

Peter Lisca

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The Grapes of Wrath as Heroic Fiction

by Leonard Lutwack

The line of descent from *The Octopus* to *The Grapes of Wrath* is as direct as any that can be found in American literature. The journey of the Okies in Steinbeck's book is certainly in the spirit of one of those "various fightings westward" that Norris identified as productive of epic writing: "Just that long and terrible journey from the Mississippi to the ocean is an epic in itself."¹ As one would expect, too, the later book reflects a more advanced stage of economic development, presenting as it does the struggle of proletarian masses against capitalist power, while the conflict in *The Octopus* is between two parties of the owning class, the ranchers, or small entrepreneurs, against the trust. Both novels have a universalizing tendency in that they create from a local situation a synecdoche of worldwide import. Thus Steinbeck's Okies, having all the surface characteristics of rural Americans of a certain region, are essentially farmers suddenly reduced by natural catastrophe and economic process to the status of unskilled laborers. Theirs is a cataclysmic predicament of the twentieth century. In the course of the journey imposed upon them they learn to identify themselves as a separate class and then to discover and develop leaders who will guide them in their effort to reestablish themselves in society. *The Grapes of Wrath* is a thoroughly didactic epic novel: an exploited group discovers that it is being exploited, that it is, indeed, a new class in society, the proletariat; individuals within that class discover the manner of that exploitation and grope for the means to combat it, or at least protest it; and the

"*The Grapes of Wrath* as Heroic Fiction." From *Heroic Fiction: The Epic Tradition and American Novels of the Twentieth Century* by Leonard Lutwack (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), pp. 47-63. Copyright 1971 by Southern Illinois University Press. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

¹"A Neglected Epic," *The Responsibilities of the Novelist* (New York, 1928), p. 281.

reader of the book, presumably, discovers that an alarming world economic condition is now making itself felt in America. (The novel has a two-part theme, the education of a people and the education of its emerging leaders, and a three-part action, the dispossession, migration, and resettlement of a people.)

To dignify his starving sharecroppers and give form to their story, Steinbeck draws upon two epic traditions of migratory peoples, the account of the Israelites in the Book of Exodus and the story of the Trojans in the *Aeneid*. From the New Testament and the epic tradition he derives the forms of heroism and self-sacrifice that inspire the leaders of these people. Criticism has taken more note of the Bible influence because it is so obvious: there are unmistakable parallels between the trials of the Okies and the Israelites, between preacher Casy and Christ, and between Tom Joad and Moses. It is not surprising that Steinbeck's language is a close imitation of the English of the King James Version. A result of his deliberate effort to adapt style to subject in all his works, it constitutes a much more successful solution to the problem of creating a special style for an epic novel than Norris's romantic colors in *The Octopus*. To obtain elevation of style Steinbeck poeticizes his prose by echoing the phrasing and vocabulary of the King James Version in his descriptive passages and, secondly, by endowing the low-colloquial speeches of Casy and Tom Joad with an unusual amount of passion, imagery, and philosophical comment. As an example of the first method, here is the opening paragraph of chapter 17, one of the interchapters:

The cars of the migrant people crawled out of the side roads onto the great cross-country highway, and they took the migrant way to the West. In the daylight they scuttled like bugs to the westward; and as the dark caught them, they clustered like bugs near to shelter and to the water. And because they were lonely and perplexed, because they had all come from a place of sadness and worry and defeat, and because they were all going to a new mysterious place, they huddled together; they talked together; they shared their lives, their food, and the things they hoped for in the new country. Thus it might be that one family camped near a spring, and another camped for the spring and for company, and a third because two families had pioneered the place and found it good. And when the sun went down, perhaps twenty families and twenty cars were there.²

²*The Grapes of Wrath* (New York, 1939), p. 264.

