

**“SURVIVING NATURAL AND SOCIAL EVIL”  
JOHN STEINBECK, *THE GRAPES OF WRATH***

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1. *The Grapes of Wrath* is an American realist novel written by John Steinbeck (1902-1968) and published in 1939. The book won the *National Book Award* and *Pulitzer Prize* for fiction, and it was cited prominently when Steinbeck was awarded the *Nobel Prize in Literature* in 1962.

**Plot summary<sup>1</sup>**

2. In Depression-era Oklahoma, **Tom Joad** hitchhikes home after being paroled from the state penitentiary. Along the road, he encounters **Jim Casy**, a preacher Tom remembers from childhood.
  - 2.1. Casy explains that he is no longer a preacher, having lost his calling. He still believes in the Holy Spirit, but not necessarily the spirituality mandated by organized religion.
  - 2.2. For Casy, the Holy Spirit is love. Not just the love of God or Jesus, but the love of all humans.
  - 2.3. He maintains that all people are holy, everyone being part of the whole soul of humankind.
  - 2.4. Tom invites Casy to join him on his walk home.
3. When they arrive at what was once the Joad farm, Tom and Casy find it abandoned. Muley Graves, a Joad neighbor, approaches and tells Tom that his family has been tracted off their land by the bank. They have moved in with his Uncle John and are preparing to leave for California to find work. Tom and Casy spend the night near the deserted farm and head to Uncle John's early the next morning.
4. The family is preparing for their journey to California when Tom and Casy arrive. Casy asks whether he can journey west with the Joads. The Joads agree to take him along. Once their belongings have been sold, everyone except Granpa is anxious to get started. They pack the truck, but Granpa has decided he wants to stay on the land, and they must drug Granpa in order to get him in the truck. They are on the highway by dawn.

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<sup>1</sup>Kelly McGrath Vlcek, *CliffsNotes on The Grapes of Wrath*, 2022. <https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/g/the-grapes-of-wrath/the-grapes-of-wrath-at-a-glance>

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5. The family stops that first evening next to a migrant couple whose car has broken down. The Wilsons are gracious, offering their tent to Granpa who has a stroke and dies. Tom and Al fix the Wilson's car, and the two families decide to travel together.
6. In New Mexico, the Wilson's touring car breaks down again, and the families are forced to stop. Granma has become increasingly ill since Granpa's death, and Tom suggests the others take the truck and continue on. **Ma refuses to go, insisting that the family stay together.** She picks up the jack handle to support her point, and the rest of the family gives in. As they reach the desert bordering California, Sairy Wilson becomes so ill that she is unable to continue. The Joads leave the Wilsons and continue across the California desert on their own.
7. Granma's health continues to deteriorate, and as the truck starts
8. its nighttime trek across the desert, Ma knows that Granma will not survive. Knowing that they cannot afford to stop, Ma lies in the back of the truck with Granma. Midway across the desert, Granma dies. By dawn, the Joads have climbed out of the desert and stop the truck to gaze down upon the beautiful Bakersfield valley. Ma tells them that Granma has passed. She must be buried a pauper because the family does not have enough money to bury her.
9. The Joads stop at the first camp they come to, a dirty Hooverville of tents and makeshift shelters. The men are talking to Floyd Knowles, a young man in the camp, when a businessman accompanied by a cop offers them work.
  - 9.1. When Floyd asks for a wage offer in writing, he is accused of being a "red," and the cop attempts to arrest him.
  - 9.2. Tom trips the cop, and Casy kicks him.
  - 9.3. When the cop regains consciousness, Casy gives himself up to the law in order to divert attention away from Tom. The Joads immediately leave to avoid any further trouble.
10. The Joads travel south to a government-run camp in Weedpatch. Here, the community governs itself, electing committees to deal with clean-up, discipline, and entertainment. The Joads are comfortable but, after a month, are still unable to find any work and realize they must move on.
11. They are offered work picking peaches in Tulare. The camp gate is surrounded by a large group of men shouting and waving. The Joads, escorted through the gate by state police, begin work immediately. They are paid five cents a box, not sufficient to feed the family a day's meal. After the first day of picking, Tom wanders outside the ranch.
  - 11.1. He meets up with Jim Casy, who is leading a strike against the peach orchard owners who want to pay two-and-a-half cents a box.
  - 11.2. Tom learns his family is being paid five cents because they are working as strikebreakers.
  - 11.3. As the men talk, authorities sneak up, looking for Casy, the presumed leader of the strike. Unprovoked, one of the men strikes Casy on the head, killing him.
  - 11.4. Without thinking, Tom begins beating Casy's killer. The other men intervene, and Tom's nose is broken. He escapes, hiding in the peach orchard until he can reach his house.

