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Dusting Down the Patriarchal Rules: The Role of Migration in Ma Joad's Adaptability to Circumstances in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*

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by

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Abstract

Critics have argued that John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* is a novel about social and inner changes. As the Joad family starts its journey to California, the reorganization of the family becomes essential to their survival. In times of material loss, Ma Joad breaks with patriarchal rules, emerges as the new leader of her family, and plays more than the housewife role assigned to the women of her time. She becomes, then, an essential figure to the maintenance of the family's integrity. The aim of this study is to analyze the way in which the determination of new social values, especially those regarding the role of women in the family, occur in the novel, taking into consideration the historical context of migration in which the narrative takes place. It was observed that the migratory movement to the west contributes to the ascertaining of new social values and to the establishment of new family roles. With Pa Joad's loss of control over his family during the journey, Ma is capable of breaking with the patriarchal ideology to assume a more influential position in the family. This thesis endorses some previous studies on *The Grapes of Wrath*, and represents an opportunity for new studies on the novel on the Brazilian academic environment.

Resumo

Para alguns críticos, *As vinhas da ira*, de John Steinbeck, é uma obra sobre mudanças sociais e individuais. No momento em que os Joad começam sua jornada em direção à Califórnia, a reorganização da família torna-se essencial para sua sobrevivência. Em tempos de perdas materiais, Ma Joad rompe com regras patriarcais, surge como a nova líder da família, e desempenha mais do que o papel de dona de casa atribuído às mulheres de seu tempo. Ela se torna personagem importante para a preservação da integridade familiar. O objetivo deste estudo é a análise da forma como novos valores, em especial os relacionados ao papel da mulher na família, são determinados no romance, levando-se em consideração o contexto histórico em que a narrativa se desenvolve. Foi observado que o movimento migratório para o oeste dos Estados Unidos colabora para a determinação de novos valores sociais e para o estabelecimento de novos papéis familiares. Pa Joad perde o controle sobre a família durante a viagem, e Ma Joad torna-se capaz de romper com a ideologia patriarcal, assumindo uma posição mais influente entre os Joad. Este estudo sustenta as afirmações de alguns críticos sobre *As vinhas da ira* e significa uma oportunidade para novos estudos sobre a obra no ambiente acadêmico brasileiro.

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Introduction

When reading John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath,* one immediately notes the kind of migration portrayed in the novel—the westward movement of hundreds of families from the southwestern and central plains of the United States during the 1930s—as an important factor of social change and the determination of new values, including those regarding the social role of women. These changes are mainly due to the need for survival in a new and unknown environment. As once pointed out by Warren French, in "The Education of the Heart," Steinbeck's novel is an attempt to show how people learn that their survival will depend "upon their adaptability to new conditions" (99). In this sense, one can see the long process of learning and changing undergone by the characters in *The Grapes of Wrath*—Tom Joad, the preacher Jim Casy, and especially the mother, Ma Joad, to mention just a few—and connect this process to the context of migration depicted in the novel.

Critics such as David Wyatt and Stephen Railton have argued that John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* is a novel about transformation and new social systems. This notion can be perceived in the novel as the Joads face their obstacles along their journey. The fictional Joads, who represent thousands of historical families that had to leave the south-central plains in the United States to escape drought and extreme poverty, evoke the suffering and need to adapt of the migrant laborers who arrived in California in the 1930s in their flight from adverse climactic and economic conditions of the Dust Bowl, the area of the country in and around the state of Oklahoma, affected by violent dust storms and drought during that period, which resulted in the failure of small family farms and in large-scale unemployment.

Among all the changes caused by the Joads family's movement westward, one that caught my attention and sympathy was that suffered by Ma Joad. As the narrative

in the novel proceeds, one can see that the family environment is deeply affected by the new conditions in which they find themselves. The family, used to being ruled by Pa Joad, the father, encounters in Ma Joad's figure a new leader who does not hesitate to take on a central role in the family's decisions in order to maintain the family's physical survival and moral dignity. As the title of my thesis suggests, she sets the patriarchal rules aside in favor of a more flexible approach to action in the face of unforeseen circumstances. Her determination is able to overcome traditional family boundaries and leads her to undertake more than the role of motherhood assigned to women in a traditional patriarchal system of family organization.

In my thesis, I wish to show that Ma Joad's transformation in *The Grapes of Wrath* is intimately related to the historical context of migration depicted in the novel, to the importance of this context to social changes, and to the determination of new values and roles, including those of gender. Although Ma Joad is always described as a strong woman, capable of taking part in family decisions, her most important changes only occur once the Joads are on the road to California. Even though she seems to have the seeds of transformation within her, she is not able to overcome the traditional family boundaries at the beginning of the journey. On the contrary, this process of surpassing the limited housewife and mother's role is a gradual one, in tune with the various obstacles faced by the Joads' during their journey, especially Pa Joad's loss of control over his family. She begins to stand out as a family leader when circumstances force it and she finds the inner strength to do so. Therefore, I strongly believe that, in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, the more distant the Joads are from their homeland, the more obstacles they face along the journey, and the more unfit Pa Joad is to assume the family's responsibilities, the stronger and more decisive Ma Joad's role becomes.

I decided to expand this project when I was writing my monograph on Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* and the story "Flight." In my monograph, I compared the important roles developed by Ma Joad and Mama Torres in their families, regarding the importance of the socio-historical contexts in which the stories take place. These two women are, in my opinion, capable of surpassing the typical place of housewives in the North American patriarchal society from the 1930's in order to keep their families intact.

In this thesis, I have decided to restrict my study to *The Grapes of Wrath*. My intention now is to integrate Ma's character analysis with the historical context of migration, taking into account the effects of movement experienced by the Joads to the construction and development of a character.

In my recent research on the critical responses to the novel, I have observed that in fact critics have been debating the social and family transformations in *The Grapes of Wrath* ever since it was first published. I found that the structural changes in the family and the acquisition of the idea of unity among the migrants have always caught the attention of students of the novel. It seems, however, that the critical responses to the novel have not been uniform over time but have followed a certain chronological pattern. In his Introduction to *New Essays on* The Grapes of Wrath (1990), David Wyatt mentions three different phases of critical responses to the novel, each spanning about fifteen years. The first phase, from 1940 to 1955, encompasses the sociological analysis of the novel in a more generalized way. During that phase, according to Wyatt, "the novel served commentators as a pretext for argument about social justice in the United States and even about the ultimate nature of humankind" (4). Character analysis would, then, fit the purpose of making statements about the social condition of the historical migrants. The second phase, from 1955 to 1973, is characterized by a more critical

analysis of the artistic and literary features of the novel. The typical analysis of the novel during this phase would take into account symbols, biblical allusions, and other literary devices used to construct the characters. These two first phases were, according to Wyatt, broadly presented by Peter Lisca in his special edition to *The Grapes of Wrath*, released in 1972.

Wyatt's proposed third phase of critical response, from 1973 to 1989, encompasses new readings of the novel after the emergence of new theoretical-critical approaches to literature in the academy, such as feminism, deconstruction, and new historicism (4-10). At the same time, recent criticism has called attention to the early responses. In their entry on *The Grapes of Wrath* in the most recent work on the author, *The John Steinbeck Encyclopedia* (2006), Michael J. Meyer and Brian Railsback affirm that "[r]ecent works of criticism have presented a thorough overview of the varied initial reactions to the novel and the controversy over it" (132). Their statement has led me to believe that this might be a new phase of the critical responses to *The Grapes of Wrath*. As Meyer and Railsback attempt to show, there is a certain concern of current criticism with what critics used to say about the novel when it was first published. It seems that the controversy found in the different reactions of critics towards the novel is the starting point to the discussion of the complexity of the issues within *The Grapes of Wrath* to many scholars nowadays.

In his Preface to The Grapes of Wrath: *Text and Criticism*, Peter Lisca pointed out that in the years that followed the publication of the novel debates centered mainly around its social and political issues, due to its strong connection to the "newsreels of the day" (Preface, v). In this way, Frederic Carpenter demonstrates, in "The Philosophical Joads" (first published in 1941), how the main lines of American thought can be found in the novel. Carpenter claims that the transition from the importance of

the "I" to the importance of the "we" in *The Grapes of Wrath* is the result of the combination of self-reliance, love of all men, and effective action, in which the Joads become aware of the need for social changes (708-19). According to Lisca, the novel has had much more to offer to its readers than a debate on social and political issues, as important as they are. He states that Steinbeck gave his novel a "great authenticity of detail" that transgressed the level of mere propaganda, as in so many other novels of the 1930s, to achieve the "level of lasting art." It is much easier nowadays to appreciate the literary value of *The Grapes of Wrath*, since it was once so difficult to separate the novel from its socio-historical context of the late 1930s (Preface, v).

In "House and Home: Thematic Symbols in *The Grapes of Wrath*," Betty Perez attempts to integrate the analysis of literary motifs to the transformations that occur in the novel. She analyzes the symbolic use of house and home in the novel, arguing that the notion of "home" undergoes a complete change throughout the novel. As soon as the physical home falls apart, the need for a spiritual home increases. In this context, the character of Ma Joad seems to increase in importance too, since she is, for Perez, the personification of the idea of home (840-53).

Although it seems to be possible to analyze the novel without considering its social themes, their importance can hardly be ignored and as a result many different critics have chosen to take them into their accounts. French's thesis, for example, is that the Joad family members go through a long process of education in which they learn the importance of social organization for the survival of a whole community of migrants. Rebecca Hinton also examines the notion of the family in the novel, stating that, in times of strong social changes, the concept expands and the family becomes more than the conjugal unit. In order to illustrate her argument, Hinton shows how the Joads, especially Ma Joad and Rose of Sharon, adapt to this new social organization,

embracing the cause of the helpless families that find themselves in the same conditions that they are (101-3).

For those critics primarily concerned with the social issues, *The Grapes of Wrath* is a novel about transformations and new social systems. David Wyatt affirms that the novel "marks the end of Steinbeck's conception of home and place" (19), and Stephen Railton, in "Pilgrims' Politics: Steinbeck's Art of Conversion" argues that it "is a novel about an old system [capitalism] dying, and a new one [socialized democracy] beginning to take root" (27). Railton's essay is an important study of the Joads' inner changes throughout the novel, and his thesis is that *The Grapes of Wrath* is about the conversion of people who become aware of the need to get together to defeat the social inequalities of the system (27-46).

For her part, Nellie Y. McKay specifically takes into consideration the transformations observed in Ma Joad's character, in "'Happy[?]-Wife-and-Motherdom': The Portrayal of Ma Joad in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*." Ma Joad's assertiveness and leadership, McKay argues, are the results of her family's lack of opportunities. As a starting point for her analysis, McKay assumes the traditional patriarchal belief that women are responsible for both the biological and cultural upbringing of the family. According to her, in this belief, "woman, wife, motherhood and mothering [the cultural function of nurturing] are synonymous" (47).

I conclude that the critical responses to *The Grapes of Wrath* have employed a variety of different approaches, but most of the critical writing on the novel has turned into a study of the social transformations portrayed in the novel. As I have observed above, the family changes that critics have perceived in the novel have been one of the main objects of study since its publication. I have to agree that Steinbeck's novel has much to say about social transformation. The new roles established in the novel indicate

the necessity of social organization and unity in order to break with the oppression provoked by the capitalist system. The novel suggests that overcoming the barriers imposed by that system seems to be less difficult when people recognize the importance of mutual cooperation, and when the conception of family surpasses the traditional boundaries.

To deepen Ma's character analysis, I intend to place it within the historical context of migration, taking into account the effects of the movement experienced by the Joads in the construction and development of her character. In this way, I intend to integrate the literary study of the novel with social, historical, political and economic issues inherent in its context of creation. The Joads' westward journey is not a simple matter of family choice, but a compulsory act which results from the combination of several interrelated factors: the natural (the harsh drought that swept the central area of the United States in the 1930's), economic (the families' loss of their lands to the bank system), socio-psychological (the general feeling of impotence in the presence of a rapid change in the economic and natural structure of the area), and cultural (the general belief of finding prosperity in the West). These factors are all introduced to the reader in the opening pages of the novel and especially in the intercalary chapters that, according to French, generally portray the condition of families in the same situation as the Joads (96). My analysis will therefore focus both on literary aspects within the novel, such as the construction of the narrative and characterization, and on social, historical and cultural issues that can be largely discussed and associated with the topic of my thesis.