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Employing Biblical devices more thickly than most, this passage indicates what Steinbeck is seeking to do and the means he uses. Dignity and solemnity are imparted to the miserable plight of the Okies by triadic phrasing, augmentations such as "near to" and "it might be," repetitions of word and phrase, and exact echoes such as "found it good." Association with the Bible story of the Israelites through language alone lends considerable elevation to the Okies. In his second method of aggrandizing the prose style of his novel, Steinbeck tries to intensify with poetic expressiveness the crude speech of his Okies. The result, as illustrated in an informal sermon by Casy, resembles the style of Huck Finn in his lyrical moments:

"I ain't sayin' I'm like Jesus," the preacher went on. "But I got tired like Him, an' I got mixed up like Him, an' I went into the wilder-ness like Him, without no campin' stuff. Nighttime I'd lay on my back an' look up at the stars; morning I'd set an' watch the sun come up; midday I'd look out from a hill at the rollin' country; evenin' I'd foller the sun down. Sometimes I'd pray like I always done. On'y I couldn' figure what I was prayin' to or for. There was the hills, an' there was me, an' we wasn't separate no more. We was one thing. An' that one thing was holy." (P. 110)

Between these two extremes, the thick Biblical and the poetic low colloquial, lies the narrative style in which the bulk of the Joads' story is told. It retains some of the deliberate rhythm of the Biblical and some of the realistic vocabulary of the colloquial styles. The three styles make a blend, one style modulating well with another. There is no weakness in the book on that score, but there is some question about the appropriateness of the exalted styles altogether. Just as in the ritual behavior of the Okies, so in the exalted language that describes them and in the impassioned speech that they sometimes use, there is considerable pompousness. In both gesture and speech Steinbeck occasionally comes too near to a burlesque tone; his seriousness becomes excessive, and he commits the prime error of many writers who attempt the epic, swelling and grandioseness. He lifts the Joads, in particular, and the Okies, in general, too quickly and abruptly from their realistic existence to the level of epic heroism.

There is no question of the influence of the Old and New Testaments on *The Grapes of Wrath*. Parallels with the *Aeneid* are hardly as deliberate, but are worth pointing out as evidence that

the whole ancient heroic tradition contributes to the materials of the epic novel. In the American work the three-part narrative scheme of the *Aeneid* appears again in the record of a people who lose their homeland, make a perilous journey to a promising new land, and fight against the hostile natives there for a chance to begin a new life. The first two parts are more tightly woven than the third because the family stays very close together as they leave home and travel the road across the country, but after their arrival in California the pressures pulling them apart multiply. Uncle John's guilt gets worse, Rosasharn's time is drawing near, Al's desire to strike out for himself is intensified, the youngsters Ruthie and Winfield are less controllable, Casy and Tom are being drawn into the larger community. The Joad family's mode of travel, the improvised car-truck piled high with household goods, can no longer serve as a striking central image after the journey is over and the family lives in a more complicated social setting. The result of all this individual stress and social complication is an increased variety of material and a more episodic structure in the third part of the novel. There is still a strong line of action in the economic struggle, but it does not have the clear goal of the earlier drive towards freedom in the West. The same blurring of the narrative line, the same sense of confused action, is to be noted in the last part of the *Aeneid*; but whereas this falling-off of intensity is a fault in the *Aeneid* because it does not accord with the triumph of Trojan arms, in the novel it is in perfect accord with the frustration of Okie ambitions. Undoubtedly, interest in the third part of the *Aeneid* flags because attention is turned away from sharply focused individuals, Aeneas himself and Dido, to more generalized accounts of tribes and warring nations. Similarly, in *The Grapes of Wrath* the exclusive interest in the family sustains the first two parts better than the last part, in which there is a scattering of interest among larger social units.

Narrative structure is the most accomplished aspect of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Steinbeck achieves a successful solution to the chief structural problem of the epic writer, whether it be Homer or Tolstoy: the harmonization of the general social action involving masses of people and major issues with particular actions involving closely examined individuals and their concerns. Steinbeck simplifies his problem somewhat by restricting himself to the members of one family and their few close associates, Casy and the Wilsons, and to a few quickly drawn agents of their enemies.

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His Joads serve the same synecdochic purpose of Zola's Maheus in *Germinal*, but it is to be noted that Zola does not confine himself to one side of the struggle alone nor to one family of miners. The Joads exemplify in detail what is presumably going on in thousands of similar families. Moreover, Steinbeck supplies a more explicit link between the general and particular actions by using "interchapters" or panoramic narrative in which the activities of all the Okies are summarized, sometimes from an objective viewpoint and sometimes as collective monologue from the viewpoint of representative Okies. Enough details are common to both kinds of action to give the sense that the Joads are living the same kind of life and having the same thoughts and feelings as the masses described in the interchapters. Except for the interruption they make in the story of the Joads, the interchapters are readily assimilated for their thematic and material relevance.