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12. Marked by his scarred face and broken nose, Tom becomes a fugitive, hidden by his family. The Joads flee the peach ranch at the first daylight. They find work picking cotton and share an empty boxcar with another family, the Wainwrights. Tom hides in a nearby cave where his mother leaves him food. The family is comfortable for a time, earning enough to eat meat daily. One day, however, young Ruthie gets in a fight with another child. She threatens to call her big brother who is hiding because he has killed two men. Ma rushes to tell Tom he must leave for his own safety. Tom agrees and leaves with plans to carry on the social work that Jim Casy has begun.
13. Al gets engaged to sixteen-year-old Agnes Wainwright. As the cotton picking slows, the rains come. It rains steadily, and the water levels begin to rise. The night that **Rose of Sharon** goes into labor, the river threatens to flood the boxcar. Pa, Uncle John, Al and the rest of the men try to build an embankment to contain the river, but are unsuccessful. Rose of Sharon's baby is stillborn.
14. After a few days, the rain subsides. Leaving Al and the Wainwrights, the remaining Joads abandon the boxcar for higher ground. They find shelter in an old barn already occupied by a boy and his starving father. The child tells the Joads that his father has not eaten in six days and is unable to keep down solid food. Rose of Sharon offers him the breast milk no longer needed for her own child. The others leave the barn as she cradles the dying man to her breast.

### Criticism

15. Some have considered the novel manipulative:

“Under cover of a pious social objective a number of other and quite different meanings are slipped past the reader's guard:

  - those of hostility, bitterness, and contempt toward the middle classes,
  - of antagonism toward religion in its organized forms,
  - of the enjoyment of a Tobacco-Road sort of slovenliness,
  - of an easygoing promiscuity and animalism in sex,
  - of Casy's curious Transcendental mysticism,
  - of a tolerance that at first seems all-inclusive but that actually extends only so far as Steinbeck's personal preferences”.<sup>2</sup>
16. Indeed, Steinbeck can appear Manichaeian – considering some characters completely good and others completely evil.
  - 16.1. Hatred of the middle-classes

“To Steinbeck~ the deadliest of the deadly sins is simply being a typical American citizen - that is, a member of the middle classes. [...] In *The Grapes of Wrath* a child is killed on Highway 66 by a recklessly driven Cadillac. Prosperous owners of Cadillacs, Steinbeck implies, have a way of killing small

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Fuller Taylor, “The Grapes Of Wrath Reconsidered: Some observations on John Steinbeck and the ‘religion’ of secularism”, *The Mississippi Quarterly* Vol. 12, No. 3 (1959), pp. 136- 144, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26473435> , 142.

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children, whereas the Okie driver of a battered pick-up only tries, unsuccessfully, to run down a cat.”<sup>3</sup>

“Steinbeck [by-passes] his reader's intellect and [triggers] quite irrational responses. By wrapping the middle classes in connotations of physical weakness, worry, sexual sterility, bafflement, and fear, Steinbeck would waken toward them feelings of revulsion and hate. [...] It is disconcerting to find that the author hates you, the reader, with a powerful, compulsive hatred; that the tolerance he speaks of so smoothly is in fact never extended to *you*; and that just in having been born on the right side of the tracks you have committed the one unpardonable sin.”<sup>4</sup>

### 16.2. People in power seem to be the epitome of evil

“In Steinbeck's eyes the Joads are all good people. They may be weakly good, like Pa or Rosasharn; or they may be strongly good, like Ma Joad and Tom. But their ill fortune is never represented as due to their own tragic flaws.

Conversely, all persons in power or authority-with the exception of the director of the government camp-are represented as evil. Greed creates fear, and fear creates injustice. As Steinbeck himself puts it: "The quality of owning freezes you forever into 'I,' and cuts you off forever from the 'We.' We follow the action steadily from the point of view of the Okies. People of other social strata are presented as enemies, portrayed in a single aspect, never seen from the inside.”<sup>5</sup>

### 16.3. There is a “binary moral structure in *The Grapes of Wrath*” whereby everything is done to evoke sympathy for the Joads, while, for example, all the Californians are depicted as evil:

“Californians are depicted to be cruel and manipulative. For instance, Steinbeck describes a migrant woman's hand which was mutilated by a Californian sheriff with gruesome detail: “The fingers hung on strings against her palm, and the torn flesh was white and bloodless.”<sup>6</sup> These starkly opposing depictions of the two parties establish the narrative of the migrant workers rebelling against the force of evil Californians.”<sup>7</sup>