For the purpose of this integration, I intend to work with certain Marxist notions such as "ideology" and "hegemony," seeing how they can be applied to my proposed combining of literary analysis and socio-historical studies. I want to see how aspects of

these concepts can be seen to influence the characters' transformations within the novel, taking into account the socio-historical context in which the narrative takes place. This approach will mainly depend on the lines of thought that had their origin in the middle of the eighteenth century with Marx and Engels, with the adherence and adaptations of important twentieth century scholars such as Louis Althusser (1918-1990) and Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937).

It is notable that Marxism was an important factor in Steinbeck's life during the years in which he wrote the novel. In his article entitled "Steinbeck's Myth of the Okies," Keith Windschuttle describes the sympathy of intellectuals of the 1930s, including Steinbeck, for Marxist ideas, and describes the author's journey to the Soviet Union with his first wife, Carol Henning, in 1937. Windschuttle also points out that the 1930s are known as the " 'Red Decade' where most artists, writers, and intellectuals took Marxism seriously, many of whom joined, or became sympathizers of, the Communist Party. For some, the Great Depression had shaken their faith in the market-based economic system; for others, it had confirmed their belief in Marxist theory, which they equated with modernism" (parag. 24-25). Although Steinbeck himself would later become an anti-Communist during the reactionary years of the 1950s (parag. 27), *The Grapes of Wrath* is a good example of how engaged with Marxist ideas Steinbeck was during the 1930s: the novel suggests the awareness of the working classes of their condition of exploitation, and the necessity of revolution in order to break with that condition.

Even though the novel was written in a period in which most of the important American writers were initially Marxist or "fellow-travelers," it is remarkable that, to my knowledge, few (if any) Marxist analysis has been made of the novel itself. For example, French's approach in "The Education of the Heart" takes into account the

acquisition of social knowledge by the Joads but does not mention Marxism itself in his analysis. Using Marxist ideas in my analysis does not necessarily mean taking advantage of the ideological nature of the novel in order to facilitate my research, but merely acknowledging its support for the kind of work I intend to do in my thesis. As the main Marxist sources, I have chosen Althusser and Gramsci in addition to Marx and Engels themselves, because they introduce concepts I may bring to my analysis in the way I need them. I intend to use these thinkers as a theoretical starting point, but it will not be the main focus, for, as Edmund Wilson observes in "Marxism and Literature," anyone "who tries to apply Marxist principles without real understanding of literature is liable to go horribly wrong" (247). The construction of characters in the narrative—namely their changes throughout the novel—will be the main focus. Therefore, my analysis would be related to the third phase of interpretation, as described above, since that phase also takes into account the historical context of the creation of the novel, and is more in tune with literary approaches related to, or derived from, Marxist thought. Wyatt refers to this phase as "context," since it embraces both the context of creation of the novel and the reasons that led Steinbeck to write it (8-11).

Finally, it is my hope and belief that this thesis will contribute to literary studies, especially to the research area of Literature, History and Cultural Memory, since my analysis will integrate the study of one of the most important characters in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* and the study of migratory issues which are specific to a given historical moment that may intervene in the construction and development of a character. I also hope that this project may signify an opportunity for new studies on Steinbeck's works in the Brazilian academic environment. Although Steinbeck won two of the most important literary prizes during his life—the Pulitzer, and the Nobel—and became one of the best-selling artists of his time, it is difficult to find recent national

publications concerning the author's books in our universities. Most of the critical works on Steinbeck found in Brazil seem to belong to a previous stage of literary criticism. I obviously share the idea that the study of Steinbeck's works is still relevant. The main themes in his novels (social class struggles, migration, human conditions and the identification of rural people and nature), especially in *The Grapes of Wrath*, are recurrent themes in contemporary history—including our own.

In order to complete the analysis, I have organized my thesis in four different chapters. In the first chapter, I will bring forward the historical context in which the narrative of *The Grapes of Wrath* occurs, relating the most important historical facts in the United States during the 1930s to the fictional narrative in the novel. In the second chapter, I will demonstrate how the migrant families in general are portrayed in the novel, exploring their attitudes towards their situation and the process of social change they undergo. The transformations that the Joad family passes through will be dealt with in the third chapter, when I will examine what French calls the "education of the heart." A Marxist reading of these transformations will be done in this chapter. Finally, in the fourth chapter, I will analyze Ma Joad's increasing importance to her family throughout the novel, observing how she goes beyond the family boundaries and starts to play more than the role of a housewife as the Joads face the obstacles of their Journey. At the end of the thesis, I intend to have accomplished my objective, establishing a conclusion of the main points identified and highlighted during the entire analysis.

1. Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* and Its Historical Context

A historical analysis of Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* is a necessary way of understanding the novel, since the Joad's saga is considerably affected by two of the most important facts of the 1930s in the United States: the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl. The harsh conditions of the families in the central plains during the 1930s were the main reason for their flight in search of better living conditions, and the Joads are probably the best known fictional depiction of these families. Therefore, at the same time that the Joads help readers grasp the implications of those two historical events for real families, the historical context of the novel helps us to perceive why the Joads react the way they react. In this chapter, I intend to discuss the importance of the historical aspects, which are broadly explored by Steinbeck in his novel.

1.1. The Great Depression and the Dust Bowl: The US in the 1930s

The Great Depression and the Dust Bowl, together, figure negatively in the lives of many families from the plains. The fact that these events are connected only helped to worsen the situation of thousands of families that decided to go to the west of the country looking for survival and dignity.

Historically famous for its worldwide consequences, the Great Depression is considered one of the main causes of the exodus of families from the plains during the 1930s. During that decade, many families experienced the consequences of this economic downturn. For the plains families, specifically, the Great Depression had a stronger impact, since they had been facing economic problems for many years.

In *Driven from the Land: The Story of the Dust Bowl*, Milton Meltzer affirms that, "for the farmer, the economic crisis of the thirties was but a new depression piled on top of an old one" (11). In fact, during the 1920s, while in a great part of the United

States people were living the “Roaring Twenties,” or “Prosperous Twenties,” the rural families were already experiencing hard times. The sudden economic growth the plains had enjoyed years before was gone way before 1929, the year of the crash of the stock market.

In the analysis of the facts which led to the economic situation in the plains, the economic growth experienced in this very area ironically becomes one of the main causes of its economic decline. As explained by Meltzer, the demand for food in Europe during World War I raised the prices of agricultural products. The lands in the plains, which were first “used mostly for grazing cattle” became a prosperous area for the growth of food, and millions of acres were “put under the plow” to grow wheat (13). In a world where cultural and political frontiers always played an important role, it is curious to see how different historical facts may be strongly connected to each other. How were farmers to imagine that the food demand in Europe would mean the growth and then the decline of a whole local economy?

Actually, they had never thought of that before the crisis was announced and unavoidable. The possibility of making money from the European demand for food enticed farmers, who invested in the land, as described by Meltzer.

> Through a broad swath, starting in Kansas and running into Texas, farmers lured by quick profits plowed submarginal land. The native grazing land was soon gone. Gone too were its root systems, which held the soil in the place. No one foresaw how this would come back to haunt the High Plains during the Dust Bowl. (13)

Meltzer’s point here is to emphasize the beginning of a more complex crisis for the plains, which would face, in the following years, the combination of a threatening economic crisis and a devastating environmental catastrophe.

It is obvious in economics that high competition leads to the dropping of product prices. That would not work differently for the plains farmers, who faced, in the 1920s, the start of an enormous and long-lasting crisis. The reasons for the complexity of this economic downturn, as pointed out by Meltzer, range from the recovery of the European nations after World War I to the farmers' investments in advanced technology, such as the acquisition of tractors, which caused unemployment and an even more indiscriminate use of the soil in those rural areas (13). The economic depression in the US plains, then, was a complex and longer-lasting phenomenon, which led entire families to bankruptcy and despair.

The early economic problems faced by agrarian families are interestingly depicted in the first chapters of *The Grapes of Wrath*. The bank, which seemed to be, at first, the best option for having all the families' problems solved, is now treated as the monster that is responsible for taking these families' lands away. The ownership of the land is a point of conflict between farmers and the bank.

> And now the squatting men stood up angrily. Grandpa took up the land, and he had to kill the Indians and drive them away. And Pa was born here, and he killed weeds and snakes. Then a bad year came and he had to borrow a little money. An' we was born here. There in the door—our children born here. And Pa had to borrow money The bank owned the land then, but we stayed and we got a little bit of what we raised. (33)

The "squatting men" in the lines above believe they still have the right to own the land that has been part of their families' property for years. The older generations had to fight for those lands, and that is enough for them to believe in their right.

In fact, the farmers claim has its reason to be in Jeffersonian agrarianism, and, understanding Jeffersonian agrarian ideal is also important to understand the migrants'

cause as a whole. Jeffersonian thought was very important during the eighteenth century. Jefferson believed in the democracy of the land, which means that everyone could own a small property. According to Jeffersonians, ownership was mainly due to the occupation of the land. In "Jeffersonian Agrarianism in *The Grapes of Wrath*," Chester E. Eisinger points out that

> possession of his own land gave the small farmer control of the means of production. It followed therefore that such a man could be economically independent, for he would be obligated to no man, he could reap what he sowed, and his agricultural way of life would make for a relatively high degree of self-sufficiency (145).

Eisinger's article aims to demonstrate how Steinbeck shares the Jeffersonian belief through *The Grapes of Wrath*. The small farmers from Oklahoma only want their right to keep on using the lands their forefathers have occupied. As they become migrants, they still look for a piece of land in the "promised land" of California to occupy and plant what they will consume. Nevertheless, as one can see in the novel, the Jeffersonian agrarian ideal fails in guaranteeing everyone's right to own a small farm when economic institutions come into action.

The bank, on the opposite side of the conflict, claims the ownership of the land because it has paid for it. In this economic, cultural and social conflict, nobody is in doubt about the harshness with which the bank takes what belongs to it. The bank representatives are quite incisive in their speech about the bank. In response to the squatting men's argument, they say, "[w]e know that—all that. It's not us, it's the bank. A bank isn't like a man" (33). This line shows the complete indifference of financial entities to the suffering of common people and opens the debate for the inhumanity of

the bank. When the squatting men argue that "the bank is only made of men," the representatives answer back.

> 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. (33)

The bank, which was founded by people, now controls people. It says what people have to do, and it is responsible for bringing the threat of suffering to families who once trusted the bank and found some comfort in it.

Although the bank is a very powerful symbol for monstrosity brought by economic recess in the novel, it is not the only one to threaten the agrarian families. The bulldozers and tractors are also regarded as monsters that sweep the land and drive the families away.

> The tractors came over the roads and into the fields, great crawlers moving like insects, having the incredible strength of insects. They crawled over the ground, laying the track and rolling on it and picking it up. . . . They did not run on the ground, but on their own roadbeds. They ignored hills and gulches, water courses, fences, houses.
>
> The man sitting in the iron seat did not look like a man; gloved goggled, rubber dust mask over nose and mouth, he was part of the monster, a robot in the seat. (35)

The tractors that were once used in favor of farmers to plow the land are now used in favor of the bank and more powerful owners who are about to expel the poorer families who used to occupy those lands. The tractors are the new figures of the monster. Their insect-like movements are augmented, and they become the new terror

of the families. If the little farmers could not see the monster called “the bank,” they can see the machines that move towards their lands and bring everything they possessed down. As the bank employees, who are in charge of representing the bank and telling the agrarian families they can no longer stay in those lands, the “man sitting in the iron seat” becomes part of a ferocious monster and cannot be recognized as human anymore.