A few minor echoes from classical epics may be cited. The patriarch of the family whose fortunes we follow, the Joads, has to be carried onto the truck when they are forced to leave home; he dies on the way, and a pause in the journey is made to bury him with solemn rites in a strange land. After the feast of pork and potatoes, Ma Joad declares, "Grampa—it's like he's dead a year." A granddaughter consoles the dead man's grieving old wife; she lies "beside the old woman and the murmur of their soft voices drifted to the fire" where the men were sitting. At the place where Grampa dies the Joads make friends with another family of Okies, the Wilsons, whose car has broken down. The two Joad boys undertake to repair it and they find the necessary parts in an auto graveyard presided over by a one-eyed "specter of a man," who cries miserably as he tells them his sad plight. This scene, according to an early commentator on Steinbeck, "afterwards floats in the mind like a piece of epic."³ The car is repaired and the two families now join forces as they proceed on their journey together. These are but faint echoes of the story of Aeneas's father, Aeneas at Eryx, and Odysseus's tale of Polyphemus.

The ceremonial solemnity with which the Joads perform certain family functions suggests a more general epic quality. The frequent family councils, the ritual killing of the pigs before the departure, the burial of Grampa, and many other activities are executed by Steinbeck's American sharecroppers with all of the

³Harry T. Moore, *The Novels of John Steinbeck* (Chicago, 1939), p. 71.

ponderous care and sacred protocol of noblemen out of the heroic tradition of the past. Such attempts to aggrandize the folk, also to be found in *The Octopus* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, often fall into bathos in Steinbeck. Much more effectively done are the many prophecies of disaster uttered all along the road to California, particularly one by a kind of Teiresias whom the Joads meet in one of the improvised campsites. A "ragged man," his coat a mass of "torn streamers," he at first refuses to say what lies in store for the Joads in California. "I don' wanna fret you," he tells Pa. What he finally does reveal is exactly what happens to the Joads in the remaining half of the book—their being exploited in an economic situation in which thousands of men compete for a few jobs. He finishes his prophecy, "and then he turned and walked quickly away into the darkness."

Jim Casy is a prophet in another, more hopeful, tradition, that of Christ in the New Testament. Disturbed by the economic plight of the farming class he serves as a Baptist preacher, he makes a retreat in order to ponder their situation and decides that he cannot help by continuing in the ministry. Actually, his Christianity is simply broadened by the sudden growth of his social consciousness. He becomes inspired with the idea that the brotherhood of all men must work together for social justice, and to this he adds a more abstract idea of the holy relatedness of mankind in a kind of Emersonian oversoul.⁴ This doctrine he preaches as a new revelation to save the Okies from destruction and the world from economic warfare. He dies preaching for the cause and saying to his assailants, "You don' know what you're a-doin!" But he leaves behind a disciple in Tom Joad, who at once begins to tell the story of Casy and even thinks he sees him after his death.

If Casy is Christian and socialist, Ma Joad is pagan and primitive. If Casy adds the spirit of a New Testament prophet to the doctrine of a twentieth-century class-conscious revolutionary, Ma Joad is in the ancient tradition of the kore-goddess protecting her hero-son and her people. She is splendidly revealed (*de a certe*) to Tom when he returns home, a stranger, after spending four years in prison for having killed a man in a quarrel:

Her full face was not soft; it was controlled, kindly. Her hazel eyes seemed to have experienced all possible tragedy and to have

⁴Steinbeck's Emersonian transcendentalism is carefully worked out by Peter Lisca in *The Wide World of John Steinbeck* (New Brunswick, N. J., 1958), pp. 168-69.

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mounted pain and suffering like steps into a high calm and a superhuman understanding. She seemed to know, to accept, to welcome her position, the citadel of the family, the strong place that could not be taken. . . . And from her great and humble position in the family she had taken dignity and a clean calm beauty. From her position as healer, her hands had grown sure and cool and quiet; from her position as arbiter she had become as remote and faultless in judgment as a goddess.

