, is told from the perspective of a nine-year-old boy who lives in Frenchman's Bend in Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha county, and whose older brother, Pete, after hearing of the attack on Pearl Harbor, decides to join the army. Pete leaves for Memphis, a hundred miles away, on a bus which stops along the road out in front of his parents' house. That night the younger brother decides he has to go after Pete, and walks the twenty-two miles to Jefferson, where he goes to the bus station. After talking a policeman into sending him to Memphis, the boy gets on the bus; though tired, the boy stays awake, marveling at how the bus takes him through town after town. The size of Memphis is overwhelming, described as frightening partly because of the large number of cars. The boy finds the recruiting office and learns Pete is leaving on a train in an hour; Pete returns to the office and talks his brother into going back home. An officer calls a woman, who is wealthy and obviously aids children occasionally, and she sends the boy home in her car, driven by her chauffeur. The different modes of transportation in the story are all alien to the boy, not a part of his previous experience; they are the means of taking him and his brother out of their familiar world and placing them in a strange and unknown world. Buses, trains, and cars, expand their geography - initially the boy imagines Pearl Harbor as "across that Government reservoir up at Oxford" - and creates a world in which the two brothers can be separated, a situation which the young boy had previously been unable to fathom.

Edition used: *Collected Stories of William Faulkner*. New York: Curtis, 1942.

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## 175

**Author:** Beatrice Griffith

**Title:** "In the Flow of Time"

**Date:** 1948

**Systems:** Streetcar

**Context:** 1943, Los Angeles; Mexican-American perspective

An account of "the sailor-zootsuit war" between rampaging servicemen and Mexicans in Los Angeles. Early in the morning of the riot, "Mingo and me had took the streetcar out to San Fernando Valley, hopped the bus, and soon we were on the little dusty road going up to my grandfather's farm." This pastoral escape lets them wear "drapes" on the day before they will join the army. On the way back they are stared at, especially their clothes: "it was like the people in the streetcar had never seen Mexicans before." Sailors and marines are attacking Mexicans all over the city. "We caught the car just as the conductor clanged the bell and banged the door shut. Everybody was scared. Mexicans, Negroes, gabachos . . . everybody was excited and talking." The rioters take over streetcars where the passengers are trapped and beat them freely. After they rampage the narrator's house (another trap), they flee in a taxi and roadster.

Edition used: Charles Kaplan, ed. *Literature in America: The Modern Age*. New York: The Free Press, 1971.

## 176

**Author:** Karl Shapiro (b. 1913)

**Title:** "Auto Wreck"

**Date:** 1942

**Systems:** Automobile, ambulance

**Context:** Contemporary

Shapiro's poem contrasts death in war, "done by hands," with death in a wreck, where we question "Who is innocent?" Even suicide has "cause and stillbirth, logic." The poem opens with an ambulance, with its "one ruby flare," "entering the crowd" at the crash scene. Then "the mangled [are] lifted / And stowed into the little hospital" which moves away even before the doors are closed. The cops still at the scene sweep up glass, make notes, and run "ponds of blood / Into the street and gutter." It is the onlookers who speculate about "The grim joke and the banal resolution" while the authorities go about their work. Even in war, then, perhaps this is "our richest horror."

Edition used: Lynn Altenbernd and Leslie L. Lewis. *Introduction to Literature: Poems*, 3rd ed. New York: Macmillan, 1975.

## 177

**Author:** John Barth (b. 1930)

**Title:** "Lost in the Funhouse" In *Lost in the Funhouse*

**Date:** 1967

**Systems:** Automobile

**Context:** World War II, Ocean City, MD



Ambrose and his family take their ritualized drive to Ocean City (Maryland), which the family visits each year on Memorial, Independence, and Labor Days. Ambrose is in the back seat with a teen-aged girl, Magda, and there is an ongoing chance that she will put her hand on his leg or he will reach behind her. The story plays with indeterminacy among current reality, memory, and fictional construction of a world where the carnival funhouse is the high point of the trip.

When Ambrose and Peter's father was their age, the excursion was made by train, as mentioned in the novel *The 42nd Parallel* by John Dos Passos. Many families from the same neighborhood used to travel together, with dependent relatives and often with Negro servants; schoolfuls of children swarmed through the railway cars; everyone shared everyone else's Maryland fried chicken, Virginia ham, deviled eggs, potato salad, beaten biscuits, iced tea. Nowadays (that is, in 19\_\_, the year of our story) the journey is made by automobile - more comfortably and quickly though without the extra fun though without the camaraderie of a general excursion. It's all part of the deterioration of American life, their father declares; Uncle Karl supposes that when the boys take their families to Ocean City for the holidays they'll fly in Autogiros. Their mother, sitting in the middle of the front seat like Magda in the second, only with her arms on the seat-back behind the men's shoulders, wouldn't want the good old days back again, the steaming trains and stuffy long dresses; on the other hand she can do without Autogiros, too, if she has to become a grandmother to fly in them.

The drive is punctuated with the ritual sighting of the power plant at "V\_\_\_," halfway there; "looking for the Towers" is much anticipated, and the person, usually a kid, who spots them gets a candy bar or a piece of fruit. Ambrose, but not his brother, figures out that you spot the landmark from the right side, but you also get more sun, so he lets Magda take the seat and win the banana. In case you wondered, Barth tells you, the person in the front right-hand seat can use the sun visor to cut down on the sun. Poetically, "Plush upholstery prickles uncomfortably through gabardine slacks in the July sun."

Edition used: New York: Bantam, 1969.

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## 178

**Author:** Leslie Marmon Silko (b. 1948)

**Title:** *Ceremony*

**Date:** 1977

**Systems:** Automobile, train

**Context:** 1940s, Laguna Pueblo, New Mexico, Native-American perspective

In this story of Tayo, a young Native American trying to recover from his horrific experience in the Philippines during World War II, the automobile and train function quite differently than they do in much fiction by white writers. Rather than escape, the highways - Highway 66 in particular - provide a means of invasion; the highway provides access for white tourists and white culture in general, an access that has destructive consequences for the Lagunas in the novel. The train also functions less as a means of escape and more as a conduit for destructive forces; it is on trains that the young Indian men leave their home in New Mexico to fight in the war and on which they eventually return, profoundly injured by their experience in the white world and unable to fit back into their communities.

Though several of the Native characters have cars or pick-ups, there is a sense in the novel that automobiles are infected with the "witchery" which Tayo must defeat, those destructive forces that are abroad in the world and which are making him sick. Among the Native veterans, Emo, the one most enamored of the white world they all experienced as soldiers,



turns out to be a minion of the witchery, and the car he drives, a beat-up Ford coupe, becomes a vehicle for the evil he serves. In one of the final scenes of the novel Tayo witnesses the torture of Harley - another Laguna - who is being kept captive in Emo's trunk (in the end Harley and another Laguna, Leroy, are found dead in the wreckage of a GMC pick-up). Significantly, in most of the scenes in which Tayo rides in cars he is in some way threatened, particularly in terms of his mental health (specifically with the prospect of being committed once again); but when he travels by horse, or by foot, away from the roads, he is clearly involved in an effective healing process. Cars are identified with a culture, a way of life that is psychically debilitating; Tayo starts improving when he gets away from the roads and from those people that are too involved with cars and roads.

Edition used: New York: Penguin, 1986.

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## 179

**Author:** Jayne Anne Phillips (b. 1952)

**Title:** *Machine Dreams*

**Date:** 1984

**Systems:** Automobiles

**Context:** World War II to Vietnam, West Virginia

Set mostly in a small town in West Virginia, this novel depicts the lives of Mitch and Jean Hampson and their two children, Danner and Billy, from World War II through the Vietnam War. As the title suggests, machines play an important role in the narrative, from the bulldozer Mitch operates as a soldier in 41st Engineers in the South Pacific during World War II, to the helicopter that is such a big part of Billy's experience in Vietnam. Also included are cement mixers and dump trucks, as part of Mitch's civilian occupation as a road builder. But the key machines in the story are the various automobiles the Hampsons own. Though Mitch has unending employment and financial troubles, his cars, though not quite new, were always "big and luxurious ... impeccably clean and cared for." Because he loses his status as breadwinner at home, more and more Mitch seeks a sense of empowerment elsewhere - mainly through his cars. But when Danner asks him if he dreams, the car is revealed as an inadequate substitute for the control he has lost over his life. In the brief and simple dream he recounts, Mitch is driving in a snowstorm that is so intense that he can't see the road, "'can't see where [he] was going.'"

For Jean the car is a means of escape from her relationship with Mitch, which she finds at times oppressive. Early in their marriage, before the children are born, there is a scene in which she takes the car, a Nash, to run an errand, but instead parks in a cemetery, where her mother is buried, and falls asleep and dreams of her mother. Mitch is overly protective of Jean - and overly worried about the car - and in response Jean uses the car to escape.

Finally, a car, a red Camaro, plays an important role in the account of the loss of Billy, who goes missing in action in Vietnam. Mitch keeps the Camaro in a shed behind his house, waiting for Billy's hoped-for return. When Danner visits her father, they go out to look at the car, which appears "bright and cherished." The car functions as a sort of stand-in for Billy, all that is left for the grieving family, because it was so important to Billy when he was still with them. As with Mitch, the car functions as an extension of Billy's personality.

Edition used: New York: Pocket Books, 1985.

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## 180

**Author:** Tennessee Williams (1911-1983)

**Title:** *A Streetcar Named Desire*

**Date:** 1947

**Systems:** Streetcar, train, Greyhound bus

**Context:** Contemporary, New Orleans

The title points to Blanche DuBois' first line: "They told me to take a street-car named Desire, and then transfer to one called Cemeteries and ride six blocks and get off at - Elysian Fields!" Williams plays off these evocative names to suggest ironically the significance of the play's events (Sc. 1). An exchange between Blanche and her sister carries this further:

BLANCHE: What you are talking about is brutal desire - just - Desire! - the name of that rattle-trap street-car that bangs through the Quarter, up one old narrow street and down another...

STELLA: Haven't you ever ridden on that street-car?

BLANCHE: It brought me here. - Where I'm not wanted and where I'm ashamed to be... (Sc. 4)

Stanley and Stella Kowalski's apartment is between the L&N tracks and the river, and the trains occasionally drown out or punctuate peoples' conversation (Sc. 4). Stanley has a car and travels for his company, and gets dirty fixing it (Sc. 4). The boy friend from Miami whom Blanche says she met last Christmas had a "Cadillac convertible; must have been a block long" (Sc 4). Blanche and her temporary New Orleans friend, Mitch, had parked and kissed by the lake (Sc. 6). After being frustrated by Blanche's posturing and pretentious, Stanley buys her a one-way Greyhound ticket back to Laurel for a birthday present (Sc. 8). In the final scene, as yet another face-saving gesture, Blanche claims that she has an admirer's invitation for "A cruise of the Caribbean on a yacht!" (Sc. 10).

Edition used: New York: New American Library, 1974.

## 181

**Author:** Merrill Moore (1903-1957)

**Title:** "Old Men and Old Women Going Home on the Street Car"

**Date:**

**Systems:** Street car

**Context:** Contemporary, urban

Carrying their packages of groceries in particular  
With books under their arms that maybe they will read  
And possibly understand, old women lead  
Their weaker selves up to the front of the car.

Men who had worked as clerks for thirty years had a different view of women, but now they are surveyed "harmlessly." Presumably this is a comment on aging people, rather than on the changed use of urban trolleys.

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## 182

**Author:** Truman Capote (1924-1984)

**Title:** *Other Voices, Other Rooms*

**Date:** 1948

**Systems:** Train, bus, automobile, wagon

**Context:** Contemporary, Louisiana

This is an interesting regression through transportation systems from the modern city to the end of the road. Once there, the young protagonist is locked into a surrealistic world of his dying father, his artistic cousin's bisexual excesses, and general moral and epistemological decay.

Twelve-year-old Joel Knox is summoned by his estranged father to Skully's Landing after his mother's death. His father's letter had said, "We have at present no mechanized vehicle." The novel starts with noting that there are no busses or trains to Noon City, so he will have to ride in a turpentine company truck which carries supplies and mail to Paradise Chapel. The rough, washboard road takes them past signs for Red Dot 5¢ Cigars, Dr. Pepper, and so on. He had gone from New Orleans to Biloxi by train, and then by bus to Paradise Chapel. It was three hours late. The truck is a Ford "of the pick-up type"; it smells of leather and gasoline; the speedometer is broken at "a petrified twenty." As they go down the highway, they wave back and forth at farmers. At Noon City they drive down an unpaved, nameless street with houses on each side and a red-barn livery stable with "horses, wagons, buggies, mules, men." Noon City on Saturdays was "a procession of mule-drawn wagons, broken-down flivvers, and buggies" which wheel in from the country and which leave at sundown. The final stretch is on a black man's wagon which will take Joel to the Landing. A cousin, Florabel, talks about a green 1934 Chevrolet that six people can ride in without anyone in anyone else's lap, which her father won in a cock fight. We hear nothing more of this car once Joel is situated at his father's home (Ch 1: 1).

Joel's only possession is his tin suitcase with stickers from Paris, Cairo, Bombay, and so on, a relic of his grandfather's wedding trip around the world just after the Civil War (Ch. 1: 1). This is the only hint of something even larger than New Orleans except for an encounter with a midget at a Moon City circus who "seemed to him Outside, to be, that is, geography, earth and sea and all the cities in [cousin] Randolph's almanac" (Ch, 2: 11).

Somewhat incidentally, a young black woman, Missouri Fever, known as "Zoo" escapes briefly to Washington D.C. - "I feels like ninety-six locomotives gonna light outa here goin lickety-split." Upon her return, three whites and a black in a red truck throw her in the back, rape her, and burn her with a cigar, a grotesque contrast with Joel's rather more protective ride into town.

Edition used: New York: Signet, 1949.

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## 183

**Author:** Truman Capote (1924-1984)

**Title:** "Children on Their Birthdays" In *A Tree of Night and Other Stories*

**Date:** 1948

**Systems:** Bus

**Context:** Contemporary, South

Capote's short story begins and ends with the death of the main character, ten-year-old Miss Bobbit, who is run over by the six o'clock bus in a small southern town. In between we learn of Miss Bobbit's arrival in town, on a bus, her precociousness, and her showbusiness ambitions. On the day of her death she was packed and ready to go, with her mother, to Hollywood, a trip financed with the money of several local boys. A traveling con-artist had come through town and sponsored a talent contest, promising that the winner would get a screen test; he had also collected \$150 each from several boys, promising he could get them jobs on boats out of New Orleans. When the con-man skips town without fulfilling any of his promises, the indomitable Miss Bobbit begins a letter writing campaign that results in his capture and the refund of the boys' money. Subsequently she talks them into using that money to jumpstart her career, promising in return 10% of her life's earnings.

Throughout her stay in town Miss Bobbit remains somewhat aloof, seemingly immune to two boys, Billy Bob and Preacher Star, who are infatuated with her. She is focused on becoming a dancer. But at the end of the story, the two boys bring her roses as a parting gift; seeing them coming, Miss Bobbit uncharacteristically runs across the street towards them, "her arms outstretched," and is struck by the bus. She had never considered herself a citizen of the town, but merely a visitor on her way somewhere else; but in a moment of weakness she attempts to embrace the two boys and their offering - and so becomes a permanent resident of the town. As long as she remains detached, her dream of a better place is intact, the bus that brought her to the town available to take her away again. But the abortive embrace precludes travel, and the vehicle of departure immediately switches her destiny from stardom to smalltown anonymity.

Edition used: Eugene Current-Garcia and Bert Hitchcock, eds. *American Short Stories*, 5th ed. Glenview: Scott, Foresman, 1990.

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## 184

**Author:** Carson McCullers (1917-1967)

**Title:** *The Member of the Wedding*

**Date:** 1946

**Systems:** Car

**Context:** early 1940s, South

The "member" of the title is Frankie, a twelve-year-old girl in a small town in the south, during the early 40s, who is poised on the precipice of puberty. And she is not happy about the prospect of womanhood. Frankie resists the feminine role that inexorably awaits her, and yet she worries incessantly about becoming a "freak." In an attempt to solve this dilemma, she determines to join her brother and his fiancée on their wedding trip, and somehow form a sort of triumvirate with the two young adults, in which she, Frankie, can be something other than masculine or feminine. On the day of the wedding Frankie packs her suitcase and after the ceremony attempts to accompany the bride and groom in their wedding car. When pleading and begging fail to coax her from the car, she, clinging to the steering wheel, is dragged from the automobile and placed "in the dust of the empty road." Back home she plans to run away, and hop a freight train to Chicago, or New York, or Hollywood. But once out of the house, suitcase in hand, she realizes that she doesn't know how to get on a freight train. She wanders around town, unsure what to do. Before long the alerted police pick her up at a cafe and take her home. Frankie soon after decides she wants to be called Frances and in the end

reconciles herself to a relatively circumscribed existence, as a young woman in a small town.

Edition used: *Collected Stories*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.

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## 185

**Author:** Rosario Ferré (b. 1942)

**Title:** *The Youngest Doll*

**Date:** 1976 in Spanish, 1991 in English.

**Systems:** Car, airplane, canal

**Context:** 1940 to 1980, Puerto Rico

"The Glass Box" follows four generations of eccentric "bridge builders" in Cuba and Puerto Rico. The great-grandfather comes to Cuba from France and is involved in a failed scheme to "dig a channel in the virgin continent [Central America] which would be the geographic feat of the century." He eventually dies inside an ice box he invented. His son, Jacobito, moves to Puerto Rico and in the 1940s grows rich building metal bridges commissioned by the Marines. The parts for the bridges are cast in factories that used to make catharine wheels for sugar mills; thus, Jacobito represents a transition from a sugar economy to an industrial economy run by U.S. interests. Consequently Jacobito owns the town's first Model T, and his house is the first to see General Electric lightbulbs, a Frigidaire icebox, a Hot Point electric stove, a black American Standard toilet and shower tub, an Electrolux vacuum cleaner and a "Sun Beam electric fan that was so noisy it made you feel you were sitting under the nose of a Pan Am DC 3." Jacobito's feverish "admiration for the foreigners" eventually leads him to imitate an American parachute fiend; he leaps from his roof, open umbrella in hand.

"Mercedes Benz 220 SL": Out for a drive in their new Mercedes, an elderly, elitist couple remorselessly run down a pedestrian, never realizing (of course) that the victim is their estranged son. Much attention is given to the car and its accessories - steering that responds to the touch, flashing chrome, the "crossed lances on the hood," automatic windows, "sexy" leather interior, a horn "like the first trumpet in *Das Reingold*," and the driver's pigskin gloves. The car is characterized by its speed, protection, security and compared to a "rolling rhinoceros" three times. Also described as a fortress and a German tank that "shows them who runs this country" or "always puts us in the right."

In "The Fox Fur Coat" Bernardo takes his twin sister for her first flight in the "small plane his father bought for pleasure trips." She buys gas for the trip with \$10. Bernardo pilots wearing "suede gloves and goggles; as he steered the plane he moved the pedals distractedly, as though sitting at a sewing machine." As Bernardo tells of a tragic sleigh accident, Marina takes in the "silent miniature world spread before her feet for the first time." Bernardo later takes off in a storm on a suicide flight.

Edition used: Lincoln, Nebraska: U of Nebraska P, 1991.

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## 186

**Author:** Louise Erdrich (b. 1954)

**Title:** *The Beet Queen*

**Date:** 1986

**Systems:** Airplane, freight train

**Context:** 1932 to 1972, Native American perspective

The action of Erdrich's novel (a work loosely linked to two of her other novels, *Love Medicine* and *Tracks*) is precipitated by an airplane ride. Adeliade Adare, the single mother of three children (the youngest an infant), goes to a local fair and there climbs aboard the airplane of the Great Omar, a barnstorming pilot. While ostensibly going for a short ride, she and Omar instead fly off and are never seen again. Someone takes the baby home, but the other two children, Mary and Karl, are left to fend for themselves. Eventually they hop a freight train to Argus, North Dakota, where they have an aunt and uncle. Mary stays, while Karl gets back on the train, leaving Mary completely alone (he grows up to be a traveling salesman). The airplane and train scenes occur in the first fifteen pages of the book, and after that the rest of the story takes place in Argus. Mary's subsequent life is significantly affected and determined by these two early instances of abandonment, as she herself never strays far from the town and also has difficulty developing close relationships with other people.

Edition used: New York: Bantam, 1989.

## 187

**Author:** Richard Wilbur (b. 1921)

**Title:** "Grace"

**Date:** 1947

**Systems:** Train

**Context:** Contemporary

Amid a series which illustrates artistic grace, from Nijinsky's "out-the-window leap" to Hamlet and Flaubert, we get an image of "the dining-car waiter's absurd / Acrobacy - tipfingering tray like a wind-besting bird." The waiter and his tray represents both art and stability "the sole things sure / In the shaken train" while the train symbolizes the wider world in war time, as the poem ends with a plea for safety of "the praiseful, graceful soldier." Having the waiter, as a working class person, likely African American, contrasts with the "higher" arts of ballet and Shakespeare.

Edition used: *The Beautiful Changes and Other Poems*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.

## 188

**Author:** Horace Gregory (b. 1898)

**Title:** "This is the Place to Wait" In *The Passion of M'Phail*

**Date:**

**Systems:** Train

**Context:** Contemporary

The section of the poem begins with an vignette on missing a train, with a nice observation on the traveller's guilty

## feelings:

When you are caught breathless in an empty station  
and silence tells you that the train is gone,  
as though it were something for which  
you alone were not prepared  
and yet was here and could not be denied;  
when you whisper, Why was I late, what have I done?,  
you know the waiting hour is at your side.

This ordinary scene leads the narrator to discuss parallels - with waiting for his doctors to diagnose his insanity, with the promise of sex, and with the sun on Easter morning.

Edition used: Louis Untermeyer, ed. *Modern American Poetry: Mid-Century Edition*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1950.

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## 189

**Author:** Muriel Rukeyser (1913-1980)

**Title:** "Ceiling Unlimited"

**Date:**

**Systems:** Airplane

**Context:** Contemporary

The poem captures the apprehension which family members have come to feel when a person is in an airplane. Against a backdrop refrain of weather reports ("Light gales from the northwest tomorrow, rain ... The Weather Bureau's forecast, effective until noon... To Cleveland: Broken clouds to overcast") a pregnant wife and her pilot husband discuss their anticipated baby. We are reminded of the early morning hour as "The cattle-trains edge along the river, bringing morning on a white vibration." Flying removes him from her world, makes him "strange to me, dark as Asia." He demystifies his task: "If I fly, why, / I know that countries are not map-colored, that seas / belong to no one, that war's a pock-marking on Europe." She only knows land; "She does not imagine how the propeller turns / in a blinding speed, swinging the plane through space; / she never sees the cowling rattle and slip / forward and forward against the grim blades. grinding." The final stanza, where the pilot is not home in time, could be ominous: "She knows night. She knows he will not come," or merely inconvenient; "Ceiling unlimited. Visibility unlimited."

Edition used: Louis Untermeyer, ed. *Modern American Poetry: Mid-Century Edition*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1950.

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## 190

**Author:** James Baldwin (1924-1987)

**Title:** "Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone"

**Date:** 1968

**Systems:** Subway

**Context:** 1940, Harlem and Brooklyn, New York



Leo Proudhammer looks back on his lonely expeditions through the New York subway system as a ten-year-old. Leo spends many of his childhood Saturdays providing an alibi for his streetwise brother. While the parents think their boys are "at the movies" for an evening, Caleb is off indulging in adult fun, while young Leo is left alone to explore the city. Subways are a grand adventure. Leo figures out how to slip beneath the turnstile and ride for free; by sitting very quietly at the side of a "respectable-looking" gentleman or lady, he can appear as if he is under the supervision of an adult. Leo travels in this "precarious anonymity," absorbing the sound, light and speed of the trains: "It seemed to me nothing was faster than a subway train, and I loved the speed, because the speed was dangerous."

For a ten-year-old on the subway, there are other dangers, however, and those less thrilling. The subway is a lesson in demographics and neighborhood zoning: "Underground, I received my first apprehension of New York neighborhoods and, underground, first felt what may be called a civic terror." Leo is comfortable in the company the elegant Saturday evening crowd; men and women in their capes, coats, lipstick and pompadours. But after a certain point going uptown or downtown, "all the colored people disappeared." Leo tells of his first such "civic terror." He rushes off the train for fear of what the white people might do to him, and promptly gets lost, riding line after line in a panic. He feels a mite safer when he leaps into a train containing a single black man - his "savior." Shy but urged on by an impossibly full bladder, Leo asks his assistance in finding a bathroom. The man scolds the boy for riding alone and guides him from Brooklyn back home to Harlem (stopping first at the restroom, of course).

Edition used: Martha Foley, ed. *200 Years of Great American Short Stories*. New York: Galahad Books, 1975.

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## 191

**Author:** James Baldwin (1924-1987)

**Title:** "Sonny's Blues"

**Date:** 1941

**Systems:** Subway, car

**Context:** 1940s, Harlem, African-American perspective

The story opens with a rather nondescript ride on a subway through Harlem. On the ride, the protagonist reads the newspaper account of his brother's arrest for "peddling and using heroine." To elucidate the guilty connection the protagonist bears to the brother-addict Sonny, Baldwin offers a story within the story. The narrator flashes back to his father's funeral and the story his mother chose to tell him on that occasion.

The protagonist learns for the first time that he had an uncle, his father's brother, who like Sonny was a gifted musician. One evening, as the father and uncle are returning from a night of drinking, the uncle is hit by a car of white joyriders. Though the driver is only trying to scare the black man, the mischief goes awry (the story is clear about who typically pays for white men's mischief). Baldwin here chooses a car and a car accident to illustrate the fluky but sure means by which life (or death) will surprise and devastate, unexpectedly separating brother from brother. The mother extracts a moral - you can't always prevent trouble, but you can anticipate it - "let him know you are there."

Edition used: Charles Bohner, ed. *Short Fiction, Classic and Contemporary*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1989.

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## 192

**Author:** Ralph Ellison (b. 1914)

**Title:** "King of the Bingo Game"

**Date:** 1944

**Systems:** Train, subway

**Context:** 1940s, Harlem; African-American perspective

Ellison uses trains at two important moments in this story; each time the train represents powerful social forces. Whether running amok or running on schedule, the trains bear down relentlessly on the protagonist who can choose to die, or to run, but can't opt out of the game.

The story follows the delusions of a penniless and desperate man who attempts to win enough at bingo to pay for an operation that will save his girlfriend's life. That life is a gamble, and for a black man a losing gamble, is made clear enough from the game show episode at the story's center. Earning a shot at the \$36.94 jackpot, the protagonist spins an enormous bingo wheel (resembling but predating Bob Barker's contraption on *The Price is Right*). The protagonist realizes that the only measure of control over his destiny which he can attain is to keep the wheel in motion, neither quitting or winning, merely keeping on.

The train images prepare for this realization. Before the bingo game begins, he dozes off and imagines himself back in the South as a boy. While playing on a railroad trestle, he sees the train coming in time to run to safety. He rests by the highway only for a moment before he discovers the train has left the track in order to pursue him down the middle of the road.

Later, during the rush of the game, the protagonist spins the wheel and experiences a vertiginous power that eventually sickens. As his power over the wheel becomes indistinguishable from the wheel's power over him, he wants to vomit; just then "his mind form[s] an image of himself running with Laura in his arms down the tracks of the subway just ahead of an A train...knowing no way to leave the tracks because to stop would bring the train crushing down upon him and to attempt to leave across the other tracks would mean to run into a hot third rail as high as his waist."

Edition used: Charles Bohner, ed. *Short Fiction, Classic and Contemporary*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1989.

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## 193

**Author:** Elizabeth Bishop (b. 1911)

**Title:** "The Man-Moth"

**Date:** 1948

**Systems:** Subway

**Context:** Contemporary, urban

The "man-moth," an urban commuter, "emerges / from an opening under the edge of one of the sidewalks." After climbing the façades in the hope of seeing the heavens, he retreats to the "pale subways of cement he calls his home," where he "cannot get aboard the silent trains / fast enough to suit him." Symbolically he "always seats himself facing the wrong way," since thus he can't know how fast he is going. The architecture of the train spawns a series of reflections about the world. The ties under the tracks are like recurrent dreams. He fears looking out the window "for the third rail, the unbroken draught of poison, / runs there beside him." If you hold a flashlight up to his eye, you will see "one tear,

his only possession." Even the streets are so dark that "The whole shadow of Man is only as big as his hat," so the subway world becomes an extension of the whole urban landscape, not a special refuge.

Edition used: Lynn Altenbernd and Leslie L. Lewis. *Introduction to Literature: Poems*, 3rd ed. New York: Macmillan, 1975.

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## 194

**Author:** William Carlos Williams (1883-1963)

**Title:** "The Last Turn" In *The Collected Later Poems of William Carlos Williams*

**Date:** 1944

**Systems:** Urban street

**Context:** Contemporary, New York City

An image of a New York street scene which links the sights and the music along lines made familiar by George Gershwin from the music side and Piet Mondrian from the art side:

Then see it! in distressing  
detail - from behind a red light  
at 53rd and 8th  
of a November evening, the jazz  
of the cross lights echoing the  
crazy weave of the breaking mind:  
splash of a half purple, half  
naked woman's body whose jeweled  
guts the cars drag up and down - ...

Like many surrealistic paintings, Williams' visual images are transformed into scenes of nightmare and violence.

Edition used: William J. Martz, ed. *The Distinctive Voice: Twentieth-Century Poetry*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1966.

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## 195

**Author:** Emmy Payne (b. 1919)

**Title:** *Katy No-Pocket*

**Date:** 1944

**Systems:** Automobile

**Context:** Contemporary

An illustrated book for young kids. Katy, a pocketless mother kangaroo, goes to the city to solve her problem. It is a place of "stores and houses and automobiles." After she gets a carpenter's apron, the picture shows her hopping along a railroad track back to her forest home. These are presumably the bare minimum symbols to convince a young person that the setting is urban.

Edition used: Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1944.

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## 196

**Author:** E. B. White (1899-1985)

**Title:** *Stuart Little*

**Date:** 1945

**Systems:** Automobile

**Context:** Contemporary, New York City

This is a famous children's story of an anthropomorphized mouse who lives with a New York City family. He catches a city bus to 72nd Street and Central Park, and has to invent a mouse-sized dime to get on board; it is accepted. He goes to a dentist's office where the man has made a functioning, small automobile with an on/off invisibility switch - Stuart drives it, in invisible mode, around the office until it smashes into furniture and its fenders are bent and its radiator leaks. The dentist gives a general message for all young kids: "Stuart, I hope this will be a lesson to you: never push a button on an automobile unless you are sure what you are doing" (Ch. 11). Stuart drives a similar car through Central Park to 110th Street and then to the Saw Mill River Parkway, but he goes in the early morning before traffic. Later he gets a job as a school teacher and changes from motoring clothing to a salt-and-pepper suit for the new job, gets an oil change, and the needed 5 drops of gasoline (Ch. 15).

This playful story gives its young readers a safety lesson and information about some of the logistics of using an automobile.

Edition used: New York: Harper and Row.

## 197

**Author:** Shirley Jackson (1919-1965)

**Title:** *Come Along with Me*

**Date:** 1968 Written: 1942-1965

**Systems:** Car, bus

**Context:** Contemporary, New England

Many of Jackson's stories work a tight line between characters' often bizarre psychology and the supernatural, something along the lines of "The Twilight Zone." These stories play out several themes of the disorientation and anonymity of public transportation and suburban life.

"The Beautiful Stranger" (1946) starts at a train station where the focus character's husband has returned from a business trip in Boston. The "first intimation of strangeness occurred at the station" - the wife and the two children arrive half an hour early, throwing off the rhythm of her perfect welcome so much that she's "unsure at last whether this was an arrival or a departure." On the drive home she wonders if she can go along on his next trip. All seems fine until the next day when she thinks, "That is not my husband," an intuition which is reinforced after he drives home from work that evening. The husband adds to the tension: "'Someone told me today,' he said once, 'that he had heard I was back from

Boston, and I distinctly thought he said that he heard I was dead in Boston.'" To relieve the tension she takes a taxi to do some shopping (they have only one car), but when she returns she can't recognize which is the house with the beautiful stranger inside. The story picks up on the similarity of suburban houses, the isolation of wives and kids compared with the routine mobility of commuting husbands.

