From main-travelled roads to Route 66: Transitions in Prairie Naturalism

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Abstract
To best represent a people of a specific spatial and historical context, literary texts must necessarily demonstrate a vested interest and familiarity of a region and its inhabitants' common experiences. In examining one particular aspect of regional naturalism in American literature, this study explores the basic tenets of Prairie Naturalism as defined by three major authors: Hamlin Garland, Willa Cather, and John Steinbeck. The short stories in Hamlin Garland’s Main-Travelled Roads (1891) establish the foundation of Prairie Naturalism with meticulous attention to daily lives on the plains and with political strategies to improve the lives of the oppressed. Willa Cather’s novels, O Pioneers! (1913) and My Ántonia (1918), again place national attention on the plains and provide representational balance with positive and negative aspects of prairie life. John Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath (1939) gives voice to an otherwise marginalized population in desperate need of conditional improvement. All three authors’ works function first as truthful representations of prairie ecology, economy, and ethnography; they function second as deconstructive entities against images of the pastoral plains inhabited by noble yeomen.

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Route 66 may be decommissioned, but it lives on in our imaginations...and in New Mexico. Check out our guide for the best stops on America's ultimate road. The Mother Road. The Main Street of America. Winding through eight states and clocking in at nearly 2,500 miles, it's the epitome of the American highway: vintage neon, classic hotels, diners serving all-American fare, curio shops, and — of course — drive-by scenery that captures the country's wide range of landscapes, from forest to prairie to desert to coast. Some of the best sights and experiences to be had on this hallowed road — or at least those sections of it that remain — are in New Mexico. U.S. Route 66 (US 66 or Route 66), also known as the Will Rogers Highway, the Main Street of America or the Mother Road, was one of the original highways in the U.S. Highway System. US 66 was established on November 11, 1926, with road signs erected the following year. The highway, which became one of the most famous roads in the United States, originally ran from Chicago, Illinois, through Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona before ending in Santa Monica in Los Angeles County. Plan a historic Route 66 road trip from Chicago to Los Angeles or travel a small stretch of the Mother Road with tips, sights, and maps. Perhaps the most compelling reason to follow Route 66 is to experience the road's ingrained time line of contemporary America. Before it was called Route 66, and long before it was even paved in 1926, this corridor was traversed by the National Old Trails Highway, one of the country's first transcontinental highways. For three decades before and after World War II, Route 66 earned the title "Main Street of America" because it wound through small towns across the Midwest and Southwest, lined by hundreds of cafés, motels, gas stations, and tourist attractions.