

Christian influence in the grapes of wrath

[Literature](#), [American Literature](#)



Authors often use religious allusions to further the significance of a novel. It is when the reader recognizes and understands these influences that the importance of the novel can be truly understood. In John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck utilizes numerous Christian references to further the underlying meaning of his novel. Steinbeck's use of intricate methods to portray Casy as a Christ figure, Tom Joad as a disciple, the family as a larger "family" of humanity, and the Joads' as the Israelites facilitate the novel's Christian influence. Initially, Steinbeck casts the character played by Jim Casy as a Christ-like figure. Jim Casy travels along with the Joad family on an expedition from Oklahoma to California. Casy, an ex-minister who has relinquished his former Christian beliefs, is now strictly practicing abstinence. "Casy's new 'religion' is based on love and a belief in each person's soul as well as an all-inclusive soul, the 'Holy Spirit' of humanity" (Stanley Ed. 107). Jim Casy's initials, J. C., also serve as confirmation of his character's function as a symbol of Jesus Christ. Even Casy's actions correspond to those of Christ: he is first introduced in the novel after evading society by escaping into the wilderness for a time of solitude and reflection. This seclusion parallels Christ's retreat from the world before beginning his mission to convert society. Also, Casy accepts the deputy's thrashing and receives punishment for Tom's actions. Jim's altruistic scuffle inevitably positions him as a leader in the fight against oppression. His life is sacrificed for his selfless actions, and his final words resemble those of Christ in his final hours: "You fellas don' know what you're doin'" (Stanley Ed. 107). Casy's actions indirectly persuade Tom Joad to follow him along the same selfless path. Casy's individual identity is a true expression of a greater self, although this

self-realization causes him to be condemned by society, and is also the reason for his crucifixion. Steinbeck's novel also resembles the New Testament in its language and imagery, and in the principles it portrays. Jim Casy's teachings, along with his unselfishness, recall Christ's wisdom and his crucifixion. This perspective furthers the similarities between the twelve Joads and the twelve apostles. Connie is representative of a Judas figure who abandons the family for money. Although the Judeo-Christian allusions are extremely compelling, the novel is not an exercise in holiness. Early in the novel, Steinbeck conveys a definite anti-religious mood, which is elucidated when Casy clarifies why he has turned away from his ministry. Furthermore, those who sermonize on sin and damnation in the migrant camps are regarded with disparagement (Stanley Ed. 107, 113, 118). Jesus started his mission following a retreat of isolation in the wilderness for a period of reflection and sanctification. He enters the novel after Christ's similar withdrawal, and informs Tom that he "went off alone, an' I sat and figured" (Shockley 267). Subsequently, as Tom converges with Casy in the protestor's tent, Casy reveals that he has "been a-goin' into the wilderness like Jesus to try to find out sumpin'" (Shockley 267). Steinbeck is undoubtedly aware of this parallel. Also, much like Jesus Christ, Casy has discarded an obsolete religion, and is currently in the process of substituting it with a contemporary gospel. In the opening scene, Jim and Tom reminisce about earlier days, when Casy advocated the old religion, thereby illustrating the prior concept of transgression and fault. Presently, however, Casy explicates his denunciation of a religion that he felt corrupted him with its emphasis on natural human desires. The Adam of the Fall is approaching exorcism via

these new indulgences (Shockley 267). Tom Joad is cast as a disciple of the Christ figure, Jim Casy. Steinbeck's compelling touch is shown when Tom expresses his desire for Casy's role. With this catharsis, John Steinbeck introduces allegory; he does not succumb to its unyielding eminence, because Tom is, in essence, nothing like Casy. Tom Joad is far more sadistic, far more filled with anger. Having been tutored by Casy, however, Tom may ultimately prove even more triumphant as a realistic missionary. One may notice that if Casy symbolizes Christ, Tom should be identified with Saint Paul - the practical, harsh organizer. The metaphorical connection through which Tom is transformed and learns to take responsibility is profoundly realized, and abounds with importance. The significance is not merely justified as a technical inevitability, but because it is evidence of Casy's veracity as a man and a teacher. The parallels to Saint Paul would be mere technical details if they were not felt so intensely (Levent 104). Following Casy's brutal death, Tom takes it upon himself to perform the role of Casy's disciple. Tom has been educated by his mentor, and now he assumes his mentor's responsibilities. Two of Christ's disciples were named Thomas, and many of the disciples selected by Christ were culled from individuals much like the Joads. Ma Joad asks Tom what should happen if he loses his life, and he replies in the manner taught to him by Casy: "Then is 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. Wherever they's a cop beatin' a guy, I'll be there. If Casy knowed, why, 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. See?"