"Louisa, Please Come Home" (1960) explores a parallel theme. Louisa had taken a bus downtown, then bought a round-trip train ticket to Chandler so her parents would think she was coming back. Along the way she stops at another town to throw off any trace. She sleeps on the train since she has no other place, and notices "how no one pays any attention to you at all. There were hundreds of people who saw me that day, and even a sailor who tried to pick me up in the movie, and yet no one really saw me." Three years later Paul, a friend from her old town, recognizes her in Chandler and takes her home on a plane - her family claims that she's not their daughter and her father gives her money to go back. Paul, it turns out, had shown up with two other candidates in the past.

"The Summer People" (1949) follows through on the problems a couple in their late sixties have when they decide to stay at their summer place after Labor Day. They take their regular "big trip" to town for shopping; Mrs. Allison splurges on glass baking dishes. The plan collapses when they learn that the kerosene truck doesn't make deliveries after the season, the car won't start, and the phone is disconnected. Even in a remote holiday resort people depend on cars and trucks; the story ends on an uncertain note as a thunderstorm zaps their battery-operated radio.

"The Bus" (1965) tells the story of Old Miss Harper, who is getting her regular bus home. In the opening scene she is unhappy with the "dirty small" bus and mentally composes a letter to the company, "Your ticket salesmen are ugly, your drivers are surly, your vehicles indescribably filthy...." The bus serves several small towns in order "to get somewhere, even home." In a recursive story which borders on reality and dream, she sleeps on the bus to be awakened by the driver, who says to the other passengers, "She thinks I'm an alarm clock." The driver puts her off, but it's not her home town, only a deserted crossroads with a RICKETT'S LANDING sign and "no stores, no lights, no taxis, no people." Two young men drive her in a pickup to "the old lady's," a house that is (or is like) her childhood home, now a Bar & Grill; she pays the truck drivers and takes a room. The closet is filled with her childhood toys, which talk to her, but she's awakened by the bus driver who says, "She thinks I'm an alarm clock," and drops her off, not at her home town but at RICKETT'S LANDING...

Edition used: Stanley Edgar Hyman, ed. *Come Along with Me*. New York: Popular Library 1968.

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## 198

**Author:** Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977)

**Title:** "Signs and Symbols"

**Date:** 1948

**Systems:** Subway, bus

**Context:** late 1940s, New York City

This short story tells of the visit of an elderly Russian couple, long displaced by the Russian Revolution, to New York City in the late 1940s to their son, confined to a "sanitarium" because of his insanity, a rare type of "referential mania" in which the patient imagines that the entire inanimate world is a "veiled reference to his personality and existence." The unrelentingly bleak lives of the couple are partially depicted by the description of their weekly journey to the sanitarium, which involves first a subway and then a bus ride. The "underground train," which is described as if it were a sentient being, breaks down; the bus keeps them waiting for a long time and is crowded when it shows up. The passages devoted to their subway and bus experiences, both there and back, provide a very unappealing portrait of urban mass transit.

Edition used: *Nabokov's Dozen*. New York: Bard, 1973.

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## 199

**Author:** James Agee (1909-1955)

**Title:** "Rapid Transit"

**Date:**

**Systems:** Subway

**Context:** Contemporary

The alienation of commuting by subway is symbolic of a general change and adaptation to urban life, and introduces a new kind of disorder into an apparently regular society.

Squealing under city stone  
The millions on the millions run,  
Every one a life alone,  
Every one a soul undone:  
...  
The wrecked demeanors of the mind  
That now is tamed, and once was wild.

Edition used: Louis Untermeyer, ed. *Modern American Poetry: Mid-Century Edition*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1950.

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## 200

**Author:** J. D. Salinger (b. 1919)

**Title:** *The Catcher in the Rye*

**Date:** 1951

**Systems:** Automobile, train, taxi, subway

**Context:** late 1940s, Pennsylvania and New York

Salinger's famous story of Holden Caulfield's reluctant coming of age takes place initially at Pencey, a prep school outside of New York, and then moves to the city itself. Holden, who has been kicked out of school, leaves for Christmas vacation early, on the spur of the moment, taking a late night train to the city. "Usually I like riding on trains, especially at night, with the lights on and the windows so black, and one of those guys coming up the aisle selling coffee and sandwiches and magazines" (Ch. 8). The only other passenger in his coach turns out to be the mother of one of his classmates, and Holden takes the opportunity to tell her what a great guy her son is, concocting a series of lies that mask his real opinion, which was that her son "was doubtless the biggest bastard that ever went to Pencey." This encounter on the train is similar to the several taxi rides Holden later takes in which he asks cabbies where the Central Park ducks go in the winter. In both instances the lonely Holden is trying to make some sort of connection with people (he asks both the woman on the train and the two cab drivers to join him for a "cocktail" - all three decline). He is constantly reaching out to the different people he meets, seeking assurance that not everyone is a "phony," that he can find someone with whom he can communicate honestly. But after several cab rides he gives up on finding that in cabs, and at one point makes a decision to walk back to his hotel, even though it's a long walk. In a sense the book is a process of narrowing

Holden's opportunities for connection; he contacts one person after another and again and again these people fail him.

The book's title refers to a variant of a Robert Burns poem, set in a context of dangerous streets: a young boy whom Holden encounters was singing "The cars zoomed by, brakes screeched all over the place, his parents paid no attention to him, and he kept on walking next to the curb and singing 'If a body catch a body coming through the rye.' It made me feel better" (Ch. 16). Holden says, "I hate living in New York and all. Taxicabs, and Madison Avenue buses, with the drivers and all always yelling at you to get out at the rear door..." His fantasy is to escape by driving to Massachusetts and Vermont and living in a cabin (Ch 19). At the end, he imagines hitchhiking out West: "I figured, I'd go down to the Holland Tunnel and bum a ride, and then I'd bum another one, and another one, and another one, and in a few days I'd be somewhere out West where it was very pretty and sunny and where nobody'd know me and I'd get a job. I figured I could get a job at a filling station somewhere, putting gas and oil in people's cars." After a bit of that, again, he'd build "a little cabin somewhere" (Ch. 25).

As manager of the school's fencing team, he had gone to a meet in New York and had "left all the foils and equipment and stuff on the goddam subway. It wasn't my fault. I had to keep getting up to look at this map, so we'd know where to get off... The whole team ostracized me the whole way back on the train. It was pretty funny, in a way" (Ch. 1). This episode is mentioned a couple of times later in the novel.

In addition to the train and taxi as meeting places, the automobile functions importantly as the place for teenage sexual encounters, encounters which Holden feels very ambivalent about. Throughout the novel he worries about the date his roommate, Stradlater, has gone on with Jane Gallagher, a friend of Holden's. Holden is worried that the "very sexy" Stradlater has tried to or succeeded in giving Jane "the time" (having sex with her). Though he repeatedly contemplates calling Jane, Holden never does, fearing that somehow she will be different, now that she has gone out with Stradlater. In thinking about the two of them together, Holden recalls double dates with Stradlater that ended up with them parking in some lonely spot. Holden has witnessed or at least heard Stradlater compelling resistant girls to let him have his way, and that memory plays on his fears. Holden himself talks about his own dates, and making out in cars, admitting that he's a virgin and explaining that when a girl says "no," he stops - in contrast to Stradlater whose response is to ply the girl in "this Abraham Lincoln, sincere voice" until she complies. The cars used on these dates are never Holden's, and, although he is sixteen, he never drives in the novel. That age, sixteen, usually marks the beginning of access to cars, a privilege in the United States that brings with it a certain amount of freedom, freedom that can translate into access to sex. But just as Holden doesn't drive, he's not ready to have sex. Though he explains his virginity by putting it off on the reluctance of the girls he's been with, it's clear that he is reluctant himself. The cars in the novel offer sexual opportunities to a genuinely interested Holden, functioning as a sort of transitional location, a precursor to more adult sexual milieus. But for Holden the transition from child to adult, particularly in terms of sexuality, is confusing and often painful. His dates in cars mirror that confusion, as they are both exciting and the source of some of his most overwhelming fears.

Expensive cars are both admired and scorned by Holden. On the first page, we hear about his brother's new Jaguar, "One of those little English jobs that can do around two hundred miles an hour. It cost him damn near four thousand bucks." His roommate's father, an entrepreneurial undertaker, has a "big goddam Cadillac"; the father talks about Jesus all the time, even when he is driving, "I can just see the big phony bastard shifting into first gear and asking Jesus to send him a few more stiffs." (Ch. 3).

Holden says (to Sally Hayes), "Take most people, they're crazy about cars. They worry if they get a little scratch on them, and they're always talking about how many miles they get to a gallon, and if they get a brand-new car already they start thinking about trading it in for one that's even newer. I don't even like old cars. I mean they don't even interest me. I'd rather have a goddam horse. A horse is at least human, for God's sake." (Ch. 19).

Edition used: New York, Signet, 1953.



**Author:** J. D. Salinger (b. 1919)

**Title:** *Nine Stories*

**Date:** 1953 **Written:** © 1948, 1949, 1950, 1951, 1953

**Systems:** Commuting train, car, cab

**Context:** Ca. 1950; some stories are set earlier, New York suburbs

These stories presuppose familiarity with some of the customs and practices of New York area, suburban commuting life which may have been quite obscure to other readers. For example, "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut" begins with a word play on the Merritt Parkway, mis-named "Merrick" by Mary Jane, the visitor from New York. As the two former college classmates get drunk in the afternoon that an ice storm begins. Mary Jane worries, "I hardly have any anti-freeze in the car," showing, probably, her ignorance about the automotive dangers from this kind of storm. Eloise, the host, later lies to her husband who calls from the train station to get a ride home, saying falsely that her car is parked in by Mary Jane's and the keys are lost. She suggests he get a lift from friends, but he can't; then "Why don't you boys form a platoon and march home?" a satirical jibe at his military experience. The whole issue of "bedroom communities," the possibility of the husband staying late at the office, the need for the wife for the drop off and pick up at the suburban station are all involved but not stated in the conversation. In contrast to the nastiness in Eloise's marriage, the black maid, first "whosis" and later Grace, asks if her husband can stay over because of the storm and is refused, "[H]e can't spend the night here. I'm not running a hotel."

Running errands in the suburbs is a sign of restored order and family at the end of "Down at the Dinghy." Boo Boo tells her son, "We'll drive to town and get some pickles, and some bread, and we'll eat the pickles in the car, and then we'll go to the station and get Daddy, and then we'll bring Daddy home and make him take us for a ride in the boat." This after the son had reported on the servants' anti-semitic remark about the husband, but had thought that "kike" meant kite.

"Pretty Mouth and Green My Eyes" involves a husband trying to figure out why his wife is late. He calls a friend who speculates that she and her companions hopped in a cab to the Village, since they "missed their last train" (from New York back home to the suburbs) - no, they drove in. The need to plan around train schedules, and the difficulty of keeping family members informed about changes in plans is exacerbated by limits on what kinds of transportation is available, but all of this is understated in Salinger's elusive style of telling his stories.

"The Laughing Man" involves a boy's club which uses a reconverted commercial bus (with straw seats) in the 1930s for trips from far uptown New York to Central Park to play sports, go to museums, and take holiday trips to Palisades Park. The all-male world is first broken into when the Chief, the adult who organizes the club, puts a woman's photograph in the front of the bus; the girl friend finally appears, talking about the trains she missed and caught in order to link up with the group; she finally insinuates herself into the baseball game. The fragile rituals and the fellowship of the bus world are thus destroyed.

"De Daumier-Smith's Blue Period," set in 1939, shows a barely-qualified art teacher who escapes from New York, where he was "holding on to the enamel pole near the driver's seat, buttocks to buttocks with the chap behind me" on the Lexington Avenue bus amid the driver's continued request to "'step to the rear of the vehicle.'" Then "Things got much worse. One afternoon, a week or so later, as I was coming out of the Ritz Hotel, where Bobby and I were indefinitely stopping, it seemed to me that all the seats from all the buses in New York had been unscrewed and taken out and set up in the street, where a monstrous game of Musical Chairs was in full swing." Enough - on to Montreal!

The final story in the collection, "Teddy," is set in the early 1950s on an ocean liner, and it includes incidental details about on-board recreation (deck tennis, swimming, shuffleboard), reserving deck chairs, taking meals, and the ship's daily newspaper.

Edition used: New York: Signet, 1954.

## 202

**Author:** Arthur Miller (b. 1915)

**Title:** *Death of a Salesman*

**Date:** 1949

**Systems:** Automobile

**Context:** Contemporary, New York city

Linda's first question of her husband, Willy, is "You didn't smash the car, did you?" which highlights two issues - the central role the car plays in his salesman's job and (as it turns out later) a pattern of accidents which the insurance inspector thinks shows Willy's suicidal tendency. One of their sons, Happy, recalls his father's stopping at a green light and going on the red, thus explaining the accident as simple careless driving. As part of his general pattern of avoiding what's really going on, he tells a neighbor that "A little trouble with the car" is why he is home, not that he's lost his job. His failure is symbolically described as "driving seven hundred miles home without having earned a cent." His frustrated hopes include a dream that he could work in New York, and "I'll never get behind a wheel the rest of my life!" so the car becomes part of his prison.

Willy's current car is a Studebaker, but he is so disoriented by his failure as a salesman that he had to drive home at ten miles an hour (four hours from Yonkers to Brooklyn). Earlier in the day he had struggled, because the "car kept going off onto the shoulder"; he was "even observing the scenery" this time, tried to open the windshield, "I absolutely forgot I was driving." Soon he recalls that "windshields don't open on new cars" - he was thinking of their old, red 1928 Chevy. Insurance and repair costs for the Studebaker are part of Willy's ongoing financial bind - the need for carburetor repairs leads him to say "They ought to prohibit manufacture of that car."

The Chevy symbolizes the Lomans' better days. In one of several flashbacks, Willy and his sons are simonizing it: "Don't leave the hubcaps, boys." They did such a good job that the car dealer didn't believe it had gone eighty thousand miles. This Simonizing becomes a telling moment when Willy and his sons, especially Biff, were genuinely close together - Willy wants to "get back to all the great times" he tells his brother's ghost. Summing up near the end of the play, "After all the highways, and the trains, and the appointments, and the years, you end up more dead than alive."

At the end of the play, Willy's car is heard leaving the house "at full speed," on to his death.

Edition used: Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976.

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# The 1950s

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In different contexts, [Kerouac](#) and [Nabokov](#) describe long-distance, continental driving around America, Kerouac "on the road" in the western states, Nabokov's Humbert Humbert from motel to motel in an elaborate pattern to avoid his pursuers. [Selby](#), by contrast, presents the complex culture of socially isolated young men in Brooklyn where sex, violence, and the local economy depend on cars. [Hawkes](#) shows various symbolic and material roles that the car plays in one family's life, while [O'Connor's](#) preacher in *Wise Blood* turns an old Essex into his pulpit. [Roethke](#) presents a drive on washed out roads as a symbol for the speaker's unconscious mind. [Stafford's](#) "Traveling Through the Dark" juxtaposes a dead deer on the road with his car's animation. [Warren](#) shows the decline of the Appalachian region partly in terms of its collapsing infrastructure. [Bellow](#) charts an elderly woman's struggle to keep her aging car in working condition so she can get to her remote home in rural California. A scheme to steal an antique Ford from a woman through fraudulent marriage to her daughter is the subject of [O'Connor's](#) "The Life You Save...." In another of her [stories](#), a grandmother's misremembered and confusing road directions lead a family to its death. [Chase](#) highlights car models as a way to identify gangsters and their police pursuers on Kansas highways. [McMurtry](#) shows the importance of the car culture in Texas with special emphasis on the car's role in teenagers' sexual encounters. [Stafford](#) in "The Trip" gives images of the drive-in restaurant, while [Booth](#) characterizes the rural Maine economy partly by the way people repair and recycle old cars. In [Albee's](#) play, segregated Southern hospitals are shown to cause blues singer Bessie Smith's death following an auto accident, while [Wilson](#) dramatizes the effects of segregation in the Pittsburgh local trucking industry. [Cushman](#) creates a plot around a man's gradually selling off parts of his prized Buick as an allegory about the general decline of Native Americans in the face of whites' technology. [Nabokov's](#) Professor Pnin, after struggling with unreliable railway and bus schedules finally joins the automobile age in his eccentric and bumbling way.

[Cheever's](#) "Country Husband" depicts the survivor of an airplane crash whose near-tragedy cannot be communicated to his family or neighbors, as he deals with routine problems commuting by train to the suburbs. [Nemerov's](#) poem gives images of the airplane as a symbol of the Eisenhower administration. [Lensky](#) shows the Mississippi River valley, with its tugboats and lock system, while [Bissell](#) deals with technical problems of towing barges during a flood on the River, as well as competition from the railroads. [Baldwin](#) describes an African-American expatriate's voyage from France to the United States on an ocean liner, and then his wonder at the new highway system. [Ferlinghetti](#) links the multi-lane highway to images from Goya's drawings of war, while [Lowell](#) associates the building of a parking garage and cars with tail fins with a general indifference to the pain of wars in this century.

[O'Connor](#) uses a train trip to Atlanta to describe a young white Georgia boy's first contact with blacks, where the train station becomes the symbol of his ability to escape back to his home. [Stafford's](#) "West of Your City" has word plays which echo the sound of a moving train, while [Wright](#) builds on the sexual symbolism of the train's masculine imagery. The commuter train in [Cheever's](#) story is the site for a sexually exploited secretary to stalk her former boss for revenge, while [Carver's](#) companion piece focuses on how other passengers react to the woman. [Bellow](#) describes how subway travellers try to guess each others' thoughts and character.

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## 203

**Author:** Jack Kerouac (1922-1969)

**Title:** *On the Road*

**Date:** 1957

**Systems:** Car

**Context:** 1950s, Western states, Mexico

In Kerouac's novel the location of the drama of American life is transferred to the automobile, specifically to the car hurtling at high speed across the continent on a journey more focused on movement than destination. In the first paragraph of the book we learn that Dean Moriarty, the central character, was born on the road, in a "jalopy" in Salt Lake City while his parents were on their way to Los Angeles. From that point on most of the significant events and interactions in the novel occur in cars. The respites in New York, Denver, San Francisco, and other places, make up a relatively small part of the narrative; the focus is on what happens during the drives between these cities. What happens is a mixture of unpredictable "adventures," sandwiched around marathon talk sessions in which stories are traded and the significance of the various experiences discussed and analyzed in an almost frenzied way.

While the focus on the car and on the road makes *On the Road* a key text in broadly understanding the burgeoning of the car culture in post-World War II America, it should be remembered that the book is also an account of the "beat" subculture, that the people in the novel and the lives that they lead are decidedly outside the mainstream. For the most part these people are not car owners (of the various vehicles used for the many trips only two are owned by the travelers - one is soon repossessed, the other breaks down and must be abandoned). Instead it is always a challenge to gain access to cars. Hitchhiking, travel bureau cars (getting a ride in exchange for gas money), borrowing cars, stealing cars - these are some of the ways the characters get around. Money is always an issue; Dean and Sal Paradise (the narrator) are relegated to hitchhiking when broke, but Dean buys a car when he's flush. But even when they have a car, money is low, leading them to steal and pick up hitchhikers for gas money.

Though Dean and Sal are men on their own, they operate in the tradition of the Joads in Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*; they're barely scraping by as they travel from one place to another. Though their situation is never as desperate as the Joads', at the same time they're clearly not on vacation. There is nothing leisurely about the driving. The trips take on the quality of frenzied quests, not for any one place, but for a way of living that can somehow capture the immediacy of the road, the excitement of self-determined movement. What they're after is a full experience of the present moment, each succeeding moment, and the suggestion is that that moment can best be appreciated behind the wheel of a large American automobile, moving at ninety miles per hour across the American landscape.

Edition used: New York: New American Library, 1957

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## 204

**Author:** Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977)

**Title:** *Lolita*

**Date:** 1955

**Systems:** Automobile

**Context:** Contemporary, All of U. S.

Nabokov's infamous novel tells the story of Humbert Humbert, a pederast who sexually exploits his stepdaughter, Lolita, over a several year period as they travel all over the United States by car. The "relationship" is initially made possible by the death of Lolita's mother, who is killed when she is run over by a car. To evade the prying eyes of friends and neighbors, Humbert takes Lolita on the road, moving from one motel to another. The series of motels and "Kumfy Kabins" that they frequent offer a anonymity essential for the continued satisfaction of Humbert's desires. Humbert, the narrator of the novel, provides a detailed account of the various categories of accommodations, the motor courts, tourist homes, "'Colonial' Inns," self-described "'high-class'" resorts, and so on. The motels and restaurants and roadside attractions that are depicted, as well as the roads themselves, offer a contrast to contemporary car travel, pre-dating the advent of interstate highways and the subsequent takeover of the overnight accommodations business by corporate chains. But the road as a place to escape to is still a familiar notion, and certainly the long trip is an attempt to separate

Lolita from the protection of community. Humbert jealously guards all her movements wherever they are staying, making sure she makes no connections, shares no confidences. Lolita is effectively removed from her childhood, not only placed in an adult position sexually, but socially isolated from all other children. Their perpetual "guilty locomotion" ensures that isolation.

Humbert's actions are certainly reprehensible, an admission he frequently (in hindsight) makes; he is aware of what Lolita lost because of him and that he can never make amends for the crime of ending her childhood prematurely. But he insists that he truly loved her. When he finds her again - she escaped from him at fourteen - she is seventeen, married and pregnant, and clearly no longer a "nymphet"; and yet he asks her to leave with him: "From here to that old car you know so well there is a stretch of twenty, twenty-five paces. It is a very short walk. Make those twenty-five steps. Now. Right now. Come just as you are. And we shall live happily ever after." The car is still all he has to offer, an illicit, shabby, and lonely life on the road, moving from one motel to the next. She of course refuses, having no desire to return to that life with Humbert.

In an afterword to the book, Nabokov insists that Lolita "has no moral in tow," that it is a fiction, like all his fiction, that affords him "aesthetic bliss,... a state of being where art ... is the norm." Seen in this light, the action of the novel gives Nabokov the opportunity to depict the poetry of place names, of car types, of all that borders the roads Lolita and Humbert travel. In spots the novel is a litany of those places and names, revealing Nabokov's fascination with the emotions and impressions that such terms evoke.

Further, Nabokov turns the road map of the U.S. into a sort of game board (and we learn Humbert is enamored of various games, such as chess); tracing the route of the initial trip as they travel through "corn belts and cotton belts" a pattern begins to emerge. Their progression is certainly not linear, but nor is it completely random. Instead they move in a series of back and forth motions, or zigzags, going west then back east, north then south then north again. It's been suggested that the trip forms a butterfly on the map (an allusion to Nabokov's frequent butterfly collecting trips), but the constant backtracking, rather than forming some concrete image, reflects Humbert's desire to recapture the fleeting moments, to somehow make time stop and indefinitely perpetuate his enjoyment of Lolita's "nymphetood." Driving in the novel, rather than a means of getting someplace, functions as a sort of anti-movement, an attempt to occupy a space apart from a disapproving society in a way that defeats the inevitability of time passing

Edition used: New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1955.

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## 205

**Author:** Hubert Selby, Jr. (b. 1928)

**Title:** *Last Exit to Brooklyn*

**Date:** © 1957, 1960, 1961, 1964

**Systems:** Car, subway

**Context:** Contemporary, New York City

A series of five stories (or dramatic acts) followed by a "Coda" which give portraits of working and poor people from Brooklyn. While the title refers to the New York subway, the most prominent use of that system is as a temporary escape route after crimes and acts of violence to make pursuit hard for the cops ("Tralala"). While most New York stories emphasize or celebrate the interconnections created by public transport, this novel points to isolated communities at the end of the line. It also parodies the car culture of the 1950s.

The stories begin with a group of men hanging out at the "Greeks" diner near the army base, "Watching cars roll by.

Identifying them. Make. Model. Year. Horse power. Overhead valve. V-8. 6,8, a hundred cylinders... Cant beat a Plymouth fora pickup... Outrun any cop in the city with a Roadmaster..." The technical specs drift into fantasy, and then into the power to use a car to get sex (and violence): "Cruise around in a load like that [a 47 Continental] with the top down and a pair of shades and some sharp clothes and ya haveta beat the snatch off witha club." The men try to "identify them by the sound of the motor then looked to see if they were right" ("Another Day Another Dollar"). A similar crowd is into motorcycles. Tommy, "the guy who got married" and had a kid and threw a party. He has a 76 Indian, "Not a onelunger," even though it's small. "Yawant somethin that can be fixed up. Yaknow, made real sharp - streamers and things and a bigass buddyseat with chrome. Man, the snatch really comes runnin... Tommyd sit on this pecka with wheels gunnin the motor and retadin the spark soundin like a gun battle." His friend Spook "had the hots for a bike for months. 6 months before he even got one he was wearing a motorcycle hat. Of course all the boys with bikes woreem." Spook prices bikes then tells the group "about the great Harley-Davidson machine he saw" ("And Baby Makes Three").

The links among cars, sex, and violence are insistent and often grotesque. The patterns of car-talk and bike-talk, with an emphasis on fantasy and boasting are echoed in the ways talk about their sexual conquests. "He talked with some of the men, listening to their jokes, their stories of dames fucked, followed each story with one of his own about how he bagged some dame and threw a fuck intoer and how she thought he was so great and wanted to seeim again" ("Strike"). In one shocking parody of the motif of sex in the back seat, a teenage whore, after getting very drunk and undressing in a bar, is gang raped until she dies in a "wrecked car in the lot on the corner of 57th street" ("Tralala").

The longest story, "Strike," focuses on Harry Black, a union leader who is in charge of the picket lines for several months. In one episode, management contracts a local trucking company to take finished goods out of the plant which precipitates fights between strikers and the police. Harry's major triumph is in getting two men to blow up all the trucks, an event which gets into the newspapers, even though he cannot take credit. Throughout, Harry uses the strike fund for doubtful purposes - ranging from buying enormous quantities of beer for the picketers to paying his cab fare so he can visit his lovers in gay bars nearly every evening. When the strike ends, Harry's life collapses - among other things, he has to ride the cheaper subway to continue his sex life, "It had been a long time since Harry had ridden the subway and it seemed to be exceptionally cold and stuffy and every turn and bump seemed to be directed against his comfort."

"Landsend" is a series of portraits of people who live in the Projects. Race plays a major role, as in the extended story of a black man, Abraham, who "opened the door of his bigass Cadillac and looked smugly at the people sitting, the people passing and the people washing their cars.... It was his. Ghuddamn right. All his. He looked at the dashboard with all its knobs and patted it. Every ghuddamn hunk of chrome belonged to him, Abe.... [He] rubbed his hand along the fine upholstery, patted the dashboard again (ghuddamn if it didnt shine like a babys ass), turned up the radio and once more dug the cats washin their cars with buckers of water, soap and sponges.... Ah, it was great, real great man, to just sit and dig the radio and smell the car, that special CADILLAC smell..." Predictably, in this novel, this advertisement-like pride in ownership leads to sex: "this was the kindda day you lake to take a ride and just cruise around and dig the music on the radio and maybe pick somethin up." Later he does pick up Lucy at a bar: "Abe let her look his Cadillac over before he opened the door. He wanted to be sure she saw those bigass fins and the whitewalls." Lucy gives him more sex than he has strength for, and he can barely struggle home to his wife - the badass Caddy is not mentioned in this humiliating return.

We get a grim hint of nature in the last scene: "The sun rose behind the Gowanus Parkway lighting the oil filmed water of the Gowanus Canal and the red bricks of the Project."

Edition used: New York: Grove Press, 1965.



**Title:** *Second Skin*

**Date:** 1964

**Systems:** Automobile

**Context:** 1920s, but chiefly 1950s

The protagonist in Hawkes' novel is Skipper, a man in his late fifties looking back on the tragedies of his life from the vantage point of a better and contented present. Though the events recalled are complex, mixed up with Skipper's longings and fears, the story concentrates on deaths, those of Skipper's father, his wife, his son-in-law, Fernandez, and his daughter, Cassandra. In each case automobiles play a large part in the lives and deaths of these characters, functioning sometimes as reflections of their conditions and sometimes as malevolent machines of destruction, wielded by the characters who menace the lives of Skipper's loved ones.

Describing his childhood, Skipper identifies a memory of his mortician father washing their hearse (which doubled as the family car), his mother watching, as "the vision lying closest to the peaceful center of my childhood." But we also learn that the father commits suicide, with young Skipper as witness, and subsequently the hearse becomes a symbol for Skipper of his ruined childhood, dating from his father's death.

Fernandez is most clearly linked with a car, his car, as Skipper realizes "that the enormous outdated Packard with all its terrible capacity for noise and metallic disintegration was somehow a desperate equivalent of my little old world Catholic son-in-law." The car functions as both a source of power for Fernandez and a reflection of his limitations: when Cassandra gets in the car for the wedding trip he "changes," slamming the door and ordering his bride to drive; but the decrepit condition of the car and his inability to drive it suggest an impotence that we later learn extends to his role as husband.

Two characters instrumental in Cassandra's eventual suicide are Miranda and Jomo, and both are closely linked to their "hot rods." Miranda's automobile (which Skipper dubs "Cleopatra's Car") appears initially as a wreck, on blocks in her backyard; Miranda cynically tries to seduce Skipper in the car, to keep him occupied while Jomo and friends sexually use Cassandra. Later, after Miranda's car is fixed, Skipper uses it to chase Jomo, whose "hot rod" is described as black and predatory, and to try to save Cassandra from his clutches. But it turns out Skipper has been decoyed away from the scene of Jomo's crime, and before he can arrive Cassandra has killed herself.

Skipper's past is presented as one long nightmare, moving from one humiliation, one death, one loss to another - and doing so by car. But he is writing from the perspective of his new life, which is on an unidentified Caribbean island where there are no vehicles. The closest object to the machines of destruction that have haunted his life is a great water wheel, now frozen in place and overgrown. Here the wheel, unlike the steering wheels of his past, is powerless, a reminder of the threat of machines/cars, but of no danger. Instead of death and loss, Skipper now leads a fecund life: he is (supposedly) the father-to-be of a pregnant young woman's child and he works as an "Artificial Inseminator" for the island's cattle. The cars that menaced his life were all damaged, junkers and rustbuckets, suggesting and wielding decay and death. But the island is green and alive, free from the fumes of cars and, more importantly, their destructive drivers. For Skipper cars represent a death-dealing technology that he has to escape from, if is to elude the fate of so many others close to him.

Edition used: New York: New Directions, 1964.

**Author:** Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964)



**Title:** *Wise Blood*

**Date:** 1952

**Systems:** Automobile

**Context:** late 1940s-early 1950s, South

In her introduction to the 1962 edition of this short novel O'Connor describes it as a "comic novel about a Christian malgre lui, and as such, very serious, for all comic novels that are any good must be about matters of life and death." The main character, Hazel Motes, sets out for the city of Taulkinham "'to do some things I never have done before'" (Ch. 1). The central "thing" he does is to develop and preach his philosophy of "The Church Without Christ," a personal gospel that attempts to deny Christ but which actually reveals Motes' obsession with the Redeemer. Key to this task is the purchase of a beat up, "rat-colored" Essex, which becomes both Motes's home and his pulpit. His grandfather's Ford had previously been used as a preaching platform. Although his preaching fails to win converts, the car remains a source of solace, particularly in the face of all the ugliness that Motes sees around him (a highway is "ragged with filling stations and trailer camps and roadhouses" [Ch. 3]), and which so angers him.

