

From Naturalism to the Drama of Consciousness—The Education of the Heart in *The Grapes of Wrath*

by Warren French

Apparently the novel that was to become *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) was written originally in the same bitterly ironic, pessimistic vein as *In Dubious Battle* and *Of Mice and Men*. In a letter to his agents and publishers in June, 1938, Steinbeck announced the decision that marked the most significant turning point in his career as an artist. He called a sixty-five thousand word novel, which was tentatively entitled "L'Affaire Lettuceberg," a "bad book"—what his father would have called a "smart-alec book"—and announced that it could not be published. "My whole work drive has been aimed at making people understand each other," he continued; "and then I deliberately write this book, the aim of which is to cause hatred through partial understanding."¹

Steinbeck pushed himself to finish a new version by autumn; and the result was *The Grapes of Wrath*, a novel that begins—with its description of a land devastated by dust storms and the slow, determined plodding of a land turtle—like the Naturalistic works that Steinbeck had been writing for nearly a decade. However, the narrative becomes something quite different—a story of the awakening of man's consciousness that coincides with the awakening of his conscience. This change is signaled in the fourteenth chapter by an interpolated credo about the uniqueness of man: "This you may say of man—when theories change and crash, when schools, philosophies, when narrow dark alleys of thought, national,

"From Naturalism to the Drama of Consciousness." From *John Steinbeck* by Warren French (Boston: Twayne Publishers, Inc., a division of G. K. Hall & Co., 1975), pp. 92–102. Revised edition, copyright 1975 by Twayne Publishers, Inc. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

¹Lisca, *The Wide World of John Steinbeck* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1958), p. 147.

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religious, economic, grow and disintegrate, man reaches, stumbles forward, painfully, mistakenly sometimes. Having stepped forward, he may slip back, but only half a step, never the full step back" (204-05).² This credo underlies Steinbeck's fiction for the rest of his life, and it is given its final form in his pronouncement during his Nobel Prize acceptance speech: "I hold that a writer who does not passionately believe in the perfectibility of man has no dedication nor any membership in literature."

The writer of *In Dubious Battle* and *Of Mice and Men* gives no evidence of believing in the perfectibility of man; the writer who rewrote "L'Affaire Lettuceberg" into *The Grapes of Wrath* does. The central story of the big novel is of the Joad family's taking the step forward that Steinbeck describes in the fourteenth chapter. This novel is not a *static* one about long-suffering Jobs; it is a *dynamic* one about people who learn that survival depends upon their adapting to new conditions. This point—that the novel tells a dynamic story about learning to change—has often, however, been missed, as is illustrated by widespread misconceptions about the tableau that unmistakably ends the story that Steinbeck has chosen to tell, even though it presents no lasting solution to the real-life situation of the migrant workers who inspired the fiction.

In the final chapter, Ma Joad leads the remnants of her "fambly" from their flood-engulfed boxcar to a dry barn on high land. There Rosasharn, whose baby has been stillborn, feeds from her breast an old man on the point of death who cannot be nourished otherwise. Although it would seem that only the prurient, who have missed the point that the plight of these people is desperate, could object to this poignant scene, it has been a bone of contention since the novel appeared. Among the early reviewers, Clifton Fadiman wrote in the *New Yorker*, that "the ending is the tawdriest kind of fake symbolism." Later, French critic Claude-Edmond Magny argued that the novel ends on "a purely poetic image which in no way brings the plot to a conclusion." Even such a standard reference work as James Hart's *Oxford Companion to American Literature* maintains the position that Steinbeck fails to complete his story, "the value of whose conclusion is purely symbolic." Thus it is charged either that the conclusion concludes nothing or that it is not prepared for by any overall

²Page references are to "*The Grapes of Wrath*": *Text and Criticism*, edited by Peter Lisca (New York, 1972).

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allegorical structure. My thesis is that both charges are wrong and that the Joad story in *The Grapes of Wrath* is—like *The Red Pony*—a consistent allegory that is concluded logically and fittingly by Rosasharn's gesture and that, furthermore—as the author himself suggests—a reader may find “five layers” in the book.³

In a sociological sense, of course, the novel is unfinished because Steinbeck does not tell us whether the migrants survive or disappear. At the time he wrote, he didn't know what the outcome of their struggles would be. He implied, however, that the actions of the reader might have a bearing on the situation, just as a great predecessor had in a novel that is in many ways similar and that certainly might have lent its title to Steinbeck's. At the end of *Hard Times*, Charles Dickens directly addresses his “Dear reader”: “it rests with you and me, whether, in our two fields of action, similar things shall be or not. Let them be!” As for the solution of the real problems that the novels reflect, Dickens and Steinbeck leave it to the readers in their “field of action”—the real world; the novelist's field of action is literary allegory, not sociological prophecy.