Monstrous figures such as the bank and the machines are important devices for the development of the novel. These two threats to the agrarian people can be largely and historically associated with the harshness of the economic crisis that haunted a great part of the rural families in the United States during the first decades of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, these monsters are not the only things responsible for driving families away from the plains. Another monstrous threat will contribute to the despair of the Joads and many other families on the plains. This monster, regarded as a huge environmental catastrophe of the 1930s, is known as the Dust Bowl.

Meltzer argues that “[t]he dust storms of the 1930s ranked among the worst environmental disasters in world history” (11). Although it is hard, nowadays, to rank such disasters, the pictures taken of the affected lands during that time do not leave any doubts about the drastic consequences of the storms for the plains. During the years of the harsh storms, the plains became an inhospitable place where dust and despair were the main features.

The fact that the dust was already a common feature on the plains was not enough for families to deal with the Dust Bowl. According to Meltzer, [d]ust was not new on the Great Plains. But never had it been so destructive as in the thirties” (46). The dust storms that reached the area in the 1930s were responsible for the destruction of approximately 35 million acres in the United Sates (49). In an atmosphere of severe damage to the soil, desperation became common among farmers and their families.

They had faced dust before, but it had never brought so much damage to the lands where victimhood and responsibility can be intimately connected.

This environment of damage, scholars may agree, was due to causes ranging from natural phenomena such as drought itself to the unorganized use of soil by farmers. In *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*, Donald Worster states that "[d]uring the thirties serious droughts threatened a great part of the nation" (11). Rain became rare in many states. Also according to Worster, the period of drought was accompanied by "intense heat" (12). The heat and the lack of rain seem to be the perfect combination for the drying up of the soil in many regions. In the plains, that would be no different. Nevertheless, the very action of heat and drought in the plains would not result in such a tremendous disaster if it were not for the help of the unorganized use of the land by farmers.

In the Introduction to his book, Worster mentions that the economical politics of the 1920s and its expansionist ideals figure as important factors in the waste of the soil, because its exploitation was made almost without any respect for these lands' natural limitations:

> During the laissez-faire, expansionist 1920s the plains were extensively plowed and put to wheat—turned into highly mechanized factory farms that produced unprecedented harvests. Plains operators, however, ignored all environmental limits in this enterprise . . . In a more stable natural region, this sort of farming could have gone on exploiting the land much longer with impunity. But on the plains the elements of risk were higher than they were anywhere else in the country . . . There was nothing in the plains society to check the progress of commercial

> farming, nothing to prevent it from taking the risks it was willing to take for profit. That is how and why the Dust Bowl came about. (6-7)

Worster's words are quite clear when it comes to the apportioning responsibility of economic growth and greed for the Dust Bowl. As in many other examples in history, civilization plays its fundamental role in this so called "natural catastrophe."

The catastrophe itself—and here I do not make any distinctions between natural and human causes—was responsible for dreadful scenes of devastation and ruin. Photographs, people's reports, and fiction give an unpleasant notion of the bad consequences of the Dust Bowl to the plains and to its population. Although it is not possible nowadays to share the real experience of the plains families in the 1930s, these different media caught part of the essence of these people's suffering.

In the fourth chapter of his book, Meltzer quotes an Oklahoman woman's letter to her friends. She reports the discomfort of living in the middle of storms.

> Wearing our shade hats, with handkerchiefs tied over our faces and Vaseline in our nostrils, we have been trying to rescue our home from the accumulation of wind-blown dust which penetrates wherever air can go. It is an almost hopeless task, for there is rarely a day when at some time the dust clouds do not roll over. "Visibility" approaches zero and everything is covered again with a silt-like deposit which may vary in depth from a film to actual ripples on the kitchen floor. (43-4)

This woman's letter is impressive for its attempt to show how everyday life is completely changed, and how difficult it is to bear the conditions brought by the dust storms. The "hopeless task" of getting rid of the dust, combined with the low visibility soon took families away from the lands they had occupied for years.

Similar impressions of the threats of the storms are noted right at the beginning of *The Grapes of Wrath*. In the first chapter, the narrator gives a brief but vivid account on the dust.

> In the roads where the teams moved, where the wheels milled the ground and the hooves of the horses beat the ground, the dirt crust broke and the dust formed. Every moving thing lifted the dust into the air: a walking man lifted a thin layer as high as his waist, and a wagon lifted the dust as high as the fence tops, and an automobile boiled a cloud behind it. The dust was long in settling again. (2)

These lines represent the danger of dust itself, because the narrator does not mention the potentiality of the wind to bring into the air a greater amount of powder, but the capacity of simpler movements to raise dust.

A few lines latter, the narrator mentions the uncomfortable experience of living among the dust, and the consequences of the storms for their homes.

> Men and women huddled in their houses, and they tied handkerchiefs over their noses when they went out, and wore goggles to protect their eyes.
>
> When the night came again it was black night, for the stars could not pierce the dust to get down, and the window lights could not even spread beyond their own yards. Now the dust was evenly mixed with the air, an emulsion of dust and air. (3)

As in the Oklahoman woman's report, these lines show how harmful the dust can be, and how people have to change their habits in order to stand what is apparently impossible to stand.

Together with the Great Depression, this environmental catastrophe of the 1930s is the cause of the migratory movement of families from the plains to California. Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* deals with these two historical events and their monstrous consequences for fictional families, such as the Joads. Seeing that there is no way out in the lands they were born and raised, these families will set on the road towards California and face even greater threats.

1.2. The Migratory Movement of the 1930s: The Dust Bowlers, the Okies, and their Observers

Migration is one of the most important themes in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. The Joads, the fictional family that represents thousands of real families from the plains, take the road westward in search for a better life. As the Joads' journey develops, they face a series of obstacles that would become common among the plains refugees during the 1930s. The kind of migration observed in the novel is typical of a given historical moment in the United States, but with its own peculiarities.

The westward movement observed in Steinbeck's novel is unique for one main reason: the plains were the only area to present a considerable decrease in the rural population, or in the population as a whole. As observed by Worster in *Dust Bowl*, the other areas of the country did not register outflow rates as high as in the plains.

> Compared with the previous decade, or . . . the previous century, Americans were remarkably stationary in the thirties. But there were areas of the nation where the very opposite was true: where there was a tremendous outward flow of bankrupt, deracinated, demoralized folk. Chief among those areas were the Great Plains. (48)

Worster's observations clarify the idea of a more localized migratory crisis in the United States. Even though the whole nation suffered from a complex Depression, and other rural areas also experienced the failure of the Jeffersonian agrarian ideal, only the states affected by the dust storms had a noticeable change in their population rates.

This unique migratory movement was responsible for the emergence of a new social group in the United States: the "Okies." The word, a derogatory term used to refer to migrants from the many states devastated by the dust storms, seems to have a reason for being. According to Worster, "[i]n net loss through migration—outflow minus inflow—Oklahoma was the easy leader: 440,000, or 18.4 per cent of its 1930s population" (48). With many Oklahomans on the road, the migrants in general were usually and offensively called "Okies" by the people from other states.

Like the numbers above, other figures and rates in the migratory movement of the 1930s are impressive and shocking. In the first half of the decade, as pointed out by Worster, almost one million farmers left the plains, and other two and a half million left the area after 1935 (49). The Pacific Northwest received over 450,000 migrants during the 1930s—almost 40 percent came from the northern and southern plains—and almost 300,000 poor people entered California by vehicles in the second half of this decade (50). Meltzer mentions the day one observer counted over thirty cars with plates from "states between Chicago and the Rocky Mountains" in a single hour (55). The main path of flight was Route 66, "the mother road, the road of flight," as described by the narrator in *The Grapes of Wrath* (118). In this "road of flight," old cars drove and, sometimes, they broke down while mathematical equations became new statistics.

Numbers like the above represent the migratory movements to the west during the 1930s. Movements marked a more drastic quest than that of the first American

settlers who went westward: the quest for survival. The desperation of the plains families increased while new statistics arose.

The bad condition of migrant families became alarming. In his book, Meltzer observes that "[m]ost migrant families had work for only about four to six months a year. Their average income—*per family*—was between $350 and $450 a year" (65), half of what was considered as a substantial level by the California Relief Administration, according to Worster (53). Since the migrants had to move constantly along the state of California to work, they had some fixed automobile expenses, which left even less money for them to feed, clothe or live under a decent shelter.

Earning way less than what was expected for adequate life, these migrants faced problems ranging from hunger to serious diseases. Pneumonia, meningitis, and tuberculosis were some of the most common illnesses among these people, especially the migrant children, as pointed out by Meltzer (73). In fact, Meltzer's data show the obvious: how can one stay healthy with no food or adequate shelter? Important examples of the hard consequences of starvation and bad living conditions can be found in the last chapters of Steinbeck's novel. Winfield, the youngest male of the Joads, gets sick from hunger (350), while Rose of Sharon's baby is stillborn (444). At the very ending of the novel occurs one of the most touching images: Rose of Sharon breastfeeds a starving man in a barn (455). The situation of the fictional Joads is not different from that of the real migrant families of the 1930s, and the novel illustrates what was very common during that decade.

As one may notice, the migrant families had to face extreme conditions of suffering during the 1930s: poverty, starvation, disease, and lack of shelter. Nevertheless, as if it was not enough, these people also had to confront the prejudice of people from the western states. To see how offensive the word "Okie" was in the 1930s,

Worster mentions a sign in a San Joaquin Valley theater: “Negroes and Okies upstairs” (52). In the social hierarchy of that decade, the migrants became as unwelcome in public places as the African-Americans, who had always been mistreated by the dominant white society.

The word “Okie” became quite common in social classification during the 1930s. Apparently, it was used to generalize about migrants from the many states of the plains. According to Worster, “no matter what your reason for being poor, or your place of origin in the southern plains states, once across the Colorado River you became an ‘Okie’” (51). This new way to refer to migrants only shows the intolerance of some people who did not care for the origins of those families. For them, the Dust Bowlers were all the same and reduced to human beings close to animals.

One of the most absurd comments made during that time represents the ignorance of some people who almost animalized the rural migrants. The journalist H. L. Mencken, as cited by Worster, said that the rural people “are simply, by God’s inscrutable will, inferior men . . . and inferior they will remain until, by a stupendous miracle, He gives them equality among His angels” (53). Mencken’s declaration sounds illogical to hear, but there were those who agreed with his theory of the biologically less developed rural people (53), which shows how unwilling people were to help the suffering migrants.

As in real life, in Steinbeck’s novel the Okies are not seen in a more romanticized way. When the Joads leave a gas station on their way to California, the service-station boy comments on the precarious situation of their jalopy, and says to his helper he would never have the courage to travel in a vehicle like that. His co-worker replies:

> "Well, you and me got sense. Them goddamm Okies got no sense and no feeling. They ain't human. A human being wouldn't live like they do. A human being couldn't stand it to be so dirty and miserable. They ain't a hell of a lot better than gorillas." (221)

The service-station worker shares the same opinion as Mencken and many other people who did not consider the Okies "better than gorillas."

Giving to the migrants the chance to be heard through his characters, Steinbeck provides them the opportunity to question the use of the word "Okie." When Tom Joad first hears the word, he learns that it is not a well-meaning way of referring to migrants. As he asks another migrant who has already been to California what the meaning of it is, the man gives his own, but true definition for it, "Well, Okie use'ta mean you was from Oklahoma. Now it means you're a dirty son-of-a-bitch. Okie means you're scum. Don't mean nothing itself, it's the way they say it" (205-6). This passage represents the feeling of displeasure and indignation of migrants, who suffered from the insulting way they were referred to in the west. The man in the novel is clear when he says that the meaning of the word is not as offensive as the way people use it.

As in the passage above, many other passages of the novel are important to understand the point of view of the migrant families. This way, Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* becomes part of the voice of those families and their main complaints. In fact, the families in the novel ask for nothing more than a place to settle and to restructure their lives. Their requests are not as abusive as the western people might think. These fictional families do not differ from the real families, and like Steinbeck, important people who observed the migrants during the 1930s contributed to show how reasonable these families' claims were.