She moved toward him lithely, soundlessly in her bare feet, and her face was full of wonder. Her small hand felt his arm, felt the soundness of his muscles. And then her fingers went up to his cheek as a blind man's fingers might. And her joy was nearly like sorrow. . . . (Pp. 100-101)

The only embrace between mother and wandering son is the touch of her hand to his face; between mother-goddess and human son is the same gulf that we see between Venus and Aeneas in book one of the *Aeneid*: "Oh, why may we not join/Hand to hand, or ever converse straightforwardly?" Like Pilar in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, like Dilsey in *The Sound and the Fury*, Ma Joad is richly endowed with the awesome, divine presence of the goddess who presides over the generations of the family and the cycle of life. Her every action—except one, as we shall see—is motivated by the instinctive desire to keep the family together for the purpose of mere survival. She cradles the dying Granma Joad in her arms, she protects and nourishes her pregnant daughter, she restores her son Tom to life.

Produced by the influences of a Christ-like companion, Casy, and his mother-goddess, Tom Joad is indeed a hero of divine origin. He is moved to heroic acts by the spirit of anger and revenge which the murder of Casy stirs in him, and on the other hand by the spirit of compassion and love for mankind which his mother so well demonstrates in her selfless devotion to the family. Images of death and rebirth mark Tom's relations with Casy and Ma Joad, as in their different ways they strive to bring him to the role of a hero. There is something terribly grim and sad about the career of Tom. Never allowed a romantic interlude, he is plunged into the troubles of his people upon his return from prison and slowly comes to an awareness of his responsibilities of leadership. Almost glumly, with little expression of personal feeling, he does not only what is expected of him but more besides. A peak in his development occurs when, in the manner of a classic brother-in-

arms, Tom at once kills the strikebreaker who has killed Casy; Tom is then himself struck, escapes from his pursuers, and comes to an irrigation ditch, where he bathes his torn cheek and nose. Casy, when he was a preacher, used to baptize people in irrigation ditches; he is killed as he stands beside a stream. Tom's introduction to the bitter struggle of worker against producer dates from the violent experience beside the stream. The stinging baptism at the irrigation ditch, after he has fled, does not lead him into his new life at once, however. He must die before he can be wholly reborn, and he must make a retreat to consecrate himself to the cause in his soul as well as in his arms and receive the blessing of his goddess-mother as well as the example of his surrogate father. He rejoins the family, but because he is being sought by the police and can easily be identified by his wounds, he must remain hidden: he is as one who no longer exists in the Joad family. To get past the guards who are looking for him, he lies between two mattresses in the Joad truck, and then he takes refuge in the brush near the boxcar that the family is now inhabiting. After Ruthie has told her playmates about her big brother Tom, Ma decides that she must release Tom from his obligation to the family for his own safety, and she goes to the "cave of vines" he has improvised. Tom, in the meantime, has come around to a sense of his duty to "fight so hungry people can eat" and is ready to begin a new life away from the family.

The scene in which Ma and Tom part is the climax of Tom's career as a hero and the very heart of Steinbeck's point that class must replace family as the social unit worth fighting for. It is a high point in Steinbeck's writing, and some of its strength comes from the association of rebirth imagery and myths of the mother-goddess and her hero son with the crude story of an organizer of farm labor in twentieth-century America. Carrying a dish of "pork chops and fry potatoes," Ma walks at night "to the end of the line of tents" in the camp of fruit pickers and steps "in among the willows beside the stream" until she reaches "the black round hole of the culvert where she always left Tom's food." She leaves her package at the hole and waits a little distance away, among the willows:

And then a wind stirred the willows delicately, as though it tested them, and a shower of golden leaves coasted down to the ground. Suddenly a gust boiled in and racked the trees, and a cricking downpour of leaves fell. Ma could feel them on her hair and on her