Near the end of the novel Motes decides that going to another city will offer a fresh start, and he contemplates the advantage of having a car, "of having something that moved fast, in privacy, to the place you wanted to be" (Ch. 11). But before he leaves town he has a confrontation with "the Prophet," another preacher who has taken to imitating Motes and preaching the Church Without Christ. Convinced that the Prophet is a non-believer, a follower of Christ, Motes first runs his car off the road and then runs him over. "The Essex stood half over the other Prophet as if it were pleased to guard what it had finally brought down." Afterwards Motes leaves town, though his car is barely working. The filling-station attendant sizes up the mechanical dilemma: "there was a leak in the gas tank and two in the radiator and that the rear tire would probably last twenty miles if he went slow" (Ch. 13). Near the outskirts of Taulkinham he is pulled over by a policeman who asks Motes to get out of the car and then pushes the Essex over an embankment. Defeated, Motes returns to town and blinds himself, a final act he thinks provides access to an inner light. Without the car his mobility is restricted, and so he injures himself, as the car has been wrecked. The car, as the vehicle for his beliefs, had sustained him in his quest: "Nobody with a good car needs to be justified" (Ch. 6). Having lost the car, his quest is over, and he turns inward, literally shutting out the light of the world.

Edition used: *Three by Flannery O'Connor*. New York: Signet, 1962.

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## 208

**Author:** Theodore Roethke (1908-1963)

**Title:** "Journey to the Interior"

**Date:** 1961

**Systems:** Automobile

**Context:** Contemporary, East Coast

"In the long journey out of the self, / There are many detours, washed-out interrupted raw places / Where the shale slides dangerously / And the back wheels hang almost over the edge." Thus begins an elaborate comparison where various road and driving conditions are tied to the narrator's troubled psychological state, his "interior." Later: "I remember how it was to drive in gravel, / Watching for dangerous down-hill places, where the wheels whined beyond eighty - / When you hit the deep pit at the bottom of the swale, The trick was to throw the car sideways and charge over the hill, full to the throttle." You have to know quite a bit about how a car works under specialized conditions to figure out what the

narrator is saying about his distress. The passing landscape, and the implied psychological environment in which the narrator lives, are also given in precise terms: "The towns with their high pitted road-crowns and deep gutters, / ... / An old bridge below with a buckled iron railing, broken by some idiot plunger, / Underneath, the sluggish water running between weeds, broken wheels, tires, stones. / And all flows past - " The auto age gives us thrills, danger, garbage.

Edition used: William J. Martz, ed. *The Distinctive Voice: Twentieth-Century Poetry*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1966.

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## 209

**Author:** William Stafford (b. 1914)

**Title:** "Traveling Through the Dark"

**Date:** 1960

**Systems:** Automobile

**Context:** Contemporary

This is a brief poem describes the narrator's finding a dead, pregnant deer "on the edge of Wilson River road," and physically feeling that the fawn is still alive, but "never to be born." This is set in symbolic contrast with the car, which is presented as also being alive: "The car aimed ahead its lowered parking lights; / under the hood purred the steady engine. / I stood in the glare of the warm exhaust turning red." The deer are pushed off into the canyon, which is "usually best" so that the narrow road can be clear, for "to swerve might make more [deer or people] dead." The living cars control the road.

Edition used: Lynn Altenbernd and Leslie L. Lewis. *Introduction to Literature: Poems*, 3rd ed. New York: Macmillan, 1975.

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## 210

**Author:** Robert Penn Warren (1905-1989)

**Title:** "Dragon Country: To Jacob Boehme"

**Date:** 1957

**Systems:** Railroad, wagon, car

**Context:** Contemporary, Kentucky

In this poem, Warren uses the idea of a mythic dragon to account for falling land values, religious revivals, Appalachian poverty, and a systematic eagerness to avoid the truth. "The slime on the railroad rails is where he has crossed the track" - it is part of a "track of disrepair" which includes what "they found, in the woods, the wagon on its side, / Mules torn from trace chains, and you saw how the harness had burst." Troops were promised to stop the dragon; "No one talks" about it. A salesman has a blowout, steps from his car - and the sheriff has the car burned up to hide the evidence. "If a man disappears - well, the fact is something to hide. The family says, gone to Akron, or up to Ford, in Detroit" - Jebb Johnson's boot, "with the leg, what was left" is found, and it is destroyed, too.

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## 211

**Author:** Saul Bellow (b. 1915)

**Title:** "Leaving the Yellow House"

**Date:** 1957

**Systems:** Automobile, accident

**Context:** Contemporary, rural California

Old Hattie, age 72, continues to live at Sego Desert Lake along with "six white neighbors," but she is having trouble making it alone. Once a week, "At the wheel of her old turret-shaped car, she drove, seemingly methodical but speeding dangerously, across forty miles of mountainous desert to buy frozen meat pies and whisky.... And at five o'clock she drove back at the same speed, calmly, partly blinded by the smoke of her cigarette." The central episode is her accident: "The explanation she gave was that she had sneezed, and the sneeze had blinded her and made her twist the wheel. The motor was killed and all four wheels of the car sat smack on the rails. Hattie crept down from the door, high off the roadbed. A great fear took hold of her - for the car, for the future, and not only for the future but spreading back into the past." As usual, when she drives home she is quite drunk, which is the real cause of the accident. She convinces a bartender to help her pull the car off the tracks; she first takes the wheel of his pickup and prays to herself: "Please, God, I didn't bend the axle or crack the oil pan." As part of the effort to pull the car a chain slips and breaks her arm; following a difficult recovery in the hospital where she nearly dies, she gets back to the yellow house. She is acutely aware of her car's significance - it is essential for her independence. She finds that the car still runs, and "Proudly, happily, she listened to the noise of tappets." She keeps hoping that her arm will heal so she can drive again. Late in the story she tries to drive it, but fails: "Then she started the motor and tried to drive out of the yard. But she could not release the emergency brake with its rasplike rod. She reached with her good hand, the right, under the steering wheel and pressed her bosom on it and strained. No, she could not shift the gears and steer." Even though she is dotty and an alcoholic, her approach to the car itself is precise and technical.

Edition used: Charles Kaplan, ed. *Literature in America: The Modern Age*. New York: The Free Press, 1971.

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## 212

**Author:** Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964)

**Title:** "The Life You Save May Be Your Own"

**Date:** 1955

**Systems:** Automobile

**Context:** 1950s, South

The main character in this short story is Tom T. Shiftlet, a one-armed itinerant carpenter who appears at the farm of an old woman and her retarded daughter. Secretly coveting an old car he spots in a shed on the farm, a "a 1928 or '29 Ford"

that hasn't run in fifteen years, Shiftlet offers to stay and do some work. He sleeps in the car. Soon the old woman is scheming to have him marry the daughter and stay permanently. After getting the car running and painting it, Shiftlet agrees to the marriage, but insists on a honeymoon weekend. But once on the road he abandons the daughter and takes the car, heading onto Mobile alone.

The Ford functions for Shiftlet in a contradictory manner, offering redemption, but doing so through the temptation to betray the two women. The title of the story, which refers to roadside signs that admonish people to drive carefully, suggests the redemption the car offers. Shiftlet tells the old woman that "'the body, lady, is like a house. It don't go anywhere; but the spirit, lady, is like a automobile: always on the move, always"; later he adds "'a man's spirit means more to him than anything else.'" For the first time in his life Shiftlet is moving, mobile, freed from the usual constraints. But as he drives away from the daughter he begins to feel depressed. He picks up a hitchhiker, a boy, to try to assuage his depression, but the boy proves mean-spirited, and soon willingly abandons Shiftlet, who in response implores the Lord to "'Break forth and wash the slime from his earth.'" In answer a thunderstorm appears, but rather than being washed clean, in the last scene of the story Shiftlet races the "galloping shower into Mobile." The car, then, also functions as a means of outdistancing the Christian redemption that it initially seems to offer.

Edition used: *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977.

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## 213

**Author:** Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964)

**Title:** "A Good Man is Hard to Find"

**Date:** 1955

**Systems:** Automobile

**Context:** Contemporary, Georgia

This short story tells of a family's drive to Florida (from Atlanta), their accident on a lonely dirt road, and subsequent discovery by three escaped convicts. Told from the point-of-view of the grandmother - who is accompanying her son and his wife and their two children - the story traces their trip from home, through a stop at a roadside restaurant, to the detour down the dirt road. The grandmother convinces her son, Bailey, to make the turn off to see an old mansion, the site of a party she attended when a young woman. But after a few minutes she realizes that her memory has deceived her and the house she remembers is actually in Tennessee; she flinches at this realization and the cat she's holding on her lap leaps onto Bailey's neck, causing him to drive off the road. Within moments they are discovered by the convicts, the Misfit and his two cronies, whom the grandmother makes the mistake of verbally recognizing. Subsequently the whole family is shot and killed, the grandmother last. The reason for the detour is a visit to the past, symbolized by the move from a paved highway to a deserted dirt road; but events on the old road suggest that the grandmother's belief that times used to be "better," is questionable at best. Further, the turn off suggests a veering from the path of righteousness, a path the grandmother tries to convince the Misfit that he can find. But when she herself discovers salvation, reaching out to the Misfit with the last minute realization that he is "'one of my own children,'" recognizing her Christian responsibility for and connection to even the most benighted individual, he shoots her three times.

Edition used: *A Good Man is Hard to Find*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977.

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## 214

**Author:** James Hadley Chase (1906-1985)

**Title:** *No Orchids for Miss Blandish*

**Date:** 1961

**Systems:** Automobile

**Context:** Contemporary, Kansas

The cover says it's a "notorious novel of violence and brutality which has left more than 2 1/2 million readers gasping!" The wealthy victim drives a Jaguar; the first group of kidnappers a Lincoln; the sadistic Grissom gang (who steal the victim from the first group) a Buick; the federal investigators a Ford. The players are often identified by their cars rather than who's in them - "the Buick pulled up." The kidnapping is on Highway 54, the trunk road from Pittsburg (Kansas) to Kansas City; the ransom money is dropped on a straight stretch of Highway 71 near the Maxwell filling station. And so on. These locations and brand names (but not models or years) add realism - even though we don't get brands for food and clothing, people on both sides of the law [and violence] have "Thompsons."

Edition used: New York: Avon, 1966.

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## 215

**Author:** Larry McMurtry (b. 1936)

**Title:** *The Last Picture Show*

**Date:** 1966

**Systems:** Automobiles

**Context:** 1949-1950, Texas

Cars are everywhere since even the distances within Thalia are great. In addition to getting around, they help identify characters and places - by color and brand name almost always. Sonny the young hero's '41 Chevrolet pickup, Abilene, the big shot's Mercury ("best car in the country"), a farmer's red GMC pickup, Jacy, the lovely and wealthy girl's white Ford convertible and her mother's big blue Cadillac, the night watchman's old white Nash, and so on.

Many of the families and individuals are touched by automobile accidents. Sam the Lion, owner of the first Ford agency in town, had his youngest son run over by a deputy sheriff (Ch. 1). Frank Crawford's father, the former high school principal became a drug addict after being injured and his wife was killed in a wreck (Ch. 3).

The highschoolers are on the road for their sexual adventures - the bus for the basketball team where Jacy and Duane pet in the back seat (Ch. 8). Lester in his Oldsmobile drives Jacy to a naked-swimming party in Wichita, where even richer kids are in sports cars and the host owns the "first Ford Thunderbird in that part of the country" (Ch. 9). Sonny drives coach Popper's wife to a doctor's appointment, which begins their sexual liaison (Ch. 6). And the trips which Sonny and Duane take to Mexico (Ch. 16), and to Fort Worth on Duane's last night before he ships out for Korea on the Continental Trailways bus (Ch. 25) emphasize the ways cars are used. Cars are, of course, involved in the silly eloping which Sonny and Jacy attempt, and in her parents' pursuit of them until they get the marriage annulled (Ch. 23).

Young Billy, who is feeble minded, is first shown sweeping the highway clean, an odd comment on the town's poverty and economic depression (Ch. 1). Later he taken by the boys to a grotesque encounter with a prostitute in the pickup's

cab (Ch. 10). After the death of Sam the Lion, his mentor, and the last picture show, he waits, confused in the theater. When he flees to the street, he is run over by a passing cattle truck (Ch. 26).

Edition used: New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989.

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## 216

**Author:** William Stafford (b. 1914)

**Title:** "The Trip"

**Date:** 1961

**Systems:** Auto

**Context:** Contemporary

The automobile confronts the drive-in: "Our car was fierce enough: / no one could tell we were only ourselves; / so we drove, equals of the car." At the restaurant they watch the waitress and manager doing their jobs which leads to the final, cynical comment that "Some people you meet are so dull / that you always remember their names," even though the restaurant workers are anonymous.

Edition used: William J. Martz, ed. *The Distinctive Voice: Twentieth-Century Poetry*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1966.

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## 217

**Author:** Philip Booth (b. 1925)

**Title:** "Maine"

**Date:** 1960

**Systems:** Auto

**Context:** Contemporary, Maine

The poem celebrates Maine's commitment to recycling and re-using automobiles, almost as if the state were a national resource. Automobiles become farm vehicles, engines are removed first to power boats, and eventually to provide anchors. The bodies are re-used as curio stands where they attract tourists in their cars, and so the cycle is closed.

When old cars get retired, they go to Maine.  
Thick as cows in backlots off the blacktop,  
East of Bucksport, down the washboard  
from Penobscot to Castine,  
they graze behind frame barns: a Ford  
turned tractor, Hudsons chopped to half-ton  
trucks, and Chevy panels, jacked up,  
tireless, geared to saw a cord of wood.

Old engines never die. Not in Maine,  
where men grind valves the way their wives grind axes.  
Ring-jobs burned-out down the Turnpike  
still make revolutions, turned marine.  
If Hardscrabble Hill makes her knock,  
Maine rigs the water-jacket salt: a man  
can fish forever on converted sixes,  
and for his mooring, sink a V-8 block.

When fishing's poor, a man traps what he can,  
Even when a one-horse hearse from Bangor fades  
away, the body still survives:  
painted lobster, baited - off Route 1 -  
with home preserves and Indian knives,  
she'll net a parlor-full of Fords and haul in  
transient Cadillacs like crabs. Maine trades  
in staying power, not shiftless drives.

Edition used: William J. Martz, ed. *The Distinctive Voice: Twentieth-Century Poetry*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1966.

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## 218

**Author:** Edward Albee (b. 1928)

**Title:** *The Death of Bessie Smith*

**Date:** 1960

**Systems:** Automobiles

**Context:** 1950s, South

In Albee's play, Bessie Smith, the great blues singer, never actually makes an appearance on stage, although she is an important character. Instead Albee recreates the place, in a small southern town, mostly at a small "semiprivate" hospital, and the circumstances of Smith's death.

In the opening scene of the play we learn that Jack, a black man and new friend of Smith's is going to drive her "north," to New York City, where she can do some recording and try to revive her flagging career. Jack doesn't reappear until the end of the play, when he shows up at the hospital to tell of the car accident he and Smith have been in while on their way north. They have already been refused admission at the other local hospital, also a "white" hospital, and so Jack has brought Smith to the one where the play mostly takes place. Smith's arm was "almost torn off from her shoulder" in the accident, and as we learn at the very end of the play, after she has again been refused admission, she has bled to death in route to the second hospital. Though the car initially offers the means of escape from the South, the means of getting north, Jack and Bessie Smith are unable to make it; but not so much because of the accident, but because of the failure of white southern society to acknowledge the humanity of blacks, their crucial need for admittance. At the first hospital Jack is told to wait, even though he insists "This is an emergency!" The "accident" is an old one, tied up with the experience of blacks in North America over the last several hundred years, and bleeding has been going on for a long time. The play suggests that any more waiting will be fatal, as the "wait" was fatal for Bessie Smith.

Edition used: New York: Coward-McCann, 1960.

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## 219

**Author:** August Wilson (b. 1945)

**Title:** *Fences*

**Date:** 1986

**Systems:** Truck-driving



**Context:** 1957, Pittsburgh; African-American perspective

The play's main character is garbage collector Troy Maxson. A gifted baseball player in his youth, Troy was shut out of the all-white major leagues. The play opens with Troy's discrimination complaint against his Union: "You think only white fellows got sense enough to drive a truck. That ain't no paper job! Hell, anybody can drive a truck. How come you got all whites driving and the colored lifting?" (Act 1: 1). Later, Troy has won the fight with the union and will be the first colored driver in Pittsburgh. Taking some ribbing because he doesn't know how to drive, Troy maintains, "Driving ain't nothing. All you do is point the truck where you want it to go" (Act 1: 4). Driving proves a lonely victory, however. As the token colored driver, Troy is separated from his friends and decides to retire early (Act 2:4).

It is asserted in passing that a women's "hips cushion the ride ... like you riding on Goodyears!" (Act 1: 1).

Edition used: New York: New American Library, 1986.

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## 220

**Author:** Dan Cushman

**Title:** *Stay Away, Joe*

**Date:** 1953

**Systems:** Automobile, wagon, motorcycle

**Context:** Contemporary, Montana, Indian reservation

Located on a gravel road from the Agency to Montana State Highway 29, eighteen miles from Big Springs, Louis Champlain and his family await the return of Big Joe, a Korean War veteran, who has been a rodeo performer at Fort Worth and Madison Square Garden. While bronc busting and wagons, one "rickety and wheelsprung" are part of the scene, most of the men are identified by their cars. These range from a Cadillac sedan, "one of the big ones, somber and hearselike" to a "beaten-up Model A Ford" which has no brakes and must be stopped by ramming a heap of firewood. The Cadillac crosses a small creek, one wheel at a time. Later, a "massive old Hudson sedan, its rear very low on broken springs" gets stuck in the same creek, and it sits there for the rest of the novel as a symbol of the failure of technology to help the Native Americans deal with the present (Ch. 2).

Two self-consuming activities dominate the novel. Louis gets a contract from the Federal government to maintain and increase a cattle herd, but he gradually sells the livestock, including the bull, to pay for alcohol and family expenses. Big Joe gets a Buick which he sells, piece-by-piece, until he is left living in the shell.

When Big Joe arrives he tells how the Cadillac he bought "Burned out the main bearings. Couple of connecting rods too" after making 108 MPH on the highway between Helena and Great Falls. He goes with two of the heifers to Great Falls and returns with a "huge new emerald green Buick sedan," called by Grandpere the "greatest of all skunkwagons" (Ch. 7). After a drinking bout where the store owner, Callahan, had let the air out of the tires by removing the valve cores, Joe drives home and shreds the tires (Ch. 9). He cannot borrow money from Louis, so he sits in the car all day, smoking and listening to the radio until the battery dies. At this point, he begins to sell the parts - the spare and tube for \$18, the wheel for \$7 more, a spotlight (traded for canned food), and so on. After he starts living in the Buick, he trades the transmission for a Harley Davidson which gives him mobility and allows him to court Mamie Callahan, who moves into the car with him (Ch. 10). At one point, experienced car thieves with a set of keys jump into the Buick but find no seats, just a bed roll, chair, stove, and some food. At the tribal fair, Joe borrows \$150 on the motorcycle and \$20 on the Buick to bet on a horse race (Ch. 13). Louis is down to his final cow; a tow truck from "some place in Great Falls" picks up the Buick, and the family finally realizes how fully Joe had equipped it as his residence. Joe and Mamie, just

married, appear on the motorcycle to find the car gone. Joe explains to his father-in-law where they had planned to live, "I had a good place ... but it was stolen away from me...."

Grandpere describes the changes that have occurred: "Long time see things go to hell. When I was young, shoot buffalo. With musket, Sharps rifle, shoot buffalo. All buffalo long time gone. See steamboat come, railroad firewagon come, skunkwagon [automobiles], devilbox [radio] come. All over now barbwire fence, grass plowed under, country go to hell. Republicans Democrats ruin country" (Ch. 11). Living in wrecked cars, selling off the government's cattle become small-scale versions of this general history.

Edition used: Great Falls, MT: Stay Away, Joe Publishers.

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## 221

**Author:** Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977)

**Title:** *Pnin*

**Date:** 1964 Written: © 1953, 1955, 1957

**Systems:** Train, bus, automobile

**Context:** Contemporary, New England

Professor Timofey Pnin is introduced in "that inexorably moving railway coach," but he is on the wrong train. Like many Russian émigrées, he is quite fond of time tables, and he is proud of figuring out his own schedule, in this case, to deliver a guest lecture at Cremona. The schedule is five years old, which explains how he has been misrouted. A conductor helps him find an alternative way to get to Cremona, by taking the bus at Whitchurch (Ch. 1: 1). In the Whitchurch waiting room, he checks his bag, but the baggage clerk on the next shift cannot find it, so he must take the bus without it. He decides to leave the bus at a strange town, since his speech is with his luggage; once off the bus, a helpful person gets him a ride on a truck which lets him arrive in time for his speech (Ch. 1: 2). Another elaborate account of trying to articulate train and bus schedules, with by-the-minute details (Ch. 4: 8) emphasizes the difficulty of getting from one small town to the other with these systems. The choices are to take faster trains and endure a 3 1/2 hour wait or to take a slower train and change to a bus.

The alternative to this series of inconveniences, outdated schedules, and reliance on the good will of functionaries (it seems obvious in retrospect) is the automobile. For the eccentric professor, it becomes a personified car, "moving and poking this way and that in a maze of doubtful roads" on the way to a resort at Onkwedo Spring run by and for émigrées. The car seems a "pale blue, egg-shaped two-door sedan, of uncertain age and in mediocre condition, [which] was manned by an idiot." Professor Pnin learns to drive with a 40 page Manual and an encyclopedia article, rather than lessons at the Waindell Driving School; he can't "combine perceptually the car he was driving in his mind and the car he was driving on the road." He can't understand why to stop at a red light, "when there was not an earthly soul around, heeled or wheeled." He got the car for \$100 from a former student who was marrying the owner of a "far grander machine" (Ch. 5: 1).

The final scene, showing Pnin's acceptance of the auto age is of the professor, just fired from his college, driving his car out of Waindell.

Mr. Lake, the art teacher at a private school, tries to immortalize the motor car. He does this by "making the scenery penetrate the automobile. A polished black sedan was a good subject, especially if parked at the intersection of a tree-bordered street and one of those heavyish spring skies whose bloated gray clouds and amoeba-shaped blotches of blue seem more physical than the reticent elms and evasive pavement." If the body is broken into "separate curves and

panels," the cubist effect brings colors and patterns together, "mirrored in the outside surface of the rear window." The chrome and the distorting effect of reflecting surfaces echo those found in Van Eyck, Petrus Christus and Memling (Ch. 2: 6).

Incidentally, Pnin's landlady, Joan Clements takes a plane to a Western state to visit her married daughter; Professor Clements follows her a day or so later (Ch. 2: 6).

Edition used: New York: Atheneum, 1964.

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## 222

**Author:** John Cheever (1912-1982)

**Title:** "The Country Husband"

**Date:** 1954

**Systems:** Airplane, commuter train

**Context:** Contemporary, suburban New York

The story begins with a survivor's perspective on an airplane crash. That traumatic event is then set next to more ordinary difficulties with commuter schedules and finding lovers' lanes, and, metaphorically, with a dog which "crashed" into a rose garden, how Francis Weed could "wreck everyone's happiness." Throughout, Weed is unable to get any of his family to listen to his account of the plane wreck, just as he cannot speak about an event he witnessed in World War II.

Weed is on an airplane from Minneapolis running into heavy weather. "The color of the cloud darkened to gray, and the plane began to rock." Francis "had never been shaken up so much." His neighbor takes a drink from a flask. "The plane had begun to drop and flounder wildly." After the stewardess announces an emergency landing, "All but the child saw in their minds the spreading wings of the Angel of Death." Hydraulic valves groan and swallow up the pilot's singing of "I've got a sixpence..." over the audio system. A "shrieking high in the air, like automobile brakes" [sic] precedes the plane's hitting its belly in a corn field. The passengers file out the door into the field, then to a barn; a string of taxis take them to Philadelphia. Through it all "there was surprisingly little relaxation of that suspiciousness with which many Americans regard fellow-travellers."

Weed gets a train to New York and then transfers to his regular commuter train to Shady Hill. On the train he talks with Trace Bearden about the crash, but the story of his "brush with death" cannot be re-created; Trace picks up his newspaper for the rest of the ride. At Shady Hill he drives home in his secondhand Volkswagen, where, again, his efforts to discuss the event get lost amidst the family's regular antagonisms and problems (one child has a splinter, for example).

Throughout the middle of the story Weed becomes infatuated with the "frowning and beautiful" baby sitter, Anne Murchison. He drives her home, "out of his own neighborhood, across the tracks, and toward the river, to a street where the near-poor lived." His fantasies about the girl include going with her to Europe on the Mauretania, and, more elaborately and more locally, finding a place to drive her and park the car - the driveway of the Old Parker mansion, a dead end street, "The old land that used to connect Elm Street to the riverbanks."

"He had been bitten gravely" by the girl's looks, so he misses the "seven-thirty-one" and has to wait for the "eight-two." While he waits, the Buffalo night express, covered with ice from the early autumn weather, goes by. He watches people eating breakfast in the dining car, imagines the soiled bed linen in the sleeping-car compartments, and sees "an unclothed woman of exceptional beauty, combing her golden hair." A couple of mornings later on his regular train, he

thinks he sees Anne on the train, but it's an older woman wearing glasses. Like much else in the story, he has "the much deeper feeling of having his good sense challenged."

Edition used: Beverly Lynn, ed. *The Short Story: 30 Masterpieces*. New York: St. Martin's, 1987.

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## 223

**Author:** Howard Nemerov (b. 1920)

**Title:** "Boom!"

**Date:** 1960

**Systems:** Airplane, automobile

**Context:** 1957

An AP bulletin is quoted on how President Eisenhower's pastor had discussed how "modern conveniences" and prosperity had led to growing religious activity. Nemerov's response is a poem in the form of a mocking prayer to a God of progress: "the sky / is constantly being crossed by cruciform / airplanes, in which nobody disbelieves / for a second.... But now the gears mesh and the tires burn / and the ice chatters in the shaker and the priest / in the pulpit..." He asks the Lord that never may "Thy sun for one instant refrain from shining / on the rainbow Buick by the breezeway / or the Chris Craft with the uplift life raft." The satire on the consumerism of this decade is sharpened by the references to brand and model names.

Edition used: Charles Kaplan, ed. *Literature in America: The Modern Age*. New York: The Free Press, 1971.

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## 224

**Author:** Lois Lensky

**Title:** *We Live by the River*

**Date:** 1956

**Systems:** River locks, tow boat

**Context:** Contemporary, Mississippi and Ohio valleys

One of a series, "Roundabout America," for young readers. "Janey Lives Over the Locks" gives episodes in the life of a young girl, her friends, and family. They live next to a lock on the Pearl River, between Louisiana and Mississippi. These people have to cross the lock to get to the store, church, etc.; from it they can see the river traffic carrying logs, sand, gravel, and rolls of paper, as well as the tugboats. The family takes its truck to visit grandma; Janey's father shows up a day late because of a traffic jam near the circus. "Lola Mae Lives on an Island" in the Mississippi. This rehearses similar issues - the logistics of getting provisions from the shore and delivering the island's product, cotton, back to market by a barge which holds their truck. "Sammy Joe Lives on the Bank" has a scene where a towboat pushing a string of barges filled with new automobiles heads down the Ohio toward the lower Mississippi valley.

This sort of book is typical of what is available for American children, either through the school library or to be bought. The "formula" is to give a minimal, episodic plot with a hint of information about how other families deal with logistical problems in their daily lives. As far as we know they stay in print for many decades, sometimes with changes in the illustrations, but rarely the text, to show more contemporary clothing styles, automobile models, and the like.

Edition used: Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1956.

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## 225

**Author:** Richard Bissell (1913-1977)

**Title:** *High Water*

**Date:** 1954

**Systems:** River towboat, train

**Context:** Contemporary, Upper Mississippi river

Covers the trip from St. Louis toward St. Paul of a diesel-powered towboat, the *Far West*, and eight barges during a major April flood. Much of the time is spent showing the interactions among the small crew. We also get a fair amount of technical information, e.g., on the consequences of having one of the barges sink - the insurance company will expect a full report, and a salvage company will try at least to get the coal out, after the flood. Barges such as this one, built in 1925, have histories of minor and major mishaps, so they have a "suicide complex" (Ch. 12). By the 1950s, the U. S. Chamber of Commerce is licensing diesel-boat captains, which suits the insurance companies, even though old-timers are allowed to work without a license (Ch. 14). We hear a brief debate at a bar on whether maintaining a nine-foot channel and the system of locks and dams has caused the flood - the Democrats are blamed (Ch. 13). The boat uses a "double-trip" system, whereby three barges are tied up with a guard; the other four are taken part-way up the river and tied up, while the tug goes back for the stragglers. This is necessitated by the strong flood current (Ch. 17). Throughout we hear about how the river-boat veterans have prostitutes and other women friends all along the river routes.

The major event in the novel is when the tug loses its rudder, crashes into a bridge, killing three of the crew. The narrator, three other crew members, and a girl passenger who had been rescued from the flood are saved. After recuperating in a hospital, the narrator takes a freight to Chicago's Union Station. He then takes a regular train to Quincy, and that ride coupled with the scary experience of the accident convinces him to quit steamboating. "Nothing like riding on a train, though. Once I get on a train, I don't really care when I get where I'm going, providing I get a comfortable plush seat. You cut right through towns and people's back yards, but you don't have to worry about them ... as long as you are inside you can do as you please and watch the sorry world slide past the windows."

Edition used: St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1987.

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## 226

**Author:** James Baldwin (1924-1987)

**Title:** "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon" In *Going to Meet the Man*

**Date:** 1961

**Systems:** Transatlantic steamship

**Context:** 1950s, Paris, on the boat, Hollywood; African-American perspective

The narrator, a famous black film actor and singer recounts his only return visit to America eight years in the past. He went for three months following his mother's death. On the steamboat his thoughts are filled with images of the U. S., rich, cold milk and chocolate cake. Americans, but not Europeans, "used first names almost at once," but he senses "an eerie and unnerving unreality about everything they said and did." Next to the last night, he sings at the gala in the big ballroom, and easily establishes an identity on board. The morning they land, "All of the deck chairs had been taken away and people milled about in the space where the deck chairs had been, moved from one side of the ship to the other, clambered up and down the steps, crowded the rails, and they were busy taking photographs - of the harbor, of each other, of the sea, of the gulls. I walked slowly along the deck, and an impulse stronger than myself drove me to the rail. There it was, the great, unfinished city, with all its towers blazing in the sun." The gangplank is "the long stretch which led to the gate, to the city." Baldwin uses the images of the immigrant in the context of the returned exile.

The changed city is disorienting: "We were in the shadow of the elevated highway but the thing which most struck me was neither light nor shade, but noise. It came from a million things at once, from trucks and tires and clutches and brakes and doors; from machines shuttling and stamping and rolling and cutting and pressing; from the building of tunnels, the checking of gas mains, the laying of wires, the digging of foundations; from the chattering of rivets, the scream of the pile driver, the clanging of great shovels; from the battering down and the raising up of walls; from millions of radios and television sets and jukeboxes. The human voices distinguished themselves from the roar only by their note of strain and hostility."

In the face of American racism in its various forms he is reminded by his producer, "one day you will remember that airlines and steamship companies are still in business and that France still exists." Back to France at the end of the story.

Edition used: Charles Kaplan, ed. *Literature in America: The Modern Age*. New York: The Free Press, 1971.

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227

**Author:** Lawrence Ferlinghetti (b. 1919)

**Title:** "In Goya's Greatest Scenes"

**Date:** 1958

**Systems:** Freeway

**Context:** Contemporary

The modern landscape for Francisco José de Goya's Disasters of War, often called "suffering humanity" is "on freeways fifty lanes wide / on a concrete continent / spaced with bland billboards / illustrating imbecile illusions of happiness." Even though we have "fewer tumbrils" the painted cars with "strange license plates / and engines / that devour America" cause "more maimed citizens." Ferlinghetti points to the dramatic increase in auto fatalities and injuries in the years after the Second World War.

Edition used: Lynn Altenbernd and Leslie L. Lewis. *Introduction to Literature: Poems*, 3rd ed. New York: Macmillan, 1975.