### 17. Obviously, Steinbeck was accused of taking side politically, of favouring left, Marxist, socialist, proletarian views. He never denied his partisanship, and yet it should be noted that he kept his

“independence from the extensive literary and political proletarian movements of the period. He took no part in the organized efforts of writers, critics, and scholars to promote leftist or Communist theory as fulfillment of their responsibility to society; nor was he personally committed to any political viewpoint” ( 49). Though there exists some element of proletarian advocacy or a socialist image of oppression in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck's main concern was more to nurture compassion toward humans

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<sup>3</sup> Taylor 142

<sup>4</sup> Taylor 142

<sup>5</sup> B. R. McElderry, Jr., “The Grapes of Wrath: In the Light of Modern Critical Theory”, *College English* Vol. 5, No. 6 (1944), pp. 308-313, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/370844> , 312.

<sup>6</sup> John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* [GoW], 337.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Ahn, “Exploring the “monster” in The Grapes of Wrath”,

<https://mikowriting.medium.com/exploring-the-monster-in-the-grapes-of-wrath-ecae8471f6a7>

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and to express and to document his concern at gross injustice than to create any specific political propaganda”.<sup>8</sup>

18. His criticism of organized religion is undoubtable – in favor of a ‘non-theological naturalism.’<sup>9</sup>

19. Moralizing: the novel

“was praised for its swift action and for the moving sincerity of its characters. But its mystical ideas and the moralizing interpretations intruded by the author between the narrative chapters were condemned.”<sup>10</sup>

### Natural & cosmic evil

20. The issue of good and evil is at the heart of Steinbeck’s understanding of his vocation as a novelist –

“As he writes in *East of Eden*, ‘We have only one story. All novels, all poetry, are built on the never-ending contest in ourselves of good and evil’”.<sup>11</sup>

21. He sees humanity as prone to terrible violence:

“It is one diagnostic trait of *Homo sapiens* that groups of individuals are periodically infected with a feverish nervousness which causes the individual to turn on and destroy, not only his own kind, but the works of his own kind.”<sup>12</sup>

22. And yet, Steinbeck believes that

“only the human heart in conflict with itself is worth writing about. Not surprisingly, we do find in his stories characters whose hearts and spirits are agonized in struggling to be morally decent.”<sup>13</sup>

23. Most commentators focus on what can be called human or historical evil in the novel – and yet it should not be forgotten that the triggering factor of the chain of events and of the unleashing of human evil is what we can call the ‘cosmic or natural experience of evil’, represented by the *Dust Bowl* at the beginning of the novel and the *flood* at the end.

#### 23.1. Dust Bowl

“In addition to their serious damage to the soils, dust storms brought tragedy and loss to human beings. They destroyed lives; created discomfort and illness among thousands; killed livestock; made highways impassable; ruined motors; damaged the contents of stores, factories, and homes; buried orchards, fields, and gardens; and disrupted commercial production. They also brought darkness in midday, and have spread mud-rains far and wide

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<sup>8</sup> Eun-Young Lim, “The Philosophical Quest of Tom Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath*” (2007). Masters Theses. 282. <https://thekeep.eiu.edu/theses/282> , 3.

<sup>9</sup> Taylor 144.

<sup>10</sup> Frederic I. Carpenter, “The Philosophical Joads”, *College English* Vol. 2, No. 4 (1941), pp. 315-325. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/370490315>, 315

<sup>11</sup> John Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, 415, cf. Luchen Li, “Steinbeck’s Ethical Dimensions”, *The Steinbeck Review* Vol. 6, No. 1 (2009), pp. 63-79. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41582099> , 63.

<sup>12</sup> John Steinbeck, *Sea of Cortez* 15, cf. Luchen Li 68f.

<sup>13</sup> Luchen Li 64.