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r who has killed Casy; his pursuers, and comes with a torn cheek and nose. He baptizes people in irrigation beside a stream. Tom's anger against producer is in the stream. The stinging rain, which he fled, does not lead him to die before he can be consecrated himself to receive the blessing of his surrogate. He is being sought by the hands, he must remain with the Joad family. To get between the two he lies between two trees for refuge in the brush. After Ruthie has left Tom, Ma decides that she will take the family for his own, as he has improvised. He has a sense of his duty to begin a new life

at the climax of Tom's death, the point that class struggle is fighting for. It is a high point of strength comes from the myths of the mother-goddess of an organizer of a party, trying a dish of "pork and beans" to the end of the line. She steps "in among the trees of the black round hole of the road." She leaves her life away, among the

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shoulders. Over the sky a plump black cloud moved, erasing the stars. The fat drops of rain scattered down, splashing loudly on the fallen leaves, and the cloud moved on and unveiled the stars again. Ma shivered. The wind blew past and left the thicket quiet, but the rushing of the trees went on down the stream. (P. 567)

A "dark figure" finally appears at the culvert; it is Tom and after her plea to talk with him he leads Ma to his hideout, across a stream and a field filled with "the blackening stems" of cotton plants. Ma crawls into the "cave of vines" and there in the dark they talk. She explains that she did not let him go earlier because she was afraid for him; with the touch of her hand she discovers that he has a bad scar on his face and his nose is crooked. Again, as in the first scene of recognition between mother and son, the hand of the mother lingers lovingly on the face of the son, just as Thetis "took her son's head in her arms" before she releases him for battle in book 18 of the *Iliad*. Ma Joad forces her gift of seven dollars on Tom to help on his perilous way. Full of his new mission in life, he does not respond to the love his mother expresses for him, but simply says, "Good-by." Ma returns to the camp, and Tom presumably will go on to his doom as Casy did before him but also to a sort of immortality for men who have fought for social justice:

"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. Wherever they's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there. If Casy knowed, why, I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad an'—I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry an' they know supper's ready. An' when our folks eat the stuff they raise an' live in the houses they build—why, I'll be there." (P. 572)

This is a kind of immortality that Ma "don' un'erstan'," although it is she who confers it on him by making his heroism possible.

It is not enough to say that this wonderful scene is inspired by the New Testament story of Christ's resurrection from the tomb.⁵ The "caves of vines" and the tomb are the womb from which the hero is delivered to a new life, but the landscape in Steinbeck's scene is more nearly that of the classical underworld. The nourishing of the hero-son by the earth-goddess mother until he is

⁵See H. Kelly Crockett, "The Bible and *The Grapes of Wrath*," *College English*, 24 (December 1962), 197; Charles C. Dougherty, "The Christ Figure in *The Grapes of Wrath*," *ibid.*, p. 226.

strong enough to leave her suggests the myth of Ishtar and Tamuz, and the commitment of the son of war and eventual death recalls the sad exchange between Thetis and Achilles. Tom Joad's "death" brings an end to his ordinary existence as one of thousands of Okies; he is reborn into the life of the epic hero, who dooms himself to an early death as soon as he elects a heroic course of action. His consecration is affirmed by his discipleship to Casy and the ritual release performed by his mother. If there is a resurrection, it is the resurrection of Casy in Tom. Tom's rebirth through the agency of Casy and Ma Joad has a striking antecedent in the experience of Henry Fleming in Crane's *Red Badge of Courage*. The change in Henry's attitude toward heroism—from callow sentimentality to a mature sense of its real consequences—is in part wrought by the example of Jim Conklin, another Christ-like figure, and Henry's encounter with death in the forest, alone, and rebirth among his comrades.⁶

The rebirth of Tom as hero is emphasized by the ironical implication of another incident. Shortly after Ma Joad has returned from the stream and the willows, the pregnant Rosasharn distractedly seeks refuge in the very same place, along "the stream and the trail that went beside it." She lies down among the berry vines and feels "the weight of the baby inside her." Not long after this the rains come. Pa Joad and other men in the camp work feverishly to hold back the swollen stream from flooding their miserable living quarters; they build an earth embankment, but it is swept away and the water washes into the camp. At the same time Ma Joad and some neighboring women are helping Rosasharn deliver her baby, but they meet with no greater success—the baby is stillborn. Uncle John is delegated to bury the "blue shriveled little mummy"; instead, he takes the apple box it is in and floats it down the river, hoping that it will be a sign to the California landowners of the Okies' sore affliction. "Go down an' tell 'em," he says, in words echoing the Negro spiritual "Go Down, Moses" and thus linking three oppressed peoples—Israelites, American Negro slaves, and the Okies. The river is the same that saw the rebirth of Tom, who is a kind of Moses to his people, and now it receives the dead infant.