I

The Education of the Heart

The story of the Joads, insofar as it concerns the novelist, is completed in the barn; for the novel is not about the family's quest for security but about their education, which is shown to be completed in the final scene.

What “education”?—the education of the heart, the same kind of education that Thomas Gradgrind receives painfully in *Hard Times* and that provides the principal link between these two powerful and controversial works. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, this education results in a change from the family's jealously regarding itself as an isolated and self-important clan to its envisioning itself as part of one vast human family that, in preacher Casy's words, shares “one big soul ever'body's a part of” (33). The novel is not so much concerned with the frustrating physical migration

³Lisca reprints in the edition cited in footnote 2 (pp. 858–59), a letter from Steinbeck to Pascal Covici, written early in 1939, in which Steinbeck defends the ending of the novel and observes that a reader will find as many “layers” as he can and “won't find more than he has in himself.”

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described—much as Steinbeck's unsparing picture of contempo-
rary conditions may have accounted for the phenomenal reception
of the novel—as with the accompanying spiritual movement that
is akin to the one celebrated in Walt Whitman's "Passage to India."

Casy, the former preacher, has already meditated upon the idea
of a brotherhood of all men before the story begins, but he cannot
formulate clearly his concept. He finds it difficult to explain his
idea that "maybe it's all men an' all women we love" (32) because
"fella gets use' to a way of thinkin', it's hard to leave" (69). When he
finds confirmation of his theory in Muley Graves's observation, "If
a fella's got somepin to eat an' another fella's hungry—why, the
first fella ain' got no choice," Casy feels obliged to say, "Muley's got
a-holt of somepin, an' it's too big for him, an' it's too big for me"
(66). The difficulty of clarifying his new idea had become evident
when he and Tom Joad had reached the deserted Joad house and
Casy had confessed, "If I was still a preacher I'd say the arm of the
Lord has struck. But now I don't know what's happened" (55).
Still, he is able to exemplify his new ideas when he replies to Ma
Joad's objection that cutting pork is women's work, "It's all
work. . . . They's too much of it to split up to men's or women's
work" (146).

When Casy finally figures out in a California jail what he does
believe, he explains his ideas in the form of a parable that
illustrates the benefits of unified action. Speaking of the inmates,
he says,

"Well, they was nice fellas, ya see. What made 'em bad was they
needed stuff. An' I begin to see, then. It's need that makes all the
trouble. I ain't got it worked out. Well, one day they give us some
beans that was sour. One fella started yellin', an' nothin' happened.
He yelled his head off. Trusty come along an' looked in an' went
on. Then another fella yelled. Well, sir, then we all got yellin'. And
we all got on the same tone. . . . Then somepin happened! They
come a-runnin', and they give us some other stuff to eat—give it to
us. Ya see?" (521–22).

At the moment, Tom Joad doesn't see; and Casy observes,
"Maybe I can't tell you. . . . Maybe you got to find out" (522). The
novel depicts the Joads' "finding out."

They are a difficult case, for *The Grapes of Wrath* is not a tale of the
conversion of the easily susceptible. The family's haughty, isolated
attitude at the beginning of the novel is illustrated by Tom's

remark to a friendly truckdriver: "Nothin' ain't none of your affair except skinnin' this here bull-bitch along, an' that's the least thing you work at" (18). Tom is not a thinker. When Casy tells him, "They's gonna come a thing that's gonna change the whole country," Tom simply replies, "I'm still layin' my dogs down one at a time" (237). Uncle John, who has been responsible for his wife's death, comes closest to understanding that something exists that is beyond the family, but he attributes the failures that result from his selfishness to "sin," and he indulges in disorganized acts of charity that lead Pa Joad to comment that he "give away about ever'thing he got, an' still he ain't very happy" (92).

Ma, whom Steinbeck calls "the citadel of the family" (100), views the trip to California only in terms of the family's success. She ponders, "I wonder—that is, if we all get jobs an' all work—maybe we can get one of them little white houses" (124). Although she burns her souvenirs to sever herself from the past (148), she does so because she thinks primarily of her importance to the family. When Tom asks if she's not "scared" that the new place won't be "nice like we thought," she replies, "No, I ain't. . . . Up ahead they's a thousan' lives we might live, but when it comes, it'll on'y be one. . . . it's jus' the road goin' by for me. . . . All the rest'd get upset if I done any more'n that. They all depen' on me jus' thinkin' about that" (168–69).