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over the country. [...] The damage was so tremendous that it seemed almost impossible for farmers to keep their old patterns of life.”<sup>14</sup>

- 23.2. Interestingly, while the first cosmic evil affects only the small farmers of Oklahoma— those who represent the good in the novel – but makes the fortune of corporations, the flood at the end affects also the orchard owners who exploit the desperate migrants. There might be a biblical allusion to the flood – but its meaning is altered:
  - i. It is not presented as a punishment for the plantation owners
  - ii. And while adding to the already unbearable misfortune of the poor migrants instead of breaking them becomes the occasion of the most symbolic instance of the triumph of good over evil, namely Rosesharn breast-feeding the man dying of hunger.
24. Natural disasters are ‘evil’ in the sense that they destroy the livelihood of people – and yet in this particular case their catastrophic consequences result from human over exploitation of the land:
  - 24.1. Rising wheat prices in the 1910s and 1920s and increased demand for wheat from Europe during World War I encouraged farmers to plow up millions of acres of native grassland to plant wheat, corn and other row crops.
  - 24.2. But as the United States entered the Great Depression, wheat prices plummeted. In desperation, farmers tore up even more grassland in an attempt to harvest a larger crop and break even.
  - 24.3. Crops began to fail with the onset of drought in 1931, exposing the bare, over-plowed farmland. Without deep-rooted prairie grasses to hold the soil in place, it began to blow away – causing the Dust Bowl.
25. In other words, evil here results from the perversion of human relation to the land – and this becomes one of the main themes of Steinbeck’s novel

“In Steinbeck's ethical frame, excessive seizure of land, be it for individual or corporate purposes, makes human beings nature's enemy and causes individual and national calamities.”<sup>15</sup>

  - 25.1. Foremost in Steinbeck’s concern is a “desecration of the land”, either through intensive exploitation or through an application of technology driven exclusively by the desire of maximizing profit.
  - 25.2. Disaster strikes when human beings loose respect and love for the land on which not only their livelihood but also their identity depend.
  - 25.3. Critics have identified Jefferson agrarianism as one of the strands of Steinbeck's social philosophy: humankind gains identity through connection with the growth-cycle of the land. People “are whole when they are working with the land, and conversely, they are depleted, emotionally and physically, when they are taken from the land.
    - i. Losing the farm "took somepin' outa Pa," and one displaced tenant states, "I am the land, the land is me." When that land is taken away, the men lose part of themselves, their dignity, and their self-esteem.

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<sup>14</sup> Lim 3f.

<sup>15</sup> Luchen Li 67.

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- ii. Also closely tied to the land is family unity. With the separation from the land comes a disintegration of the family unit. Ma expresses this most succinctly when she observes,

"They was the time when we was on the lan'. They was a boundary to us then. ...We was the fambly — kinda whole and clear. An' now we ain't clear no more."<sup>16</sup>

- 26. Significantly, the title of the novel appears at the end of the most scathing and the most lyrical chapter of the novel, where Steinbeck lets his (and the reader's) indignation flare at the consequences of a purely monetary relation to the land:

- 26.1. first the growers display exceptional ingenuity in increasing and improving the product of the soil

- 26.2. the excess in production drives the prices down and the harvest is destroyed, while the children of exploited and underpaid migrant labourers die of hunger.

"The people come with nets to fish for potatoes in the river, and the guards hold them back; they come in rattling cars to get the dumped oranges, but the kerosene is sprayed. And they stand still and watch the potatoes float by, listen to the screaming pigs being killed in a ditch and covered with quicklime, watch the mountains of oranges slop down to a putrefying ooze; and in the eyes of the people there is the failure; and in the eyes of the hungry there is a growing wrath. In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage."<sup>17</sup>

### Wrath

- 27. The image of the grapes of wrath comes from Julia Ward Howe's "The Battle Hymn of the Republic",<sup>18</sup> which in turn is a quotation from Revelation 14:18-20,

"The angel swung his sickle on the earth, gathered its grapes and threw them into the great winepress of God's wrath. They were trampled in the winepress outside the city, and blood flowed out of the press, rising as high as the horses' bridles for a distance of 1,600 stadia".

- 28. In the novel though, anger and wrath do not signify vengeance nor retribution but resilience and vitality:

"The women watched the men, watched to see whether the break had come at last. The women stood silently and watched. And where a number of men gathered together, the fear went from their faces, and anger took its place. And the women sighed with relief, for they knew it was all right—the break had not come; and the break would never come as long as fear could turn to wrath."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Vlcek.

<sup>17</sup> GoW 445.

<sup>18</sup> "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;  
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;  
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword:  
His truth is marching on."

<sup>19</sup> GoW 554.