God, I'm talkin' like Casy." (Shockley 269) Steinbeck uses the Joad family to symbolize something far greater. The Joads encounter numerous adversities, deprivations, and casualties, and towards the end of the story almost cease to exist. Nonetheless, the tone of the novel is buoyant. This encouraging feeling is derived from "the growth of the Joad family as they begin to realize a larger group consciousness" (Stanley Ed. 110). The maturity of this theme can be seen predominantly in Ma Joad, beginning with her desire to keep the family close. Ma exclaims in the last chapter, "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" (Stanley Ed. 110). The foremost symbol in Steinbeck's work is the family, which stands for "the greater 'family' of humanity" (Stanley Ed. 113). The Joads are at the heart of the powerful characteristics of the novel; nevertheless, they exemplify human vigor and frailty. Hazards in nature and human civilization impair the family, and they endure financial and environmental disasters, just as all mankind must. Near the end of the novel, the Joads begin to understand that they are members of a larger family. The land is a representation of individual distinctiveness; what the Joad family suffers when they lose the home farm is a loss of identity, which they strive to recover during their expedition, and in California. Pa Joad, in particular, loses his strength after the Joads are "tractored off" his family's land (Stanley Ed. 113). After their loss, he must relinquish his influence in the family to Ma (Stanley Ed. 110, 113). The symbol of family as a greater family of humanity is furthered as the Joads continue westward towards California. The Joads encounter the Wilsons, who help them bury their deceased patriarch by unselfishly supplying a quilt. Also, as the Joads arrive in

Hooverville, Ma Joad helps feed the starving children of the camp, even though her own family barely has enough to eat. An comparison can be made between the Joads' journey from the desiccated Southwest to California and the movement of the Children of Israel from Egypt to Canaan. The Joads, like the Children of Israel, arrive in a region overflowing with milk and honey; however, the contemporary Canaanites annihilate their surplus animals, fruits, and vegetables, while the Joads become sick from starvation. California, therefore, becomes the boondocks, and the Joads are obligated to deviate indefinitely, the land of promise remaining an illusion. Also, the resentment the Joads meet with during their journey across U. S. Highway 66 from the administrator of the roadside camp and the filling station associates at the desert border recalls the way in which the Israelites were treated by tribes such as the Amorites and Midianites. The raggedy gentleman at the roadside camp, along with the dejected Okie and his son at the Colorado River, satisfy the responsibility of the spies who desire information regarding the land of Canaan. Like the spies, these informants validate the fortune of the land in which the Joads are arriving, and attempt to warn them about the harsh treatment which they should anticipate. Nevertheless, the Joads do not imitate the performance of the Israelites: " With nothing but misery behind them" (Crockett 110), the Joads are obligated to move onward, into greater wretchedness (Crockett 110). John Steinbeck's complex presentation of Jim Casy as a Christ-like figure, Tom Joad as a disciple, the family as a larger " family" of humanity, and the Joads' as the Israelites help contribute to the novel's Christian influence. The Christian foundation of this novel furthers the reader's understanding of the unimaginable hardships the Joads and other

families endured during the Depression. Sometimes, we learn, individuals may have to sacrifice their home, their identity, or even sacrifice themselves for the common good. Works CitedCrockett, H Kelly. "The Bible and The Grapes of Wrath." A Casebook on The Grapes of Wrath. Ed. Agnes McNeill Donohue. NY: Thomas Y. Cromwell Company, 1968. Hinton, Rebecca. "Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath." The Explicator Vol 56. 2 (Winter 1998). 30 November 2004 <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=0&did=00000002681734T&SrchMode=1&sid=3&Fmt=3&VIn.html>. Levent, Howard. The Novels of John Steinbeck: A Critical Study. University of Missouri Press, 1974. Shockley, Martin. "Christian symbolism in The Grapes of Wrath." Steinbeck and His Critics. Ed. E. W. Tedlock, Jr. and C. V. Wicker. University of New Mexico Press, 1957. Stanley, Deborah A, ed. Novels for Students. Vol 7. London: Gale Group, 1999.