When Ma threatens Pa with a jaek-handle to prevent the family's splitting up, she argues, "All we got is the family unbroke. Like a bunch of cows, when the lobos are ranging, stick all together. I ain't scared while we're all here, all that's alive, but I ain't gonna see us bust up" (231). She still seeks rationalizations that will incorporate the Wilsons into the family rather than make assistance to them appear to be help to strangers. "We got almost a kin bond," she tells Sairy; "Grampa, he died in your tent" (227). And she insists that Casy not write the note to be pinned to Grampa's body because the preacher "wan't no kin" (195).

But the family disintegrates in spite of Ma's brave efforts and her bold protests. The dog is killed on the highway. Grampa dies of a stroke before the family crosses the Oklahoma border, and Granma dies before they have reached the fertile valleys of California. Because each death symbolizes an inability to adjust to the changed conditions imposed by the migration, it does not challenge the family's basic unity. Ma is more severely shaken by the departure of the oldest son Noah to live "beside a nice river" (284),

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and she is forced to observe, "Family's fallin' apart. . . . I don't know. Seems like I can't think no more" (294). Most alarming, however, is the disappearance of Rose of Sharon's husband Connie Rivers because his running away shatters a potential family unit that is just in the process of forming.

Ma's family pride is shattered in other ways. She is disturbed by the California border patrolman from whom she first hears the term "Okie" when he tells her, "We don't want none of you settlin' down here" (291). Then she is upset by the vigilance committee which warns the family, "We ain't gonna have no goddam Okies in this town" (382). Despite these affronts and her insistence on sharing with the Wilsons over their protests, she still thinks primarily in terms of the family unit. Her reaction upon arriving in Bakersfield is "the famby's here" (311), and in the encounter with the vigilantes she counsels Tom to do nothing because "the famby's breakin' up" (381).

The first significant change in the family's attitude occurs in the Weedpatch government camp where the Wallaces share their work with Tom, although they may thereby cut their own meager earnings. The self-governing arrangement of the camp also makes the Joads feel like decent people again. Evaluating her recent experiences, Ma says, ". . . in Needles, that police. He done somepin to me, made me feel mean. Made me feel ashamed. An' now I ain't ashamed. These folks is our folks. . . . Why, I feel like people again" (420); but she prefaces her remarks with the reminder, "We're Joads," and she still talks about settling the family in a little white cottage. At this camp the Joads meet people who do not think of cooperation as "charity," but all is not harmonious even here. A religious bigot attacks Rose of Sharon, and the women of the camp stage a garbage fight. Pa Joad is still far from won over to Casy's way of thinking—"I can't starve so's you can get two bits," he tells another man in a quarrel about taking others' jobs for lower wages (463).

The easy atmosphere of the government camp, where—as one man observes—"We're all a-workin' together" (488), is in striking contrast to the tense atmosphere at the Hooper Ranch. There the prevailing attitudes are epitomized by a checker's remark that putting holes in the bottom of buckets "keeps people from stealing them" (506). Here Ma learns "one thing good"—"If you're in trouble or hurt or need—go to poor people. They're the only ones that'll help—the only ones" (513–14). The Joads still think of help,

however, only as a means towards maintaining the family. When Casy, now a labor organizer, pleads with Tom to support a strike against the ranch, Tom replies, "Pa wouldn' do it. . . . He'd say it wasn't none of his business. . . . Think Pa's gonna give up his meat on account a other fellas?" (524).

A family crisis is precipitated at the ranch by Tom's impetuously killing the man who has killed Casy. Tom decides that he must run away because, as he tells Ma, he "can't go puttin' this on you folks." Ma retorts angrily, ". . . goin' away ain't gonna ease us. It's gonna bear us down. . . . They was the time when we was on the lan'. They was a boundary to us then. . . . We was always one thing—we was the fambly—kinda whole and clear. An' now we ain' clear no more. . . . We're crackin' up, Tom. There ain't no fambly now" (536). She pleads with him to stay, and the family leaves the ranch. Ma's suspicion of any idea beyond that of loyalty to the family appears in her replying, when Tom insists that he must go, "You can't. . . . They wouldn' be no way to hide out. You couldn' trus' nobody. But you can trus' us. We can hide you, an' we can see you get to eat while your face gets well" (545-46).