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**Author:** Robert Lowell (b. 1917)

**Title:** "For the Union Dead"

**Date:** 1960

**Systems:** Parking garage

**Context:** Contemporary Boston

"[D]inosaur steamshovels" are digging an underground garage on the site of the old Aquarium; "Parking-spaces luxuriate like civic / sandpiles in the heart of Boston." Ironically overlooking the construction site is the statue of Colonel Shaw, head of the "bell-cheeked Negro regiment," the first black regiment in the Civil War. Lowell notices the absence of memorials to World War II, although there is a poster which advertises how a Mosler safe survived Hiroshima. The indifference to all wars is shown as an image of the tail-fin excesses of the 1950s: "Everywhere / giant finned cars nose forward like fish; / a savage servility / slides by on grease."

Edition used: Charles Kaplan, ed. *Literature in America: The Modern Age*. New York: The Free Press, 1971.

**Author:** Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964)

**Title:** "The Artificial Nigger"

**Date:** 1955

**Systems:** Train

**Context:** Contemporary, Atlanta and rural Georgia

Mr. Head and his grandson, Nelson, travel to Atlanta from their small town home in a county from which all blacks have excluded. Head had requested the railroad to make a special stop, and they wait in the early morning, "Trains passing appeared to emerge from a tunnel of trees and, hit for a second by the cold sky, vanish terrified into the woods again." He fears it won't stop, but "The engine charged by, filling their noses with the smell of hot metal and then the second coach came to a stop exactly where they were standing." On the car, most passengers are asleep. Head tells the boy to keep close track of his ticket stub - it's his way home - and trying to keep open their escape route is a theme in the story. Not only is this Nelson's first train ride, but he also sees his first Negro walking through the cars. Head showed him the men's room, "demonstrated the ice-water cooler as if he had invented it," and took him to the diner, "the most elegant car in the train." We see, but Nelson doesn't quite understand, that the dining car is segregated - two tables "set off from the rest by a saffron-colored curtain." As they near the city, he sees that "the country side was becoming speckled with small houses and shacks and that a highway ran alongside the train."

In Atlanta, they notice the "putty-colored terminal with a concrete dome on top" as the landmark for getting back in the afternoon. They walk, get lost in a black neighborhood where they are directed to a "long yellow rattling trolley" which they fear to take. They follow the trolley tracks in what they think is the right direction, but, instead they wander to the suburbs where "There were no sidewalks, only drives," but manage to catch the train home from the suburban stop. [The image from the title is a statue they see just before boarding the train, a final comment on Nelson's introduction to the city and to racism.] Once home safe, the train "disappeared like a frightened serpent into the woods," and Nelson



resolves never to leave.

Edition used: Charles Kaplan, ed. *Literature in America: The Modern Age*. New York: The Free Press, 1971.

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## 230

**Author:** William Stafford (b. 1914)

**Title:** "West of Your City"

**Date:** 1960

**Systems:** Train

**Context:** Contemporary

The opening lines of a poem which invites us to see nature (and the west) afresh uses a familiar train-ride image with a play on how it sounds against the rails:

West of your city into the fern  
sympathy, sympathy rolls the train  
all through the night on a lateral line...

Edition used: William J. Martz, ed. *The Distinctive Voice: Twentieth-Century Poetry*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1966.

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## 231

**Author:** Richard Wright (1908-1960)

**Title:** *The Long Dream*

**Date:** 1958

**Systems:** Train

**Context:** 1950s, "Clintonville," USA; African-American perspective

Fishbelly is a boy learning his place in the world. With great seriousness, Wright reworks a clichéd Freudian connection and elaborates the train image in such a way as to make it stand for the power and fear that surround black male sexuality in the mid-twentieth century.

Fishbelly's dad, Tyree, is the black undertaker in town. Running into the funeral parlor's "guest room" on an errand, Fish is drawn near the bed by the strange "bumpbump" sound of sex, and there confronts the spectacle of his naked father, "two staring red eyes, a strained, humped back; and he heard harsh breath whistling in an open throat" (18). Terrified, Fish at first thinks his father is "working on a dead body." Fish understands that his father is embarrassed and that this woman is somehow in his mother's place. His father's funeral business, the fear of punishment, the conviction that his father had been "acting like a train" (22), and the smell of sex all combine, taking Fish back to an earlier scene of pregnant fish bladders. This reconfiguration of pleasure, secrecy, train-like power establishes Fish's future understanding of male sexuality.

"From that day on," the narrator tells us, Fish's dreams are embroidered with the apparition of speeding trains:

thundering trains loomed in his dreams - hurtling, sleek, black monsters whose stack pipes belched gobs of serpentine smoke ... whose pushing pistons sprayed jets of hissing steam - panting trains that roared yammeringly over far-flung gleaming rails only to come to limp and convulsive halts. (23).

One dream in particular shows the connection between sexual power and powerlessness that trains represent in Wright's work. Fishbelly sees himself approaching a beautiful, brand new train despite his mother's prohibitions. He drives the enormous, throbbing machine - pushing it to unimaginable speeds. The dream is one of perfect power for which Fish must sacrifice all control. The pleasures of manhood can't be had without the dangers, and power necessarily entails punishment.

Edition used: Perennial Classics. New York: Harper and Row, 1987.

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## 232

**Author:** John Cheever (1912-1982)

**Title:** "The Five-Forty-Eight"

**Date:** 1954

**Systems:** Commuter train

**Context:** Contemporary, New York suburb

Cheever's short story is about Mr. Blake, who sleeps with his secretary (after she has been on the job three weeks) and then has her fired. The story actually begins six months later, when the woman, Miss Dent, follows Blake from work to his commuter train, which he's taking home to the suburbs. On board he recognizes two people from his home town but does not acknowledge them, nor they he. Mistake. The unhappy woman sits next to him, pulls her revolver on him, and explains her distress in evangelical terms. His acquaintances don't notice his predicament.

When they get off at his stop, she forces him up the tracks away from the station, where she makes him grovel in the dirt before letting him go.

Blake had seen Miss Dent immediately upon leaving work and tried to lose her on the way to the train station; when he boards he thinks he has eluded her. The coach he enters is described as uncomfortable and shabby, and it "smelled oddly like a bomb shelter in which whole families had spent the night." But though the milieu is worn, "it was a scene that meant to Blake that he was on a safe path" - as the bomb shelter comparison suggests. But just at this moment Miss Dent appears and sits down beside him, her concealed gun trained on his midsection. Confronted with this danger, Blake frantically tries to figure some way of signaling his fellow passengers, two of whom are neighbors. But he doesn't have a friendly relationship with either; he has previously alienated them both, which is why he sat alone in the first place, leaving himself open to Miss Dent's machinations. When the Shady Hill station is announced Blake sees "the abandoned mansion outside of town, a NO TRESPASSING sign nailed to a tree, and then the oil tanks." This routine, whereby landmarks herald the approach to a familiar place, is given a literary turn as we consider the alienation suggested by those objects. At his stop are "a dozen or so cars waiting by the station," mostly wives there to pick up their husbands. But Blake's wife is not among them - as we have learned, Blake is an emotionally abusive husband, and their estrangement from each other is many years old. During their walk a train passes from the north where "the windows where people ate, drank, slept, and read flew past." Both the train and the cars offer the possibility of community and refuge, but Blake, through his selfishness and lack of compassion, has isolated himself from others, and so neither train nor automobile can provide safety. On the contrary, the train provides the opportunity for Miss Dent to have her

revenge, as the coach functions as a cage from which Blake can not escape. Miss Dent corners him on the train, and then on the lonely and anonymous tracks has her way with him.

Edition used: *The Housebreaker of Shady Hill and Other Stories*. New York: Harper, 1958.

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## 233

**Author:** Raymond Carver (1938-1988)

**Title:** "The Train"

**Date:** 1983

**Systems:** Train

**Context:** 1950s, New York suburbs

This short story is dedicated to John Cheever and appears to pick up where Cheever's story, "The Five-Forty-Eight," leaves off. After threatening a man with a gun, and making him plead for his life (we're not told why), a young woman, Miss Dent, walks to a nearby railway station to wait for the next train. It is late at night, but after a few minutes two people come in, a woman and an old man. Their conversation is intriguing but inexplicable out of context. Miss Dent remains silent while they speak, but just as she is about to say something, to reveal her actions of earlier in the evening, a train pulls in. As they move out onto the platform, the few people on the train assume that the three people boarding are together, "and they felt sure that whatever these people's business had been that night, it had not come to a happy conclusion. But the passengers had seen things more various than this in their lifetime.... For this reason, they scarcely gave another thought to these three who moved down the aisle and took up their places." Like Miss Dent, they don't ask questions, ponder what's beneath the surface of these people's apparent unhappiness. The passengers are contrasted to the cozy families moving toward bed in the suburbs the train is passing through; the passengers are outsiders of a sort, their presence on the train at such a late hour indicating that they aren't a part of the suburban community. At the same time the passengers separate themselves from each other, from each other's "business," and remain silent and detached even while riding together in the night. The train, rather than a gathering place for travelers, functions to emphasize the passengers' willing isolation from one another.

Edition used: *Cathedral*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1984.

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## 234

**Author:** Saul Bellow (b. 1915)

**Title:** "A Father-to-Be" In *Seize the Day*

**Date:** 1955

**Systems:** Subway

**Context:** Contemporary, New York City

A subway scene in the middle of the story shows us Rogin, a chemist, on his way to his fiancée's apartment. He enters

the "stony, odorous, metallic, captive air of the subway," and overhears a conversation where one man is telling the other that he is an alcoholic. This triggers a series of observations and interpretations of the lives of people he sees as "the human tides of the subway swayed back and forth, and cars linked and transparent like fish bladders [he just stopped at a delicatessen] raced under the streets. How come he thought nobody would know what everybody couldn't help knowing," since, after all, he recognized the man's "alcohol-wasted" face. "Thoughts very often grow fertile in the subway, because of the motion, the great company, the subtlety of the rider's state as he rattles under streets and rivers, under the foundations of great buildings, and Rogin's mind had already been strangely stimulated." Rogin interprets what he sees in terms of his own life and concerns, even though the narrative tone gives the impression that his views are rather general. This latter is, presumably, Bellow's comment on how we see and understand the world around or above us.

Edition used: James Moffett and Kenneth E. McElheny, eds. *Points of View: An Anthology of Short Stories*. Signet Classic, 1966.

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# The 1960s

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[Dylan's](#) song describes a Minnesota highway as a religious place, basically isolated from the rest of the world, while [Munro](#) pictures highway driving as a refuge from a family's tragedies. [Saroyan](#) also sees long distance car travel as a way to gain transitory freedom, and to escape briefly from time. [Erdrich](#) tells of two young Native American brothers' drive to Alaska in the first convertible on the North Dakota reservation, and she follows that car's history in their lives after one brother returns from Vietnam. The "fear of flying" in [Jong's](#) novel precedes an extended account of driving a fast sports car across Europe, with implicit contrasts to American freeways.

[Roethke's "All Morning"](#) sets traffic disruptions against the pleasures of bird watching; his "[Far Field](#)" describes how a dream of driving alone then stalling in a snow storm leads to images of mutilated animals and death. [Hollander](#) gives poetic images of a New York City's bridge and the subway tunnel. [Jones/Baraka](#) has a harsher view of the train's arriving from the South, the subways, and Father Divine's Cadillac. [Bambara](#) portrays a groups of African-American kids on a humorous cab ride down Manhattan. [Cisneros](#) talks of the excitement which a Cadillac causes in the San Antonio Latino community, and she uses car-based metaphors are part of peoples' ordinary language. The junk yard in [Dickey's](#) poem is a place which stirs up a boy's images of the cars' former owners, and as a place for sexual exploration. [Crews](#) elaborates on the junkyard setting, and then develops a grotesque scenario where a young man sets out to eat a new Ford Maverick on Wide World of Sports.

[Wolfe's Kandy-Kolored](#)... gives extended descriptions of hot rod shows, stock car racing, and demolition derbies as exciting and marginal elements of the '60s car culture. Cars in [Segal's](#) novel have a more ordinary role in allowing young lovers to be together, visit in-laws, and generally drive fast on East coast highways. Unlike [Jarrell's](#) images of an older person in a shopping center, [Oates](#) shows a suburban drive-in world from a teenage girl's perspective, and her threatening encounter with an older man who is identified with his gold-painted jalopy. [Updike](#) gives many details of the suburban world - commuter bus, auto agencies (recently introducing Japanese cars), car repair shops, the end of trolley lines, potholes. [Cheever](#) describes the difficulty of a man in a bathing suit trying to cross a highway.

White peoples' reactions to the desegregation of city busses in the South is dramatized in [O'Connor's](#) short story. [Serling](#) describes other social changes in the airline industry: the professionalization of stewardesses, the advancement of women into executive positions, and a sense of the effects of introducing jets to replace the older propeller aircraft.

[Wilson](#) suggests that whites have stopped exploiting African-Americans, since both the railroad and the highway system are completed. [Plath](#) associates the train with a woman's sexual body. [Brautigan](#) characterizes a family's twentieth-century history as a series of events such as a train accident and a honeymoon trip, and car travel later on. [Warner's](#) story for children keys on sentimental pictures of an antique railroad and a vanishing technology. [Wolfe's Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test](#) describes another cross-country odyssey, this time in a psychedelically-painted bus which is also a rolling moving-picture productions facility.

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## 235

**Author:** Bob Dylan (b. 1941)

**Title:** "Highway 61 Revisited"

**Date:** 1965

**Systems:** Automobiles, the road

**Context: Contemporary, Midwest**

This song appears on Dylan's album of the same name, an album that includes such songs as "Like a Rolling Stone" and "Ballad of a Thin Man," and which is considered by critics to be one of his best records. Dylan grew up in Hibbing, Minnesota, and the Highway 61 in the song obviously refers to the important road that runs the north-south length of the state, along the eastern border and through the two major urban areas, Duluth and the Twin Cities. But the song, as the title might suggest, is not obviously a return home, an account of Dylan's beginnings. Instead Highway 61 seems to function as the archetypal American road, the road that provides access to dreams and desires - but in this song that myth is depicted ironically. Anything can happen on this highway, but that's not necessarily cause for celebration. In the first stanza God tells Abraham to "Kill me a son," and that he wants it done "Out on Highway 61"; in the second stanza a homeless man is looking for a "place," and a man "pointed with his gun" toward that same highway; in the third stanza a criminal is looking to fence some stolen goods and is told Highway 61 is the place to go. The highway is a religious location, a place for exercising blind faith, and it's where the down and out are hidden, and it's a place where the legal system can be subverted. And in the last stanza it's where "the next world war" can be staged: "We'll just put some bleachers out in the sun / And have it out on Highway 61." The highway in America is where possibility awaits, but in this song the highway is anti-communal, and, separated from the community, it offers the chance to do what can't be done in the open, in public. The highway is clandestine, exciting in some ways, but also extremely dangerous.

Edition used: *Highway 61*. Columbia, 1965.

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## 236

**Author:** Alice Munro (b. 1931)

**Title:** "Miles City, Montana" In *The Progress of Love*

**Date:** 1986

**Systems:** Automobile

**Context:** 1961, Washington state, Vancouver, Montana

This short story opens with an anecdote from the narrator's childhood, about the drowning of a young boy, before cutting to the beginning of a cross-country road trip (in 1961, in a new Morris Oxford) from Vancouver to Ontario, undertaken by the narrator, her husband, and their two small children. The narrator describes her usual life as a mother and wife as "living in a state of siege," but on the drive she can appreciate each moment and experience as it comes, can be "a watcher, not a keeper." She wonders why she loves the driving so much, suggesting that maybe it's because what goes by her window "isn't scenery," but something more real and direct. They are going to Ontario to see family, a visit the narrator is not looking forward to - her pleasure is in the trip there.

The drive takes them down through Washington and into Montana, where they stop in Miles City, so the children can go for a brief swim. But the youngest, a three-year-old, almost drowns in the municipal pool, an incident which ties into the opening anecdote, and gets at the central concern of the story, which revolves around parenting - specifically the relationship between accident and responsibility. The narrator, both as a child, and as a parent, is appalled at the lack of control over death that parents have, the fact that simply bringing children into the world renders them automatically vulnerable and finally immune to protection. The drive has been a time of pleasure for the narrator, a respite from her usual life; but the incident at the pool brings home the realization that arriving anywhere intact, even moving from day to day, is always and inevitably fraught with dangers that can't be foreseen.

Edition used: Hans Ostrom, ed. *Lives and Moments: An Introduction to Short Fiction*. Fort Worth: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1991.

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## 237

**Author:** William Saroyan (1908-1981)

**Title:** *Short Drive, Sweet Chariot*

**Date:** 1966

**Systems:** Car - Lincoln

**Context:** 1963, Middle West

In the summer of 1963 Saroyan and his cousin drove from London, Ontario to Fresno, California in a 1941 Lincoln limousine (which has only 5,000 miles on it). This short book covers the trip from London, through Detroit, across Michigan, on to a ferry crossing Lake Michigan, across Wisconsin and Minnesota (through the Twin Cities), ending in Pierre, South Dakota (three days short of Fresno). The book is mostly one long conversation between Saroyan and his cousin, covering an amazing array of topics: psychiatry, God, death, Hemingway, movies, Saroyan's writing, Henry Ford, etc. And Saroyan delivers all this in the guise of a sort of mobile and very literate stand-up comic; the book is witty, humorous, and fast-paced. The book is also very much about driving, particularly long-distance driving. Included in the non-stop dialogue are discussions of traffic, accidents, the relationship between memory and long drives, the condition of the limousine, the specific roads they are traveling, roadside stands, motels, the car ferry, night driving, as well as the "freedom" experienced in cross-country driving. While there is a vast difference between this book and Kerouac's *On the Road* - for one thing Saroyan is in his mid-fifties and relatively well-off - the two texts share a fascination with time, and express similar ideas about the relationship between time, experience, and car travel. For Saroyan life is most fully exhilarating in the present moment - it's here and then it's gone, moment after moment. In a car, enjoying movement itself, apart from thoughts of a destination or the road behind, he finds a freedom that is miraculous and revelatory, providing, if only fleetingly, an access to "truth" that is not available moving at a more mundane pace. The big black limousine opens up a privileged space for contemplation and conversation and for a more immediate experience of time, an experience that Dean and Sal in Kerouac's novel also celebrate.

Edition used: New York: Pocket Books, 1967.

## 238

**Author:** Louise Erdrich (b. 1954)

**Title:** *Love Medicine*

**Date:** 1984

**Systems:** Car

**Context:** 1960s, North Dakota, Native American perspective

The chapter, "The Red Convertible," is a narrative told by Lyman Lamartine about himself, his brother Henry, and the convertible they buy together. They are Chippewas, living in North Dakota, and the first on their reservation to drive a convertible. The early part of the chapter tells of their drives through the Dakotas, Montana and up into Alaska; but when Henry is drafted to fight in Vietnam, the car is put in mothballs. When Henry returns after three years, he is a changed man, mean and seemingly on the edge of insanity. Lyman secretly trashes the convertible and schemes to get



Henry interested in fixing the car up. The plan works and Henry throws himself into restoring the car, an activity which seems to have a therapeutic effect. Once he finishes, the two brothers go for a test drive to a nearby river. There Henry reveals that he knows Lyman secretly wrecked the car and tells him he doesn't want it. They argue, fight, seem to reconcile, but then Henry jumps into the river and drowns. After trying to save him, Lyman returns to the convertible and pushes it into the river. The car functions before the war as an important marker of the brother's close relationship, but after Henry returns from fighting, not even the red convertible can reestablish the ties that so closely linked the two men.

Edition used: New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

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## 239

**Author:** Erica Jong (b. 1942)

**Title:** *Fear of Flying*

**Date:** 1974

**Systems:** Airplane, car, train

**Context:** Contemporary, travel in Europe

The issue announced in the title is dramatized in the opening chapter. Isadora, the narrator, is on a Pan Am flight to Vienna with 117 psychoanalysts, including six who had treated her fear and a seventh who is her husband. She rehearses her physiological symptoms during the takeoff, and expresses her hope that "the laws of aerodynamics are not ... flimsy superstitions," and her skepticism about the "diabolical explanations of air-foil" in the multilingual card. She is humorously convinced that only her concentration and that of her mother keep the plane aloft, and thus the flight requires constant vigilance. *Fear of flying* expresses a concern about the future which runs against the attitude of her lover, an amateur existentialist, who forbids her to talk about the future. In the same vein, riding on a train or driving a car are more insistently present modes, and Isadora finds them more comfortable.

Also in the first chapter is Isadora's sexual fantasy that she will meet a man in a second-class European train compartment and they will have physically pleasant and psychologically anonymous sex, a contrast to her sexual relations with her husbands and lovers, especially Adrian, who is her companion for the second half of the novel. Near the end of the book she is in exactly the situation she thought would be delightful and escapes from what then is clearly an unwelcome rape attempt; now she looks for a crowded compartment, "One with nuns, or a family of twelve, or both" (Ch. 18). Her travel by train in Germany and Austria is colored by the fact that she is Jewish, so she has fears or fantasies that the ordinary trains are actually cattle cars, that the station commander "with his high-peaked Nazi hat" is going to route her to a concentration camp (Ch. 4).

Isadora and Adrian, after she leaves her husband at the psychoanalysts' congress, travel extensively in France, Italy, and Germany in his Triumph. "We came to know the German Autobahn automats with their plates of sauerkraut and knockwurst.... We were usually drunk from noon on, careening down the Autobahn in a right-hand-drive car, taking wrong turns everywhere, being tailgated by Volkswagens going 80 miles an hour, by Mercedes-Benzes blinking their headlights aggressively and doing 110, by BMWs trying to outrun the Mercedes-Benzes.... I am secretly in love with death. I will suffer morbidly through a shuttle flight from New York to Washington, but behind the wheel of a sports car I'll start doing 110 without hesitation and love every terrifying minute" (Ch. 8).

In her youth, she and her lover, Charlie, went on the Queen Elizabeth tourist class. They could not share a cabin because they needed proof of marriage, so they wound up in single-sex rooms with four berths each and had little luck finding a place for sex. They get in this predicament because Charlie is so frightened of flying he won't even go near a plane (Ch.

13).

Edition used: Frogmore (UK): Panther, 1976.

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## 240

**Author:** Theodore Roethke (1908-1963)

**Title:** "All Morning"

**Date:** 1964

**Systems:** Automobile

**Context:** Contemporary, New England

A couple of nice moments in a poem where tracking birds in the countryside is disrupted by automobiles. The wood pigeon, high in the trees, "his call floating over the on-coming traffic"; those back of the house "Flapping away heavily when a car blasts too close." Nature has a small victory, though: "And the ducks near Lake Washington waddle down the highway after a rain, / Stopping traffic, indignant as addled old ladies."

Edition used: William J. Martz, ed. *The Distinctive Voice: Twentieth-Century Poetry*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1966.

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## 241

**Author:** Theodore Roethke (1908-1963)

**Title:** "The Far Field"

**Date:** 1964

**Systems:** Automobile

**Context:** Contemporary

The narrator's dreams take him to the "far field" of the title at first through a detailed account of driving alone in a snowstorm. The road is "lined with snow-laden second growth," snow is "tickling the windshield." The isolated trip, with no traffic in either direction, goes further into the countryside, "changing from glazed tarface to a rubble of stone, / Ending at last in a hopeless sand-rut, / Where the car stalls, / Churning in a snowdrift." This stalled car leads to a series of images of dead animals, "young rabbits caught in the mower," polluted streams, swamps. Despite the unpleasanties at the end of the road, we are ultimately assured that "All finite things reveal infinitude."

Edition used: Lynn Altenbernd and Leslie L. Lewis. *Introduction to Literature: Poems*, 3rd ed. New York: Macmillan, 1975.

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## 242

**Author:** John Hollander (b. 1929)

**Title:** "Helicon"

**Date:** 1962

**Systems:** Urban streets

**Context:** Contemporary, New York city

Poetic images of the city viewed from the bridge above and the subway below street level: "Gray / Stony light has flashed over Morningside Drive since noon," past the "Blanched steel trusses of Hell-Gate ... revealing the clarity of / Harlem's grid, like a glimpse of a future city below." "The heights of Morningside / Sloped downward, to the north, under the iron line / The subway holds to above it, refusing to descend / Under the crashing street."

Edition used: Charles Kaplan, ed. *Literature in America: The Modern Age*. New York: The Free Press, 1971.

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## 243

**Author:** LeRoy Jones (Amiri Baraka) (b. 1934)

**Title:** *Black Magic: Collected Poetry, 1961-1967*

**Date:** 1961-3, 1963-5, 1965-6

**Systems:** Railroad, subway, car - Cadillac

**Context:** 1960s, New York area; African-American perspective

Jones writes with some cynicism of the railroad's role in providing African-Americans with a way out of the South: "Trains / leaning north, catching hellfire in windows, passing through Chicago, / And then all ways, we go where flesh is cheap.... Make your way, and swing the general, that it come flash open / and spill the innards of that sweet thing we heard, and gave theory to" ("Three Modes of History and Culture"). The atmosphere is more poetic in the brief "On Out": "Train roars thru / dead dark. Lights ringing / on fences, air, night, slide / on the outside, and I ride / pinned together in the fast light."

"The Visit" describes the departure of a "Yellow girl. Gone / in the subways, my heart / pounding above the train." The subway is also presented as a symbol of broader cultural change, "We are in the era of imminent brake failure, breakdown / Country boys make believe they are emerging from pyramid crypts." The speaker talked with a subway conductor, who "just drove his train, dreaming of Columbia" ("Lowdown").

"Five Father Divine Women Circling a cadillac on the Last Day of the Year 1966" uses the notoriously expensive automobile to point up some of the excesses which Jones finds in Divine's followers.

Where are you in the snow, ghost, looking at jewels  
and lips, ghost, are you near us now, in hover  
in a dance air, the red hair of ghost wind wraps you  
near the cadillac and the ladies preparing their trip  
to daddy's shrine...

the ladies pulld off in their cadillac  
they'll be dead like you very soon  
contact  
broken  
with  
the living, the other ladies  
cadillac riders in their fading youth

## 244

**Author:** Toni Cade Bambara (b. 1939)

**Title:** "The Lesson"

**Date:** 1972

**Systems:** Taxicab, subway

**Context:** 1950, New York; African-American perspective

This story provides a brief but interesting look at City transportation from a ten(?) -year-old's point of view. The narrator is a young hellion, and she gives a humorous account of a summer excursion in which she and her friends take a cab downtown. They are closely supervised by prim Miss Moore - "this lady [who] moved on our block with nappy hair and proper speech and no makeup." The kids are distinctly uncomfortable in the presence of Miss Moore, "who always looked like she was going to church." Their parents, however, occasionally allow her to round up the kids and administer "lessons," because - as the narrator tells it - "she'd been to college and said it was only right that she should take responsibility for the young ones' education, and she not even related by marriage or blood."

This particular lesson is about the value of money, and the first exercise in economics concerns the cost of transportation. The narrator, tired of the lesson before it's begun, suggests "we oughta get to the subway cause it's cooler and besides we might meet some cute boys. Sugar done swiped her mama's lipstick, so we ready." Miss Moore has other plans; she astounds the group when she "steps out in the street and hails two cabs just like that."

Miss Moore puts the narrator and three others in a cab on their own and sends them on their way. The narrator's description shows the ride to be an exhilarating and boisterous adventure, and points out the tension between the driver and his inexperienced passengers:

Then [Miss Moore] hustles half the crew in with her and hands me a five-dollar bill and tells me to calculate 10 percent tip for the driver. And we're off. Me and Sugar and Junebug and Flyboy hangin out the window and hollering to everybody, putting lipstick on each other cause Flyboy a faggot anyway, and making farts with our sweaty armpits. But I'm mostly trying to figure how to spend this money. But they all fascinated with the meter ticking and Junebug starts laying bets as to how much it'll read when Flyboy can't hold his breath no more. Then Sugar lays bets as to how much it'll be when we get there. So I'm stuck. Don't nobody want to go for my plan, which is to jump out at the next light and run off to the first bar-b-que we can find. Then the driver tells us to get the hell out cause we there already. And the meter reads eighty-five cents. And I'm stalling to figure out the tip and Sugar say give him a dime. And I decide he don't need it bad as I do, so later for him. But then he tries to take off with Junebug's foot still in the door so we talk about his mama something ferocious. Then we check out that we on Fifth Avenue and everybody dressed up in stockings. One lady in a fur coat hot as it is. White folks is crazy.

The cab is a high-energy experience - hot and more self-contained (no chance to meet cute boys) - in comparison with the return trip by subway, where they were "watchin the tracks whizzin by large then small then getting gobbled up in the dark." But the cab provides anxious fascinations and lessons of its own, for instance, the ever-ticking meter that rivets the attention, the politics of tipping inappropriately.

## 245

**Author:** Sandra Cisneros

**Title:** *The House on Mango Street*

**Date:** 1984

**Systems:** Bicycle, car, subway.

**Context:** Late 1960s, early 1970s, Chicago and San Antonio; Chicana perspective

This novel is composed of brief vignettes and recounts a young Chicana's "coming of age."

In "Our Good Day" the narrator Esperanza makes two new friends by going in on the purchase of a neighbor boy's bike: \$15, five bucks each. The focus is on their newly acquired friendship, power and daring as they all three pile on ("which makes the bike all wobbly as if the wheels are spaghetti"). They ride "fast and faster" around the neighborhood and down "the avenue which is dangerous."

The vignette "A Smart Cookie" underscores the difference in educational opportunity for a Chicana school-girl and her Mexican mother. As a girl in Mexico, the mother quit school because she was ashamed of her clothing. Now she must rely on her school age American daughter to help her negotiate life in the U. S. Esperanza tells us that her mother, who can speak two languages, repair TVs, and sing operas, "doesn't know which subway train to take downtown. I hold her hand very tight while we wait for the right train to arrive."

In "Louie, His Cousin and His Other Cousin," Esperanza recalls the only time the neighborhood saw the "other cousin," the day he drove up honking "in this great big yellow Cadillac with whitewalls and a yellow scarf tied around the mirror" and invited an undesignated number of kids to pile in for a ride. Lots of attention is given to the white leather interior, automatic windows, FM radio and "a little white cat in the back window whose eyes lit up when the car stopped or turned." Police sirens cut the ride short, and all wave as the cousin pulls away in the back of the "cop car."

Other stories relate cars to female sexuality: In "The Family of Little Feet," girls experiment with high heels; the Bum Man on the tavern stoop tells Rachel (in the lemon pumps), "you are prettier than a yellow taxi cab." In "Hips": "One day you wake up and they are there. Ready and waiting like a new Buick with the keys in the ignition. Ready to take you where?" Finally, "The Monkey Garden" shows abandoned cars which pop up "like mushrooms" in this overgrown and Edenic vacant lot/playground; the vehicles are alternately innocent and ominous. "The old blue pick-up" is first a clubhouse for the kids and later the spot where a group of boys take Sally for "kisses."

Edition used: Houston, TX: Arte Publico, 1988.

## 246

**Author:** James Dickey (b. 1923)

**Title:** "Cherrylog Road" In *Helmets*

**Date:** 1963

**Systems:** Auto junk yard

**Context: Contemporary, South**

This dream-like poem of seventeen six-line stanzas describes a car junkyard in the south, on a blazing summer day, from the perspective of a young boy who clambers through the various abandoned cars, imagining their past owners and the places they went. While he wanders among the cars he is also anticipating the arrival of a girl, who comes regularly to the junkyard, wrench in hand, to practice a sort of junior archeology on the wrecks - and to meet him in the back seats of cars. They come together in the midst of the "dreaming traffic," and later leave separately, the boy flinging himself down the road on his bicycle, "wild to be wreckage forever."

Edition used: William J. Martz, ed. *The Distinctive Voice: Twentieth-Century Poetry*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1966.