These Dust Bowl observers were of great importance to the recognition of the migrants' causes. They showed to the rest of the nation the suffering of the families that fled from the dust storms and poverty and the plains. Among these observers were photographers such as Dorothea Lange and Arthur Rothstein, economist Paul Taylor—Lange's husband—and Carey McWilliams, who was the director of California Immigration and Housing Office. According to Worster, these people "assumed responsibility for bringing the plight of these migrants before the nation in the late 1930s" (54). Together, these observers produced documents, articles, and photographs which helped the government think of solutions for the problems of the migrant families. Some of Dorothea Lange's photographs, for instance, are well-known for the sincerity in which they reveal the pain of migrants. Lange represented the Farm Security Administration (FSA) together with other important photographers. The pictures they took in their travels throughout the country were used to illustrate Archibald MacLeish's poem *Land of the Free*, which, as Worster observes, reflects MacLeish's concern with forest devastation, the ruin of the soil, and the deterioration of the land as results of an unorganized development of commercial farming (45-6).

With the intervention of observers, people had a more faithful idea of what was going on in some areas of the country. In a speech at the Commonwealth Club in 1938, Paul Taylor expressed his feelings about the migrants.

> These simple facts we must face. It follows as elementary, therefore, that whether we like them or not, we dare not tolerate in our midst their hunger and malnutrition of their children, their unsanitary living conditions, and their disease. Neither the state of California nor the United States can postpone or avoid this responsibility (qtd. in Meltzer, 77).

In his speech, Taylor was appealing for the attention of Californian politicians and businessmen to the bad conditions of the migrants. As a Californian economist and university professor, Taylor had some credibility in his words, and was an important representative of the migrants' claims. The other important Californian figure to take up the migrants' cause was Steinbeck himself.

An important fact about Steinbeck's dedication to the novel is his commitment to the migrants' cause as a whole. Not only did he write a novel denouncing the bad living conditions of those people, but he also traveled along with some families and had his own impressions on what was going on at that time. In his visits to squatters' camps in the second half of the decade, Steinbeck collected enough material to write a series of articles for the *San Francisco News*. "The Harvest Gypsies," as these articles were entitled, were published in October 1936. In the article titled "*The Grapes of Wrath*" Peter Lisca mentions Steinbeck's great concern with what he saw (75). As quoted by Lisca, in one of his articles, Steinbeck wrote, "I just returned yesterday from the strike area of Salinas and from my migrants in Bakersfield. This thing is dangerous. . . . Issues are very sharp here now" (75).

Steinbeck was not just a mere observer of the migrants. He embraced their cause as his own. He lived in a migrant camp, joined migrants in their search for work and even picked cotton with them, as pointed out by Lisca (75). Steinbeck's efforts to understand the migrants' needs were extremely important to his novel. Living with migrants made him see what these people really needed. He had to live with unemployment, starvation, and disease near him, which made him feel. His compassion for the families was such that, according to Lisca, Steinbeck's plans in that year included signing a six week contract to write the screenplay for *Of Mice and Men*. With the six thousand dollars he would earn, he could give two dollars to each of three

thousand migrants (76). His intentions show the precarious condition of the families. Two dollars apiece would make a big difference at that time.

Experiencing the migrants' needs and transcribing those needs into *The Grapes of Wrath* was not an easy task for Steinbeck. Facing negative criticism on his novel seemed to be even worse. According to Worster, the reception of the novel was not the best among some critics.

> Not everyone was ready to appreciate Steinbeck's choice of subject, to accept his radical opinions, or to like his colloquial style. Some literary critics complained that mawkish sentimentality spoiled parts of the book. Edmund Wilson disliked the way the novel reduced humans to an animal level and made them too much a part of nature, too coarse and debased. (54)

In fact, the animal-like life that bothered Wilson is one of the most striking features in the novel. The characters' behavior is not impelled by their own will, but by the circumstances in their lives. Nevertheless, many other Americans were discontented with the way *The Grapes of Wrath* reported the dilemma of the migrant families, and Worster mentions that Steinbeck's novel was banned in many states. Yet, the greatness and importance of the novel are still recognized nowadays.

> No other novel of the thirties had anything like its national impact; it taught an entire reading public what to think about the Okies and exodusters, and it would endure, for all its aesthetic and analytical faults, as one of the great American works of literature. (54)

Worster's words illustrate the outstanding place of the novel within American literature. Despite all the problems some critics attributed to it, *The Grapes of Wrath* cannot be discarded for its literary, social, cultural and historical significance. It brings to readers

part of what the migrant families of the 1930s really felt, and denounces the abuses of a society that pretended not to see what should be seen and fought.

The migratory movement of the 1930s was a striking event in American history. Provoked by poverty and lack of opportunities in the plains, this movement figured as uncommon and unique. Lots of families saw no other alternative than taking the road to the West. The dream to find better living conditions outside the plains was not immediately achieved by families that faced starvation, unemployment and extreme poverty in an unknown land. In this troubled context, *The Grapes of Wrath* emerges as a novel of social accusation and becomes one of the most important literary works of its era.

2. The Migrant Families in Steinbeck's Novel

John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* is largely determined by the implications of the economic and environmental crises observed in the 1930s in the United States. In order to present to the reader the consequences of these problems to the population, the novel brings forward migrant families and the obstacles they have to overcome during this period. The Joads are the main characters in the novel, but the reader becomes acquainted with many other families in the intercalary chapters (usually referred to as "interchapters"), as well as in the chapters about the Joads. All these families undergo a process of deep change provoked by social, geographical and economic factors. In the context of migration, they have to acquire new values and abandon old family ideals in order to survive. In this chapter, I will investigate how the families are portrayed in *The Grapes of Wrath*, identifying the most important social changes observed in the family sphere. The families in the interchapters of the novel will be the main focus of examination here.

2.1. Fathers, Mothers and Children: Their Attitudes towards the Condition of Loss

One of the most important aspects in the structure of the novel is its chapter division. The thirty chapters of *The Grapes of Wrath* are divided in two main types: the interchapters and the chapters about the Joads. The interchapters contextualize much of what occurs in the chapters about the Joads. In his article titled "*The Grapes of Wrath*," Peter Lisca affirms that these chapters have two main purposes. Some have the function of "amplify[ing] the pattern of action created by the Joad family," and others "have the function of providing . . . historical information" (84). All the sixteen interchapters therefore become important to the understanding of the novel as a whole. The behavior

of the general families in the interchapters is much in accordance with the behavior of the Joad family.

The families portrayed in *The Grapes of Wrath* are organized on the basis of typically patriarchal values. Men, women, and children have their specific roles, and these values do not change until bigger changes occur. Throughout the novel, it is common to see evidence of the particular functions of each of family members—husband, wife, and child—and how their roles influence the reactions to the condition of loss.

Even though migrant families have to be reorganized in order to survive this new context, the roles of mothers and children do not seem to be as changed by the new conditions as the fathers' role is. In the face of uncertainty and threat, motherhood and childhood still survive in their wholeness. Women still have to take care of their families, whereas men cannot support their families economically or emotionally, and it does not matter how far the migrant families are from their homeland. Children in turn have to help their families, working together with their parents for little money, but they do not seem to leave their childlike behavior behind. Actually, in *The Grapes of Wrath*, at times of deep changes, women and children have an accumulation of family duties while, on the contrary, men see part of their duties being divided with mothers and children.

In the first chapter, when the families still occupy their own homeland, there is a clear description of the different behaviors of men, women and children towards the dust and drought in their lands. While men observe the ruined food, women observe the men's reaction, and children observe both men's and women's reactions.

> Men stood by their fences and looked at the ruined corn, dying fast now, only a little green showing through the film of dust. The men were silent

> and they did not move often. And the women came out of the houses to stand beside their men—to feel whether this time the men would break. The women studied the men's faces secretly, for the corn could go, as long as something else remained. The children stood near by, drawing figures in the dust with bare toes, and the children sent exploring sense out to see whether men and women would break. (3)

This passage illustrates the hierarchical positions within the typical patriarchal family. Men are expected to register the first impressions of the family losses. Women's impressions in turn will depend on their husbands' attitudes. Finally, children's impressions will depend on men's and women's impressions.

In a patriarchal organization as such, the families understand the importance of men's reactions towards obstacles and challenges. Men's strength is expected to be shown either in gestures or in words.

> After a while the faces of the watching men lost their bemused perplexity and became hard and angry and resistant. Then the women knew that they were safe and that there was no break. Then they asked, What'll we do? And the men replied, I don't know. But it was all right. The women knew it was all right, and the watching children knew it was all right. Women and children knew deep in themselves that no misfortune was too great to bear if their men were whole. (4)

What is worth of mentioning here is the importance given to men's wholeness. The family depends on the strength of men, who are expected to stay firm and not fall apart. Not knowing what to do next is not a major problem to these men, and their families know that. The major problem is to fall apart in a severe situation.

As long as men are whole, the patriarchal organization of the family will not be changed. Men, women, and children will still maintain their particular roles, and life will move on almost in the same way.

> The women went into the houses to their work, and the children began to play, but cautiously at first. . . . The men sat in the doorways of their houses; their hands were busy with sticks and little rocks. The men sat still—thinking—figuring. (4)

As one can see, the families go back to their usual duties, since the men have not broken yet. Women and children can keep on doing what they are supposed to do according to the patriarchal family model. Housework and play take place while men think of what they will do next.

The kind of behavior illustrated in the first chapter of *The Grapes of Wrath* is important to understand how family relations are built in the specific context of the narrative. The patriarchal foundations of the families are clear and perceptible at the beginning of the novel. Each family member's role is well defined and easy to understand. In fact, this chapter is the introduction of the migrant families' saga. It is from this beginning that the lives of the families will deeply change.

Men's control over their families is evident in a patriarchal structure. They are usually responsible for decision making. The major problems of the families are expected to be solved by them. The families portrayed in *The Grapes of Wrath* do not behave differently at first. In the fifth chapter of the novel, for instance, the narrator mentions once again the importance of men in hard times. When the owners of the lands come to claim their property, the men are responsible for carrying on the conversation in the name of the entire family. While the tenants leave the house to talk to the owners, their wives and children wait in silence inside their houses.

> In the open doors the women stood looking out, and behind them the children—corn-headed children, with wide eyes, one bare foot on top of the other bare foot, and the toes working. The women and the children watched their men talking to the owner men. They were silent. (31)

The silence of women and children represent the condition of dependence on the family head. Their role is merely to observe what is going on outside their houses. There is no chance of interference in the owner-tenant conversation. Their silence is required at this moment, which is the only support they are capable of giving to their men.

In the family model portrayed in the novel, at the same time women and children have to keep in silence, men have to behave with anger so that despair will not absorb the families. Their wrath towards the situation is important to the maintenance of the family's integrity. In the same chapter, when the owners leave the land, the tenants start to think of what they will do next. This is when the women and children carefully move toward them. They know their men are angry.

> The women moved cautiously out of the doorways toward their men, and the children crept behind women, cautiously, ready to run. The bigger boys squatted beside their fathers, because that made them men. After a time the women asked, What did he want? (34)

The women do not ask directly what they want to know. They wait for a while, because they are aware of what angry men can do. At the same time, the bigger boys assume their role of men through the simple gesture of squatting, while the children are aware of the danger of the possibility of being beaten in such an extreme situation. This passage actually shows some of the codes shared by the members of a patriarchal family: caution, squatting, and silence, for instance.

Patriarchal family codes are mainly translated into simple gestures and actions, but they are meaningful to the entire family. When informed that the families have to leave the land, the women ask their men where they will go, and, as their men do not have a formed answer, they know that it is time to take their children into their houses.

> And the women went quickly, quietly back into the houses and herded the children ahead of them. They knew that a man so hurt and so perplexed may turn in anger, even on people he loves. They left the men alone to figure and to wonder in the dust. (34)

The women do not have the right to bother the men, because the men have to think of a solution to the family problems alone.