A major change in attitude has occurred, however, by the time of the final interview between Tom and Ma. Young Ruthie Joad has undone the family by boasting about it. In a childish quarrel, she has revealed that her brother is a killer who is hiding nearby. Ma realizes then that Tom must go. While hiding, Tom has been thinking about Casy's ideas; and, when his mother says that she is worried that she may not know what has become of her son he tells her:

"Well, maybe like Casy says, a fella ain't got a soul of his own, but on'y a piece of a big one—an' then. . . . Then it don' matter. Then I'll be all aroun' in the dark. I'll be ever'where—wherever you look. Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. . . . An' when our folks eat the stuff they raise an' live in the houses they build—why, I'll be there" (572).

Tom has given up his concept of clan loyalty and has replaced it with the concept that one must help whoever needs help. Gradually the rest of the family comes to share this concept.

Pa learns the lesson of cooperation during the building of a dam to hold floodwater out of a cotton-pickers' camp; and he cries, "We can do her if ever'body helps" (595). Uncle John, too, finally breaks with tradition in order to teach the world a lesson. Instead

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of burying Rosasharn's stillborn baby, he sets it adrift in a creek, saying, "Go down in the street an' rot an' tell 'em that way. That's the way you can talk. Don' even know if you was a boy or girl. Ain't gonna find out" (609).

Most importantly, Ma's acceptance of the idea of a responsibility beyond the family after her last meeting with Tom is shown in her conversation with a neighbor whom she thanks for helping during Rosasharn's labor:

The stout woman smiled, "No need to thank. Ever'body's in the same wagon. S'pose we was down. You'd give us a han'."

"Yes," Ma said, "we would."

"Or anybody."

"Or anybody. Use' ta be the fambly was fust. It ain't so now. It's anybody. Worse off we get, the more we got to do." (606).

But while this speech accepts the spirit of Casy's idea of universal brotherhood, it does not translate the meaning into action. Some concluding gesture must indicate that education of the heart has transformed the family's behavior.

The opportunity arises in the barn where the family discovers the famished man. Ma's unstated suggestion that Rosasharn give her milk to him carries into practice the idea that "worse off we get, the more we got to do." Having come to the barn with almost nothing, the family, through Rosasharn, gives the one thing it has left to offer—the most intimate gift it could. The tableau in the barn does not halt an unfinished story; it marks the end of the story that Steinbeck had to tell about the Joads. Their education is complete; they have transcended familial prejudices. What happens to them now depends upon the ability of the rest of society to learn the lesson that the Joads have learned. The novel is neither riddle nor tragedy—it is an epic comedy of the triumph of the "holy spirit." The Joads have not been saved from physical privation, but they have saved themselves from spiritual bigotry.

The Grapes of Wrath is not, therefore, a period piece about a troublesome past era; it is an allegory applicable wherever prejudice and a proud sense of self-importance inhibit cooperation. The message of the novel is that cooperation can be achieved only when individuals of their own volition put aside special interests and work together to achieve a common purpose.

This message is not new in American literature. As Frederic Ives Carpenter pointed out not long after *The Grapes of Wrath* appeared,

the novel reflects the thinking of the nineteenth-century American transcendentalists:

Beside and beyond their function in the story, the ideas of John Steinbeck and Jim Casy possess a significance of their own. They continue, develop, integrate and realize the thought of great writers of American history. Here the mystical transcendentalism of Emerson reappears, and the earthy democracy of Whitman, and the pragmatic instrumentalism of William James and John Dewey. . . . Jim Casy translates American philosophy into words of one syllable, and the Joads translate it into action.⁴

Steinbeck's development of the vitally American thought of the transcendentalists does not indicate any specific "influence" of Emerson or Whitman. Neither Steinbeck nor Casy mention these past writers. Those who suppose that a younger man's ideas paralleling and developing an older man's necessarily indicate a direct influence of the older on the younger make the very assumption that Emerson warned against—that we learn only from books. As Whitman suggested in "Song of Myself" two men may independently develop the same ideas from a sympathetic reading of Nature and observation of their fellowmen.

II

Structure and Meaning

The danger always exists, however, that readers will become so involved in the fortunes of the particular characters in a novel that its universal implications will be overlooked. To avoid this danger that *The Grapes of Wrath* might be interpreted as a unique story of one family's history, Steinbeck paired the chapters carrying forward the history of the Joads with others that show the general implications of the things that happened specifically to them.