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## 247

**Author:** Harry Crews (b. 1935)

**Title:** *Car*

**Date:** 1972

**Systems:** Automobile

**Context:** Contemporary, Jacksonville, Florida

Crews' novel is about the Mack family, who live over Salvage House, amidst the forty-three acres of Auto-Town, their wrecking yard on the outskirts of Jacksonville, Florida. The father, Easy Mack, who had once been considered the "best shade-tree mechanic in Lebeau County, Georgia," loved cars: "he had always loved them. Always in all ways." He runs Auto-Town with his three grown children: Mister, who operates the car crusher and scrap metal end of the business and who is obsessed with money; Junell, who drives the tow truck, "Big Mama," scooping up wrecks off of the nearby highway, and meeting her boyfriend, Joe, a highway patrolman, at accident scenes (the only place they meet), where they neck and pet in the backseat of his cruiser; and Herman, Mister's twin and a "dreamer of mad dreams," the only one of Easy's three children who hadn't "taken hold and found [his] place."

The book is largely about Herman's attempt to take hold, to find something beyond the junkyard that will give his life meaning. But though the running of Auto-Town isn't enough to satisfy him, Herman, like the others, does look to cars for that meaning. One of his first "dreams" is "CAR DISPLAY: YOUR HISTORY ON PARADE," an attraction he creates which consists of "individual [wrecked] cars for each of the last fifty years" (1920 to 1970) spread across ten acres of the junkyard. "Everything that's happened in this goddam country in the last fifty years," said Herman, "has happened in, on, around, with, or near a car.... And everybody wants to return to the scene of the crime." The display is a huge success, visited by thousands of people; but when a man stabs his brother-in-law over the hood of a '47 Ford coupe, and a woman loses her sanity at the sight of the interior of a '40 Studebaker, Easy makes Herman shut down the show, telling him there is "no joy. No love" in such autoarchaeology.

Herman's next project is the main focus of the book: he decides to eat a car. He makes a deal with a local hotel owner to eat a new '71 Ford Maverick, piece by cut-up piece, a half ounce at a time, a half pound a day - a rate that will require ten years to completely consume the car. The eating and "passing" are done in separate performances, in the hotel's ballroom, next to the slowly disappearing car, each day before enthusiastic sellout audiences (and *Wide World of Sports* is recording the whole thing for an eventual highlights film). After the first eating performance Herman returns to his room and has a waking dream in which he imagines he is "filled" with cars, cars racing in his eyes, in his veins, in his limbs, and in his heart. Terrified, he feels himself filling up with cars "tighter and tighter until finally he was bumper to bumper head to toe." At the last moment, as he feels himself beginning to explode, Herman comes up with a "solution": "He was a car. A superbly equipped car. He would escape because he was the thing that threatened himself, and he



would not commit suicide."

But finally, after eating and passing the front bumper, the grille, both front fenders, and part of the hood, Herman can't go on. He hurts too much, the physical pain is becoming overwhelming. To continue, he realizes, would be suicide. He realizes that his consuming love and worship of the Maverick, his desire to transform himself into the car, to swallow it, has been a misdirected dream. He still loves the car, but he can't stand "that kind of pain from something" he loves. His attempt totally to identify with the car - to the point of assimilation - has proven impossible and hurtful. By practicing a sort of theophagy, literally consuming the body of his god, and by subsequently imagining himself a car, Herman has attempted to ingest the transformative power of the car, its divine qualities. But what he has consumed turns out to be the death force of the car, a "quality" of automobiles that is well documented in the novel, in the violent highway accidents, the wrecked cars at the junkyard, and the polluted air and water that engulfs and surrounds Auto-Town. The car Herman worships proves a destructive god, and so he must give up his quest, look for a human connection.

In place of the car, Herman develops (over the course of the performances) a relationship with Margo, the "hotel whore," and he takes her with him back to Auto-Town after he gives up on eating the Maverick. In the final scene of the novel they sit together in the middle of the junkyard, in the backseat of a wrecked Rolls Royce, the car where as a child Herman had played "Mommy and Daddy" with a neighbor girl, who was one day crushed by cars as she made her way towards the Rolls. Love for Herman is rediscovered in the Rolls Royce, but a less destructive love, one that expects less from the automobile.

Edition used: New York: William Morrow, 1972.

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## 248

**Author:** Tom Wolfe (b. 1931)

**Title:** *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*

**Date:** 1965 Written: © 1963-1965

**Systems:** Automobile

**Context:** Contemporary, South, both coasts

Several of Wolfe's portraits focus on the new roles of automobiles in the American culture of the 1960s. The relevant essays are on demolition derbys, customized cars, and stock car racing. Wolfe shows how these anti-Establishment subcultures set trends in the Detroit industry as well as young peoples' attitudes. The "Introduction" recalls Wolfe's visit to the New York Hot Rod and Custom Car show, with "weird . . . nutty-looking, crazy baroque custom cars, sitting in little nests of pink angora angel's hair for the purpose of 'glamorous' display." One exhibitor, Dale Alexander, is an artist who creates cars "which more than 99 per cent of the American people would consider ridiculous, vulgar and lower-class-awful beyond comment almost." Stock car racing in the South had replaced baseball as the top sport, a move from a fixed, land sport modeled on cricket to one with "standard-looking, cars that go 180 miles an hour or so."

"The Last American Hero" starts with Wolfe's trip to a stock car race. "Ten o'clock Sunday morning in the hills of North Carolina. Cars, miles of cars in every direction, millions of cars, pastel cars, aqua green, aqua blue, aqua beige, aqua buff, aqua dawn, aqua Malacca, Malacca lacquer, Cloud lavender, Assassin pink, Rake-a-Cheek raspberry, Nude Strand coral, Honest Thrill orange, and Baby Fawn Lust cream-colored cars are all going to the stock car races, and that old mothering North Carolina sun keeps exploding off the windshields." Wolfe thinks he is "in the midst of the biggest traffic jam in the history of the world," with 17,000 fans converging on the North Wilkesboro Speedway to watch Junior Johnson, the hero. Stock cars are important to the mentality of the automobile world because they use vehicles which are technically like those which ordinary people could drive. The 600 horsepower, 427 cubic inch motor could be



bought by special order. After the first rounds of "hot" cars, the 1947 Hudson, 1946 Chrysler, 1955 Pontiac, and a lot of Fords, Chrysler and Ford began active sponsorship of racing cars. Johnson's use of privately-owned Chevrolets broke the tradition. When he shifted to a Ford, it was noted by the Southern fans of the sport, and it affected which cars they would buy. That led to Detroit's interest in promoting the sport, despite the general tendency of the Establishment to ignore the South, rural culture, and young people ("good old boys").

"Clean Fun at Riverhead" traces the history of demolition derbys when Lawrence Mendelsohn recognized that most people who went to stock car races liked the wrecks, "So why put up with the monotony between crashes?" The demolition derby, where one hundred cars in four heats converge until one is still running, is "culturally the most important sport ever originated in the United States." As part of the "national symbolism," it ties into the claims that three quarters of all car thefts are by joy riders, and that the police suspect that many accidents on the road are caused by belligerent drivers.

The title story begins with Wolfe's visit to the Teen Fair at Burbank, California, where customized cars are treated as art objects. George Burris, the biggest name in customizing, works out of "Kustom City" in North Hollywood, a place which is not a body shop but an art gallery - most customized cars never touch the road, but are carried from show to show in trucks. They are curvilinear abstract sculptures in the Brancusi tradition. They challenge Detroit, which works in a Mondrian mould. The streamlining, such as that which evolved from paper mockups added to the Studebaker Avanti, affected special cars made for Elvis, Liberace, Barry Goldwater, and others, and ultimately Detroit itself. A person from the Cadillac "styling center" shows up at one of the customizing shops. Wolfe claims that some twenty modifications from the customizing world wound up in Detroit, including, for example, the "bullet-shaped, or breast-shaped if you'd rather" front bumpers on the Cadillac. Wolfe concludes, "the young Detroit stylists came to the automobile strictly from art school and the abstract world of design - rather than via the teen-age mystique of the automobile and the teen-age ethos of rebellion."

Incidentally, "The Peppermint Lounge Revisited" tells of New Jersey teen-age girls who catch the Somerset Line bus in Plainfield at 7:30 on Friday and take the Turnpike and Lincoln Tunnel to the Port Authority Terminal for their mid-town fling at the place where the Twist was invented. Wolfe notes that they get off at the platform "with some incredible number of 155. One hundred and fifty-five platforms: this was New York."

Edition used: New York: Pocket Books, 1966.

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## 249

**Author:** Erich Segal (b. 1937)

**Title:** *Love Story*

**Date:** 1970

**Systems:** Car

**Context:** Contemporary, New England, New York city

Segal uses driving style as a symbol of the relations between Oliver, the narrator, and his father and his father-in-law. For example, Oliver reminds us and his wife, Jenny, that the drive from Cambridge to his parents' home in Ipswich, Mass., is 40 minutes although he had done it in 29: "A certain distinguished Boston banker claims an even faster time." Jenny comments that he's driving "like a maniac," and that the speed will "kill us" even before her first meeting with his father whom he dislikes "Because everyone likes him." At Ipswich he misses the turnoff to his family's estate, and then he asks editorially, "Is there something symbolic in the fact that I backed up three hundred yards to the entrance of our place?" [Yes, there is, but both Segal and his early-twenties narrator are less than subtle about emotions and about

symbolism.] (Ch. 7).

We had earlier learned that Jenny's mother was killed in a car crash, and, on the first page, that she had died at the age of 24, so many of the comments in the book, such as the one about high speed being fatal hold potential dramatic irony. Jenny does not drive at all.

In contrast, when Oliver drives the MG to visit her folks he is "obeying all posted speed limits," and Jenny complains when he does 40 in a 45 mile zone: "I told her the car needed tuning, which she believed not at all." In Cranston, Rhode Island, "there were entire families sitting on their porches with apparently nothing better to do this Sunday afternoon than to watch me park my MG" (Ch. 9). Presumably Oliver drives reluctantly because he does not know what to expect from this visit.

After Jenny is diagnosed with fatal cancer and is rushed to the New York city hospital for emergency treatment, Oliver has to drive to his father's for \$5,000 to cover the medical expenses. "It is impossible to drive from East Sixty-third Street, Manhattan, to Boston, Massachusetts, in less than three hours and twenty minutes. Believe me, I have tested the outer limits on this track, and I am certain that no automobile, foreign or domestic, even with some Graham Hill type at the wheel, can make it faster. I had the MG at a hundred and five on the Mass Turnpike." He again breaks his personal best in getting to his father, but this time with a kind of immediacy lacking in the earlier trip. Oliver does not tell his father why he needs the money, but puts the request in nasty terms which leads his father to pay out of love even though Oliver shrinks from touching his father's hand (Ch. 20). To show that the father rises above his son's crassness and rejection, he finds out about Jenny's illness and takes the trouble to drive himself to New York - alas, too late, since Jenny had died, but not too late to close the symbolic circle.

Edition used: New York: Avon, 1977.

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## 250

**Author:** Randall Jarrell (1914-1965)

**Title:** "Next Day"

**Date:** 1960

**Systems:** Station wagon

**Context:** Contemporary, suburban

A picture of modern shopping, "Moving from Cheer to Joy, from Joy to All," ironically picking up on soap names. "And the boy takes it to my station wagon, / What I've become / Troubles me even if I shut my eyes." The speaker, an old woman, notices that her face "looks at me / From the rear-view mirror, with the eyes I hate, / The smile I hate," and she recognizes her aging and approaching death framed and constrained by the vehicle.

Edition used: Charles Kaplan, ed. *Literature in America: The Modern Age*. New York: The Free Press, 1971.

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## 251

**Author:** Joyce Carol Oates (b. 1938)

**Title:** "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" In *The Wheel of Love*

**Date:** 1970**Systems:** Automobile**Context:** Contemporary, small town

Oates's short story is about a fifteen-year-old girl, Connie, and her experience of coming of age, the sexual awakening of adolescence. Early in the story Connie's experiences are limited to brief make-out sessions in the cars of boys she meets at the local drive-in, nights she thinks of as sweet and gentle, "the way it was in movies and promised in songs." But one Sunday her parents and sister leave for the day and Arnold Friend, whom she recognizes from the drive-in but doesn't know, shows up in his gold "jalopy," bent on having Connie. Friend, who is not a "boy" but it appears a thirty-year-old man, begins his "seduction" by asking Connie to go for a ride with him in his car, a car that is described as "painted so bright it almost hurt her eyes to look at it." Friend's name is painted on the side of the car, as are various sayings. At first he's gentle and cajoling, but as Connie continues to resist his entreaties to come for a "ride," his impatience begins to show. He comes out and tells her that he's going to be her "lover," and begins describing what he's going to do; when Connie panics and threatens to call the police, he answers with his own threat of coming in the house to get her if she picks up the phone. Finally he tells her if she doesn't come out he'll wait for her family, hinting that he'll kill them when they return. In the end Connie does come out to get in his car.

The connection between adult sexuality and the car is clear in the story. The house is the place of childhood, but the car is the way out into the world, away from "Daddy," whom Connie continually invokes in her attempt to resist Friend (her forays in other cars with boys were always short, followed by a return home). But the "healthiness" of this transition, this going for a ride, is questionable in the story. Arnold Friend and his desire are depicted in a frightening and threatening manner. Further, Friend is several times described as sinisterly unreal, as if he is operating from behind a mask, suggesting that he arises from some evil or devilish origin. In the end Connie begins to see herself from the outside, and to think that her body "wasn't hers," and when she joins Friend outside she moves like an automaton or a zombie. Going to the car is not simply "growing up" in the story, but a movement that for a young girl is dangerous, that puts her under the control of a male sexuality that objectifies her. As an adolescent it is clear that Connie lives under the authority of her father, but that authority (represented by the house she doesn't want to leave), though also patriarchal, is clearly more benevolent. At the end of the story it's not clear just what Arnold Friend has in mind, beyond "having" Connie; as her threats to her family reveal, Friend is capable of murder and their ride together could prove fatal for Connie.

Edition used: Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, eds. *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1985.

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## 252

**Author:** John Updike (b. 1932)**Title:** *Rabbit Redux***Date:** 1971**Systems:** Automobile, commuter bus**Context:** late 1960s, eastern Pennsylvania

Set in the "stagnant city of Brewer" (Pennsylvania) with specific references to the first lunar landing, the 1968 Democratic convention, Vietnam war, and Senator Ted Kennedy's car accident, Updike presents the world of rather small cities which have no clear link to metropolises. The characters are definitely part of an automobile-focused culture, but not quite totally committed. Rabbit (Harry Angstrom, a middle-aged Linotype operator) and his father regularly commute by bus to work, yet each family has a car, a Falcon and an old Chevy, respectively. After Rabbit and his wife, Janice, separate, she takes the Falcon but he doesn't seem much inconvenienced. Janice's father owns a Toyota

agency, Springer Motors, which becomes one excuse for Rabbit's frequent racist and conservative remarks about selling "Jap cars" and "tinny cars" (Ch. 1). Rabbit's bigotry is established early in the novel. On the first bus ride we see, he notices that the "bus has too many Negroes," and that, as it moves out of town, it "begins to drop people instead of taking them on" (Ch. 1).

Predictably, individuals and families are pegged by their cars. Rabbit's wealthy teen-age lover Jill from Stonington, Connecticut, has a white Porsche. His sister, a wealthy person with multiple sexual partners and a fair amount of money borrows an indigo Toronado from some guy she meets. The Fonsnachts, neighbors of slightly more wealth, have a blue Mustang. Jill's car breaks down when the motor seizes from lack of oil ("Don't they do it when they put the gas in?"), and "Rabbit gets out to look under the hood, but the works of this machine are not open and tall and transparent as with a Linotype, but are tangled and greasy and closed." The drive to the garage is humiliating and, under the circumstances dangerous since they have an escaped prisoner with them. Their ride back to town with a stranger: "Car tires crackle; an ancient Fifties Buick, with those tailfins patterned on B-19s, pulls into their orbit" (Ch. 2). Street sounds are constant - on Saturday night in the town, we hear "cars driven by teenagers laying rubber and shifting down" (Ch. 2). Outside the place where Janice and her lover live, she is kept awake by worry, but she "was surprised how this city always rumbles with traffic" and her insomnia makes "the darkness shudder between pulses of the headlights that tirelessly pass below on Eisenhower Avenue" (Ch. 4).

Changes, for the worse, in Brewer, are partially charted by symbols such as the "flowerpotted traffic circle where the trolley tracks used to make a clanging star of intersection" and the main street was "potholed macadam," (Ch. 1) or, later, that middle of the town is "all parking lot" (Ch. 4).

Incidentally, Jill's parents fly from Connecticut and Rabbit's sister flies from the West Coast to be with their ailing mother. For the upper middle class, this mode of travel is possible, but it is not presented as being routine.

Edition used: New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

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## 253

**Author:** John Cheever (1912-1982)

**Title:** "The Swimmer"

**Date:** 1964

**Systems:** Highway, suburban roads

**Context:** Contemporary, Eastern suburb

The central character swims (and drinks) his way home through his neighbors' nearly-linked swimming pools on what starts out to be a summer day, but which symbolically becomes autumn by the time her arrives. Along the way he walks on driveways that cut his feet, across lawns, and into a couple of parties. At one point he overhears a de Haviland trainer airplane overhead; a train whistle makes him wonder what time it is, and then reminds him of "the provincial station at that hour, where a waiter, his tuxedo concealed by a raincoat, a dwarf with some flowers wrapped in newspaper, and a woman [his wife?] who had been crying would be waiting for the local." After swimming most of the way, he has to cross a highway to continue the adventure: "Had you gone for a Sunday afternoon ride that day you might have seen him, close to naked, standing on the shoulder of route 424, waiting for a chance to cross. You might have wondered if he was the victim of foul play, had his car broken down, or was merely a fool. Standing barefoot in the deposits of the highway - beer cans, rags, and blowout patcher - exposed to all kinds of ridicule, he seemed pitiful." "An old man, tooling down the highway at fifteen miles an hour, let him get to the middle of the road, where there was a grass divider. Here he was exposed to the ridicule of the northbound traffic, but after ten or fifteen minutes he was able to cross."

After traversing the Village's public pool, he crosses another road, and is a couple of pools away from home. Upon his arrival there, "He tried the garage doors to see what cars were in but the doors were locked and rust came off the handles onto his hands." The house is locked, his family has left, "the place was empty." The empty garage, then, is a symbol of his financial and psychological ruin.

Edition used: Eugene Current-Garcia and Bert Hitchcock, eds. *American Short Stories*, 5th ed. Glenview: Scott, Foresman, 1990.

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## 254

**Author:** Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964)

**Title:** "Everything that Rises Must Converge"

**Date:** 1965

**Systems:** Urban bus

**Context:** Contemporary, Southern city

Set in the context of the civil rights movement, and especially recently integrated buses, the story emphasizes the consciousness of both whites and blacks about who will sit near whom, who will talk with whom.

The middle-aged Julian takes his widowed mother downtown for her weekly weight reducing class at the Y; "She would not ride the buses by herself at night since they had been desegregated." She puts on her new hat ("hideous" in her son's view) as part of her formal dress for the occasion. The neighborhood has been fashionable forty years ago, but Julian now would like to move where the nearest neighbor would be three miles away. Her mother glories in the memory that "Your great-grandfather had an plantation and two hundred slaves." She speaks on that topic "every few days like a train on an open track. He knew every stop, every junction, every swamp along the way, and knew the exact point at which her conclusion would roll majestically into the station." This romantic metaphor about the train contrasts to the squalid details about the bus ride.

When Julian is alone on the bus, he makes a point of sitting beside a Negro, "in reparation as it were for his mother's sins." "The frustration of having to wait on the bus as well as ride on it began to creep up his neck like a hot hand." He tells his mother, "Nobody in the damn bus cares who you are." He helps her up the steps of the bus, puts in the tokens, and they sit on one of the seats which face the aisle in the front. "Everybody was white. 'I see we have the bus to ourselves,' she said. Julian cringed." The woman across the aisle understands the code and agrees: "I came on one the other day and they were thick as fleas - up front and all through." She also complains about "... 'those boys from good families stealing automobile tires.'" Julian picks up an abandoned newspaper from the floor and opens it so he won't have to talk, "a kind of mental bubble."

The bus stops "with a sudden jerk" and "a large Negro got on ... well dressed and [who] carried a brief case." The mother's immediate whispered reaction is, "Now you see why I won't ride on these buses by myself." The white woman moves to a rear seat; Julian takes her place - he would like to talk about "art or politics or any subject that would be above the comprehension of those around them." The black man hides behind his newspaper. Julian tries to make contact by asking for matches; after the man gives them, he sees the NO SMOKING sign and hands them back: "The Negro refused to come out from behind his paper." He recalls times when he talked with a black undertaker and another Negro man who slipped him two lottery tickets, but "he had never been successful at making any Negro friends." The bus stops again and a "sullen-looking colored woman got on with a little boy." The four-year old sits next to Julian's mother, and the "giant of a woman" squeezes next to Julian - her hat is, ironically, as "hideous" as his mother's. The mother calls her son who slides down until she snatches him.

All four get off at the same stop; Julian's mother tries to give the boy a new penny, an awkward gesture which her son anticipates, but the black woman slugs her with her purse: "He don't take nobody's pennies!" The mother is immobile on the sidewalk, gets up and wants to go home, then collapses again in an apparent stroke.

Edition used: Hans P. Guth and Gabriele L. Rico, eds. *Discovering Fiction*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Blair, 1993.

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## 255

**Author:** Robert Serling

**Title:** *Stewardess*

**Date:** 1982

**Systems:** Airplane

**Context:** 1955 to 1970, Miami and New York

Serling charts the professional rise of Danni Hendricks from stewardess to vice president of In-Flight Services of the fictional Trans-National Airlines (TNA). Along the way he dramatizes the shift in equipment from propellor planes to 747s, the entry of blacks into the industry, the professionalization of stewardesses, union bargaining, and executive-suite politics. The novel is an example of how late twentieth-century, popular fiction can serve as a vehicle for social history and liberal commentary.

When Hendricks is first hired in 1955, TNA is on the verge of deciding on the DC-7, which holds more than 72 passengers (Ch. 1). During the training period, the stewardesses (and others) must also learn about the Convair 240 (40 passengers) and Lockheed Constellation (68) (Ch. 3, 4). By 1957, the airline has ordered fifteen Boeing 707s, which hold 111 passengers, and travel at double the speed - the effect on the crew is to serve twice as many people in half the time (Ch. 8). The decision not to select the Douglas DC-8 was based on better delivery dates; the 707s arrive in 1959, and by the next year the airline is booking 70,000 first-time flyers, chiefly women and children, a situation that changed the airline industry's almost exclusive emphasis on business flights (Ch. 11). By the mid-sixties, TNA, having ordered Boeing 747s for delivery in three years, needs totally to restructure its routes (Ch. 14); however, because the company is overextended, with many quarters of deficit, the order is shifted to four fewer 747s and six more 727s. In March, 1970, with the first 747, the age of the jumbo jet arrives, and the company's president reminisces: "This beautiful, magnificent creation - my God, only forty years ago I was flying Ford trimotors and thinking there'd probably never be a bigger airplane built." (Ch. 18).

Hendricks's first flight on a jet is rendered lyrically: "Takeoffs. Accelerations so slow at first that 240,000 pounds of aluminum, plastic, cloth, rubber, and fuel seemed glued to the runway. Then the exhilarating sensation of increased speed as the turbines screamed defiance of gravity... and the racing wind caught the airfoil of the wings like a giant hand pushing the plane up.... The incredible knowledge that this 120-ton monster was covering almost ten miles every minute, and doing it so quietly and smoothly that it seemed to be suspended in the sky.... Letdown and landing. A return to earth with a controlled steadiness that made one think the jetliner was riding an enormous railroad track toward the ground.... adventure without real danger, sense-quickening without concern, excitement without fear" (Ch. 11). As with other changes in American technology, the older system provides metaphors for a new one.

Hendricks is presented as being at the center of social changes for stewardesses, especially after she is promoted to a central-office, middle management position after she drafts a key report on the staffing needs of the 707s. She eventually wins the battles to abolish rules terminating married stewardesses and those over 35, and she is instrumental in hiring the first two black women for the job. The opposition (and support) for these positions comes from the all-male executives of the airline; some changes had been adopted by other airlines, others are accepted on moral or economic



grounds (Ch. 10, 13).

Other episodes and events are part of Serling's general portrait of the industry. In a 1956 flight through a thunderstorm (incredibly with Eleanor Roosevelt on board), Hendricks is calm and helpful when the plane loses altitude (Ch. 6). We see her reaction to a plane crash where crew members she knows are killed (Ch. 9). In the early 1960s she helps to disarm a hippie-type who tries to get LSD-laced cookies passed to the pilot, and who may be a hijacker (Ch. 11). She works on an appropriate reaction to 1965-66 pictures of a naked TNA stewardess in Stud magazine (Ch. 14). In the face of a threatened strike by stewardesses, she comes up with the successful negotiating package, one part of which includes setting up In-Flight Service as an independent department with its own vice president (Ch. 15-16). After giving details about how the vice presidents conduct their infighting, and how the successor to the president might be selected, we finally see Hendricks promoted to become the first woman vice president of the company (Ch 17-18).

Edition used: New York: St Martin's/Marek, 1982.

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## 256

**Author:** August Wilson (b. 1945)

**Title:** *Two Trains Running*

**Date:** 1990

**Systems:** Train, cars

**Context:** 1969, Pittsburgh; African-American perspective

Memphis owns a small rib-joint in Pittsburgh. For twenty years he's known that two trains run from Pittsburgh to Jackson, Mississippi every day; there was a time when he had the schedules memorized. Ever since he was driven off his farm and run out of Jackson, Memphis has been plagued by the memory. The white men that burned his crops also disemboweled his mule and castrated the beast while Memphis watched. "They ran me out and I called it a draw," he says:

One of these days I'm going back and get my land... When I left out of Jackson I said I was gonna buy me a V-8 Ford and drive by Mr. Henry Ford's house and honk the horn ... then I was going out and buy me a 30.06 and come on back to Jackson and drive up to Mr. Stovall's house and honk the horn. Only this time I wasn't waving.

At first Memphis imagines revenge in economic terms; he will succeed in spite of the men who determined to prevent that success. But, as he tells it, it took thirteen years to get that Ford. Six years later he traded it in on a Cadillac: "There wasn't no way in the world I was going back to Jackson then. Do you know what they do to a nigger they see driving a cadillac in Jackson? But I'm going back one of these day. All I got to do is find my way down to the train depot."

Where the fine cars would represent one kind of victory over his tormentors, a victory that could in fact backfire, the train offers an entirely different form of redress. In his introduction to the play, August Wilson writes, "There are always and only two trains running. There is life and there is death. Each of us ride them both. To live life with dignity, to celebrate and accept responsibility for your presence in the world is all that can be asked of anyone." In this drama trains represent the opportunity to return and return with dignity - to one's past, to the scene of one's disgrace. There one can "pick up the ball," in Wilson's words, that is, confront your loss or face your adversary responsibly and, in turn, force him to take responsibility for the dirt he's done you.

Railroads and highways also represent the wealth white men have extracted from black labor. "Ain't no more money in niggers working," says Memphis's buddy Holloway as he philosophizes on unemployment: "If the white man could



figure out a way to make some money by putting niggers to work, we'd all be working. He ain't building no more railroads. He got them. He ain't building no more highways. Somebody done already stuck the telephone poles in the ground..."

Edition used: Printed in *Theater* 22.1 (1991):42-72.

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## 257

**Author:** Sylvia Plath (1932-1963)

**Title:** "Getting There" In *Ariel*

**Date:** 1965

**Systems:** Train

**Context:** Contemporary

In this late poem, Plath uses the train as a metaphor of both journey and condition, specifically as a bodily metaphor for her experience as a woman. The train at first seems a now-familiar phallic representation: "The gigantic gorilla interior / Of the wheels appall me - ." And on this nightmare train the narrator says: "I am dragging my body / Quietly through the straw of the boxcars."

Where she is trying to "get" it turns out is a place to escape, a place where she can be something else. But on the journey there she is undergoing a transformation that will ready her for arrival, a bodily shift from passenger to a train herself. After the description of the men on the train as "wounded," a "Dynasty of broken arrows!" "The body of this woman" and the train seem to become synonymous.

The train is dragging itself, it is screaming -  
An animal  
Insane for the destination,  
The bloodspot,  
The face at the end of the flare.

In the final lines the destination is achieved,

And I, stepping from this skin  
Of old bandages, old boredoms, old faces

Step to you from the black car of Lethe  
Pure as a baby.

The train functions simultaneously as a sort of male prison and as a womb from which she is reborn into a new body, a new life. The train is both what encases her and what saves her, taking her where she wants to go, and delivering her to a new beginning.

Edition used: *The Collected Poems*. New York: Harper and Row, 1981.

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## 258

**Author:** Richard Brautigan (1937-1986)

**Title:** "The World War I Los Angeles Airplane"

**Date:** 1971

**Systems:** Airplane, train, automobile

**Context:** Contemporary, California

At the beginning of this very brief short story the narrator gets a phone call and learns that his wife's father is dead. In an effort to decipher what "his death means to all of us" the narrator composes a list, of 33 items, which is a synopsis, a sort of mini-biography of the dead man's life, a life that has been very eclectic, full of success and failure, with a preponderance of the latter for the last twenty-five years or so. The title refers to the father's experience as a pilot in World War I, one of the several experiences of his early life that were exciting and satisfying. But in addition to that experience, his life has been shaped and marked by other transportation technologies: by "a horrible automobile accident ... in which everybody was killed but him," by a conversation on a train in Texas that led to his moving to Idaho and starting a bank, by a honeymoon trip by train to Philadelphia, by a Chevrolet that was the only thing left him after a business failure and in which he moved his family to California. The function or meaning of these different modes of transportation is impossible to generalize about; but their importance in the father's life, their profound influence and effect is undeniable. The man lived from 1890 to 1960 and he was immersed in a culture that relies daily on cars, trains, and planes, and so it's not surprising that these would inscribe his life. The act of remembering the life of a man in the twentieth century is almost inevitably going to utilize transportation experiences as "historical landmarks," and Brautigan's story clearly illustrates that modern link between life and machine travel.

Edition used: *Revenge of the Lawn: Stories 1962-1970*. New York: Pocket Books, 1972.

## 259

**Author:** Gertrude Chandler Warner

**Title:** *Caboose Mystery*

**Date:** 1966

**Systems:** Train

**Context:** Contemporary, probably an Eastern state

"The Little North Railroad is a story book railroad, but the cabooses are real cabooses." The Alden children had previously lived in a boxcar in the woods with their grandfather who has "a friend who owns a railroad." He uses his connection to get them all a ride on an old-fashioned big caboose with a mysterious past. The caboose is equipped with a bottled-gas stove, sink, icebox, canned food and bunk beds. Along the way, the kids find out about the emergency brake and the "dead-man's pedal"; Benny pulls the lever to start the train. It turns out that the caboose had been part of a circus train, and a previous user had hidden a diamond necklace in one of the mattresses; the plot involves getting this back to the former owner so he can take care of his horse. The path to the recovery includes taxi rides, removing a fallen tree from the path of a fast train, and various ad hoc changes in the train's rather informal schedule.

Other children's novels in this series include *The Boxcar Children*, *Houseboat Mystery*, and *Bicycle Mystery*.

Edition used: Chicago: Albert Whitman: 1973.

## 260

**Author:** Tom Wolfe (b. 1931)

**Title:** *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*

**Date:** 1968

**Systems:** Bus

**Context:** Contemporary, California

A saga of author Ken Kesey and his entourage in the mid-Sixties with the "great bus trip" as the main event of the early chapters. Kesey is, until the final chapters, wandering away from drugs charges, arrests, and trials and so pursuit and escape are dominant themes. Kesey's group of followers and collaborators, The Pranksters, assembles in a San Francisco garage called the Warehouse to organize a bus trip to the 1964 New York World's Fair. The bus, a 1939 International Harvester, is wired with an elaborate sound system both to record the passing world and to broadcast music, lectures, and poems back. The bus is also the rolling studio for a Movie, ultimately 40 hours long, which shows the Pranksters' travels and consciously includes the outside world's harassments and interactions with the bus. The "Hieronymus Bosch" bus is flamboyantly decorated: "The painting job, meanwhile, with everybody pitching in is a frenzy of primary colors, yellows, oranges, blues, reds, was sloppy as hell, except for the parts Roy Seburn did, which were nice manic mandalas. Well, it was sloppy, but one thing you had to say for it; it was freaking lurid. The manifest, the destination sign in the front, read: 'Furthur,' with two u's" (Ch. 6).