As long as the family is still set on the land, the patriarchal roles and codes do not change. While men squat and think of a way out of the problem, women occupy themselves with the household chores, and children carefully play in the yard.

> The children crowded about the women in the houses. What we going to do, Ma? Where we going to go?
>
> The women said, We don't know, yet. Go out and play. But don't go near your father. He might whale you if you go near him. And the women went on with the work, but all the time they watched the men squatting in the dust—perplexed and figuring. (35)

The defined roles within these families are precise. One does not interfere in the other's business unless there is something bigger than the patriarchal structure going on. This is the way the family members behave at the beginning of the novel, and only in the face of loss associated with complete uncertainty will these functions change.

The patriarchal model starts to fall apart at the moment the men are not capable of thinking of a solution. They are too connected to their land and to their past. As soon as they have to leave their land and give up their past, they begin to lose their strength.

The tenants are deeply shaken when they are informed that they have to leave the land and that there is nothing else they can do to reverse the situation. They seem to be too attached to their land, and they are not capable of handling their loss. This feeling of belonging to the land is evident in the fifth chapter of the novel, when the tenant ponders the land.

> The tenant pondered. "Funny thing how it is. If a man owns a little property, that property is him, it's part of him, and it's like him. If he owns property only so he can walk on it and handle it and be sad when it isn't doing well, and feel fine when the rain falls on it, that property is him, and some way he's bigger because he owns it. Even if he isn't successful he's big with his property. That is so." (37)

Little properties are part of the men, because they have dedicated most of their lives to them. Taking the land away from a man is taking a piece of him. The men in *The Grapes of Wrath*, then, feel as if a part of their body is cut off.

As if having their property taken away was not enough, the men in the novel are also obliged to give up part of their past. They have to get rid of their belongings, which means that they have to leave part of their memories behind. Even though both men and women have to throw part of their past away, they have different reactions to the situation.

> In the little houses the tenant people sifted their belongings and the belongings of their fathers and of their grandfathers. Picked over their possessions for the journey to the west. The men were ruthless because

> the past had been spoiled, but the women knew how the past would cry to them in the coming days. (86)

The difference between men and women and their reactions is a presage of what might come next. The old family structure will be deeply affected. The only feeling the men have is anger; they show a strong resentment for their past being spoiled. Women, on the other hand, do not show any deep change in their behavior, because they know that belongings may be connected to the past, but they are not the past.

Without their land and their past, the men change their behavior. There is a certain feeling of impotence that paralyzes them. Thinking replaces acting. The women in turn still have their usual work to do, no matter where they are. In chapter sixteen, for instance, when the Joads stop in a camp for the night, there is a short description of the men's behavior towards their new condition. The narrator mentions that "the men on the porch were rigid, motionless, quiet," and that "[t]heir faces were hard in the hard light, and they were very still" (186-7). At the same time the men are gathered on the porch, something happens in a tent. A child complains and a woman softly sings to the child (187). This passage shows that the work of taking care of a child, which is attributed to the woman in a patriarchal family, is not interrupted by the sudden changes in these families' lives. The men are motionless because their patriarchal role is diminished or even ceased with the westward movement.

Although it seems clear that there is a rupture with some patriarchal practices in the novel, the families are not ready to entirely overcome the patriarchal system automatically. It is interesting to observe how some specific roles are kept by the migrant families, especially when the families are settled.

There are two clear examples of the division of work according to genders in chapter twenty-four. The first one appears right at the beginning of the chapter, in the

description of the family's preparations for the Saturday dance in the government camp where the Joads settle.

> On Saturday Morning the wash tubs were crowded. The women washed dresses, pink ginghams and flowered cottons, and they hung them in the sun and stretched the cloth to smooth it. When afternoon came the whole camp quickened and the people grew excited. . . . About mid-afternoon child bathing began, and as each child was caught, subdued, and washed, the noise on the playground gradually subsided. Before five, the children were scrubbed and warned about getting dirty again; and they walked about, stiff in clean clothes, miserable with carefulness.
>
> . . . By six o'clock the men were back from work or from looking for work, and a new wave of bathing started. By seven, dinners were over, men had on their best clothes: freshly washed overalls, clean blue shirts, sometimes the decent blacks. The girls were ready in their print dresses, stretched and clean, their hair braided and ribboned. The worried women watched the families and cleaned up the evening dishes. (331)

The passage illustrates the different roles assigned to each family member, as it usually happens in the patriarchal family system. This means that the families still keep some of their traditional practices when they have the chance to. Although they are not living as well as they wished, they are settled, and the men can work or look for job as they used to when the families were at home.

A second example of role division according to genders happens in the next pages of the chapter. As the Joads learn when they arrive at the government camp, there are different committees that organize life in the camp. The women's committee is

basically responsible for tasks such as receiving the new families and explaining how the sanitary units work, whereas the men's committee gathers to plan strategies for keeping order in the camp. During an assembly of the men's committee, one of the members mentions a women's fight in his unit, and adds that the women's committee should be responsible for handling a women's fight.

> The tubby man from Unit Three said, "Anybody that think this committee got all cheese an' crackers ought to jes' try her. They was a fight in my unit today—women. Got to callin' names, an' then got to throwin' garbage. Ladies' Committee couldn' handle it, an' then come to me. Want me to bring the fight in this here committee. I tol' 'em they got to handle women trouble theirselves. This here committee ain't gonna mess with no garbage fights." (334)

The tubby man's speech clearly supports the idea that the work in the camp is gender divided, and that the men should not interfere in women's issues, because they have their own presumably more important issues to take care of. His words demonstrate the interest of separating the responsibilities into men's roles and women's roles for the migrant families at least in less uncomfortable times.

The two examples above show that the migrant men do not totally lose their importance to their families. What happens is that, at times of loss, the men are not capable of fulfilling all their expected obligations. They are in a sense incomplete, whereas the women still have their usual duties. Nevertheless, the men are still respected, and the women recognize their significance for the survival of the family, as shown at the end of chapter twenty-nine. In this chapter, the narrator mentions the consequences of the flood for the migrant families—unemployment, disease, and

hunger—and the hatred of Californians towards these families. The closing of the chapter indicates the importance of men's strength to their families.

> 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 into wrath. (434-5)

The fact that migrant men, women and children seem to react differently in times of loss and displacement does not necessarily mean that the patriarchal values are automatically overcome. The men still have their importance to their families, and the roles are well defined every time the family encounters a less disturbing situation. Besides, the women still trust their men. They know that total despair is far from coming to the families, as long as there is wrath where there could be fear. The passage above shows that the men's break will not come as long as their minds are filled with anger. It also shows that one man does not face the problem alone. Men gather, and that makes them stronger. In order to prevail over their families' new condition, the patriarchal rules will have to coexist with—and later make room for—a more important rule: gathering together. The families will soon learn that union is essential and urgent, and that will make the whole difference in the novel.

2.2. When the Families Become One

One of the most noticeable lessons in *The Grapes of Wrath* is the importance of collective union to the survival of the migrant families. In search for better living conditions in the west, the families in the novel build new relationships and become

more willing to integrate and help one another. With the hard experiences of a new world, the families perceive the necessity of working together, and they create new social relations that overcome some old values. The migrant families will soon become one.

The concept of a single, more extended family is largely explored in chapter seventeen, but the novel gives some evidence of what is about to come in earlier chapters. Chapter twelve modestly seems to suggest the start of a new family organization that will integrate all the migrant families.

The setting of chapter twelve is Route 66. It is the main road in the migrants' way westward. The families' destination cannot be achieved without that road. It binds families that have a common interest.

> 66 is the path of a people in flight, refugees from dust and shrinking land, from the thunder of tractors and shrinking ownership, from the desert's slow northward invasion, from the twisting winds that howl up out of Texas, from the floods that bring no richness to the land and steal what little richness is there. From all of these the people are in flight, and they come into 66 from the tributary side roads, from the wagon tracks and the rutted country roads. 66 is the mother road, the road of flight. (118)

The importance of Highway 66 is such for the migrants that it becomes "the mother road." It connects the migrant families in a way that everyone becomes part of a big family, with a past in common and the same urgencies. 66 also creates a consciousness of help and cooperation among the migrant people. The families traveling in old or improvised cars do not have any guarantees of reaching their destination, but may encounter rescue on their way when it is really needed.

> And here's a story you can hardly believe, but it's true, and it's funny and it's beautiful. There was a family of twelve and they were forced off the land. They had no car. They built a trailer out of junk and loaded it with their possessions. They pulled it to the side of 66 and waited. And pretty soon a sedan picked them up. Five of them rode in the sedan and seven on the trailer, and a dog on the trailer. They got to California in two jumps. The man who pulled them fed them. And that's true. But how can such courage be, and such faith in their own species? Very few things would teach such faith. (122)

As the narrator describes, a certain feeling of trust in the human beings arises in times of difficulty. Necessity makes the families more willing to accept and offer rescue. In fact, this passage shows what will become common in the next chapters. The mutual help will guide those who have the same problems and interests. The families in the novel will soon learn to think of the other when the other is in need.

In the analysis of the changes in the behavior of the people in the novel, there is one aspect which is worth of mention. A more collective attitude emerges as the new philosophy of the migrant families. As soon as the families find out they are not alone on the road, they start to think as a group and not as isolated individuals anymore. The growth of collective thinking is described in chapter fourteen, when the narrator mentions the gathering of families on their way to the west. The man who was used to complaining about his own losses now understands that these losses are not his alone, but also the losses of many other people in the same condition as he is. It is the transition from the "I" way of thinking to the "we" way of thinking.

> One man, one family driven from the land; this rusty car creaking along the highway to the west. I lost my land, a single tractor took my land. I

> am alone and I am bewildered. And in the night one family camps in a ditch and another family pulls in and tents come out. The two men squat on their hams and the women and children listen. Here is the node, you who hate change and fear revolution. Keep these two squatting men apart; make them hate, fear, suspect each other. Here is the anlage of the thing you fear. This is the zygote. For here "I lost my land" is changed; a cell is split and from its splitting grows the thing you hate—"We lost *our* land." The danger is here, for two men are not as lonely and perplexed as one. And from this first "we" there grows a still more dangerous thing: "I have little food" plus "I have none." If from this problem the sum is "We have a little food," the thing is on its way, the movement has direction. Only a little multiplication now, and this land, this tractor are ours. (151-2)

Here, the words of the narrator function as a warning to those who are afraid of any revolutionary movement. The instant that people gather and claim for their common interests, they may represent a danger to the big land owners.

It is interesting to note the analogy with embryology in the passage above. It serves to indicate that the change from the "I" to the "we" way of thinking is only at its very beginning. On the waysides of the mother road, these families start to share their misery, their distress and their indignation. It is the conception of a new movement that embraces the whole and disregards the individual.

> The two men squatting in a ditch, the little fire, the side-meat stewing in a single pot, the silent, stone-eyed women; behind, the children listening with their souls to words their minds do not understand. The night draws down. The baby has a cold. Here, take this blanket. It's wool. It was my

> mother's blanket—take it for the baby. This is the thing to bomb. This is the beginning—from "I" to "we." (152)

The conception of group awareness is the starting point of action. The following pages of the novel will show that the migrant families are ready to understand the importance of working together in favor of their common needs. It is the overcoming of the individualist way of dealing with life. According to Carpenter (1941), the novel

> traces the transformation of the Protestant individual into the member of a social group—the old "I" becomes "we." And it traces the transformation of the passive individual into the active participant—the idealist becomes the pragmatist. (712)

The migrants in *The Grapes of Wrath* start to put their new thoughts into practice. Individualism is about to vanish among the families. Social consciousness is soon acquired from need, and is the main stimulus for action. As the narrator explains at the end of chapter fourteen, "[t]he Western States are nervous under the beginning change. Need is the stimulus to concept, concept to action" (152). The first actions, as notably seen in the next pages of the novel, are cooperation and union, themselves.

In the analysis of the most striking changes in the novel, it is interesting to notice how the families reorganize in an unknown environment. As mentioned above, a new way of thinking takes the place of a more individualist philosophy. Assembled in night camps, the families improvise new and mutable worlds that correspond to their needs and try to meet their urgencies.