29. Wrath is not destructive because it can turn into action – this includes social and political aspects – hence the suspicions that the novel was promoting a ‘communist’ or ‘revolutionary’ agenda.
- 29.1. In reality this wrath progressively and unexpectedly appears as the flip side of love – as we shall see:
  - 29.2. “Unleashed anger is not the central thrust of Steinbeck’s story. Anger is not Tom’s story nor Casy’s nor is it Steinbeck’s final response to a system that starves children.
  - 29.3. While the growing wrath of the people is justified, as Steinbeck acknowledges, Tom Joad finds another way. Throughout most of the book, Tom subdues his sharp retorts by leaning on others: on Ma, on Casy, on lessons learned in prison, and finally on his awakened conscience.
  - 29.4. *The Grapes of Wrath* could be read as a lesson in containment [of anger]: Tom learns to contain his wrath and channel it to something larger and better than himself. Although he kills Casy’s murderer (which seems justified), his conscience is also awakened by that blow and he becomes a crusader for justice.”<sup>20</sup>

### Systemic Evil

30. “At the beginning of the novel, the former preacher Jim Casy tells Tom that while in the wilderness he rejected a Christian notion of sin:
- “There ain’t no sin and there ain’t no virtue [...] “There’s just stuff people do. It’s all part of the same thing. And some of the things folks do is nice, and some ain’t nice, but that’s as far as any man got a right to say.”
- 30.1. This does not mean that there is no evil though. In reality, the novel reconfigures the meaning of sin more than once, moving from personal to systemic sins.
  - 30.2. Crimes that go “beyond denunciation” are systemic, not individual:
    - i. when oranges are burned to keep prices high, “the smell of rot fills the country”—the message of chapter 25.
    - ii. Camp manager Jim Rawley “don’ believe in sin,” Mrs. Sandry [a religious bigot in the novel] tells Rose of Sharon; he says, she sniffs, that “sin is being hungry” and people being cold.
    - iii. That’s a notion of sin Mrs. Sandry cannot possibly grasp. But Casy can—and when he reunites with Tom near the end of the book, he schools Tom in his own, revitalized sense of wrongdoing.”<sup>21</sup>
31. One of the reasons of Steinbeck’s disillusion about organized religion is that it distracts from the reality of evil – it does not see where the ‘devil’ really hides – as colourfully expressed by the preacher Casy:
- “Here’s me that used to give all my fight against the devil ’cause I figgered the devil was the enemy. But they’s somepin worse’n the devil got hold a the country, an’ it ain’t gonna let go till it’s chopped loose. Ever see one a them Gila monsters take hold, mister? Grabs hold, an’ you chop him in two an’ his head hangs on. Chop him at the neck an’ his head hangs on. Got to take a

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<sup>20</sup> Susan Shillinglaw, *On Reading The Grapes of Wrath*, 63-64.

<sup>21</sup> Shillinglaw 139-140.



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screw-driver an' pry his head apart to git him loose. An' while he's layin' there, poison is drippin' an' drippin' into the hole he's made with his teeth."<sup>22</sup>

32. "Casy realizes [that there are] evil and sin on a scale larger than anything he has ever conceived in the past.

32.1. [...] In the modern industrial age, sin has reached new depths when it becomes something perpetrated by huge companies, or organisms, or countries.

32.2. These institutions are faceless, they are relentless, and they have the ability to cause damage to millions of people and to our planet on a scale that goes far beyond Grampa cursing, Al coveting his neighbor's Cadillac 16, or Casy committing adultery.

32.3. This raw evil sidesteps all accountability because it is not a person, and hence, as the farmers find out, it was a monster that could not be forced to leave them alone at the point of a shotgun.<sup>23</sup>

32.4. Even Hercules, when he fought the Lernaean Hydra, was able to cut off its heads one by one and scorch them so they would not grow back, but the Dust Bowl farmers do not even have that opportunity. In every case, the evil is said to have originated somewhere else, not with the messenger, but with the Bank, and beyond that with the Company, and beyond that with a corporation somewhere back East.

32.5. Yet the actions of the Bank and the Company are very real: it needs—<sup>24</sup> wants—insists—must have—as though the Bank or the Company were a monster, with thought and feeling that had enslaved them."<sup>25</sup>

33. This kind of evil is considered a 'monster' because nobody can control it:

"We're sorry. It's not us. It's the monster. The bank isn't like a man. Yes, but the bank is only made of men. No, you're wrong there—quite wrong there. The bank is something else than men. It happens that every man in a bank hates what the bank does, and yet the bank does it. The bank is something more than men, I tell you. It's the monster. Men made it, but they can't control it."<sup>26</sup>

### An anti-Christian novel?

34. Steinbeck has been accused of having "hijacked part of the Christian story in order to turn it to the illustration of profoundly non-Christian meanings."<sup>27</sup>

35. This seems confirmed by what is referred to as the 'naturalism' or the 'animalism' of the novel and more generally of Steinbeck:

35.1. He seems to reject the religious or traditional account of sin

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<sup>22</sup> GoW 164.