⁶See John E. Hart, "The Red Badge of Courage as Myth and Symbol," *University of Kansas City Review*, 19 (Summer 1953), 249-56.

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th of Ishtar and Tamar and eventual death of Achilles. Tom Joad's sentence as one of thousands of the epic hero, who as he elects a heroic end by his discipleship to his mother. If there is not Tom. Tom's rebirth is a striking antecedent to his *Red Badge of Courage*. Heroism—from callow consequences—is in nature, another Christ-like figure in the forest, alone, and

ized by the ironical character Ma Joad has re-pregnant Rosasharn, along "the stream run among the berry bushes." Not long after in the camp work from flooding their embankment, but it is a camp. At the same time are helping Rosasharn greater success—their to bury the "blue apple box it is in will be a sign to the nation. "Go down an' spiritual "Go Down, peoples—Israelites, never is the same that is to his people, and

and Symbol," *University of*

In Tom the Biblical and epic traditions of the hero came together to make a proletarian leader of the twentieth century. The man of anger and the quick blow of revenge is also the disciple devoted to self-sacrifice in the cause of the downtrodden and deprived. The son of the spouse-goddess is released from the death that is the family in order to do battle for the class that will possess the future. The man of violence bred from personal pride—Tom killed his first man in a tavern brawl—is baptized in the violence of class struggle, and he turns, like the classical hero, from the defense of his own rights to the defense of all men's rights. Like Presley in *The Octopus*, Tom is an apprentice-hero who learns from a man more experienced in warfare, in class warfare. What Presley learns from his mentor, the anarchist barkeep, is in the same political tradition as what Tom learns from Casy; the leftist attack on capitalism is rejected by Norris, however, and seemingly accepted by Steinbeck after it is filtered through Christian feeling and presented in Biblical and epic images.

The Grapes of Wrath begins with a drought bringing death to the land and dispossession to its inhabitants and ends ironically with a flood that again destroys the land and disperses the people. Nature as well as society dooms the Okies, who fall from one catastrophe into another, losing their land, their belongings, their livelihood, and finally even their miserable shelters. But in spite of homelessness and despair, the Joads have succeeded in making an important journey, passing from one bond, the family, to another, mankind. "They's changes—all over," it is said. "Use' ta be the family was fust. It ain't so now. It's anybody." In place of the family a new form of social organization is tentatively envisaged on the model of a small socialist community. Not all can see the promised land—only Casy, who does not live to enter it, and Tom, who is on the verge of entering it at the close of the book. Pa Joad's symbolical attempt, in fighting the river, to unite the community after the old style of neighborly cooperation comes too late and fails. Having long since relinquished control of the family to Ma, Pa Joad is a man without a role to play in the world. He joins Magnus Derrick in the company of those in the older generation who, unable to accommodate themselves to a new situation, are only pitifully heroic. Others, those who seek individual solutions, are shown to be equally futile. Muley Graves stays on the abandoned farmlands in Oklahoma and must live "like a coyote" on

the trash left behind and the wild animals still surviving on the plains. Uncle Noah wanders away down a river he half-wittedly fancies, and Uncle John gets drunk when he can sneak the money. Al, Tom's younger brother, strikes out for himself, ironically to start another hapless family. While Ma cannot understand Tom's social idealism, she and Rosasharn do come around to the side of humanity in the closing scene of the book when Rosasharn, with her mother's prompting, feeds to a dying old man, a stranger, the milk her body had stored for her child. With neither child nor husband Rosasharn must abandon the idea of family. Ma's family has disintegrated, Rosasharn's has not even had a chance to begin.