Social life on the bus is dominated by LSD trips; it becomes "like a pressure cooker." It has a refrigerator, bunks, and so is a self-contained world. The ride to New York goes through the South, and the bus attracts frequent attention by the police. In New Orleans, "The city cops were no more able to keep their Cop Movie going than the country cops. Hassler talked sweet to them like the college valedictorian and Kesey talked sweet and down-home and Hagen filmed it all like this was some crazed adventure in cinema verité and the cops skedaddled in a herd of new Ford cruisers with revolving turret lights. Sayonara, you all" (Ch. 7). The usual driver is Neal Cassady, the model for Dean Moriarty of Kerouac's *On The Road*, now forty years old, which provides a link between the hipsters and the Beat generation, a link emphasized by a meeting with Kerouac, Alan Ginsberg, Terry Southern and others when the bus arrives in New York City. Kesey's message is "about how writing was an old-fashioned and artificial form and pointing out, for all who cared to look... the bus" (Ch. 8). The run back, over the northern route from Ohio through Minnesota, South Dakota (frequently noted as being 191 miles to drive across), into and out of Canada where Mounties become part of the Movie.

During a big protest against the Vietnam war, they paint the bus a dull red, the color of dried blood with (anti-)military symbols. It rains. The paint washes off, so they do an American Eagle, put on a fake gun turret with two cardboard cannons (Ch. 16). Kesey flees to Mexico to avoid his drug charges - the bus is driven down to be in the action. Sandy, one of the Pranksters, says "I'll always be on the bus" (Ch. 25). Between his conviction and sentence, Kesey and his family (the Pranksters are disbursed) take the bus to his home town, Springfield, Oregon. At the end, "Kesey was writing again, working on a novel. The bus was there, parked beside the Space Heater House" ("Epilogue").

In an incidental remark, Wolfe and the Pranksters mock a group of Vietnam protesters as "A bunch of fraternity men in their Mustangs!" (Ch. 26). Also, when the Pranksters are visited by the Hell's Angels gang, the latter's "trip" was motorcycles, parallel to the Prankster's dedication to Acid (Ch. 13).

Edition used: New York: Bantam, 1969.

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# The 1970s

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[Pirsig](#) celebrates the motorcycle as a way to travel closer to the countryside than the car. [Robbins'](#) main character uses her thumb of mythic size to hitchhike all over the country, while [Tyler](#) depicts more ordinary hitchhiking as the current equivalent of hopping a freight. [Apple](#) creates an odyssey of Mr. Howard Johnson searching for new motel sites in one story, and he dramatizes another part of the infrastructure in describing an enormous service station in Wyoming. [Oates](#) sets a story in a shopping plaza with the lack of sidewalks, delays from road construction, and other incidental details. [Thompson](#) focuses on the automobile's role in the drug cultures of Los Angeles and Las Vegas, and regrets the superficiality of depending so much on the car. [Cervantes](#) shows how Mexican-Americans are excluded from the wealth which is involved in the L. A. freeway system. That system's noises and violence also affect [Forché's](#) return from civil war in El Salvador. [Carver](#) has a car which is used in the commission of a senseless murder, while [Wolff](#) shows an injured man who is left to die in the back of a pickup during cold weather. Car accidents with grotesque effects in [Irving's](#) novel are the defining points in characters' lives, and become comments on the association between cars and sex. In *Christine*, [King](#) takes to extreme a boy's occult love affair with his car. [Williams](#) depicts the more ordinary envy a yard worker has for expensive vehicles. [Phillips](#) shows the car to be protective, defining its own reality, while in [Mason's](#) story, the vehicle fails to shelter a young couple from their infant's death at a drive-in movie, or from the husband's disability following a truck accident. A similar theme is developed in [King's](#) *Cujo* with its mad dog which traps a family in their car.

In [Albee's](#) play, the airplane is an ironic symbol of the myth of human progress, while [Hoban](#) uses it as the central symbol of the lost high-tech society as viewed from a future world long after an atomic holocaust. [Blume](#) points to the role of the school bus in teenagers' lives. [Paley](#) depicts the rowdiness of teen age boys on a subway, where an accident leads to the death of one of them. [Reed](#) surveys several modes of the Bay Area's transportation from an African-American intellectual's perspective, and he dramatizes skyjacking and baggage handling in the airlines.

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## 261

**Author:** Robert M. Pirsig (b. 1928)

**Title:** *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*

**Date:** 1974

**Systems:** Motorcycle

**Context:** Contemporary, Middle West, West, Northwest

A combination of philosophical inquiry and travel narrative, Pirsig's book gives an account of a motorcycle trip from Minneapolis to Northern California - through North Dakota, Montana, Idaho, Washington, and Oregon - on which the author is accompanied by his eleven-year-old son. The trip provides both an opportunity and a discursive frame for the author's detailed examination of the notion of "Quality" - as he writes early in the book, he wants to replace the common "eternal question 'what's new?' with 'what is best?'" Pirsig calls the subsequent discussion a "Chautauqua," in the spirit of the traveling tent-shows that before radio and television brought speakers to all parts of the country, particularly those non-urban areas through which Pirsig is traveling.

Though Pirsig never identifies the specific type of motorcycle he's riding, it's clear from the time frame (the early 1970s) and details he gives about the bike, that the motorcycle is relatively primitive, in terms of touring capabilities, compared to contemporary models. Pirsig discusses the unique attributes of motorcycle travel, comparing it to car travel,

contending that the car functions as a buffer between the driver and the world, but that the motorcycle places the rider squarely in the scene, making for a more direct and immediate experience. He further differentiates between the two modes of transportation by pointing out that conversation is difficult on a moving motorcycle and so "instead you spend your time being aware of things and mediating on them." Pirsig also discusses types of roads, maintaining that freeways or interstates are the worst, paved county roads the best. On the smaller roads he contends that the people are not in a hurry to get somewhere, because they live along these roads; they have more of a sense of "hereness and nowness" and that sense rubs off on the traveler/rider. The importance of the present moment, which he later describes as "the totality of everything there is," is a key idea of the book and one that is reminiscent of Kerouac's *On the Road* and Deans's talk of "IT" and "time" ("Quality" and "IT" have much in common, not least that they are both undefinable). But central to the notion of "Quality" is a careful approach to all experience, and "care" is not particularly important for Dean or Sal. By care Pirsig means that tasks, relationships - any action - should be approached in a manner that seeks a quality experience; this could be paraphrased as "doing things right." As the title suggests, one of Pirsig's major examples is working on motorcycles. He discusses at length his own practice of maintaining his motorcycle, going as far as to classify the many types of difficulties the mechanic comes up against. More than an analogy, though, the type of maintenance he advocates is a direct illustration of the sort of care for quality that the book is finally about. But even more than an illustration, good motorcycle maintenance is a way of being in the world, the most high quality way.

Edition used: New York: Bantam Books, 1975.

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## 262

**Author:** Tom Robbins

**Title:** *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*

**Date:** 1976

**Systems:** Hitchhiking

**Context:** 1960-mid 1970s, Richmond, Virginia and Dakotas

An entertaining hitchhiking book, explicitly in the tradition of Whitman ("Song of the Open Road"), Steinbeck, and Kerouac (with whom Sissy Hankshaw, the main character, has a passing relationship). "Sissy Hankshaw arrived at the Rubber Rose - and, subsequently, the clockworks - as she had always arrived everywhere: via roadside solicitation. She hitchhiked into the Rubber Rose because hitchhiking was her customary mode of travel; hitchhiking was, in fact, her way of life, a calling to which she was born" (Ch. 4). The Rubber Rose is the largest all-woman ranch in the West; the clockwork is a mystical place in the mountains near the ranch. She has enormous, medically remarkable thumbs which make her career possible.

As a young child in South Richmond, Virginia, she hitched for the first time in a Pontiac station wagon and never walked to school again; at thirteen she went two hundred miles to Virginia Beach, an act which made her realize that, echoing the dictionary, the thumb gives the hand "greater freedom of movement" (Ch. 6). South Richmond itself is a place settled by "bony-faced psychopaths... [who] had come, mostly by Ford from North Carolina." The men "knew more about the carburetor than they knew about the clitoris." Her family recites the traditional warning about the dangers of girls hitchhiking, but Sissy's one rule, "keep driving" protects her virginity. She is molested from time to time. For example, from "One motorist, a tanned athletic type, managed an occasional French lick while keeping his Triumph TR3 on a true course in moderate traffic." She prefers "gentle, rhythmic tollings. And automatic transmissions. (No girl likes to be molested by a party who is always having to shift gears.)" (Ch. 8). Her girlhood fantasies including hitching to Atlantis, Persia, Tibet, Egypt (Ch. 10).

The novel has a continued strain of commentary of national politics, some of which is conveyed by automotive

metaphors. "One June, Richmond, Virginia, woke up with its brakes on and kept them on all summer. That was okay; it was the Eisenhower Years and nobody was going anywhere." In her boredom she tries to hitchhike an ambulance (going both ways) (Ch. 13). During high school she decides to leave home on US 1, north; the pot-smoking, black musician driver amazes her about "the speed at which he made that big Lincoln rocket out of the tobacco slums, forever and forever, bearing Sissy Hankshaw up to the heights" (Ch. 14). Her future husband is quoted,

"Hitchhiking is not a sport. It is not an art. It certainly isn't work, for it requires no particular ability nor does it produce anything of value. It's an adventure, I suppose, but a shallow, ignoble adventure. Hitchhiking is parasitic, no more than a reckless panhandling, as far as I can see."

Sissy's view: "In the Age of the Automobile - and nothing has shaped our culture like the motor car - there have been many great drivers but only one great passenger" (Ch. 15). She spends a decade on the road which is playfully summarized:

She had made Mack trucks rear back on their axles, caused Mercedes-Benzenes to forget about Wagner, stopped Cadillacs as cold as a snowman's heart attack... Wherever traffic flowed she had fished its waters, hooking Barracuda and Stingrays, throwing back Honda minibikes and garden tractors. At her signal, Jeeps and Chryslers fell over one another, Mercurys and Ramblers went into trance, VW's halted with a Prussian exactitude... (Ch. 21).

Sissy is part Indian; she enjoys the fact that the first ride was in a car "named in honor of the great chief of the Ottawa: Pontiac." She has "visions of a future wilderness where bison and Buicks would mingle in harmony and mutual respect, a neoprimitive prairie where both pinto and Pinto would run free (Ch. 18). She arrives at the Rubber Rose in a Chevy pickup. The drug culture of the ranch has appropriate vehicles nearby - a psychedelic VW microbus, a pickup with a handmade camper in the bed and appropriate painting, and so on.

During her first trip to New York she is forced to ride in a taxi, but it, "having no free will, rolled downtown" (Ch. 22). Her years on the road were without agenda or goal, so this is a limitation which makes her (enormous) thumbs itch to get back. The theme of her travels is caught indirectly in the long-awaited third peyote vision of Delores, one of the ranchers: "The enemy is every expert who practices technocratic manipulation, the enemy is every proponent of standardization and the enemy is every victim who is so dull and lazy and weak as to allow himself to be manipulated and standardized" (Ch. 115).

Edition used: New York: Bantam, 1977.

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## 263

**Author:** Anne Tyler (b. 1941)

**Title:** *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*

**Date:** 1982

**Systems:** Car - hitchhiking

**Context:** Contemporary, Baltimore

Aside from incidental references to family cars and train rides, this novel has a hitchhiking scene which points up how that mode of travel is similar to hopping a freight earlier in the twentieth century. Except here it doesn't work out to be a means of escape. Fourteen-year-old Luke Tull decides to leave his family's home in Lynchburg, Virginia, to visit his uncle and grandmother in Baltimore. His trip starts when he wonders if he could hail a Trailways bus, which inspires him to hitchhike, "as if obeying orders, [he] stuck out his thumb." A truck stops, despite the NO RIDERS sign in the



window; "It was filled with loud music and a leathery, sweaty, masculine smell that make him feel instantly comfortable." The driver takes him to Richmond, and, when he gets out he realizes that he is far from home, vulnerable, and anonymous - he wishes he had an i.d. so he would be identifiable if he were killed on the road. A man with a young son offers him a lift, "Luke had never been in a car as old as this one." The man and boy had been on the road for three weeks, apparently visiting some of the father's old girl friends, since he is about to be divorced. In a novel which focuses on the tenuous relations among the various Tull generations, this contact sets up various comparisons for Luke to ponder.

After his second ride drops him off in Alexandria at 4:00, he becomes aware of "the foreign smells of tar and diesel fuel, or the roar of traffic." He thumbs for a short time until he is picked up by a woman in a Dodge, very much concerned for his safety, "Do you know the kind of perverts in this world?" She has been "circling the Beltway forever," and, amid her tears and worry, she agrees to take him to Baltimore. She recounts stories of crimes against children, tells him that she could be a kidnapper or murderer. Her driving is a compulsive effort to escape her family, especially her daughter's scorn: "'it's like I'm driving till I find ... my past self. Then mile by mile, I simmer down. I let up on the gas a bit more. So, by suppertime, I'm ready to come home again.'" They get to Baltimore's outskirts by 5:00, where they find his relatives' address through the phone book. Almost as soon as he arrives, his uncle calls his folks, thus alleviating their worry. They are willing and able to drive up in their Mercedes, and they take Luke back home the same day. The whole episode emphasizes the closeness of the cities on the east coast. The fact that hitchhiking goes so smoothly, despite the undercurrent of potential danger sets one mood which contrasts with the ease with which the phone and automobile can pull the rug from under the young boy's effort to run away from home.

Edition used: New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

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## 264

**Author:** Max Apple

**Title:** *The Oranging of America and Other Stories*

**Date:** 1976

**Systems:** Automobile

**Context:** Contemporary, Wyoming and other Western states

The title story, "The Oranging of America," shows in a humorous way, what goes on behind the tinted windows of executives' limousines, in this case that of Mr. Howard Johnson. Johnson's famous chain of restaurants was known for serving an interesting variety of ice cream flavors. The limousine has a special freezer in the back which keeps a supply of 18 trial flavors which Johnson, and especially his chauffeur, Otis Brighton (a driver of Louisiana mules in 1925), sample and approve for sale. The freezer motif is taken a step further when Johnson's associate, Mildred Bryce, becomes persuaded to have her body cryogenically preserved; Johnson rewards her many years' of service by ordering a bullet-shaped cryogenic capsule on a U-Haul trailer, which will be pulled by the car, always ready for service. "Mildred Bryce contemplated her immortality, a gift from the ice-cream king."

The "oranging" comes from the roof color of Mr. Johnson's restaurants and motels. The trio of passengers spends most of their time visiting existing sites and selecting new ones. "When she [Mildred] and Howard had started their travels, the old motel courts huddled like so many dark graves around the stone marking of the highway. And what traveler coming into one of those dingy cabins could watch the watery rust dripping from his faucet without thinking of everything he was missing by being a traveler ... his two-stall garage, his wife small in the half-empty bed, his children with hair the color of that rust." Mildred's "life was measured in rest stops," and that need, coupled with hunger had been the preliminary sign that new facilities were needed. Right after the Second War, in a twelve-cylinder '47 Lincoln,



they toured and found new sites in California, New England, and the Midwest. The key is Johnson's mystical, visionary experience, a sixth sense which visited him in corn fields where "he would mark the spot with his urine or break some of the clayey earth in his strong pink hands."

"Gas Stations" traces the proliferation of highways and roadside conveniences into the western states after the second World War. The story begins at "World's largest, eighty-three pumps, forty-one urinals, advertized on road signs as far east as Iowa. Oasis, Wyoming, U. S. 40, hard to miss as you whiz on by. Even Jack Kerouac on an overnight cross-country spin used to stop here for soft ice cream." The narrator's Chevy is gassed at pump #48, and he reads the story of its founding. As with Howard Johnson's restaurants, it was founded on a dream. The owner as a shepherd boy in the 1920s survived a blizzard and decided to name this place of struggle "Oasis"; in the 1930s there was no road within 100 miles. The narrator flashed back to "Ted Johnson's Standard," the gas station of his childhood. Ted "was the magician of the fan belt," and he combined mechanical skill with a concern for the safety of his customers. He kept a record of their "deathless days" for twenty years. It turns out that the huge station's founder had made a fortune in the 1930s after he took the freight to South Dakota and then Chicago. Months before World War II he returned to Oasis where the nearest road is now fifty miles away. He built towers of fluorescent lights, put in pinball machines, a wax museum, and a restaurant: "The road will come."

The narrator talks with "Mr. Big" who is sitting at the counter. In the 1970s the owner's problems are Arabs and OPEC, who are buying up Coney Island and Disneyland, and probably have taken Ted Johnson's Standard. He now gives out free headdresses during Ramadan and "Allah Lives" bumper stickers. The narrator has a J. Paul Getty franchise on a station outside San Francisco where he will have only three pumps for three grades of gas, and "rubber machines and ten-cent Cokes if I can get them." "Mr. Oasis" advises him to learn dentistry and laughs heartily at his sentimental plan. Ellie, a waitress on roller skates in the big station, decides to leave Oasis and to go with the narrator; she promises to check the oil and clean windshields and to help continue the tradition of good service. As they move off, he has a vision of Mormons on camels in pursuit. The final scene links the powerful engine, auto safety, and sex. "Three hundred and forty cubic inches rumble. I buckle up, Ellie moves close. Careful on the curves, amid kisses and hopes I give her the gas."

Edition used: Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1981.

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## 265

**Author:** Joyce Carol Oates (b. 1938)

**Title:** "Stalking"

**Date:** 1972

**Systems:** Automobile, highway

**Context:** Contemporary, shopping mall

Thirteen year old Gretchen visits a shopping plaza in pursuit of an "Invisible Adversary," a haunting spirit or a mental projection. Part of the theme of the story is that Gretchen goes to and leaves the plaza on foot, and thus sees some of the details from an anomalous point of view.

Her stalking begins when she enters the BUCKINGHAM MALL, 101 STORES: "Cars and trucks and buses from the city and enormous interstate trucks hauling automobiles pass by on the highway." There is no sidewalk, so she walks across the grounds, first past an office building under construction, a "gouged-up area," then a brand new gas station which hasn't been opened for six months. The station is "all white tile, white concrete, perfect plate-glass windows, with whitewashed X's on them, a large driveway and eight gasoline pumps, all proudly erect and ready for business";

however, one wall has tar on it, and some windows have been broken. A barricade diverts traffic to a "narrow, bumpy, muddy lane" on the shoulder to the highway. She jumps over the final, dirty landscape feature - "a concrete ditch that is stained with rust-colored water."

The cars gradually slow down as she gets nearer the plaza until there's a single lane of traffic into the service drive. The parking lot is "A city of cars on a Saturday afternoon." The signs for the lots and lanes are "spheres, bubbles, perched up on long slender poles. At night they are illuminated." After a couple of acts of petty vandalism, like stuffing up a public toilet, the adversary scolds her. She spots him in the "maze of cars" and pursues him across the lot and two muddy fields, in effect driving him to run across the highway where he is struck by a car. He stumbles and staggers along the sidewalk on the other side, and then to the Piney Woods subdivision where Gretchen lives, and where, again, there are no sidewalks. The stalking ends in her house with the adversary's bloodstains on the carpet.

Edition used: Hans P. Guth and Gabriele L. Rico, eds. *Discovering Fiction*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Blair, 1993.

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## 266

**Author:** Hunter S. Thompson (b. 1939)

**Title:** *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*

**Date:** 1971

**Systems:** Automobile

**Context:** 1971, Las Vegas

Thompson's account of a week spent in Las Vegas first appeared in *Rolling Stone* in November 1971. The book is a fevered, high speed description of journalist Raoul Duke (aka Thompson) and his "attorney's" drug inflected adventures in Vegas, where they are ostensibly "covering" first the Mint 400, an off-road motorcycle and dune buggy race, and then the National District Attorney's Conference on Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs. But while these events are the official assignments (and pay the bills), the real goal is to "find the American Dream." The first and crucial step in this search involves renting a car that will take the two men from Los Angeles across the desert to Las Vegas; but not just any car will do - it must be a convertible and it must be large. They settle on a red Chevy that Thompson dubs the Red Shark. After a night of driving all over L.A. making drug buys (they load up on acid, mescaline, opium, marijuana, amyl nitrate, cocaine, ether, uppers, downers, and more) they take off for Nevada.

The ensuing encounters with "authority" in its many different guises (including a scene in which a highway patrolman pulls over Duke) depict the relationship between the remnants of 60s counterculture and those who have "cophearts." In the midst of the Vegas week the red Chevy is exchanged for a new white Cadillac Coupe de Ville (also a convertible - this one referred to as the "White Whale"), which is described at length ("Everything was automatic"). The big cars are partly about "total control," being untouchable, but they also are a facade, particularly for Thompson and his attorney, who are clearly trying to pose as something they are not, to successfully swindle the cops, the hotels - everyone in power. Thompson plugs into the power grid through the large machines, which he identifies as the proper vehicles for a quest for the American Dream; but in contrast he also claims that "old Americans go out to the highway and drive themselves to death with huge cars." The excessiveness of the cars is what makes them an appropriate and central element of the American Dream, as does their essential phoniness, the realization that what they communicate and accomplish is basically a superficial form of intimidation that is anything but appealing. Considered in the context of the late 60s and early 70s, particularly the dissatisfaction with the Vietnam War (which comes up several times in the book), the Chevrolet and Cadillac, though at moments in the narrative suggestive of the familiar notion of freedom, more importantly represent the exploitive and violent aspects of the "American Dream."

Edition used: New York: Popular Library, 1971.

## 267

**Author:** Lorna Dee Cervantes (b. 1954)**Title:** *Emplumada***Date:** 1981**Systems:** Freeway, car**Context:** 1970s, 1980s, Southern California, Mexican-American perspective

"Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway" opens describing the freeway across the street from the speaker's home. A "blind worm, wrapping the valley up from Los Altos to Sal Si Puedes," the freeway is blind, or indifferent, not only to its destination, but also to the life that exists along side it. Three generations of the speaker's family hide in the freeway's ominous shadow which, worm-like, lengthens at dusk. Freeway imagery opens and closes this long poem, signifying the speaker's departure from this family and her eventual return.

Dedicated to the "lumpen bourgeoisie," "To My Brother" recounts a life of poverty. Dreams of escape sustain the brother and sister through the daily struggle to pay their bills; escape is symbolized differently for each: his fantasy car versus her "dime bag of uppers for the next / buzzing shift." The speaker and her brother conduct a nightly argument, "a bicker / to buy a new used car, / a four-door sedan, a six/ month guarantee." While saving for a car is patently absurd in these circumstances, to entertain the possibility is essential to their psychic survival.

"Las casitas" of the Mexican/Mexican-American cannery workers are set in ironic juxtaposition to the expensive superhighway, "Freeway 280" of the title, that speeds travelers past: "The freeway conceals it / all beneath a raised scar." The metaphor is economic as well as organic; the scar seals over (economic) damage with a display of speed and wealth. The speaker notes that once, the freeway meant order and escape: "I wanted out, wanted the rigid lanes / to take me to a place without sun, / without the smell of tomatoes burning / on swing shift in the greasy summer air." But in likening the freeway to a scar, she makes it a sign not only of loss but also of continuing life and health. Beneath the "fake windsounds of the open lanes" gardens, trees, lots "come back stronger than they were." Back in the poor neighborhood she once fled from, the speaker believes that here she will find "that part of me / mown under / like a corpse / or a loose seed."

"Poema Para Los Californios Muertos" again makes a freeway the sign of the wealth and vitality that has been taken or extracted from a region, the poem opens: "These older towns die / into stretches of freeway. / The high scaffolding cuts a clean cesarean / across belly valleys and fertile dust." The cesarean is both a strange birth and a violent theft; Los Altos, California, "once a refuge for Mexican Californios," is now "a bastard child" where "Californios moan like husbands of the raped." The town becomes the illegitimate offspring of a rape, and in this sense the freeway represents U. S. territorial expansion and annexation of Mexican land.

Edition used: Pittsburgh, PA: U of Pittsburgh Press.

## 268

**Author:** Carolyn Forché (b. 1950)

**Title:** *The Country Between Us*

**Date:** 1981

**Systems:** Train, car

**Context:** 1970s, Los Angeles, travel in El Salvador

This collection of poems, which has been described as an effective synthesis of the personal and the political, is largely inspired by and about Forché's time spent in El Salvador (1978-80) and the difficulty of her subsequent return to the U.S. In "Return" the narrator speaks of the psychic transition involved in moving from El Salvador to Los Angeles; the sound of tire blow-outs makes her think of death, and strange cars near the house suggest an insidious and always watching presence. She recalls driving "those streets with a gun in my lap," and tells of the American attaché's wife who flies her own plane around the small country, offering her help. In "Departure" a train both slices and sutures the landscape, and provides a means of anonymous escape for the "dead," who can't know each others' names, but who must flee alone - trusting no one - from threatening government forces. In "On Returning to Detroit" another train trip is described, a cold journey in which a fine ice covers everything inside and out. The narrator watches the other passengers and imagines their lives, particularly that of a woman who is clearly grieving something or someone.

Edition used: New York: Harper and Row, 1981.

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## 269

**Author:** Raymond Carver (1939-1988)

**Title:** "Tell the Women We're Going"

**Date:** 1982

**Systems:** Car

**Context:** 1970s, Washington state

This short and somewhat cryptic (a common attribute of Carver's minimalist style) story tells of two young men, briefly chronicling their friendship, beginning in high school, when they went in together to buy a '54 Plymouth for \$325, and working up to the present time of the story's action, when the two are married and in their early to mid-twenties. In the midst of an afternoon barbecue, Jerry (who already has two children, with a third on the way) suggests that he and Bill (who is still childless) go on a "littlerun." They drive through rural Washington, along the "Naches River highway" until they come to a familiar tavern. After several hours of drinking they return to the car. While driving they come across two young women bicycling down the road. When their attempts to pick them up fail they follow them to Picture Rock, a locally known spot. There Jerry follows them up one of the paths, and in the last line of the story we learn that, out of sight of the highway, he kills them both with a rock.

Though Carver's stories are generally difficult to decipher, it does seem that the "run" the men make is initially meant to serve as an antidote to their boredom; similarly, the murder seems to operate as a violent outlet for Jerry's frustrations, which aren't explicitly described but suggested by the brief and bare-boned account of his life since high school. Also, the car Jerry and Bill are driving that afternoon is a '68 Chevy hardtop, a rather nondescript model that fits well with Jerry's rather nondescript existence.

Edition used: *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. New York: Vintage, 1982.

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## 270

**Author:** Tobias Wolff (b. 1945)

**Title:** "Hunters in the Snow" In In the Garden of North American Martyrs

**Date:** 1981

**Systems:** Automobiles

**Context:** Contemporary

A man named Tub, carrying a hunting rifle is waiting for a ride from his friends. A passing driver is frightened by the rifle and "hit the gas. The tires spun on the ice." Later, "A truck slid around the corner, horn blaring, rear end sashaying. Tub moved to the sidewalk and held up his hand. The truck jumped the curb and kept coming, half on the street and half on the sidewalk. It wasn't slowing down at all." This turns out to be his companions, and Kenny, the driver, mocks him: "You ought to see yourself... He looks just like a beach ball with a hat on." They are late, so private transport can be off schedule just as public systems are.

The truck is a mess. Juvenile delinquents threw a brick through the windshield and the heater doesn't work, so the three men are quite cold throughout their driving. As hunters they notice that most of the land they pass is posted; they really aren't welcome. After stopping to hunt for a while, Kenny (driving) and Frank pull out and force Tub to scramble to catch on and then to ride in the back. Tub winds up wounding Kenny, and he is put in the truck bed as they look for medical attention. Despite the weather the car starts: "you've got to hand it to the Japanese." Tub and Frank's hands get so cold they stop at a bar to warm up; they have left their injured companion outside. By story's end they have lost directions to the hospital, which, we assume, does in Kenny. It is hard to tell from the flat tone of the story whether this is a general slam at male hunters in pickups or a more personalized tale of Tub's revenge.

Edition used: Eugene Current-Garcia and Bert Hitchcock, eds. *American Short Stories*, 5th ed. Glenview: Scott, Foresman, 1990.

## 271

**Author:** John Irving (b. 1942)

**Title:** *The World According to Garp*

**Date:** 1978

**Systems:** Car accident

**Context:** Contemporary

Irving's novel is filled with tragic and violent events that affect the characters' lives, and two of these key events involve cars. In the chapter "Walt Catches Cold," a car accident occurs that causes a crucial change in Garp, the central change of the story, involving his understandings of sex, lust, and responsibility. While Garp takes his two young sons, Duncan and Walt, to the movies, his wife Helen struggles to break off an affair with Michael Milton. Helen and Milton sit in his car in her driveway, as Helen tries to convince him it's over; Milton insists Helen go down on him one last time. At the same time Garp, is heading home early, driving his VW Bug. As we have seen earlier in the novel, Garp has a practice of cutting off the engine and lights as he nears his house, and gliding silently up the driveway. On this night he does the

"trick" as usual, to please the boys, unaware of Milton's car, which he rear ends at a high speed. On impact Helen bites off Milton's penis, Duncan pitches forward onto the VW's stickshift and puts out one of his eyes, Garp breaks his jaw, and Walt is killed.

Garp, who is a writer, subsequently works to purge his guilt and remorse by writing *The World According to Garp*, a shockingly violent novel whose first chapter is included in Irving's book. In *Bensehaver* a young mother is abducted from her home by a teen-aged boy and driven in a turquoise pick-up to a nearby rural area. The boy pulls off on the side of a small two-lane road and attempts to rape the woman on the bench seat of the truck; but in the midst of the rape she gets ahold of the fishing knife he has used to threaten her, and in a grisly and graphic scene she eviscerates her rapist.

In both scenes described Irving works with conventional notions of the car as a familiar location for sex, but in Garp car sex turns out to be violent and dangerous; in the context of the action of the rest of the book, the suggestion is clearly that it's better to stay home.

Edition used: New York: Pocket Books, 1979.

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## 272

**Author:** Stephen King (b. 1947)

**Title:** *Christine*

**Date:** 1983

**Systems:** Automobile

**Context:** 1978, Libertyville, Pennsylvania, outside Pittsburgh

The Christine of the title is a 1958 Plymouth Fury, a hulk seemingly beyond repair, that is bought in the beginning of the novel (1978) by teen-aged Arnie Cunningham from the 71-year-old Roland LeBay. Arnie vows to fix up Christine, though his parents object strongly to the car, particularly because it signifies a loss of control over their son. Miraculously, though no one sees him do the work, Arnie restores Christine to immaculate condition. And as the car changes, he too changes: his acne clears up, he becomes less self-effacing, more confident, and he gets a girlfriend, Leigh Cabot, a very attractive new girl at school. But soon after he finishes the car, Buddy Repperton and three of his cronies, classmates and devoted tormentors of Arnie, trash the car, completely destroying it. Arnie, who used to be so calm and even tempered, is livid and rages that he'll "get" whoever's responsible, and all the rest of the "shitters" who have been trying to keep him down.

Throughout the early part of the novel there are suggestions that Christine has a life or personality of her own, that "she" is not a normal car, but possesses some sort of supernatural - and evil - power. These hints are confirmed after she's been wrecked, when we find that she can repair herself. Christine's odometer runs backward, and so when she moves she goes back in time, reversing the direction of her deterioration; Arnie's role in the original and the subsequent restoration has been to literally push her around the junkyard behind Darnall's Do-It-Yourself Garage (where he keeps the car), moving the odometer back and "fixing" the car. After Christine becomes fully operative - she strikes out on her own. She begins to kill those who have attacked her, and who have thus attacked Arnie; but she does so only when Arnie has a solid alibi (he's out of town when most of the murders occur). And though she is severely damaged during each of the killings, she is completely fixed by the time the drive back to the garage is complete.

