

Family ties in the grapes of wrath

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The indefatigable spirit of unity emerges as the one unfailing source of strength in John Steinbeck's migrant worker classic *The Grapes of Wrath*. As the Joad family's world steadily crumbles, hope in each other preserves the members, sense of pride, of courage, and of determination. A solitary man holds a grim future; with others to love and be loved by, no matter how destitute one is materially, life is rich. This selflessness is not immediate, however; over the course of the book several characters advance from affected altruism to unconscious magnanimity.

A recently paroled Tom Joad makes his first encounter with altruism as he attempts to hitchhike with a trucker whose employer has outlawed the practice. When the trucker points out the "No Riders" (11) sign his truck carries, Tom replies, "But sometimes a guy'll be a good guy even if some rich bastard makes him carry a sticker." (11) Steinbeck has cleverly cornered the man by utilizing a tool often implemented in Depression-era literature: the classification of the guilty rich as anonymous, thus convincing the trucker that he is "not one whom any rich bastard could kick around." (11) Still, this generous gesture is caused by shame and guilt, not by an independent moral factor.

The notion of a collective spirit is explored when Tom meets the former preacher, Casy. Casy has given up classical religion because it lacks pragmatism and overemphasizes escapism. In a thesis statement that is repeated several times, he says, "Maybe it's all men and women we love; maybe that's the Holy Spirit the human spirit, Maybe all men got one big soul and ever body's a part of." (33) At this early point, though, Tom remains skeptical. "Joad's eyes dropped to the ground, as though he could not meet

the naked honesty in the preacher's eyes. " You can't hold no church with idears like that." (33)

Sharing is developed more when Tom, taking Casy under his wing, runs across an old friend, Muley. Though a vagrant, he has freshly killed rabbits in possession. Steinbeck shows the crossover to unconscious unity as Casy asks Muley if he'll share: " I ain't got no choice in the matter, what I mean, if a fella's got somepin to eat and another fella's hungry why, the first fella ain't got no choice." (66)

Banding together in organized efforts is an elusive goal rarely achieved in the novel. Characters dream of unions at several points: " If we was all mad the same way, Tommy they wouldn't hunt nobody down" (104) Ma says to calm an irate Tom, and is later reiterated by Tom in reference to a strike: " Well, spose them people got together an says, Let em rot. Wouldn't be long fore the price went up, by God!" (336) These ideas are shot down as unattainable, and remain unrealized until the Joads enter the self-governed commune. Synergy is the main theme there; Tom puts it best while digging a ditch: " A pick is a nice tool, if you don fight it. You an the pick workin together." (407) This strikes a contrast with the description of the tractors plowing the land: " The land bore under iron, and under iron gradually died; for it was not loved and hated, it had no prayers or curses." (49) Just as people must work together, humans and the land must exist in harmony to survive.

The movement towards unconscious altruism occurs on the trip west.

Meeting the Wilson family, Ma reassures them that their tagging along "

won't be no burden. Each'll help each, an we'll all git to California. The relationship was plain." (202) Still, at this young stage there must be reciprocity to justify the altruism. When Ma reveals that she sat alone with the dead body of her mother through the night, she explains simply, " The fambly hadda get acrost." (312) She made a sacrifice without thought, carrying out a deed that caused her nothing but pain but was necessary for the betterment of others.

The final scene is the ultimate in sincere charity. Rose of Sharon is selfish throughout most of the trip, especially when it comes to milk for her unborn baby. When Winfield needs milk to regain strength, she pouts, " I ain't had no milk. I oughta have some." (543) After delivering a stillborn baby, the family happens upon a starving man. She doesn't need to be prodded into breast-feeding him; " the two woman [Ma and Rose] looked deep into each other" (618) is all the interaction necessary. Her symbolic gesture of looking past her own worries to aid another, of giving of herself to inject another with life, of placing the nutrients designed for a relative into the body of a stranger, is a fitting way to end the book. That she " smiled mysteriously" (619) at this action means she has gained the knowledge Casy spoke of at the beginning of the book, proving that even the most selfish have room for redemption.