The achievement of new values in the novel comes in chapter seventeen, when the narrator describes the migrants' union in the camps along the roadside. The union of the families redefines the relations and creates a more powerful group. The first step in this achievement is set: the families soon become one family.

> 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.
>
> In the evening, a strange thing happened: the twenty families became one family, the children were the children of all. The loss of home became one loss, and the golden time in the West was one dream. (193)

In this passage, fear and mutual identification are clearly presented as the main causes of union. The migrants look for some common ground, and they find it in the creation of what was, at first, unfamiliar to them. Sharing their experiences, the migrants build new relationships, with principles and values adapted to their situation. In the search for better living conditions in the west, the migrant families build what the narrator calls "worlds."

> Every night a world created . . . Every night relationships that make a world, established; and every morning the world torn down like a circus.
>
> At first the families were timid in the building and tumbling worlds, but gradually the technique of building worlds became their technique. Then leaders emerged, then laws were made, then codes came

> into being. And as the worlds moved westward they were more complete and better furnished, for their builders were more experienced in building them. (194)

The moving and mutable worlds built every night by the migrant families are important to their survival because it is in these worlds that they will find the help they need. In these worlds, they will share their experience and dreams. Together, these families will try to come up with an answer to their questions, and become involved in a larger and more complex sphere than the family's.

The reorganization of the migrant families into a bigger, unique family is the basis of social change in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Without a fixed land to live on, the migrants find in this more complex arrangement the ground for a new relation with life. They have to leave old values behind, namely their individualist attitudes, and get used to a different way of seeing the world around them. Besides that, on the foundations of a more inclusive sphere, the migrants have the chance to reflect upon the inequities of a socio-economic system that suppresses the poor by emphasizing profit.

In order to have the social inequities highlighted, the narrator gives a brief historical account on California in chapter nineteen. From the time it was taken from Mexicans to the day the hungry migrants reached the state, a lot has changed, "[a]nd as time went on, the business men had the farms, and the farm grew larger, but there were fewer of them" (231-2). The transformation of the area into a land of big farms is what puzzles the migrants the most. The questions start to emerge, and the families cannot understand why there is so much in the possession of few people. The fear of the Okies emerges at the same time their hunger for dignity arises. The narrator alerts the owners about three important historical facts, and gives to the reader an idea of the social changes that might come next in the historical context of the novel.

> And the great owners, who must lose their land in an upheaval, the great owners with access to history, with eyes to read history and to know the great fact: when property accumulates in too few hands it is taken away. And that companion fact: when a majority of the people are hungry and cold they will take by force what they need. And the little screaming fact that sounds through all history: repression works only to strengthen and knit the repressed. (238)

The passage above clearly expresses the reasons for a social clash between migrants and landowners. The combination of the three facts is what feeds any repressed group. Union, in this case, would be the basis for the migrants' victory in their attempt to correct the inequities. A given group is only capable of making social changes when there is some unity established. The migrant families in the novel have both the stimulus and the basis for building a social revolution. Their claims are not abusive. They want food, a piece of land, and dignity. Their cause is simple in a land like California, full of prosperity and dreams, but the obstacles the migrants face are not as simple as their cause, and that is what generates the uneasiness between the two sides of the particular struggle in *The Grapes of Wrath*: migrant labors versus capitalist landowners.

It is worthy of mention at this point that the largely announced social revolution promised by the union of the migrant laborers never occurs in the novel. Larger struggles between the two involved classes are not depicted in the novel. Railton points out that the novel is actually "a novel about conversion," and that readers "are the converts whom [Steinbeck] is after" (29). Railton suggests that Steinbeck's concern is with the readers' reaction to the novel. Following Railton's argument, I would add that Steinbeck wants to denounce what he has witnessed himself in his observations of the

real “Okies,” and to alert his contemporaries—no matter which social class they belong to—of the need to embrace a more collective and less individualist behavior in order to correct the injustices of the capitalist system before the real riots provoked by the wrath towards inequities occur.

The following pages of the novel will narrate the growth of anger among the migrant families. Actually, the survival of the families depends on this anger. Surrounded by hunger, poverty, and repression, these people encounter in their ire the strength not to fall apart. In chapter twenty-five, the narrator mentions overproduction on the California lands. The owners prefer to see the fruit rot than feed the hungry people, which only intensifies the anger of the migrant people.

> The people come with nets to fish for potatoes in the river, and the guards hold them back. . . And they stand still and watch the potatoes float by . . . [A]nd 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. (349)

All the frustrations of the migrants are gathered into anger. They have nothing else to lose but their lives, and, in search for survival, this is the only thing they do not want to lose. The transformations undergone by the families in the novel have the purpose of sparing their own lives. In the context of loss and lack of opportunities, new values arise and the wrath emerges as a force for change. The social changes come in order to adapt to the new circumstances. It is more evident with the Joads, but its atmosphere is also felt in the interchapters. The suggestion of necessary deep changes is a constant in the novel. It is what mostly approximates it to the Marxist ideals that will be explored in the following chapters.

The analysis of the changes undergone by the migrant families in *The Grapes of Wrath* demonstrates that the novel is narrated in a tone of denunciation, since it shows the major problems faced by the real migrants of the 1930s. By describing the suffering of the fictitious people, the narrator suggests the necessity of change in order to reorganize society in a more harmonic way. Interestingly, Steinbeck seems to address his message to the main classes involved in the problem. The narrator alerts the big proprietor to the danger of concentrating the land in a few hands and shows the importance of union to the migrants. Moreover, he points up the flaws of the capitalist system by announcing the consequences of the restriction of wealth and profit to few people, giving to the reader who is not directly connected to the classes involved an idea of the real suffering of the migrant families.

3. The Joads' Education of the Heart

In my previous chapter, I introduced the changes observed in the behavior of the migrant families shown in the interchapters of Steinbeck's novel. I demonstrated that, with time, the families learn that together they can face the obstacles in their struggle for survival in a stronger way. In the case of these families, unity is essential to overcoming the problems that arise in a new and unknown environment. The union of the migrant families is necessary, because only this way can they change the economic organization in the California of the 1930s, and fight against the oppressive treatment of a landowning class. Although Marxism was not explicitly dealt with in the last chapter, some of its beliefs were partly explored in my analysis of the transformations that occurred in the family structure in *The Grapes of Wrath*, since I showed the migrants' awareness of the importance of revolution in order to break with an overwhelming socio-economic system. Class struggle is the constant in Marxist criticism.

In this chapter, I will integrate the analysis of the migrant families in the novel with that of the Joads. My purpose now is to work with the transformations observed in the main family in the novel. I hope to demonstrate how the Joads reorganize the family in order to achieve their main goals on the westward journey. The Marxist critical background will be explicitly and more deeply explored in this chapter, since I plan to analyze how the learning process of the family helps the Joads understand the oppressive economic system in which they are inserted.

As it happens with the other migrant families portrayed in *The Grapes of Wrath*, there is a deep transformation in behavior and values of the Joads from the beginning to the end of the novel. The process of education undergone by the family members is mainly due to the challenges faced throughout their journey to the west. They all suffer from the harsh conditions of a compulsory migratory movement, and that situation is

the starting point of transformation for the family. In different ways, the family members seem to undergo a process of learning in which cooperation is essential. In fact, the theme of education in the novel is elusively explored by French in his article titled "The Education of the Heart," the inspiration for the title of this chapter.

3.1. The Education of the Joads: How the Family Transforms during Their Journey

The transformations of the Joads in *The Grapes of Wrath* are mainly caused by necessity. As pointed out by French, the Joads have to change in order to survive (99). The family does not acquire new values as a matter of option. With time, they learn that they will only keep going as a family if they embrace the cause of a whole community. Even though some family members go through a deeper process of education, namely Tom Joad, Ma, and the preacher Jim Casy, who joins the Joads at the beginning of their journey, others, such as Pa Joad, Uncle John, and Rose of Sharon, also show some important changes by the end of the novel.

A striking characteristic of Pa Joad at the beginning of the novel is his apparent individualism, in tune with what is common among the migrant families. As the head of the family, Pa is responsible for leading the Joads' assembly right before their departure. Informed that Jim Casy wants to join them, Pa demonstrates his reluctance in accepting someone who is not part of the family on their journey. His arguments to Ma are reasonable. The family has little food and little room in the truck. Nevertheless, Ma presents even more convincing arguments for taking Casy with them.

> "There ain't room now," she said. "There ain't room for more'n six, an' twelve is goin' sure. One more ain't gonna hurt; an' a man, strong an' healthy, ain't never no burden. An' any time when we got two pigs an'

> over a hundred dollars, an' we wonderin' if we kin feed a fella—" She stopped, and Pa turned back, and his spirit was raw from the whipping. (102)

Ma's plausible arguments are enough to cause a certain discomfort in Pa, and consequently change his mind. Pa accepts Jim Casy, but his selfish temper is far from being changed. His private interests usually come first. He does not seem to embrace the family cause as much as Ma Joad does. The family can only expect from him a more collective attitude by the end of the novel.

Pa's education takes too long, and so Ma is the one responsible for bringing him into action. In the Weedpatch Camp, for instance, the family encounters in the comfort of the sanitary unit a reason to become stationary. Without any job for the family, the lack of money starts to bring serious problems to the Joads, and Ma is the one who opens the eyes of the men in the family to the threat.

> Ma said fiercely, "You ain't got the right to get discouraged. This here fambly's goin' under. You jus' ain't got the right."
>
> Pa inspected his scraped nail. "We gotta go," he said. "We didn't wanta go. It's nice here, an' folks is nice here. We're feared we'll have to live in one a them Hoovervilles." (351)

Ma wakes Pa up, but he is unwilling to leave the camp because he fears what may come next. As in the family's assembly in their homeland, Pa has to accept Ma's arguments. He does not show major reluctance but expresses his uneasiness towards the fact. Ma's words are strong but necessary. Pa hates to leave, but has to agree with Ma that his family cannot stay in the government camp anymore.

The passage above demonstrates that Pa's self-centered view is once more shaken by Ma's speech, but the following chapters will show us that his individualism is

not entirely overcome. In a conversation with Jim Casy, Tom Joad affirms that his father "would not give up his meat on account a other fellas" (384). Tom's words are the response to the preacher's arguments on a peach-picking strike, and, in fact, he takes into consideration his family individualism, since he says that his mother would not starve Rose of Sharon's baby for other people's causes (384), but he emphasizes his father's selfish mind by unconsciously contrasting his behavior to Ma's. Pa would think twice of his own meat, whereas Ma would think of her grandchild's health before joining any strike.

The fact that Pa is more selfish than his wife does not necessarily mean that he is not capable of learning the values of union and cooperation. It is clear that he needs his wife's help to face the whole situation properly. In one of his most selfless acts in the entire novel, that is the case. In chapter thirty, when the stream starts to rise because of the rain, he sees the danger of the flood that might invade the train car in which the family is living. This is when he realizes that collective work might protect them and the other families that are in the same situation as the Joads. He believes that if they all help, they can block the water from invading their camp (437). Although he realizes the danger around his family on his own, he can only act when Ma gives no other option to him, seeing that Rose of Sharon is in labor.

> Ma said, "Her time's come."
>
> "Then—then we couldn' go 'f we wanted to."
>
> "No."
>
> "Then we got to buil' that bank."
>
> "You got to." (440)

Once again, Pa's attitudes depend on Ma's words. This time, however, he seems to accept his obligation to take care of his family more easily, and demonstrates his

capacity for seeing the danger in advance. When the Joads reach the train cars, they have already experienced a lot of adverse circumstances. The lack of opportunities has already given them the awareness of their situation. Pa still needs Ma's words, but that does not mean that he has not learned anything yet. On the contrary, Ma's words to Pa in the train car function more as a confirmation than an order to him. The idea of gathering all the men is his, and the necessity of asking for Ma's opinion shows that he has built a new relationship of trust with his wife.