<sup>23</sup> GoW 34-37.

<sup>24</sup> GoW 41

<sup>25</sup> MacPhail, K. (2009). "'He's—a kind of a man": Jim Casy's Spiritual Journey in *The Grapes of Wrath*". in *The Grapes of Wrath* (2 vols.). Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill. [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789042026834\\_007](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789042026834_007), 109f.

<sup>26</sup> Gow 64.

<sup>27</sup> Taylor 143.

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“Looked at from this nonteleological view- point, the experiencing of sex unavoidably loses its special human meanings and becomes, not merely primitive, not merely promiscuous, but simply animal.”<sup>28</sup>

35-2. Provocatively, he sees the church and the brothel as performing analogous roles:

“The church and the whorehouse arrived in the Far West simultaneously. And each would have been horrified to think it was a different facet of the same thing. But surely they were both intended to accomplish the same thing: the singing, the devotion, the poetry of the churches took a man out of his bleakness for a time, and so did the brothels.”<sup>29</sup>

35-3. He rejects “sin and guilt as one of the worst lies of organized religion”

‘Maybe it ain’t a sin. Maybe it’s just the way folks is. Maybe we been whippin’ the hell out of ourselves for nothin’.’<sup>30</sup>

35-4. The characters of the novel see negatively “the migrants’ reliance on prayer for better days and food to feed their families. Their faith—albeit strong—functions as an opium of the people that simply delays the day when their wrath boils over, and they stop praying, take up arms and fight together as one group for a life that is more equitable.”<sup>31</sup>

36. “Mainline religion was completely under the sway of the monster to the point that it preached against even the desire to establish unions for fear that these organizations might topple the status quo.”<sup>32</sup>

37. His is a secular religion in which there “is no need for self-control; all is permitted. To act ethically, men have only to act naturally. They have only to forget the illusion of sin, practice a universal tolerance, and obey that impulse.”<sup>33</sup>

### What to do with evil?

38. To recap: organized religion, that is especially Christianity, are discarded because they prevent people from becoming aware of what real evil is, what are the real sins, and what is the best way of fighting against evil.

39. Steinbeck is not only denouncing evil, but showing that despite its formidable power, love is stronger. Many commentators have traced back this conviction to Steinbeck’s social philosophy formulated by Jim Casey and exemplified in the lives of Tom, Ma, and Roseharn.<sup>34</sup>

40. “*The Grapes of Wrath* brings together and makes real three great skeins of American thought.

- i. It begins with the transcendental oversoul, Emerson's faith in the common man, and his Protestant self-reliance.
- ii. To this it joins Whitman's religion of the love of all men and his mass democracy.

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<sup>28</sup> Taylor 139.

<sup>29</sup> East of Eden 217, cf. Luchen Li 67.

<sup>30</sup> GoW 32.

<sup>31</sup> MacPhail 119.

<sup>32</sup> MacPhail 114.

<sup>33</sup> GoW 32. Cf. Taylor 138.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Carpenter 316.

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- iii. And it combines these mystical and poetic ideas with the realistic philosophy of pragmatism and its emphasis on effective action.”<sup>35</sup>
41. Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), the most well-known proponent of Transcendentalism<sup>36</sup>, defined the *Oversoul* as the universal mind or spirit that animates, motivates, and is the unifying principle of all living things.
  - 41.1. Casy makes numerous references to this one large soul that connects all in holiness, and they dovetail nicely with the basic idea of strength in group unity.
  - 41.2. Somewhat conversely, American transcendentalism also recognized individualism, a faith in common people and their self-reliance.
  - 41.3. This concept of the survival of the human life force is symbolized by the survival of the land turtle<sup>37</sup> and Ma's comment, "We're the people — we go on."
  - 41.4. This combination of rugged individualism and an embracing of all men as part of the same Great Being is physically expressed in the education and re-birth of Tom Joad: His strongly individual nature gives him the strength to fight for the social welfare of all humanity.<sup>38</sup>
42. While these influences are undoubtable, Steinbeck's portrayal of the only good powerful enough to withstand and overcome evil is ultimately moulded on the figure of Christ.
  - 42.1. His criticism of organized religion, his naturalism, his rejection of the commonly received version of Christianity with its insistence on the sin of the flesh (especially Puritanism) or individual holiness makes this move all the more significant.
  - 42.2. There is no doubt that Steinbeck *does not* think that Christianity is the answer.
  - 42.3. And yet he cannot help making his heroes thoroughly Christ-like.
  - 42.4. **A way of saying: with regards to the challenge of evil, if Christ did not exist we would have to invent him!**

### Steinbeck Christ-like heroes<sup>39</sup>

43. The most developed Christ-like figure of the novel is the former preacher Jim Casy.
  - 43.1. In his earliest conversation in the novel, Casy identifies himself as a former Burning Busher. This name is clearly suggestive of a Pentecostal group, which Ma Joad will later specify as Holiness.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Carpenter 324f.

