

Society and collectivism



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Ralph Waldo Emerson's experiences in life create a pathway that guides the development of his morals and values. Through his journey, he establishes a unique interpretation towards life that he culminates in "Self Reliance." By understanding Emerson's philosophy, John Steinbeck accomplishes his desire to spread collectivism through *The Grapes of Wrath*. Realizing the superfluous amount of conformity and consistency in society, Steinbeck utilizes his characters to stress the importance of self-reliance because it broadcasts the benefits of collectivism while igniting the development of original ideas that could change society.

The notion of self-reliance invokes change in Jim Casy's life. Throughout his life, the preacher relies on religion to dictate his life and his decisions because society stresses devoutness, thus influencing his decision to preach. Along with the desire to create happiness for the people that he encounters, conformity hinders Casy from reflecting on his own morals. His inability to act on his own opinion causes religion to consume his life. Emerson argues, "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds" (24). Since mankind "are loath to disappoint," Casy constantly preaches "somepin [he] thought would make 'em happy" because he could not develop alternative ways to live life while making people happy. Consistently relying on religion harms the preacher's ability to form novel ideas without outside influence because "with consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do" (24). Although Jesus dominates the community, Casy finally senses the need for change because "[he] know a bunch of stories [about Jesus], but [he] only love people" (23). He understands his failure in allowing an unknown person to control his life, accepts his mistakes, and pledges to act on his opinion and

morals so that his and other people's lives change for the good. Through his spiritual journey, Casy escapes society's religious prison and achieves self-reliance. He "can't say no grace" because he "ain't got the call" due to his rejection of society's ideals and morals, such as religion. He values that "there's love here" more than he values the "spirit" and a person named "Jesus," thus influencing his decision to stop preaching. Although he doesn't quite reach self-reliance due to his reliance on religion, he still develops the basis of "a lot of sinful ideas [that] seem kinda sensible" (20). Fueling his spiritual journey, these ideas develop a foundation for Casy's collectivist ideology.

Throughout his migration with the Joad family, Casy fully realizes the meaning of community and life from the lens of cooperation and desires to share his message with civilization. Even though Jim Casy completes his evolution from a conformist preacher to an innovative philosopher, he must broadcast his new ideology and operate within the walls of injustice, thus fully achieving self-reliance. As Emerson portrays, "It is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude" (23). Jim Casy understands that his spiritual journey becomes worthless if he neglects the opportunity to work with his collectivist ideals around civilization. Although people "don't know what [they're] a doin'," Casy's spiritual and metamorphosis succeeds because "to be great is to be misunderstood" (25). Realizing the importance of his message, Casy "[dodges] down into the swing" and becomes a martyr because he concludes that tragic and unjust death would spread his communal ideology. Jim Casy's voluntary death

steers Tom Joad towards the path of self-reliance because it lays the final tracks for Tom's philosophical evolution. Discovering the importance of self-reliance, Jim Casy informs Tom of his mission: " Maybe I can't tell you... Maybe you got to find out" (382).

Throughout the novel, Tom learns from Jim Casy's actions, speech, and spiritual journey, but he never quite figures out the true meaning of collectivism because one must achieve self-reliance so that new ideas develop. If Jim Casy attempts to inform Tom about his take on society and collectivism, then Tom's actions for society would simulate " an apology or extenuation of their living in the world" (22). Tom must undergo a separate process to achieve self-reliance, develop an original meaning towards life and collectivism, and act on his realization. Jim Casy's death and Tom's experiences in California paves the road for Tom's transformation. After he explores life to the greatest extent in the cave, Tom pledges to help people " wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat...wherever they's a cop beatin' up a guy," thus establishing his presence as a fully realized and self-reliance prophet. Quite similar to Jim Casy, Ma Joad completes an individual journey and alters her ideology and view on life that pertains to family and community. Throughout her life, Ma stress the importance of family: "' What we got lef' in the world'? Nothin' but us. Nothin' but the folks'" (169). The farm in Oklahoma creates symbolic walls that surround the family and isolate other members of society, thus explaining Ma's dedication towards family.

The family's migration to California dissolves the traditional sense of family, thus infiltrating Ma's mind and spinning the wheels of evolution. Encounters with the cops and impoverished people foreshadow her journey's conclusion

because it forces Ma to realize that “ these folks is our folks” and “ they’re the only ones that’ll help” (376). Upon parting with Tom, Ma understands this new perspective on life, but remains hesitant to accept it and implement collectivism into her life, thus failing to finish her journey self-reliantly. Nevertheless, Ma’s rebirth occurs after exiting the womb-like cave and battling the her daughter’s birth because she accepts that “ use’ta be the family was fust. It ain’t so now”(445). As her journey concludes, she implements her fresh interpretation of collectivism into her life because she understands that “ to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all man - that is genius” (19), thus achieving self reliance.

Achieving self-reliance, Steinbeck publishes his novel *The Grapes of Wrath* in spite of being ostracized by a majority of his readers for acting like a communist. His portrayal of Jim Casy, Tom, and Ma publicizes the benefits of self-reliance and collectivism. Through his philosophy, Emerson teaches Steinbeck and society that consistency and conformity plague individualism, creativity, and the mind, thus evoking realizations about life among humanity.