As Pa Joad, Uncle John also shows that he has learned a lot from the obstacles of migration by the end of the novel. When he is asked to take care of the baby's body, he refuses to burry the baby and guides it on the stream current. He wants the body to tell everyone what his people have been through (448). In one single action, Uncle John gives to the migrant people the opportunity to be represented by someone who, ironically, will never have the chance to speak. Uncle John, who once felt guilty for his wife's death (69) and believed he was a burden to his family (318-9), is now ready to take his part in this larger process of education.

Although Uncle John does not have the same individualist behavior as Pa, he also feels his strength vanish with the journey, and needs something to feel released from his guilt. At the beginning of the novel, Tom says to Casy that his uncle always give his things away to people, but that does not make him happy (69). When Tom fights against the deputy in the Hooverville, Uncle John feels the necessity to get drunk. This is the way he faces the "hurtin' inside" (268-9). Despite giving his goods away and getting drunk, he never feels better, because it is not his sin that makes him weaker, but his lack of attitude, and his decision to let the baby's body be taken by the stream is exactly what makes him stronger and more important to his family.

Following the same example as her father and uncle, Rose of Sharon gets to understand the importance of mutual help and cooperation at the ending of *The Grapes of Wrath*, and is responsible for the most touching gesture in Steinbeck's novel. At first, she is described as a young woman whose attention is only given to her pregnancy. All her thoughts and attitudes concern her baby (96). She is not capable of changing in a first moment, and gets scared and shaken when a religious woman in the Weedpatch Camp tells her other women have lost their babies because of the sin committed by the migrants (308). In the peach-picking farm, she yells at Tom because he has killed a man and she is concerned that her baby will become a freak because of everything her family has been through (393). Rose of Sharon's overprotective behavior towards her baby obscures her sense and does not allow her to do much for the whole family.

Rose of Sharon only embraces the whole family's cause willingly when there seems to be no more hope for her baby. She decides to go cotton-picking in the hours that precede the labor. Although her mother tells her she has to rest, she insists on going and convinces her mother (425-6). This is the first time in the novel that Rose of Sharon assumes bigger responsibility for the entire family, but it is not the only demonstration of support. At the end of the novel, when the family hides from the rain in a barn, she breastfeeds a starving man, and closes the narrative in a selfless and loving gesture (455). Her final action represents the fulfillment of her heart education, seeing that she is willing to help someone she has never seen. If Rose of Sharon's perceptions are firstly blinded by her pregnancy, they become enlightened by the possibility of a different maternity.

The changes observed in the attitudes of Pa Joad, Uncle John and Rose of Sharon do not occur instantaneously. Some preparation and willingness is required. The circumstances are the lessons and the obstacles are not capable of shaping people unless

they are ready to accept the transformations. When the Joads leave Uncle John's land, there are thirteen people in the truck. Grampa dies before the family crosses the Oklahoma limits (138), and Ma announces Granma's death after the family crosses the desert in California (228). Their adaptation seems to be impossible in the new land. Grampa is too stubborn, and, as Casy observes, Grampa and his land are so connected that they have become one thing (146). Granma in turn reveals to be an extremely religious woman, which becomes an obstacle when it comes to acquiring new values. Besides that, she is deeply shaken by her husband's sudden death, and, consequently, also gets sick and dies. Grampa and Granma lack the required readiness for the deep changes proposed in the novel, and die before they get to experience most of the challenges of the Joads' journey. Their changes would depend on their ability to shape their behavior, but they have lived the old values for too long to readapt.

Like Grampa and Granma, the youngest members of the family are not ready for the changes, for they are too immature to understand the true meaning of cooperation. Winfield and Ruthie are usually described in childish attitudes. They giggle when Uncle John decides to get drunk and mock him (270). In the Weedpatch Camp, Ruthie refuses to wait for the end of a croquet match to join the other children and fights with another girl (317). Al, the sixteen-year old Joad son, sometimes behaves like a grown man, but complains about the whole situation (371) and wants to leave the Joads and follow his girlfriend's family when he announces he is going to marry her (437). Although he shows some cooperation during the journey, his interest in girls is stronger than his will to help his family. Compared to Ruthie and Winfield, Al is placed in a more mature and important position in his family, but, like his sister and brother, he does not seem to be totally prepared to embrace the cause of a whole group. They are all still too young to learn the value of mutual cooperation.

The process of heart education of the Joads depends on their readiness to adapt to new values. It also depends on time. It is not sudden, and it varies from one person to the other. Noah Joad and Connie, Rose of Sharon's husband, do not have the opportunity to experience it. They both leave the family before they can learn the importance of cooperation. Noah, the misshapen Joad son, decides to stay at the river bank and refuses to follow his family to California (209), and Connie decides to abandon his wife when he realizes that his dreams will not be immediately achieved in the golden state (272). Differently from them, Pa Joad, Uncle John, and Rose of Sharon have the chance to find out the importance of union and selflessness for their survival. Each, in their moment, gives their contribution to their kind. Although they do not seem to reach the highest level of education by the ending of the novel, they demonstrate that they are not too far from it.

3.2. The "Holy Sperit:" The Education of Tom Joad and Jim Casy

Even though the revolution is strongly suggested throughout the whole novel, it never takes place, for Steinbeck's goal is not to raise riot between the two sides involved, but make people aware of the importance of readapting in order to benefit everyone. In his article, French observes that "to be understood, Steinbeck must be read as a reformer, not a revolutionary" (98). The true revolution never comes in the novel because Steinbeck is more interested in the heart transformation of the characters. This transformation is mainly represented by the perception of the "human Holy Spirit," and is introduced to the Joads by the preacher Jim Casy.

When Jim Casy is introduced in the novel, the reader becomes acquainted with his reflections upon the real meaning of religion. In his first conversation with Tom, he insists on saying that he is not a preacher anymore, and that he does not love Jesus

because he does not know anybody named Jesus. His real love is for people (23). The relations established among people become Casy's real religion, and the basis for what he believes is the real Holy Spirit.

At the beginning of the novel, Casy does not know exactly what the Holy Spirit is. He is seen at an early stage of learning, but his interest in trying to understand human relations is great. When he tries to explain them to Tom, he ponders the possibility of having found the real meaning of such a spirit, and opens the discussion about unity and equality in the novel.

> "I figgered about the Holy Sperit and the Jesus road. I figgered, 'Why do we got to hang it on God or Jesus? Maybe,' I figgered, 'maybe it's all men an' 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.' Now I sat there thinkin' it, an' all of a suddent—I knew it. I knew it so deep down that it was true, and I still know it." (24)

Casy's thoughts are only emerging at the beginning of the novel. Like the Joads, he has to experience the challenges of migration in order to prove to himself his theory. With Casy, however, the process of education happens faster and more willingly. His curiosity to learn more about the human soul will help him understand the importance of people's unity and cooperation. Soon, he will be able to teach the Joads the lesson he has learned.

Casy's values change when he starts to believe that there is something greater than his faith in God on Earth. His eagerness to learn with people is such that he asks to join the Joads in their journey to the west. He wants to be with people and learn something from them. He makes it clear to the Joads that he will not be a preacher on the road. He wants to learn from his people, not teach them.

> ". . . I ain't gonna try to teach 'em nothin'. I'm gonna try to learn. Gonna learn why the folks walks in the grass, gonna hear 'em talk, gonna hear 'em sing. Gonna listen to kids eatin' mush. Gonna hear husban' an' wife a-poundin' the mattress in the night. Gonna eat with 'em an' learn." (94)

Casy's emotional willingness to learn is such that his eyes become "wet and shining" during the speech (94).

Casy's speech sounds passionate and convincing. He emphasizes his intention to learn all the time, and denies his real gift. He does not yet understand his importance to the Joads' learning process. He does not want to be a preacher anymore, but he is called a preacher anyway. The narrator always refers to Casy as "the preacher," and so do the Joads. Although he refuses that title, he keeps it to himself, and starts to preach to the Joads what he is also learning. When he offers his help to Ma, she observes him curiously and says that salting the meat is "women's work," but he answers her back by saying that "[i]t's all work . . . They's too much of it to split it up to men's or women's work" (107). He reveals himself as an accurate observer of the people, which helps him understand the migrants' situation better.

With time, Casy becomes aware of the importance of cooperation, and what was, at first, obscure to him, becomes clear. When Tom knocks out a deputy in a camp, Casy takes the blame and goes to prison to protect Tom (266-7). Latter, as the leader of a peach-picking strike, Casy reencounters Tom and tells him what he has learned with other prisoners.

> "Well, they was nice fellas, ya see. What made 'em bad was they needed stuff. An' I begin to see, then. It's need that makes all the trouble. I ain't got it worked out. Well, one day they give us some beans that was sour. One fella started yellin', an' nothin' happened. He yelled his head off.

> Trusty come along an' looked in an' went on. Then another fella yelled. Well, sir, then we all got yellin'. And we all got on the same tone, An' I tell ya, it jus' seemed like that tank bulged an' give an' swelled up. By God! Then somepin' happened! They come a-runnin', an' they give us some other stuff to eat—give it to us. . ." (382)

The lesson Casy insists in trying to understand during the whole novel is before his eyes at the moment he first appears in the narrative. In prison, Casy's previous observations become concrete by the union of the prisoners. The "Holy Sperit" to which he refers at the beginning of the novel is the key to overcoming the common needs. Its materialization in the prisoners' protest is the conclusion to his theory. As a head of the strikers, Casy becomes a martyr to their cause (386). His theory, however, survives in the practices of the Joads, especially Ma and Tom.

As I have argued, readiness is a very important factor to the changes in the attitudes of the Joads. In the analysis of the characters, there is no doubt that Tom Joad is more prepared than any other member of his family except for his mother. As Ma Joad observes in the Weedpatch Camp, she does not have to lean on him, because he has more sense than the other men in the family (353). As a former convict, Tom demonstrates more experience than his folks. His restless and curious temper makes him a good observer. Combined with his caring behavior, these characteristics become essential to his learning process and to his transformations throughout the novel.

Tom Joad turns out to be a very dedicated disciple of Jim Casy. His conversations with the preacher enlighten his thoughts about the situation of his people. Despite his thoughtless behavior at times, Tom is usually inclined to help those who need him. At the beginning of the novel, we become aware of his first crime. He has been to prison for killing another man (13). Latter, on the road, he reaches for the jack

handle to hit a man who has called his family "Okies," but is stopped by his mother (279). When Casy is killed, his first reaction is to hit one of the men who have attacked the preacher. He commits his second homicide (386). As he knocks out a deputy in the camp, he is trying to protect a man he has just met (264). Except for his first crime, all his other acts flourish from his sympathy for his folks. These frivolous acts are unlike his willingness to support his own people.

In different passages in the novel, Tom is capable of sacrificing his own freedom for the people he recognizes as his own. Nevertheless, he also has to go through a process of education of his heart, just like the other members of his family. When his family stops in a camp and Ma cooks their meal, some starving children gather around the food, hoping for the Joads' compassion. Heart broken but in defense of the Joads, Tom refuses the food but tries to send the kids away, saying that they are not doing any good to his family (257). Latter on, in the Weedpatch Camp, he is invited to breakfast by a family he has just met (290). He learns that mutual cooperation has to go beyond the family sphere. He finds out that the Wallaces, the hosts, have been through a lot of pain before, and that has made them more willing to help others (293). Soon, Tom learns the right message and becomes a very active supporter of the migrants' cause.

Unable to understand Casy's words at first, Tom undergoes a deep and complete process of transformation throughout the novel. In the last conversation with his mother, he shows that he is ready to share the preacher's thoughts with the world. He can recognize in Casy's words the importance of union.