<sup>36</sup> *Transcendentalism* is a philosophical, spiritual, and literary movement that developed in the late 1820s and 1830s in the New England region of the United States. A core belief is in the inherent goodness of people and nature, and while society and its institutions have corrupted the purity of the individual, people are at their best when truly "self-reliant" and independent. Transcendentalists saw divine experience inherent in the everyday. Transcendentalists saw physical and spiritual phenomena as part of dynamic processes rather than discrete entities

<sup>37</sup> In chapter 3 of the book "a land turtle navigates through a dry patch of ground toward a slanted highway embankment full of oat beards and foxtails. Resolute and unswerving, the turtle fights its way up the slope to the highway and begins to cross the hot pavement. A speeding car swerves onto the shoulder to avoid the turtle. Moments later, a truck purposefully clips the shell of the turtle, sending it spinning to the side of the highway, landing on its back. Eventually, the turtle rights itself, crawls down the embankment, and continues on its way." "With this symbol, Steinbeck specifically refers to the notion that humanity and its life force will continue to regenerate regardless of obstacles and setbacks.", Vlcek.

<sup>38</sup> Vlcek.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Martin Shockley, "Christian Symbolism in The Grapes of Wrath", in *The Grapes of Wrath (2 vols.)*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill.

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- i. Significantly, the Biblical account of the burning bush is in Exodus 3, where God confronts Moses and calls him to lead Israel out of slavery in Egypt.
  - ii. Given this allusion, it is notable that both Tom and Casy are barefoot, paralleling God's command to Moses in the Exodus passage to remove his sandals because he was standing on holy ground. Hence, Tom and Casy both represent Moses: Tom because after killing someone, he was sent into the wilderness of prison, and Casy because he is unsure of himself and yet will lead the people.<sup>41</sup>
- 43.2. Jesus began his mission after a period of withdrawal into the wilderness for meditation and consecration; Preacher Casy comes into the book after a similar retreat. He tells Tom,
- “I went off alone, an’ I sat and figured.”
- 43.3. At the end of the book Tom recalls how Casy
- "went out in the wilderness to find his own soul, and he found he didn't have no soul that was his'n. Says he foun' he jus' got a little piece of a great big soul. Says a wilderness ain't no good 'cause his little piece of a soul wasn't no good 'less it was with the rest, an' was whole."
- 43.4. Later when Casy and Tom meet in the strikers' tent, Casy says he has
- “been a-goin’ into the wilderness like Jesus to try to find out sumpin.”
- 43.5. Jim Casy is by the same initials identified with Jesus Christ.
- 43.6. Like Jesus, Jim has rejected an old religion and is in process of replacing it with a new gospel. Casy says,
- ‘I says, ‘What’s this call, this sperit?’ An’ I says, ‘It’s love. I love people so much I’ fit to bust, sometimes.’ An’ I says, ‘Don’t you love Jesus? [...] ‘No, I don’t know nobody name’ Jesus. I know a bunch of stories, but I only love people [. . .] an’ I want to make ‘em happy, so I been preachin’ somepin I thought would make ‘em happy’” (GOW 26)
- “‘Maybe,’ I figgered, ‘Maybe it’s all men and women we love; maybe that’s the Holy Sperit—the human sperit—the whole shebang. Maybe all men got one big soul ever’body’s a part of.
- 43.7. First, he feels a compulsion to minister, to serve, to offer himself. When the Joads are preparing to leave for California, he tells them:
- “I got to go ... I can’t stay here no more. I got to go where the folks is goin’.”
- 43.8. Not long afterward, Casy sacrifices himself to save his people. When Tom is about to be arrested, Casy tells the police that he is the guilty one.
- “It was me, all right ... I’ll go ’thout no trouble.”
- 43.9. So the Joads escape the consequences of their transgressions.

c. \_\_\_\_\_

<sup>40</sup> GoW 210. The Holiness movement is a Christian movement that emerged chiefly within 19th-century Methodism. Churches aligned with the holiness movement teach that the life of a Christian should be free of sin. The word *Holiness* refers specifically to the belief in entire sanctification as an instantaneous, definite second work of grace, in which original sin is cleansed, the heart is made perfect in love, and the believer is empowered to serve God. For the Holiness movement, "the term 'perfection' signifies completeness of Christian character; its freedom from all sin, and possession of all the graces of the Spirit, complete in kind."