Although the author nowhere in *The Grapes of Wrath* discusses the method he is using, he explains—as Peter Lisca indicates in *The Wide World of John Steinbeck*—the conscious literary theory behind his procedure in his preface to a book containing still pictures from the film, *The Forgotten Village*, Steinbeck's next creative project after *The Grapes of Wrath*. Commenting upon the problems that had

⁴Frederic I. Carpenter, "The Philosophical Joads," *College English*, II (January, 1941), 25.

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to be faced in making this film about the introduction of scientific medicine to a remote, superstition-ridden Mexican community, the novelist explained:

A great many documentary films have used the generalized method, that is, the showing of a condition or an event as it affects a group of people. . . . In *The Forgotten Village* we reversed the usual process. Our story centered on one family in one small village. We wished our audience to know this family very well, and incidentally to like it, as we did. Then, from association with this little personalized group, the larger conclusion concerning the racial group can be drawn with something like participation.⁵

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck did not take a chance on one method or the other; he used both to leave nothing undone that might help get his point across. The Joad story focuses, like *The Forgotten Village*, upon one family; and the "generalized method" is used in the interchapters. By using this double approach, Steinbeck did what he could to protect himself against the attacks some people made upon the book. By presenting the problems he was concerned with through the history of a particular family, he forced readers to visualize these problems as they affected individuals; and he denied escapists the consolation of the sociology textbook that treats depressed groups in numbers too large to be comprehended.

On the other hand, by using the generalized method, he denied in advance any charges that the history of the Joads was unique. By making what happened to the Joads representative of general situations that he also commented upon, he avoided the error made by some who attempted to answer his novel by presenting a unique case and suggesting that it was typical. In the device of the interchapter, Steinbeck found exactly the technique that he needed to make his novel simultaneously a general and an intensely personal history of the travails of a culture in transition.

Even this last description, however, too much limits the novel as a tale of a particular time and place. In a letter to his editor, Steinbeck observed that there are "five layers" in the book, although a reader finds no more than he has in himself. Steinbeck nowhere explains what "five layers" he has in mind, but an inquiry into his meaning might begin with the most famous explanation of "levels of meaning" in literature in Dante's *Convivio*:

⁵*The Forgotten Village* (New York, 1941), p. 5.

Exposition must be *literal* and *allegorical*. And for the understanding of this you should know that writings can be understood and must be explained, for the most part, in four senses. One is called *literal*; and this is the one which extends not beyond the letter itself. The next is called *allegorical*; and this is the one which is hidden beneath the cloak of these fables, being a truth concealed under pretty fiction. . . . The third sense is called *moral*; and this is the one which readers must ever diligently observe in writings, for their own profit and for that of their pupils. . . . The fourth sense is called *anagogical*, or supersensual; and this is when we expound spiritually a writing which, even in the letter, through the very things expresseth things concerning eternal glory.⁶

We have examined already the literal and the allegorical levels of the novel as the literal tale of the migration from Oklahoma and as an illustration of the "education of the heart." On the "moral level," as I have also already suggested, the author—like Dickens—is expressing outrage that such conditions exist and pleading with readers to play their role in alleviating and eliminating them; the novel demands not agreement, but action. On the anagogic level, as Dante puts it, a writing expresses things "concerning eternal glory," a radiant security beyond the chaotic flux of man's material experiences. Does Tom Joad achieve a vision of such glory when he tells Ma that he'll "be all aroun' in the dark"? Does he urge the reader to aspire to a similar vision? Here the novel, with its rejection of traditional religious solutions, may provoke most thoughtful controversy.

Steinbeck speaks of a fifth layer. May individuality be transcended altogether? What of the "one big soul" that Casy feels everybody may be part of? What does Steinbeck mean when he speaks in chapter 14 of "Manself"? Are these concepts related to the "pure consciousness" sought through some meditation techniques? Is there a "layer" of experience at which individual distinctions are obliterated and at which life is perceived only as an all-pervasive force?

Contemplated in this manner, *The Grapes of Wrath* is not just a story of the Okies' migration to California, of man's perpetual

⁶Translation follows C. H. Grandgent, *Dante* (New York, 1916), 273–75. For a fuller account of Dante's arguments and their application to an analysis of the layers of meaning in *The Grapes of Wrath*, see the chapter on this novel by Warren French in *A Study Guide to Steinbeck: A Handbook to His Major Works*, edited by Tetsumaro Hayashi (Metuchen, N.J.; 1974).

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pursuit of an elusive dream, of man's injustices to man, or even of the final reward of the deserving—the pure in heart that shall see God. It is rather the endless story of the strivings of a life-force to endure and triumph over inert obstacles that beset its way.