By this time in the novel it's clear that Arnie has changed drastically, and that the change is undeniably linked to the car. It turns out that Arnie is literally becoming Roland LeBay, a man who has been described as perpetually angry and



bitter. LeBay has risen from the grave to continue wreaking his revenge on all the "shitters" who have thwarted him. We learn from his brother that LeBay was in the army, a mechanic who could never afford a new car of his own, but who for thirty-four years repaired the cars of others. On retirement he finally bought his first new car - Christine - and she had become the most important thing in his life, the one dependable relationship. Arnie becomes as difficult and ornery as LeBay was, and his relationships with his parents, with his only friend, Dennis, and with Leigh all deteriorate. After Christine polishes off Buddy et al., she begins to threaten those close to Arnie, anyone who he thinks is against him (which is almost everyone). The book ends with Christine trying to kill Dennis and Leigh, who have begun their own relationship, a secret Arnie discovers.

Throughout the novel - and inevitably throughout this discussion of the novel - the Plymouth Fury is gendered, referred to as "she." And, to everyone but Arnie, "she's" not a nice girl, but a vindictive "bitch" - a pejorative that is repeatedly invoked. Further she's a "whore"; when LeBay sells Christine to Arnie, Dennis is reminded of "a very old pimp huckstering a very young boy." Leigh is jealous of the car, and uneasy whenever she is a passenger. She's vaguely uncomfortable making out in the car, feeling that there "the act of kissing him, making love to him, seemed a perversion worse than voyeurism or exhibitionism - it was like making love inside the body of her rival." When Arnie ridicules Leigh's jealousy, telling her he thought girls were only jealous of other girls, she responds "Cars are girls." And for Arnie it seems that Christine is the perfect girl, the perfect companion and comforter: "She would never argue or complain, Arnie thought. She would never demand. You could enter her anytime and rest on her plush upholstery, rest in her warmth. She would never deny."

Another aspect of the novel is the link between cars and rock and roll. Each chapter is headed by an epigraph of rock lyrics that deal with cars; most of the songs are from the late 50s and early 60s (Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley, etc.), but there are also a few from the 70s (Bruce Springsteen, in particular). Also, sometimes when Arnie is driving around Christine's radio plays a station that seems to be broadcasting from the late 50s; and we learn that LeBay was an avid listener to early rock music. The car in these songs - and for Arnie and LeBay - is a sort of mini kingdom, in which the male driver is in charge and can't be ordered around. Christine does function as a refuge, but an imperfect one - the world does intrude. When that control is abrogated, Christine, working for her owners, strikes back violently. It's as if the promise of rock and roll is going to be fulfilled one way or another, if not by escaping in the car, then by using the car as a weapon against the "shitters" that prevent that escape.

Edition used: New York: Viking, 1983.

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## 273

**Author:** Joy Williams (b. 1944)

**Title:** "The Yard Boy"

**Date:** 1982

**Systems:** Automobile

**Context:** Contemporary, Florida

The young man pointed to in the story title has two possessions, a pickup truck and a stuffed plover. He once ran over an old lady and broke her leg (but the consequences are not played out). He drives over causeways to the Florida keys where he works at mowing lawns and talking to flowers.

A client, Mrs. Wilson, has a Mercedes 350 SL which she had driven up to 130 MPH with "no sound of strain at all." She takes the yard boy for a ride. "She darts in and out of traffic with a fine sense of timing. Behind them, occasionally, old men in Gremlins [suggesting the American Motors' subcompact and goblins] jump the curb in fright. Mrs. Wilson



glances at them in the rear-view mirror seeming neither satisfied nor dissatisfied." A Good Humor truck "scatters a tinkle of music and a carton of Fudgesicles as it grinds to a stop." The surrealistic account of the ride points out the arrogance of rich people driving in expensive cars.

Edition used: Eugene Current-Garcia and Bert Hitchcock, eds. *American Short Stories*, 5th ed. Glenview: Scott, Foresman, 1990.

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## 274

**Author:** Jayne Anne Phillips (b. 1952)

**Title:** "Fast Lanes."

**Date:** 1987

**Systems:** Car

**Context:** late 1970s, Colorado to West Virginia via the south

This thirty-page story, set in the late '70s, is about a three week road trip from Denver to West Virginia (via Texas), undertaken by two casual friends, Thurman and an unnamed women, in a small Japanese pick-up. The two characters appear to be unrecuperated hippies; but while Thurman seems to have found a satisfactory life as an itinerant carpenter, the women is clearly a "floater" without direction, bent on self-destruction through drugs, alcohol, sex, or whatever means available. Thurman considers the fast lane on the highway dangerous, and suggests she use it only to pass; but the woman wants to stay in the fast lane, doesn't want to bother going around slower moving vehicles.

At the beginning of the trip the relationship between the two had to be negotiated: the woman asked if it was going to be a "kissy-poo number." As the "rider" (Thurman calls himself "the driver") she is relatively powerless, at the mercy of Thurman. But it turns out that Thurman will not take advantage of her helplessness - and she largely chooses to be helpless; he teaches her to drive the truck, which has a standard transmission, encouraging her to become more than a passenger. As a self-described floater, the woman has a fear of home (she's going back to West Virginia to visit her sick father). She focuses not so much on the road, but on the truck itself, which is a sort of capsule containing all of reality, all that she wants to acknowledge anyway. The truck is a moving shell that protects her from the life that awaits all along the road.

Edition used: *Fast Lanes*. New York: Dutton, 1987.

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## 275

**Author:** Bobbie Ann Mason (b. 1940)

**Title:** "Shiloh"

**Date:** 1982

**Systems:** Automobile, truck

**Context:** Contemporary, Kentucky and Tennessee

The troubles begin when Leroy Moffitt is injured and disabled in a highway accident, so he can't continue to work as a truck driver. His rig is "like a gigantic bird that has flown home to roost" at the start of the story, or, as his frustration grows, "like a huge piece of furniture gathering dust in the backyard." His wife, Norma Jean, sells cosmetics at the Rexall, and explains about what she sells, but "he thinks happily of other petroleum products - axle grease, diesel fuel. This is a connection between him and Norma Jean." Actually, the real troubles in the marriage began when, as 18-year-old newly-weds, their four-month-old baby dies of sudden infant death syndrome in the back seat, between features at a drive-in.

Since he is disabled from driving the truck, he is home and drives around town "rather carelessly. Power steering and an automatic shift make a car feel so small and inconsequential that his body is hardly involved in the driving process.... Once or twice he has almost hit something, but even the prospect of an accident seems minor in a car." [A humorous word play appears in Norma Jean's mother's story about a baby whose legs were chewed off by a "datsun," a mistake for "dachshund," which she persists in making even after being corrected. This exchange is a vehicle to point to Norma Jean's guilt for the baby's death.]

The main event is a drive to the Shiloh battlefield; Leroy tells his mother in law, "'I've been to kingdom come and back in that truck out yonder... but we never yet set foot in that battleground.'" Here it is not so much a battleground, but a surrender, as the Moffitts split up there.

Edition used: *The Story and its Writer*, ed. Ann Charters, 3rd ed., Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1991.

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## 276

**Author:** Stephen King (b. 1947)

**Title:** *Cujo*

**Date:** 1981

**Systems:** Automobile, bus, airplane

**Context:** Contemporary, Maine

King's story of a rabid dog (the Cujo of the title) and the complicated series of events that lead to tragedy is dependent on the movements of the many characters, and their various locations at key moments in the plot; these movements are undertaken by airplane, greyhound bus, van, and most importantly, Ford Pinto. The main focus of the story is the Trenton family, Vic, who is partner in a small advertising firm in the Maine town where the novel is set, his wife, Donna, and their four-year-old son, Tad. Because of a crisis with his business, Vic must leave town, for Boston and New York; Donna is left with an ailing Pinto (they have a Jaguar too, but she can't drive a stick shift) which she takes, the day Vic leaves, to a local man, Joe Camber, who works out of his barn at the end of a lonely rural road. Camber's wife, Charity, and son, Brett, have also just left town, on a bus to Connecticut to visit relatives. It turns out that the Camber's dog, Cujo, has contracted rabies, and it's on the day of Donna's attempt to get the car repaired that the rabies has progressed to the point of driving Cujo - a two-hundred pound St. Bernard - mad. By the time Donna and Tad arrive at the Cambers', the dog has already killed Joe as well as the nearest neighbor, Gary Pervier, a solitary alcoholic.

The Pinto, which has carburetor problems, barely makes into the Camber's driveway before quitting for good. The dog, seemingly waiting for them to appear, attacks the car, trying to get in at Donna and Tad. A two day siege ensues, two days marked by record temperatures of over 100 degrees. Trapped in the Pinto Donna and Tad struggle to survive as the malevolent dog lurks nearby; at one point Donna tries to get to the Camber's house but the dog attacks her, wounding her in the stomach and thigh before she can struggle back into the car. In the middle of the second day, due to a long chain of events, the local sheriff shows up, but Cujo stalks and kills him. Finally, both weakened by the two day

struggle, Donna and the dog engage in a last encounter, in which she manages to kill Cujo with a baseball bat. At that moment Vic shows up in the Jaguar, only to find Tad dead in the Pinto, seemingly from the combination of dehydration and fear.

The above account of the plot suggests a more pedestrian and straightforward story than King actually provides. Cujo is linked with an evil that is unearthly and unstoppable: prior to the events at the Cambers', Tad has had visions of a "monster," one much like a rabid dog, lurking in his closet, waiting to attack him; and the dog is also linked to Frank Dodd, a serial murder who had preyed on the small town a decade earlier. Donna perceives Cujo's actions as more calculated and intelligent than possible for a normal dog; and his physical endurance and strength seem unnaturally excessive, even for a St. Bernard. The suggestion is clearly that he is possessed by more than rabies.

Sitting in the Pinto, trapped by the dog, Donna imagines the car shrinking, until it is the size of a coffin. But the car also offers protection, the only barrier between them and certain death. For Tad, however, the choice is only between a quick and a slow death. Choosing a Pinto as the death car may be some sort of sick joke on King's part, an allusion to the infamous proclivity of Pinto gas tanks to explode in rear-end collisions, but beyond that the car in general is transformed in the novel from convenient family transportation to the parent's worst nightmare. Donna's job as mother (and Vic's as father) is primarily to keep Tad safe, to keep the "monsters" at bay. At a very young age Tad learns, from seeing the monster in his closet every night, that monsters are real and threatening and that he needs protection; his parents try to reassure him that there are no such things as monsters but Tad remains unconvinced. Trapped in the car, Tad grips a piece of paper with the "Monster Words" on it, a catechism his father composed as a means of reassuring the boy at night. Ironically, a "well" car would offer them an easy escape from the "monster," but in Cujo events consistently take an unhealthy or inconvenient turn: people don't show up when they're supposed to, the weather turns unbearable, and cars don't start. When things don't go as they usually do, as they're supposed to, that opens the door to the evil that Cujo contracts and executes. A working car can take you down the highway, the cool wind blowing in the open windows, but a car that stops running can leave you trapped and helpless. And a car can stop running at any time.

Edition used: New York: Viking, 1981.

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## 277

**Author:** Edward Albee (b. 1928)

**Title:** *Seascape*

**Date:** 1975

**Systems:** Jet plane

**Context:** Contemporary

Albee's two-act play takes place on a sand dune, where Nancy and Charlie, a middle-aged retired couple, discuss what they want to do with the rest of their lives. While Charlie wants to "rest," Nancy is interested in a more active life. Near the end of the first act they notice in the distance down the beach what they think are some people. But these two "people" turn out to be human-size sea creatures, sort of lizard or newt-like (named Leslie and Sarah), who have been drawn out of the sea to explore the land. The initial encounter is a frightening one for both couples; the two males brandish sticks at one another. But at that moment a jet plane flies low overhead with a deafening roar, and Leslie and Sarah, overcome with fear, "race back over the dune toward the water."

Low flying jet planes appear four times in the play: just as the play begins, during Charlie and Nancy's conversation, and twice during the encounter between the two couples. In the initial scene Nancy says, "Such noise they make," and Charlie replies, "They'll crash into the dunes one day. I don't know what good they do." This same dialogue is repeated

three of the four times as the jet appears, hinting at the threat the jets will clearly come to embody in the play. Coupled with the lengthy and often sceptical discussion of evolution the two couples engage in (the humans try to explain the concept to the sea creatures), the ubiquitous presence of the jet suggests a distrust of the whole idea of human "progress," especially technological progress. After the discussion of evolution - and of human social and sexual mores - Leslie and Sarah are not convinced that the long human journey from primeval water to land and eventually modernity has been a movement for the better. They reject modern civilization, in part epitomized by the jet, which is so frighteningly and violently loud and obtrusive, and so heedless of the people on the beach. Leslie and Sarah are more closely connected to the natural world, a connection that has clearly become tenuous for Nancy and Charlie and for the rest of humanity. The sea creatures rightfully fear the jet, instinctively conscious of the threat of high tech, the ways in which it produces "brute" behavior. Though the conversation between the two couples is largely a matter of Charlie and Nancy teaching Leslie and Sarah about the human world, the play suggests that humans have much to learn from a species that is not corrupted by "civilization."

Edition used: New York: Atheneum, 1975.

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## 278

**Author:** Russell Hoban (b. 1925)

**Title:** *Riddley Walker*

**Date:** 1980

**Systems:** Airplane

**Context:** Contemporary

Hoban's apocalyptic novel is set over two thousand years in the future, in what was England, and chronicles a sort of initiation journey, the coming to knowledge of twelve-year-old Riddley Walker. Riddley's world is one of a very few people living within fenced enclosures, under what are by contemporary standards very primitive conditions. The "1 Big 1" had gone off in 1997, and humanity was nearly destroyed, and continues to exist only in a debased state. Even the language of the novel, which is written as a first person narrative by Riddley, is a corrupt version of modern English, a version that requires a slow and careful reading and occasionally concentrated effort to decipher. The myths of the survivors contain germs of technological knowledge - nuclear fission, in particular, is recognizable in its mythic form - and some of the characters in the book, Riddley among them, are trying to recover that knowledge. But their efforts, though they form the focus of the story, are clearly, from a late twentieth century perspective, hopeless: they have images representing the knowing but not the knowing itself. These people have only recently made the transition from a nomadic existence to farming, and they are far from developing what now could be considered even rudimentary technologies, such as electricity (in terms of transportation they don't appear to have yet rediscovered the wheel, but there is mention of boats).

But in their myths, in their collective memory, they sense what they have been, sense that they have been much more "powerful." While the ultimate violence and suffering brought about by that power is acknowledged in their myths, there is still a longing for that past, a longing that translates into the attempt to somehow put the "Littl Shynin Man," who in one of their central myths was pulled in two, bringing about the final destruction, back together again, and so recapture that past power. That past power is largely symbolized by the memory of airplanes, which are cited several times as evidence of the superiority of prior knowledge. Riddley, when he discovers what seems to be a room full of computers, exclaims "'O what we ben! And what we come to!'" He asks himself "How could any 1 not want to get that shyning Power back from time back way back? How cud any 1 not want to be like them what had boats in the air and picters on the wind?" Similarly, another participant in the quest, Goodparley, says, "'Them boats in the air seams like they ben hevvy on my back longs I can member. What wer it put them boats up there in the air dyou think? Power it

musve ben musnt it. Youve got to have the Power then befor youwl have the res of it havent you." Airplanes then represent the almost unimaginable knowledge that has been lost, and function as the focus of the yearnings of Riddley, Goodparley, and others. Further, the airplane is a significant image because it not only shows what has been lost, but it is a technology that played an important role in events leading up to the apocalypse. That is to say, airplanes, jets, are a technology that has been utilized for the purpose of vast destruction, as have most of humanity's highly advanced technologies. Humanity's extraordinary manipulative abilities, which are particularly amazing from Riddley's perspective, are shown in the novel as not simply "1 thing," but a mix of the "good" and the "bad," the creative and the destructive. The novel ends not with the rediscovery of the mechanics of air travel or nuclear power, but with the unexpected discovery of the "1 Littl 1" - gunpowder. That some sort of more familiar "civilization" will as a result eventually evolve is not difficult to imagine. It seems at the end of the novel that humanity is back on track - albeit the same track that led to the annihilation in one fell swoop of most life on earth.

Edition used: New York: Washington Square Press, 1980.

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## 279

**Author:** Judy Blume (b. 1938)

**Title:** *Blubber*

**Date:** 1974

**Systems:** School bus

**Context:** Contemporary, suburbs

The Judy Blume books are famous for dealing with "real" ethical issues shared by school children. To help establish credibility, the novel includes several trips on school buses, the need for a child to be driven to school by car because her project is too big for the bus, and definition of the suburb as having a 25 mph speed limit, looking somewhat like the country, and being where "everyone who lives here works in the city, like my mother and father." The suburban car-culture is assumed to be well-known by the readers.

Edition used: New York: Dell Yearling, 1974.

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## 280

**Author:** Grace Paley (b. 1922)

**Title:** "Samuel." In *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*

**Date:** 1974

**Systems:** Subway

**Context:** Contemporary, New York City

This very short story takes place on a subway train, in which a car full of white passengers watch as three black boys "jiggle and hop on the platform between the locked doors" of the cars. While the men remember dangerous and "brave"

things they had done when boys, the women think disapprovingly of the danger. After one woman gets up and admonishes them, the boys only laugh, prompting a man "whose boyhood had been more watchful than brave" to stand up and pull the emergency cord. Immediately the brakes lock up and the motion pitches one of the boys, Samuel, off the platform and down between the cars, where he is killed. In this story communal transportation provides the opportunity for childhood adventure (similarly one of the men had remembered jumping onto speeding trucks when he was a boy), as well as a location for a tragic playing out of race relations. Paley gives little space to a description of the setting, assuming in her readers a knowledge of subway trains, particularly the placement and function of an emergency cord.

Edition used: Eugene Current-Garcia and Bert Hitchcock, eds. *American Short Stories*, 5th ed. Glenview: Scott, Foresman, 1990.

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## 281

**Author:** Ishmael Reed (b. 1938)

**Title:** *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*

**Date:** 1974.

**Systems:** Cars, cabs, railroad, airplane

**Context:** 1970s, Berkeley, California; African-American perspective

This novel spoofs academic life (particularly the academicization of Black Studies and African American literary studies) and satirizes social movements in Berkeley. Reed also delivers a harsh critique of black militants. Louisiana Red is a degenerate form of HooDoo magic - a liberal politics of blame, begging and "giving each other the business" so that no one gets too far ahead of anyone else. With moochers and legitimate HooDoo Workers moving all across the country, air transportation takes on a central role. The book also highlights the occupation of chauffeur.

Brief mentions (Ch. 1) show the railroad to be outdated - the old Santa Fe passenger station in San Francisco is now a steak joint. The more state-of-the-art commuter trains are perfect machines; however, the narrator attributes any mechanical problems to ghosts, not computers: "the problems of the Bay Area Rapid Transit are due to the burial grounds of the Costanoan indians it disturbs as it speeds through the East Bay." In a similar way, the narrator will conclude that the problems of contemporary culture, such as the high blood pressure caused by Louisiana Red, can be traced back to the unquiet ghost of slavery.

The novel shows that a certain knowledge of transportation makes one "city-wise" or cosmopolitan and commands prestige. Max Kasavubu, a white professor of literature from Columbia, teaches at Berkeley: "He wrote short stories in which he would cite all of the New York subway stops between the Brooklyn Ferry and Columbus Circle. This impressed his colleagues who like many members of the northern California cultural establishment felt inferior to New Yorkers. He derived his power from this and was able to get a job."

Max is writing a daring interpretation of Native Son, which proves that Bigger actually escapes execution at the novel's end and implies he will return as Savior to the black race. Kasavubu's obsession with the character of Bigger leads to long hallucinations about the social prestige and sexual threat contained in the white fantasy of the black chauffeur. Consequently black chauffeurs show up throughout the novel, signifying either prestige or sexual aggression. Also, as masters of transportation, chauffeurs are admired as "professionals," men in control of their city and their clients (Ch. 9).

Two scenes turn on air traffic. One underscores differences between the airport culture of New York and that of San Francisco (Ch. 9). After meeting his party at the baggage claim, Inspector Papa Labas studies two beggars/proselytizers working the crowd. He criticizes them for their lack of style and wit, claiming NYC panhandlers had developed begging into an art form: "Can you lend me fifty-cents? I just killed my mother-in-law and don't want to repair the axe."

In a final scene that parodies TV and film action dramas and ridicules dogmatic terrorists (Ch. 37), Minnie, the head moocher, busts two fellow moochers out of jail and skyjacks a plane to make their getaway. Until the takeover, we see the boredom of air travel through the eyes of one passenger. After ten minutes out, he's already drinking a Bloody Mary, reading a magazine, looking out at a bland view. He naps for half an hour, then strolls to the "bilingual toilet." Once the skyjack is underway, the moocher-flunkeys don masks like woolen socks and collect the passengers' valuables. Minnie recognizes this particular passenger as a small time actor on his way to a gig in New York; she proceeds to lecture him on lack of social relevance in his last performance. Minnie is shot on the spot for talking too much. How the passenger gets the gun on board, we don't know, but the fact that the ticket-holder has a gun and the skyjackers do not comments on the politics of airline safety.

Edition used: New York: Atheneum, 1989.

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# The 1980s

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[Springsteen](#) describes the car as a way out of the rust belt, but often with frustrating results, and he touches on an encounter with a state trooper. [Mukerjee](#) shows how car types and even an Amish buggy reflect their originating cultures, and he depicts a refugee from Afghanistan taking advantage of the international airline system. [Hogan](#) tells of a woman who settles after taking the wrong turn on a freeway, and then describes a beaded railroad engineer's hat as a symbol of Native American interaction with the technological culture, a motif also reflected by [Glancy](#) where the car provides metaphors for changes among the Cherokee. [Tillman](#) describes difficulties in coordinating schedules among modes of transportation in Europe and North Africa. [Butler](#) imagines a future California where old and rehabilitated cars are used by bandits yet still give some promise of escape. [Marshall](#) uses the luxury cruise ship both to represent a social microcosm and, with other boats, to explore African-Americans' Caribbean roots.

Auto accidents, their causes and their consequences, are the main topic in [Wolfe's](#) novel; he also explores the complex social roles of the New York subway, limousines and busses. On a smaller scale, [Brown](#) describes a dog killed by a car and its young owner's revenge which leads to a fatal crash. [Mooney](#) includes the thrill and danger of high speed driving, along with insights into the world of people who have an employees' airline pass. [DiLillo](#) sets his tale at a midwestern college where station wagons are used for dropping students off for the year, and where automobile crashes are the subject of an academic course. [Vonnegut's](#) novel of a New York college explores peoples' concern about the relative prestige of car makes and models; the scholarly subjects include the history of the Conestoga wagon and the Erie canal. [Mason](#) juxtaposes the backdrop of running ordinary errands with children's coming on planes to visit their ailing mother. An ordinary plane flight begins [Clark's](#) mystery story, while a car key is the crucial clue; [Cooper](#) sets a mystery in Oklahoma, specifically Highway 5, and car models, years, and colors give both leads and false clues throughout. [Dorris and Erdrich](#) set the ordinary use of cars in New Hampshire, with details like the inconvenience of the seatbelt for a late-pregnancy woman, against the place of cars on a Caribbean island which has become the recycling place for worn out American clunkers where some of the old enthusiasm about cars as reflections of their drivers is revived.

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## 282

**Author:** Bruce Springsteen (b. 1949)

**Title:** Various songs

**Date:** 1975-1987

**Systems:** Automobile

**Context:** Contemporary

Up until his most recent work, the car/road metaphor has played a central role in Springsteen's lyrics, such a pervasive role that any discussion of the place of cars in his music must, in this context, be very selective. We want to look at five of his songs, all from different albums, which reveal how the car - what it can provide, what it means - has changed over the twenty-year course of Springsteen's songwriting career. The five songs are "Thunder Road," from *Born to Run* (1975), "Racing in the Street," from *Darkness on the Edge of Town* (1978), "State Trooper," from *Nebraska* (1982), "Cautious Man," from *Tunnel of Love* (1987), and "Seeds," from *Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band Live/1975-85* (1986).

The narrator of "Thunder Road" is a young man trying to convince a young girl named Mary, to get in his car and ride off with him to "case the promised land," telling her "these two lanes will take us anywhere." At the same time, he

makes it clear that he's no savior: "Well now I'm no hero / That's understood / All the redemption I can offer girl / Is beneath this dirty hood." However, that car, and the road it will take them to, is enough; getting out can save them. But the narrator can't do it alone - Mary, her companionship, is crucial to the journey, as those before him have discovered: "There were ghosts in the eyes / Of all the boys you sent away / They haunt this dusty beach road / In the skeleton frames of burned out Chevrolets." The narrator concludes, "... so Mary climb in / It's a town full of losers / And I'm pulling out of here to win." In this early song Springsteen is clearly tapping into the American myth of the road as a way out of the rust belt, the way to a more prosperous and fulfilling life.

But after *Born to Run* it's hard to find such optimism in the songs. "Racing in the Street" is a song narrated by a man who rides from "town to town" in his '69 Chevy, with his partner, Sonny, and races for money. But rather than celebratory, the song is mostly a somber one. They've been racing for years, and seemingly "getting" nowhere; his girlfriend "cries herself to sleep at night," and "all her pretty dreams are torn / She stares off alone into the night / With the eyes of one who hates just for being born." But the narrator is still hopeful, despite their struggles: "Tonight my baby and me, we're going to drive to the sea / And wash these sins off our hands." Though the promise of the road is unraveling in this song, the narrator suggests there is still some modicum of self-respect to be gained on the road: "Some guys just give up living / And start dyin' little by little, piece by piece / Some guys come home from work and wash up / And go racing in the street."

If the man and woman in "Racing in the Streets" are possibly an older and somewhat disillusioned version of the male narrator and Mary in "Thunder Road," then the driver in "State Trooper" could be seen as the next step in the downward spiral that the road finally hasn't been able to remedy. In this short, tense song, the narrator is driving around alone, late at night, on the edge, ready to explode. "Mister state trooper," he warns, "please don't stop me / Maybe you got a kid, maybe you got a pretty wife ..." The driver has no "license, registration," he's on the margins of society, with no place to go, no place to drive. The song concludes "Hey somebody out there, listen to my last prayer / Hi ho silver o, deliver me from nowhere." In this song, the road has become a place of isolation and loneliness, in strong contrast to the place of hope and potential that "Thunder Road" depicts.

There are very few road songs in Springsteen's most recent work, an absence which reveals how the metaphor had become a dead end in his songwriting. "Cautious Man" makes explicit his distrust of the road as a solution to people's problems. In the first line we learn that "Bill Horton was a cautious man of the road," that he carefully keeps himself apart and protected. But Bill falls in love and marries "a young girl," lets "his cautiousness slip away." One night, after a terrible dream about losing his wife, Bill gets out of bed: "He got dressed in the moonlight and down to the highway he strode / When he got there he didn't find nothing but road." Finally, the road has nothing to offer, only escapism; Bill returns to his bed, ready to stay with his wife, ready to take that chance. In Springsteen's recent work, the adult thing to do is not get in your car and drive away, but to face up to your problems and to your self, and to work on strengthening and preserving connections to the important people in your life.

"Seeds" doesn't fit neatly into the evolution we've outlined, but it does connect Springsteen's work to that of Woody Guthrie and John Steinbeck (two important influences). The song is narrated by a man who has left the industrial midwest and, with his "wife and kids," driven down to Texas in search of work. But like the Joads, this family finds no work, and though their situation soon becomes desperate, they get little sympathy from the locals: "Parked in the lumberyard freezin' our asses off / My kids in the backseat got a graveyard cough / Well I'm sleepin' up front with my wife / Billy club tappin' on the windshield in the middle of the night / Says 'Move along man move along.'" Cars also mark class differences in the song, distinguish between those who have too much and those who have too little: "Well big limousine long shiny and black / You don't look ahead you don't look back / How many times can you get up after you've been hit? / Well I swear if I could spare the spit / I'd lay one on your shiny chrome / And send you on your way back home." At the end of the song the narrator, though he headed for Texas believing in the promise of the road, just as the Joads headed for California, warns that it's an empty promise: "So if you're going to leave your town where the north wind blow / To go on down where that sweet soda river flow / Well you better think twice on it Jack / You're better off buyin' a shotgun dead off the rack / You ain't gonna find nothin' down here friend / Except seeds blowin' up the highway in the south wind / Movin' on movin' on it's gone gone it's all gone." Like the Joads these people have no choice but to keep moving on, but they have less hope than Ma Joad, convinced that "it's gone gone all gone." A bleak song, "Seeds" is also sung with a lot of anger, anger that the promise of the road, which is largely synonymous with the promise of America, has proved hollow, has betrayed those who believed.

Edition used: Columbia Records.

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## 283

**Author:** Bharati Mukherjee (b. 1940)

**Title:** "Orbiting" In *The Middleman and Other Stories*

**Date:** 1988

**Systems:** Buggy, car, airplane

**Context:** 1980s, Manhattan

This story uses Thanksgiving dinner to stage Manhattan's clash of religious, ethnic, and immigrant cultures. Mukherjee critiques a brand-name cosmopolitanism or worldliness that is ignorant of international issues. Thus the Volvo and Ingmar Bergman become examples of "Swedish engineering" for one character. Meanwhile Brent, who met his wife on a cruise ship, owns a BMW he bought "on the gray market and saved a bundle ... then spent \$300 to put in a horn that beeps a Sousa march" (King Cotton). Ironically, Brent's dad is an Amish farmer in Iowa who has "never taken their buggy out of the county."

Cars and cruises display the consumer savvy and prestige of these relatives and in-laws of Italian and Amish descent. However, the pleasure of this American dream fulfilled is offset (rather melodramatically) by the presence of Roashan, the Afghani refugee. Ro, a political prisoner and torture victim, manipulates global transport for different ends. He tells a disbelieving crowd of his escape from Afghanistan via bribes and a forged visa; he concludes saying he spent six days "orbiting" international airports - "the main trick is to have a valid ticket, that way the airline has to carry you, even if the country won't take you in."

Edition used: New York: Fawcett, 1988.

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## 284

**Author:** Linda Hogan (b. 1947)

**Title:** "Making Do"

**Date:** 1986

**Systems:** Car, train, truck

**Context:** Contemporary, Chickasaw perspective

After the deaths of her children, Roberta heads north toward Denver, but, because "it was fate that she missed the Denver turn-offs from the freeway," she settles in a town ironically named The Tropics. There she and another Chickasaw become involved or obsessed with collecting the debris of a consumer culture - plastic six-pack cans, worn-out shoes. A final symbol of the flawed grafting of Native American and white cultures comes through the narrator:

Once I saw a railroad engineer's hat in a museum. It was fully beaded. I thought it was a new style like the beaded tennis

shoes or the new beaded truckers' hats. But it was made in the late 1800s when the Lakota were forbidden to make traditional items. The mothers took to beading whatever was available, hats of the engineers of death. They covered colony cotton with their art.

We make art out of our loss.

Roberta in Colorado is carving wooden birds, trying to carve her children's souls.

Edition used: *Braided Lives: An Anthology of Multicultural American Writing*. Minnesota Humanities Commission and Minnesota Council of Teachers of English, 1991.

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## 285

**Author:** Diane Glancy (b. 1941)

**Title:** "Without Title"

**Date:**

**Systems:** Car

**Context:** Contemporary; Cherokee perspective

The short poem verbally dramatizes the psychological meld between urban and reservation (or even open prairie) lives, embodied in the poet's father both hunting buffalo and working in the stockyards, and "I remember the animal tracks of his car / out the drive in snow and mud, / the aerial on his old car waving / like a bow string." The two lives and two times flow into the same images where the car supplies the metaphors for Native-American cultural memory.