<sup>41</sup> MacPhail 101.

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“Between his guards Casy sat proudly, his head up and the stringy muscles of his neck prominent. On his lips there was a faint smile and on his face a curious look of conquest.”

43.10. Jim Casy had taken upon himself the sins of others.

43.11. Particularly significant, however, are Casy’s last words directed to the man who murders him,

“Listen,” he said, “You fellas don’ know what you’re doin’.”

And again, just before the heavy man swings the pick handle Casy repeats, “You don’ know what you’re a- doin’.”

43.12. Tom later tells Ma Joad what happened and what Casy said to the police. When Tom says that Casy told his murderers, “You don’ know what you’re a-doin’,” Ma twists her hands together, asks Tom if Casy really said that, and remarks how she wishes Granma could have heard (GOW 392). She is very clear that these words echo Christ’s on the cross, asking God, “Forgive them, for they know not what they do,” indicating both his forgiveness and his power.<sup>42</sup>

44. Casy though is not the only Christ-figure in the novel.

45. **Tom** too becomes a Christlike figure by the end of the novel. Cf. his answer to Ma’s worry lest he lose his life reflects what he has learned from Casy.

“They might kill ya,” Ma had objected. “Tom laughed uneasily, ‘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 what, Tom?” “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. Wherever they’s a cop beatin’ up 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.”

45.1. This sentence echoes Jesus’ words “Lo, I am with you always.”<sup>43</sup>

46. Then there is the character of **Ma Joad**. “From her first appearance in the novel, Ma is the epitome of the concept of loving one’s neighbor. She is the first to extend comfort or nourishment to strangers. This willingness to help people is seen in her welcoming of Casy into the family and her feeding of the hungry children in the Hooverville camp. She works selflessly for others and tries to instill the same attitude in Rose of Sharon.

47. Finally there is **Rosesharn**. She is “slow to embrace this selflessness and giving, focusing instead on her own comfort and well-being for the majority of the novel. In the end, however, she, too, becomes part of this embracing of all humankind when she offers her life-giving milk to the starving stranger”.<sup>44</sup>

47.1. At the end of the novel, after the flood, Ma and the other characters carry Rosesharn (who has just given birth to a stillborn baby) to higher ground. They

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<sup>42</sup> MacPhail 122f.

<sup>43</sup> Matthew 28:20

<sup>44</sup> Y. Manikumar, “The Grapes of Wrath - an Aesthetic Discovery”.

[https://www.worldwidejournals.com/global-journal-for-research-analysis-GJRA/recent\\_issues\\_pdf/2013/December/the-grapes-of-wrath-an-aesthetic-discovery\\_December\\_2013\\_1599027350\\_29.pdf](https://www.worldwidejournals.com/global-journal-for-research-analysis-GJRA/recent_issues_pdf/2013/December/the-grapes-of-wrath-an-aesthetic-discovery_December_2013_1599027350_29.pdf)

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find shelter in an old barn. Once inside, they realize that they are not alone — a boy is kneeling next to the body of his father. The boy tells Ma that his father is starving. The weakened man cannot keep down anything solid, but must have some nourishing liquid like soup or milk.

47.2. Ma looks to Rosesharn, and as their eyes meet.

47.3. Ma knows what must be done, but the decision is Rosasharn's:

“Ma's eyes passed Rose of Sharon's eyes, and then came back to them. And the two women looked deep into each other. The girl's breath came short and gasping. “She said, 'Yes.'”

47.4. The meaning of this incident, Steinbeck's final paragraph, is clear in terms of Christian symbolism. [...] Rosasharn gives what Christ gave, what we receive in memory of him. The ultimate mystery of the Christian religion is realized as Rosasharn

“Looked up and across the barn, and her lips came together and smiled mysteriously.”<sup>45</sup>

48. Thus, like Christ, Jim Casy and Tom Joad [...] love people so much that they are ready to die for them.

48.1. Formerly the only unit of human love was the family, and the family remains the fundamental unit. The tragedy of *The Grapes of Wrath* consists in the breakup of the family.

48.2. But the new moral of this novel is that the love of all people- if it be unselfish-may even supersede the love of family.

48.3. So Casy dies for his people, and Tom is ready to, and Rose of Sharon symbolically transmutes her maternal love to a love of all people.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Shokley.

<sup>46</sup> Carpenter 321.