The images of the community and the hero that dominate the ending of *The Grapes of Wrath* are pitiful enough: a fugitive coming out of hiding to do unequal battle with an infinitely superior enemy and two frightened women trying desperately to save a dying old man in an empty barn. It seems to be an image of miserable survival in the face of awesome odds. Still, out of the sordid circumstances of a purely naturalistic life a hero is born in a manner reminiscent of great heroes of the past. The affirmation of a better future seems groundless, but there is affirmation nonetheless, and a hero is ready to attempt its achievement by leading people who have prepared themselves for a new kind of society. "The book is neither riddle nor tragedy," insists Warren French, "it is an epic comedy of the triumph of the 'holy spirit.'" ⁷

Norris explores the possibilities of heroism in one novel, Steinbeck and Hemingway in a whole succession of novels. Steinbeck seems to want to believe in heroic behavior and the ideal community, yet in one novel after another he submits a negative report as to the chances of either in our time. His first novel, *Cup of Gold* (1929), in Warren French's summary, "asserts that there is no place for the swashbuckling hero in the modern world."⁸ In *Tortilla Flat* (1935) Steinbeck lovingly presents the irregular habits and amusing antics of a number of paisanos, but at the same time, by stressing a mock-heroic parallel with Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, he insists upon our viewing their attempts to be heroic as ridiculous. In the end, Danny, the Arthur of a paisano Round Table, armed

⁷John Steinbeck (New York, 1961), p. 107.

⁸Ibid., p. 37.

with a broken table and with "The Enemy" in companions used for war next novel, *In Dubious* another figure from this work is starkly naive leader of embattled legion that renders him face. His epitaph is so brief: "Comrades! He the hero in *Of Mice* "shapeless of face," havior. In his time of where a path winds mores." But Lennie become his execution great strength he h community.

In *The Grapes of Wrath* altogether forlorn image a face, badly battered him, his spirit is revived and, presumably, he finishes before he even never materializes. In place of refuge should hidden by willows never dies actually, not symbol Ma Joad as his promoter. Mac, a hard not have the mythical a cave to retire to if he George, but there is not the cave and the willow hero to the world, a figure recognized as Tom Joad one who affirms the anonymity of twentieth the signs of an ancient

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with a broken table leg, goes out to do battle and dies in a duel with "The Enemy" in the "gulch," a place which he and his companions used for want of an outhouse. Although the hero in the next novel, *In Dubious Battle* (1936), bears a slight resemblance to another figure from the Arthurian legend, Percival, the mood of this work is starkly naturalistic. Jim Nolan's attempt to become the leader of embattled laborers is soon ended by the blast of a shotgun that renders him, horribly and quite literally, a hero without a face. His epitaph is spoken by his mentor, Mac, and is necessarily brief: "Comrades! He didn't want nothing for himself—." Lennie, the hero in *Of Mice and Men* (1937), is a feebleminded giant, "shapeless of face," and obviously incapable of responsible behavior. In his time of trouble he takes refuge in a place near a river where a path winds "through the willows and among the sycamores." But Lennie is not reborn there; his best friend must become his executioner there because Lennie cannot control the great strength he has and is consequently a menace to the community.

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, for the first time, Steinbeck offers a not altogether forlorn image of the epic hero. Tom Joad is a hero with a face, badly battered though it is; he survives the assault upon him, his spirit is revived at a place where willows grow by a stream and, presumably, he is embarked upon a heroic career. Jim Nolan finishes before he ever really begins, and the possibility of rebirth never materializes. Just before his death Mac advises him of a place of refuge should the occasion ever arise, "a deep cave" hidden by willows near a stream. But Jim never gets to the cave; he dies actually, not symbolically as Tom does. Nor does Jim have Ma Joad as his protective goddess and Casy as his martyred mentor. Mac, a hardheaded and cautious labor organizer, does not have the mythical credentials to inspire a hero. Lennie also has a cave to retire to if he becomes too much of a burden to his friend George, but there is no returning from it. Only Tom returns from the cave and the willows, the place of death, to present the face of a hero to the world, a face so badly scarred that he can no longer be recognized as Tom Joad. Of all Steinbeck's heroes, he is the only one who affirms the possibility of a hero arising out of the anonymity of twentieth-century economic strife and still bearing the signs of an ancient dedication.