Edition used: *Braided Lives: An Anthology of Multicultural American Writing*. Minnesota Humanities Commission and Minnesota Council of Teachers of English, 1991.

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## 286

**Author:** Lynne Tillman

**Title:** *Motion Sickness*

**Date:** 1991

**Systems:** Taxi, bus

**Context:** 1980s, travel in Europe and North Africa

As the title suggests, this book is very much about movement, specifically about travel. But rather than calling the book "travel literature" it would be more accurate to describe the (unnamed) woman narrator's account of her peregrinations across Europe (and into North Africa) as a story of tourism, of the struggle to understand her relationship to foreigners and foreignness. The narrator's movements are traced through a series of jump-cuts, each section titled by a different city, and ordered by association rather than chronologically, as one incident will remind the narrator of another, in another city, precipitating an immediate change of venue.

Surprisingly there is little description of how she moves from one location to another. However, there are a few telling examples (it could be assumed that descriptions of transportation might have become redundant). Chapter Four, "Twisted Intentions," for example, is almost completely devoted to an account of how she gets from London to Venice, a trip that involves a taxi ride, meals in train stations, several trains, and a ferry. What comes through in this chapter (and in an earlier description of a London bus ride) is the narrator's feeling that she is out of place and incompetent. She finds it difficult to negotiate the different and confusing, languages, currencies, and schedules. Once seated in each conveyance she's fine, but it's a struggle to get from one type of transportation to another, and to negotiate the demands of hunger and her other needs. In Chapter 6, "Indulgences," the narrator joins two English brothers on a car drive through Italy, a much more simple and leisurely trip because it takes place within a single country, and because she leaves the planning to the brothers. In this instance, the car (and the brothers) acts as a buffer between her and the strangeness of being in a foreign country.

Edition used: New York: Poseidon Press.

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## 287

**Author:** Octavia E. Butler (b. 1947)

**Title:** *Clay's Ark*

**Date:** 1984

**Systems:** Automobile

**Context:** Contemporary

Butler's near-future novel, is set in the remote desert areas of southern California, east of Los Angeles, in the year 2021. Social conditions have deteriorated to the point where most people either live in heavily protected "enclaves" (the abode of the rich), or in "sewers," incredibly violent descendents of inner-city ghettos. The "car age" is over, and only the rich, "private haulers," and various "parasites" still have automobiles. Cross-country travel is very limited and very dangerous, undertaken only by black market truckers and those nostalgic enough for road travel to take the attendant risks. The novel begins with Blake Maslin and his two teen-age daughters - in their restored (and fortified) Jeep Wagoneer - travelling from Needles to their home, Palos Verdes Enclave. But they are hijacked on the road and taken to a nearby ranch. It turns out that the group of ten or so people living at the ranch have been infected by an extraterrestrial organism that made its way to earth in the body of one man, Eli, who had been a member of a space expedition; his craft had crash-landed on the return to earth, and he was the only survivor. The organism combines with human cells and initially makes humans (especially men) very sick - many die. But it enhances the human capabilities - strength, eyesight, etc. of those that survive. The hitch is that it also creates a compulsion to pass on the organism to others. Further, the offspring of the infected people aren't quite human, but sort of cat-like quadruped versions of humans. In an effort to control the spread of the organism, Eli and his people occasionally pluck people off the road, infect them and make them a part of the group. The compulsion to infect others can not be denied or overcome, but the people at the ranch are trying to keep it under control, keep an epidemic at bay. The organism can "'drive you like a car,'" we learn, an apt metaphor considering the connection between cars and freedom in the novel.

Blake and his daughters, though they are already infected, manage to escape the ranch in the Wagoneer; but while fleeing they are captured by a "car family," one of the many outlaw gangs that roam the desert, preying on stray travelers and isolated ranchers. These people have no base, but literally live in their cars, nomadic predators capable of unbelievable cruelty and violence. They are at the other end of the car spectrum from Blake, who is wealthy enough to make a hobby of collecting cars, to indulge a nostalgia for a time of easier and safer travel; but in the hands of the car families, the car is no longer a vehicle of leisure, but both a home and a weapon. Blake manages to escape from the car

family and reach a nearby road; but when he tries to flag down a truck, the hauler purposely runs him over, and then stops to rob the body. But Blake is not quite dead and he manages, against his will, to infect the hauler (by scratching his arm); though Eli's people go after the hauler, he escapes and takes the organism to L.A., beginning a worldwide epidemic. Eli and his people return to the ranch, isolated from the ensuing chaos. The car in the novel, in the hands of Blake, retains a hint of freedom, the joy of the open road; but Blake is one of the few wealthy enough to indulge a "hobby." For the most part the car has become a vehicle of predation and destruction, wielded by the outlaws that live along the highways and finally functioning as the means of spreading the organism. Though the heyday of the car has passed by 2021, it plays a central role in Butler's apocalyptic narrative, figuring largely in the violent and self-destructive fate of humanity.

Edition used: New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984.

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## 288

**Author:** Paule Marshall (b. 1929)

**Title:** *Praisesong for the Widow*

**Date:** 1984

**Systems:** Luxury cruise ship, steamboat, sailboat

**Context:** 1980s, New York, Caribbean, African-American perspective

Marshall's novel employs a journey motif to chart the spiritual and economic transformation of the well-to-do widow Avey Johnson. To the traditional psychological and geographical dimensions of the literary "voyage of discovery," Marshall adds the cultural-historical dimension of the African diaspora. The widow's travel via luxury liner and sailboat through the Caribbean becomes a symbolic repetition and reversal of the Middle Passage; recovering a personal history for Avey necessitates recovering the collective history of Africans and their descendants in the New World.

Three boat trips are at the center of this novel. Avey goes sour on her vacation cruise aboard the luxury liner *Bianca Pride* and disembarks; she hopes to find a quick flight from the port of this Caribbean island to New York. Instead she finds herself bound for the island of Carriacou on board the shabby sailing boat *Emmanuel C.* For Avey, this trip provides a "shock of recognition" and opens an extended memory of girlhood trips aboard the steamboat *Robert Fulton* up the Hudson River. These memories combine with earlier recollections of a great aunt's tales of the first Ibo people to land on Tatum Island, South Carolina.

*The Bianca Pride*, "huge, sleek, imperial" is described in the first five chapters (75 pages). Particular attention is given to the types of activity available on the ship and the caliber of society with which one mixes - Avey has packed six suitcases, a shoe caddy and hatbox for a two week cruise (Ch. 1: 1). Avey is unable to find privacy on a ship with fifteen hundred passengers, despite the apparently monstrous size of the vessel. Chapter Four mentions Decks One through Three in addition to the Sports Deck which offers billiards, golf links and a rifle range; also mentioned: a ballroom, several dining rooms, a library, space for a "floor show," as well as decks for passenger cabins. She travels with two companions also in their fifties; together they are the only three black persons on the voyage. This fact is crucial to Avey's departure. It is in the social chill of the Versailles room that the three dine and there where Avey is confronted with the fateful Peach Parfait à la Versailles. Sickened by her life of rich consumption, she can literally consume no more and is nauseated to the point where she decides to disembark.

Unable to catch a plane from her island port of call to New York, Avey strikes up conversation with islander Lebert Joseph (his name a play on Legba, West African luo - a god of wisdom and communication). Lebert whisks her away on the annual excursion "home" to Carriacou island, where employees of the tourist industry on one island, return home to



perform traditional dances and "call their Nation."

The festive atmosphere at the wharf recalls for Avey the same festive, family-feeling which was part of summer riverboat excursions from Harlem up the Hudson to Bear Mountain Park (Ch. 3: 4). These one-day trips began at 6 AM on the pier, two hours before the S.S. Robert Fulton was to arrive. Avey's memory emphasizes the new clothes, "freshly marcelled" hair, fried chicken, potato salad and West Indian rice that made this an important social occasion. Of chief importance is the collective bond Avey would sense at these times, "for those moments, she became part of, indeed the center of, a huge wide confraternity."

Confraternity becomes the point of the Carriacou excursion which Avey joins some forty years later. Lebert's sailing ship, the Emmanuel C is shabby and dangerous, jam-packed with people, and sure to sink. In terms of plot this short two hour voyage marks a return to origins for Avey and the islanders. Symbolically, however, the ride resonates with the horror of slavers in the middle passage (see especially Ch. 3: 6). Avey experiences this juxtaposition of historical moments as a purge and rebirth; she loses control of all bodily functions in a way that infantilizes her even as it literally reverses the rich intake characteristic of her life to this point. She arrives on Carriacou "cleansed" and able to rethink her personal history in terms of the history of diaspora, economic exploitation and cultural assimilation of African peoples.

Edition used: New York: E.P. Dutton.

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## 289

**Author:** Tom Wolfe (b. 1931)

**Title:** *The Bonfire of the Vanities*

**Date:** 1987

**Systems:** Automobile, taxi, subway

**Context:** Contemporary, New York City

The novel traces the consequences of an urban automobile accident as it affects the driver, passenger, and victim, and their families, friends, and co-workers, and ultimately the whole community (at least as much as New York City is affected by what people read in newspapers). The paper says "Two vastly different New Yorks collided when Wall Street investment banker Sherman McCoy's \$50,000 Mercedes-Benz sports roadster struck [African-American] honor student Henry Lamb" (Ch. 23).

The fourth chapter is the account of the accident itself, one of the most detailed in American literature. It starts when Sherman picks up his mistress, Maria Ruskin, from Kennedy airport, and they have to figure out how to get her collection of designer luggage into the roadster, "He had to stack half of it up on the back seat, which wasn't much more than an upholstered ledge. Terrific, thought Sherman. If I have to stop short, I'll get hit in the base of the skull by matched flying cream-colored vanity cases with chocolate-brown trim." The drive toward Manhattan, in the "tide of red taillights," seems routine until he becomes confused by the hopeless signage and tangle of approaches to the bridges and expressways: "His sense of direction was slipping away. He must be heading north still. The down side of the bridge hadn't curved a great deal. But now there were only signs to go by. His entire stock of landmarks was gone, left behind. At the end of the bridge the expressway split into a Y. MAJOR DEEGAN GEO. WASHINGTON BRIDGE ... BRUCKNER NEW ENGLAND ... Major Deegan went upstate ... No! ... Veer right ... Suddenly another Y ... EAST BRONX NEW ENGLAND ... EAST 138TH BRUCKNER BOULEVARD ... Choose one, you ninny!" [Wolfe's suspension dots]. Once off the expressway and wandering block after block through South Bronx slums, they try unsuccessfully to follow any cues they can, all the time ironically under an unidentifiable expressway. The accident itself seems, on evidence later in the book, to have been caused when two black youths place a tire in a side street with



an eye toward stopping the Mercedes and robbing its occupants (Ch. 29). When Sherman gets out to move the barrier, Maria takes the wheel; in their effort to escape, the car hits one of the youths. The social and moral dilemma is whether they dare to report the hit-and-run, an act which would surely become public or at least would come to the attention of Maria's and Sherman's spouses. It's also not clear if Sherman should (Gatsby-like) say he was driving, should the issue emerge.

Aside from this accident and crime, automobile debris is a regular part of the New York landscape. Just on the way from the airport, Sherman and Maria pass "an enormous two-door sedan, the sort of car they used to make in the 1970s, up against a stone retaining wall" and "another abandoned car by the side of the road. The wheels were gone, the hood was up, and two figures, one holding a flashlight, were jackknifed over the engine well" (Ch. 4). When we first meet the two detectives, Martin and Goldberg, they are investigating "where a man had been shot to death in the back of an automobile. The automobile was a Cadillac Sedan DeVille.... Kramer looked in, and what he saw was horrible beyond anything the phrase 'shot to death in the back of an automobile' had even begun to suggest to him" (Ch. 6).

The case to solve the hit-and-run is gradually developed by police detectives and the district attorney's office, with considerable pressure from the African-American community. It initially depends on car-related clues, chiefly a partly-seen license plate number and the make of Sherman's car. The DMV (Department of Motor Vehicles) list has 500 Mercedes-Benzes in the state whose plates begin with the right letters, but only 124 from the city or Westchester county (Ch. 12). As Sherman reads the newspaper accounts he realizes that the identification is getting closer, until, even his young daughter makes the connection (Ch. 13). The other main clue is the garage where he spends \$410 per month per car for the Mercedes and his Mercury station wagon. (The policeman who tracks the Mercedes down and finds out that it had been used the night of the crime notices that these fees are more than he pays for his house [Ch. 16].) At one point in the legal proceedings, Sherman tries to convince his lawyer that his Mercedes isn't really a luxury car; it's "like a Buick used to be" (Ch. 12).

Wolfe also comments, although in less detail, on public transportation in New York. The taxis at 79th Street and Fifth Avenue "take the young Masters of the Universe down to Wall Street" for ten dollars. Despite the regulations which require drivers to go anywhere, from this location they "wouldn't budge unless you were going down to Wall Street or close to it." Sherman appreciates the cabs, since they provide "Isolation!" from "the trenches of the urban wars" (Ch. 3). Later, Sherman and his wife hire a "black Buick sedan" from Mayfair Town Car, Inc., to go to a party which is six blocks away, so "walking was out of the question." It would be ok to go there by cab, but he would lose face to hail one to get home. The cost is \$246.50 for the five hours. Outside the party there are so many limousines that it is hard to get to the curb; the really wealthy own their limos, hire a chauffeur for \$36,000 a year, and incur other costs of \$14,000.

Sherman does not take the subway to work, but his father does, as a "matter of principle. The more grim the subways became, the more graffiti those people scrawled on the cars, the more gold chains they snatched off girls' necks, the more old men they mugged, the more women they pushed in front of the trains, the more determined was John Campbell McCoy that they weren't going to drive him off the New York City subways" (Ch. 3). Early in the novel, District Attorney Lawrence Kramer is seen catching the D train from 81st Street and Central Park West to his office in the Bronx. He "stood in the aisle holding on to a stainless-steel pole while the car bucked and lurched and screamed. On the plastic bench across from him sat a bony old man who seemed to be growing like a fungus out of a backdrop of graffiti. He was reading a newspaper.... Half the people in the car were wearing sneakers with splashy designs on them and molded soles that looked like gravy boats.... on the D train the reason way, they were cheap. On the D train these sneakers were like a sign around the neck reading SLUM or EL BARRIO." Presumably a full account of the subway system would lead to similar examples of dress patterns and their correlation with social class, and other factors (Ch. 2).

Maria the mistress' husband, Arthur Ruskin, "a little Jew from Cleveland," delivers "a long soliloquy about the many roads he had traveled in his career and about the many forks in those roads." His dinner companion, a reporter, hears an account of his air charter business which was developed during the Energy Crisis of the early 1970s. In his dialect, "Efry focking Arab who wants to go to Mecca, I'm gonna take him there." He first leases three worn-out Electras, but eventually winds up with "Kosher 747s." He gets Arab travel agents to find customers who will "squeeze the price of an airplane ticket out of their pitiful possessions in order to make the magical pilgrimage." They bring their live chickens and lambs to the airport, so Ruskin lets them bring the animals on board, but puts down a plastic shield to protect the rugs; they are "flying nomads on a plastic desert." Once a plane went off the runway at Mecca, an accident which

panicked the crew, but not the ignorant passengers who think it is normal, "that's the way you stop an airplane!" Ruskin's laughter at this episode leads to his fatal heart attack, which leads nicely to the "traffic jam" of waiters and customers and so on in the aisles of the restaurant (Ch. 26). Like much of Wolfe's writing, this chapter combines understated reportage of improbably coincidental events with a series of metaphoric comments to achieve wry social commentary.

Edition used: Toronto: Bantam, 1988.

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## 290

**Author:** Larry Brown (b. 1951)

**Title:** "Boy and Dog"

**Date:** 1984

**Systems:** Car - Mustang

**Context:** Contemporary

This story consists of about three hundred lines, each a short, simple sentence, and recounts the events that follow when a '65 Mustang runs over an eight-year-old boy's dog. While the boy mourns the dead dog, the driver returns to search for a missing hubcap. Hiding behind a tree, the boy throws a brick at the driver, striking him in the head; the Mustang crashes into another tree and after a few moments bursts into flames. People stop, someone tries unsuccessfully to rescue the driver, some ineffectual fire fighters arrive, as does the media. The boy watches it all. The story is told in grisly detail but is undeniably funny, ending with the observation that "Kids are violent these days. / Especially where pets are concerned."

Edition used: *Facing the Music: Stories*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 1988.

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## 291

**Author:** Ted Mooney (b. 1951)

**Title:** *Easy Travel to Other Planets*

**Date:** 1980

**Systems:** Airplane, car

**Context:** 1980s, New York City

The setting of this novel is New York City and the Virgin Islands, but the time is not entirely clear. For the most part it is obviously the present, but there are a few peripheral yet persistent aspects of the narrative that make the world of the book strange. For instance, the world is moving toward war because of unresolved disputes over the sovereignty of Antarctica; another unfamiliar detail is the prevalence of something called "information sickness," a disease whose debilitating symptoms (bleeding from the nose and ears, vomiting, etc.) can be brought on any time, supposedly because of the general overload of stimuli in the modern world - recovery is accomplished by assuming the "memory-elimination posture." Though the novel is most directly about two couples and their difficult relationships (the main character Nicole develops a relationship with a dolphin - she's a dolphin researcher - that at one point involves a sexual

encounter; this causes a dilemma for her [human] lover, Jeffrey), the highly technologized information society - particularly as manifested by transportation technologies - in which these relationships are played out is crucial to the narrative.

For example, one of the other main characters, Melissa, has a TWA pass that allows her to fly anywhere in the world at any time for free. Her lover, Diego, resents this access to travel and presses her to marry him (she will lose the pass if she marries). Many scenes depict different characters picking up or dropping off others at airports and the flight experience itself. The terminals in particular are a persistent element in the story, their similar architecture at one point described as meant to "dilute the alarming wonder of flight." Easy Travel plays on the anxiety generated by an ever faster paced world, and that pace is certainly accelerated by air travel. Cars also play a role in the novel, particularly through the importance to the plot of several accidents (there is also a lengthy scene at a NASCAR race - the Fossil Fuel 250). In the denouement of the book, Nicole, riding in Diego's cab, opens the door of the cab and steps "delicately out into traffic," where she's run over "several times." Finally, the last image of the novel involves a car, as Melissa watches her terminally ill mother (who has just dropped her off at the train station) "backing out of the station at a speed that seems, then and at all other moments, incredible." It's that speed that Mooney is largely concerned with, how it affects the lives of his characters.

Edition used: New York: Ballentine, 1983.

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## 292

**Author:** Don DeLillo (b. 1936)

**Title:** *White Noise*

**Date:** 1985

**Systems:** Automobiles

**Context:** Contemporary, Midwest

Set in a small Midwestern college town, this novel follows the lives of Jack Gladney (a professor of Hitler Studies and the narrator), his wife Babette, and their four children, all offspring of former marriages. The central event of the story is an industrial accident that forces the Gladney's to evacuate their home, but this incident is just one element of a dense narrative that examines many facets of contemporary American culture, including supermarkets, television, and car crashes. What most permeates the book, however, is an obsession with death, its myriad manifestations as well as its inevitability. At the same time *White Noise* is a comic novel, a grimly funny account of modern America.

Automobiles are a constant presence in the novel, particularly as a significant marker of family. In the opening scene of the story a line of station wagons, "like a desert caravan," arrives at the college for the fall semester; parents bring their children and their children's possessions and all meet in a communal gathering that "tells the parents that they are a collection of the like-minded and the spiritually akin, a people, a nation." In another scene the car functions as sort of rolling dining room, as the Gladney family sit packed together eating fast food.

However, cars in the novel are most often connected to death, to the fear of and fascination with mortality. For example, there is a lengthy description of the Gladneys and others having to evacuate their homes because of a nearby train wreck which has spawned a huge toxic cloud; they drive through incredible traffic, to a Boy Scout barracks that has been designated as an evacuation center. Later the barracks must be abandoned as the toxic cloud nears, and chaos ensues as all the cars try to leave at once, to flee death. In another scene a professor of "American environments" discusses his seminar on cinematic car crashes, and encourages his students to "look past the violence" and see the complex and fiery crashes as examples "of the old 'can-do' spirit," a spirit of "innocence and fun." The car wreck has become an academic

subject.

Finally, in the last chapter of the book, Babette's youngest child, two and half-year-old Wilder, manages to get out of the yard and ride his tricycle to a nearby highway, which he proceeds to cross. The scene is described at length as Wilder somehow manages to pedal across the first three lanes, push the bike across the grassy median, and then ride across the other three lanes. Coming at the end of the novel, Wilder's dash through traffic signifies the constant and very real threat of death and yet the miraculous ability of people to fend it off - at least for a while.

Edition used: New York: Penguin, 1986.

## 293

**Author:** Kurt Vonnegut (b. 1922)

**Title:** *Hocus Pocus*

**Date:** 1990

**Systems:** Automobile, motorcycle

**Context:** 1970s to 1991, New York state

The fictional narrator, Eugene Debs Hartke, talks about automobiles by brand names throughout, including his Mercedes (a gift from the mother of a rich student he rescued), a prison warden's Isuzu, a Toyota hearse, a very expensive Rolls-Royce Corniche convertible, a twelve-year old Buick which needs an \$850 transmission job, and so on. Vonnegut assumes that his readers know the costs and prestige-values of these vehicles, imported and domestic.

A couple of curious, vehicle-related customs from the 1980s are pointed out. "Coring," removing the valve stem to flatten a tire, is performed by drunk high school students on Hartke's Mercedes and all other expensive cars on campus at one point (Ch. 14) and on Hartke's car alone several times later. The local café features "prostitutes in vans in the parking lot out back," an extreme variant of the cultural constant which associates cars and sex (Ch. 28, 35).

The novel is set in Scipio, New York, the home of the Mohiga Wagon Company which, in 1830, made the "sturdiest and most popular" Conestoga wagons that "carried freight and settlers across the prairies." The founder of that company founded the college where Hartke now teaches. His son, Elias, "wrote a technical account of the construction of the Onondaga Canal," a link to the Erie Canal; the Onondaga is filled in and is now Route 53. This playful history, in the second chapter, shows how the novel's locale is ironically central yet isolated from the rest of America.

Incidentally, the system of closed-circuit televisions used to monitor the prison resembles the portholes on an ocean liner, and "Life was like an ocean liner to a lot of people who weren't in prison, too, of course" (Ch. 31).

Edition used: New York: Berkley Books, 1991.

## 294

**Author:** Bobbie Ann Mason (b. 1940)

**Title:** *Spence + Lila*

**Date:** 1988

**Systems:** Automobile, plane

**Context:** Contemporary, Kentucky

This is a self-consciously educational novel about the medical treatment for breast cancer and mastectomy. The main setting is a hospital in Paducah where Lila undergoes various diagnoses and treatments while her husband, Spence, and children negotiate their trips between the hospital and the family farm. The first page has Spence notice road signs, like the old Burma-Shave sequences - his car has a hole in the muffler; the seatbelts are cut off to deactivate the warning buzzer. Along the ride he notices an ad at a gas station for free Coke with a tune up (Ch. 1). This sort of detail, involving some ironic symbolism about the dangers of riding in a car with simple backdrop about contemporary culture, is frequent in the book. While waiting to hear the biopsy results, Spence drives to a Wal-Mart store to get windshield washer fluid and wiper blades, but temporarily gets disoriented in the parking lot until he finds his car (Ch. 7).

In another symbolic passage, as Lila is awaiting her second operation, she thinks that "Growing into old age toward death is like shifting gears in a car; now she's going into high gear, plowing out onto one of those interstates, racing into the future" (Ch. 17).

Daughter Nancy arrives by plane, although the flight is delayed because of fog in Boston. Later, during confusion following the mastectomy, Lila isn't sure whether Nancy came from New York or Boston, a passing comment which points out how domestic flights are roughly similar in time and how little the source matters to the people who greet their relatives (Ch. 14).

The family crisis brings out retrospective moments. Lila recalls their eloping in Spence's old Ford with a rattling door and blinking headlights (Ch. 15). While Spence is talking about leaving the farm to his kids, a "jet plane flies over, leaving a white scar"; he then recalls scary experiences he had during World War II (Ch. 17).

Edition used: New York: Harper & Row.

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## 295

**Author:** Mary Higgins Clark (b. 1931)

**Title:** *A Cry in the Night*

**Date:** 1982

**Systems:** Car, airplane

**Context:** Contemporary, Minnesota and New York city

This novel is a typical "national best seller" from the late twentieth century. We are told throughout about the details of the characters' upscale culture, and these include frequent (and unexceptional) references to their cars and driving. The novel starts in New York where city life is characterized on the negative side by watching three filled buses pass and having to walk, and on the positive by Jenny's estranged husband picking her up in a limo for dinner at the Four Seasons. Jenny and her kids move to a new marriage with Erich, a famous artist, in Greater Minnesota - the transition is pointed out by the in-flight announcement, "We are crossing over Green Bay, Wisconsin. Our altitude is thirty thousand feet..."

In rural Minnesota the realistic details include mention of County Road 26, the joys of having no traffic lights, cleared

highways in the winter, and so on. Jenny's former husband, who gets an acting job at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, calls to get directions so he can visit his children; later he borrows another actor's car in a family emergency. As part of the mystery in the story, he is killed on the way, having missed a turn and driving into the ice-covered river and drowning. The car key is part of the inquest evidence. As the mystery deepens, a canceled airplane reservation, tire tracks in the snow, and a car rented in Duluth play their roles in the story. Predictably, brand names are mentioned frequently - Erich's Cadillac and his four-year-old Chrysler station wagon (and Bisquick coffee cake and Jane Pauly on "Good Morning America").

These details from television culture and the brand names resonate with the readers' experiences, whether directly or informed by advertising and other media.

Edition used: New York: Dell, 1983.

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## 296

**Author:** Susan Rogers Cooper

**Title:** *The Man in the Green Chevy: A Milt Kovak Mystery*

**Date:** 1988

**Systems:** Automobile

**Context:** Contemporary, Oklahoma

Milton Kovak is the homicide unit head for a rural county sheriff's office in Oklahoma. He got the job because he was the only official who didn't vomit at the "big wreck out on Interstate 12." Oklahoma Highway 5 is a constant presence in the book, for trips to investigate the suspects' alibis, the path between the Prophecy County Sheriff's Office and Milt's lover's house, and, occasionally, the site of wrecks, some fatal, others trivial (Ch. 12, 13). Milt uses the squad car, but its repairs are six months overdue, owing to budget problems, and his personal, reliable '55 Chevy four-door (known at times as "the '55) which he had owned since high school (Ch. 2).

In this modern detective novel, people are linked to their cars and driving habits by the police. In the opening chapters, Milt and others in the community identify friends and suspects by their physical appearance and, always, their cars. The ongoing dilemma is to find the man in an old, green '70 Chevy Impala with a bad muffler and rust stains. Laura Johnson, who says she had seen the killer, has an "antique" VW van, blue and white with the original paint job (Ch. 1). Milt's '55 also has the original paint job and "Original seats, covered in plastic to keep 'em original" (Ch. 3). Police checks on suspects always include information about outstanding parking tickets and speeding violations - often that is all which the computer-based files contain (e.g., Ch. 8). David Perry and the Mays family in Tulsa is under suspicion, and Milt's efforts to nail down their alibis involves his interviewing neighbors about which cars had been at the house over the key weekend - a teenager across the street had not seen the Mayses' car, and he would have noticed because he liked the vehicle (Ch. 6).

This is a world whose topography is car- and street-centered. Directions for Milt to find an abandoned '73 green Chevy are quite precise: "I pulled off Highway 5 at FM 217, went 2.7 miles by the odometer, took a left onto an oiled-clay side road, drove .35 miles and turned left again onto a rutted dirt road. The grass growing up in the middle of the two tire tracks was so high it was obvious the road wasn't used often, if at all" (Ch. 8). Of course, the number of green Chevys is enormous, which makes the original claim credible, the discovery of the false clue likely, and the final revelation that the Chevy never existed equally credible.

Edition used: Toronto: Worldwide Mystery, 1991.

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**Author:** Michael Dorris and Louise Erdrich (b. 1954)

**Title:** *The Crown of Columbus*

**Date:** 1991

**Systems:** Automobile

**Context:** Contemporary, New Hampshire and the Caribbean

The Dartmouth College academic couple (in pursuit of the Crown and other Columbiana) incidentally drive around in ordinary automobiles. We get a couple of technical details, such as the inconvenience when Vivian has to extend the seat belt to accommodate her late-stage pregnancy [one of the earliest seat belts in American literature], the rushed ride to the hospital for delivery "He had managed the drive that took me over half an hour on the very best of days, in eighteen minutes.... I was in the car before the next contraction" (Ch. 5). Soon after Violet is born, her mother takes her to visit her father, and she "unhooked the safety belt around her car seat [another first?] and brought her into her [unmarried] father's home" (Ch. 6).

Jeeps are used on the Caribbean island of Eleuthera, characterized by "Poor soil, bright colors, dark people, junked automobiles" (Ch. 11). Roger, the father, intellectualizes: "I despise a clutch that slips. A vehicle is the extension of oneself, the four-wheeled face one presents to the world, the ectoskeleton upon which one depends both for attracting others and for protection, if necessary, from them. A car announces its occupants. The medium is the message, the means that justifies the end. When air travel deprives me of my vintage Saab - understated, elegant, secure - I don't begrudge the extra money spent for a quality rental.... I actually like leasing, the variety of exploring the gadgets of each new model: cruise control, electric mirrors, the random-scan button on the radio." The Caribbean, it turns out, has wound up with "a detritus of enormous, Detroit-made clunkers [which] had been blown to the island off shore." Roger's hopes for a new car are dashed, since what his high rental fee gets him is the "twin of the car in which I had ridden to my girlfriend's public high school senior prom. It was vaguely Chevrolet, tan and broad, with treadless tires as smooth and inflated as inner tubes. The upholstery of the bench front seat - how odd the antique phraseology lay in wait at the back of one's mind - told tales of melodrama and passion, of passengers carrying sharp objects in their back pockets and drivers who ignored the ashtray when they smoked" (Ch. 15). Roger's attention to marketing details lets him observe this historical regression in the history of automobiling, and it matches the historical quest which is the main plot of the novel.

Edition used: New York: Harper Collins.

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Alvin Kernan in *Printing Technology, Letters & Samuel Johnson* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1987), p. 7, characterizes the traditional definition as including all "serious and excellent" writing, and the later as being limited to "verbal works of art made by the creative imagination."

The full title is *The Railroad in Literature: A Brief Survey of Railroad Fiction, Poetry, Songs, Biography, Essays, Travel, and Drama in the English Language, Particularly Emphasizing its Place in American Literature. Issued by The Railway & Locomotive Historical Society, Inc.*, Baker Library, Harvard Business School, Boston, Massachusetts.

Freight handling by trucks and by railroad, as well as business travel by plane, have failed to capture the literary imagination, despite their significance in the American economy.

Works published in the first couple of years of a decade which depict contemporary events are usually in the chapter for the previous decade, since we assume a year or so lag between their completion and publication.

This is not to say that no one wrote about these states; just that they are not in our sample. Remember, we do not claim to have included every literary work.

Books (and movies) concerning military aviation during and after each World War are prevalent, but we excluded them from our survey.

Or it was just bad luck that canals never had a Mark Twain to write a "Life on the Erie."

Melville's *Moby-Dick* does this, but the ship is essentially a floating factory.

Especially in the earlier nineteenth century, physical transportation was the only means of communication - ;messages had to be delivered by hand. The telegraph and later the telephone changed all that, as dramatized by the immediate collapse of the Pony Express once the transcontinental telegraph was completed in 1861. This issue is not often directly raised in American literature.

Hayden White (*Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, 1978) "There is no such thing as a single correct view of any object under study but ... there are many correct views, each requiring its own style of representation." p. 78 "Theorists of historiography generally agree that historical narratives contain an irreducible and inexpungeable element of interpretation." p. 51.

See Charles Norris' *Bread* (1910) for an example of liberal sentiments concerning the place of women in the workplace and in society.