> "Lookie, Ma. I been all day an' all night hidin' alone. Guess who I been thinkin' about? Casy! He talked a lot. Used ta bother me. But now I been thinkin' what he said, an' I can remember—all of it. Says one time he went out in the wilderness to find his own soul, an' he foun' he didn'

> 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. Funny how I remember. Didn' think I was even listenin'. But I know now a fella ain't no good alone." (418)

In his last appearance in the novel, Tom teaches his mother the same lesson he has learned from Casy. His last words to Ma are touching and honest. If everyone is part of a great soul, she does not have to suffer from his departure. Like Casy, Tom is ready to embrace the fulfillment of the education of his heart, and leaves with Ma the responsibility of sharing the same thoughts with the rest of his family.

> ". . . Whenever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Whenever 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." (419)

Tom's complete identification with his people is the last step for his learning process. At the moment he sees himself in the others and in others' actions, he recognizes the importance of cooperation for the welfare of the whole group. His words to Ma reflect one of the most striking messages in the novel. Union makes people stronger, because it is by means of union that the "Holy Sperit" works properly.

3.3. "Talking Red:" A Marxist Reading of the "Holy Sperit"

As I have demonstrated in this chapter, the need for the union of the migrant families is one of the main debates on the novel. In the thoughts of Jim Casy, the Joads

find the practical meaning of what he calls the "Holy Sperit." Through cooperation, the family overcomes the obstacles of the journey, and starts to believe in the power of the group. It is the birth of a more socialized system in which the welfare of the whole depends on the work of each and all of its members.

Union is a social theme in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Togetherness is suggested as the first step to overcome the common problems of the migrant people. At the same time, it becomes a threat to the big land owners. When Steinbeck prompts the debate on union in his novel, he tries to evoke the discussion on the need for changes in the economic and social systems of the 1930s' United Sates. This debate allows the association of the novel with a Marxist reading.

One of the most important premises of Marxist criticism is the concern with the historical context in which a given text emerges. As Terry Eagleton affirms in his Preface to *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, "Marxist criticism analyses literature in terms of the historical conditions which produce it" (Preface, vi). In the case of *The Grapes of Wrath*, the historical context of migration is fundamental to the understanding of both the novel as a whole and the changes observed in the characters. In my first chapter, I have pointed out the most important historical facts of the 1930s in the United States as the basis of my analysis. The understanding of the historical context of migration helps to conclude that, when the Joads decide to transform themselves and build new social relations that include mutual cooperation and love for the other, they are taking into consideration everything that they have learned in this specific context.

Another important aspect of Marxism is, as Eagleton observes, its commitment to the explanation of social transformations.

> Marxism is a scientific theory of human societies and the practice of transforming them; and what that means, rather more concretely, is that

> the narrative Marxism has to deliver is the story of the struggles of men and women to free themselves from certain forms of exploitation and oppression. (Preface, vii)

The attempt to predict social transformation draws Steinbeck's novel close to Marxist interpretation. The struggle of the migrant families to become more decently treated in the new land is aimed at releasing them from the oppressive system in which they are inserted. The families want nothing more than to rebuild their lives. They only need a piece of land and a home to start over. The landowners, however, have their large lands and profits to protect. The migrants have to struggle against abuse and greed, so that they can live humanly. The reorganization in a more collective way is the means that they have to win over oppression.

The notion and understanding of what Casy calls the "Holy Sperit" is an essential part of this kind of analysis, since it is the starting point of these social changes. The Joads are not ready to transcend the family sphere before they realize the importance of mutual help. The welfare of each person depends on the strength of the whole group. This strength is only acquired when everybody works together. When Pa Joad suggests a working-party of the men to protect the families in the train cars, he is not only embracing the cause of his family, but helping other families in the same situation as the Joads. Rose of Sharon's maternal gesture towards the starving stranger is also the acknowledgement of the importance of mutual help.

The Joads may not understand what Casy exactly means by "a Holy Sperit." The preacher himself tries to figure it out throughout his personal journey, and only becomes aware of it when he goes to prison. In spite of that, they are capable of understanding the core of the "Holy Sperit" by experiencing in others' help the greatness of cooperation. When Grampa Joad gets sick, they find in a migrant couple from Arkansas

the physical and emotional support they need to carry on their journey. The Wilsons offer Grampa Joad their tent and their mattress so he can lie down and rest (136). When he dies, they also offer their support, helping the family bury Grampa (142-3). In the Weedpatch Camp, the Wallaces invite Tom to breakfast and tell him that they will help him find a job (291). If Casy's words are too complex, these selfless gestures are simple enough to bring the Joads to a more supportive way of dealing with their problems.

The idea of mutual help and, consequently, of mutual reliance is also connected to the overcome of class dominium, and suggests the break with oppressive forms of social organization. The migrant families reorganize their relations in order to face the obstacles to their survival in a new environment. Natural and economic problems are not the only barriers they find in their way. The Californian capitalist landowners and their protectors, the police force, also impede the prosperity of the migrants by suppressing their freedom in many ways. Only collective acts help the families to free themselves from the power of these groups.

The Weedpatch Camp is a clear example of an attempt to get free from the oppression of overwhelming groups. In the camp, the Joads are informed that the migrants, gathered in committees, are responsible for running the whole camp, and that the police cannot get into that place without a warrant (287). The committees are chosen by the families themselves and are formed by men and women who have the same urgencies as them. Everyone can be a member of a committee, even Tom (336). The Weedpatch Camp is the place where the migrant families can be themselves without worrying about the interference of the police or any group associated with the dominant classes in California. The camp is an independent world inside a bigger world. It has its own rules, but these rules must be followed by everyone who lives there. The entire organization of the Weedpatch camp is the responsibility of all, and the welfare of the

whole community depends on the work of each one. Even though it is a government camp, the migrants have the freedom to establish its working structure, and they take turns in committees. The Weedpatch Camp is an attempt to break with the oppressive forms of class organization by trusting in the competence and the spirit of collectiveness of the migrant families.

The strike in the peach-picking farm figures as another example of the "Holy Sperit" being put into practice in order to set the migrant families free from the capitalist landowners' dominance. In fact, Tom learns about the strike when he reencounters Jim Casy a few moments before the preacher's death. This is when Casy talks about his experience in prison, and tells Tom he has understood the importance of the union of men (382). The strike is the means that the peach-pickers have to raise their wages, but if there is not collaboration from all, they cannot achieve their goal. Casy and the other strikers find out that the Joads are making five cents for each box of peaches they pick, and alert Tom that soon they will get half the money for the same work. The only alternative to avoid that is by joining the strikers (382-4). The strike is a fight against the abusive practices of the landowners and also the concretization of the notion of the "Holy Sperit". Casy warns Tom of the risks his family is running, but also tries to teach him an importance lesson about union and mutual cooperation in the face of oppression.

The idea of the "Holy Sperit" is strongly associated with Marxist ideas. Even though it may be inaccurate to affirm that *The Grapes of Wrath* is a "Marxist novel," a Marxist reading of the novel is essential when one identifies the social transformations that occur in the text. Steinbeck seems to be extremely concerned with the understanding of the importance of collectiveness and the love for all. The combination of these two elements leads to the break with oppressive social organizations that ignore

a majority in the benefit of few people. The reorganization of the Joads and the other migrant families do not intent to take what the overpowering classes have, but to take what they need to live decently. It is a matter of revolting against the exaggerations of the capitalist system through the education of the hearts of the needy.

The Grapes of Wrath reflects Steinbeck's sympathy for Marxism, since the need for social transformation through union is deeply explored in the novel. It is the means that the migrant families have to survive in the new land. As I mentioned in the introduction to my thesis, Steinbeck's name was associated with Communism in the 1930s. Nevertheless, as I demonstrated in this chapter, he is more of a reformist than a Marxist revolutionary. And yet, while he suggests the social reform in his novel, he illustrates important Marxist concepts. Capitalist oppression and exploitation of the working class is a recurrent theme in the novel as well as in Marxist literary analysis. Even though Marx was thinking of the urban proletariat and not rural workers, the idea in *The Grapes of Wrath* is essentially the same. The migrant families depend on the low wages offered by the landowners, as it happens to the Joads on the peach-picking farm. Following this concept, class struggle emerges as another important Marxist notion in the novel. The migrant workers are systematically oppressed and soon start to reject the oppression, by reacting towards the workers' low wage and the inhuman treatment they have in the camps, for instance. The notion of the importance of collective action opposed to individual action is also a Marxist concept present in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Casy's conception of the "Holy Sperit" put into practice is the concretization of that notion.

Besides these Marxist concepts, the importance of historical context to the fictional world of the novel becomes an essential part of a Marxist reading of the novel. The historical scope helps one perceive the essence of the narrative. It is practically

impossible to separate the Joads' saga from the real migrant families' saga in the 1930s. *The Grapes of Wrath* has its place in history because it denounces the social abuses of the specific context of its creation. For being faithful to the migrants cause, Steinbeck's novel was appreciated by some and strongly rejected by others when it was published. Both French (100) and Worster (54-5) mention the aversion with which some people received the novel. In times when the United States feared a Communist advance in their own land, *The Grapes of Wrath* was interpreted by many as subversive. Ironically, a Marxist reading of the novel shows concepts such as capitalist oppression, class struggle, and the importance of collectiveness aim to raise the consciousness to a more respectful treatment of the migrant families, which makes of *The Grapes of Wrath* more of a humanist work than a Marxist novel.

4. A Break with the Old Values: Ma Joad's Importance for the Joads

In the previous chapters, I laid the groundwork for the major analysis of my thesis: the process of change identified in Ma Joad's attitudes throughout the novel. It is not possible to understand these changes without taking into account the socio-historical scope in which they occur. Her transformations take place at the same moment more complex transformations occur around her. Ma Joad's adaptability to the new circumstances is extremely important for her family's survival. In times of hopelessness, she gradually demonstrates her strength and assumes the position of the new head of the Joads. With Pa's loss of control over the migratory situation, the family's welfare depends on Ma's brave attitudes. Even though she is described as a powerful woman, Ma also undergoes a deep process of changes that will define much of the family's destiny. The purpose of this chapter is to show how these changes happen, as well as their consequences to the Joads. I also intend to demonstrate that the old patriarchal rules in which the Joad family is founded are left behind at the moment a more collective organization of the migrants is needed. The Marxist concepts of "ideology" and "hegemony" associated with the social changes will be bases for the analysis in this chapter.

4.1. The Education of Ma Joad: The Importance of Ma's Adaptability for the Family Survival

Under the circumstances of loss and migration, Ma Joad has to demonstrate her ability to adjust to the new situation. Like the other members of the family, she undergoes a deep process of learning. In her case, specifically, this process culminates in the assumption of control over the family's problems. Along the family's journey, Ma Joad transcends the motherly position and becomes the new head of the family. This

process of deep transformation has its core in the external transformations, but Ma's natural features will also be relevant.

When Ma Joad first appears in the novel, she is seen in her daily duties as a housewife (73). Nevertheless, her first characterization, a physical description, already shows the remarkable strength that will help her break with the typical housewife role in order to play a more effective part in the family:

> Ma was heavy, but not fat; thick with child-bearing and work. She wore a loose Mother Hubbard of gray cloth in which there had once been colored flowers, but the color was washed out now, so that the small flowered pattern was only a little lighter gray than the background. . . . Strong, freckled arms were bare to the elbow, and her hands were chubby and delicate, like those of a plump little girl. Her hazel eyes seemed to have experienced all possible tragedy and to have 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 her family, the strong place that could not be taken. (74)

Ma's physical features show that life experience has made her stronger. She is "thick with child-bearing and work." The typical duties of motherhood have helped her acquire a more resistant body structure, not easily destructible. The delicacy of her hands means that, somehow, she might present some childlike fragility at times. Ma's emotional constitution, however, is what completes her, and keeps her from falling apart during the family's journey. Experience has also contributed to her mental power, for she is introduced as a woman with "a superhuman understanding," who seems to recognize "her position, the citadel of the family."

Ma's position as "the citadel of the family" is important to understand the big changes in her attitudes along the novel. The word "citadel" works as a reference to the future struggle the family will face in their journey. By describing Ma Joad as a citadel, the narrator is not just giving her strong characteristics, but also emphasizing her ability to observe each member of the family in a privileged position and look after the whole family at troubled times. McKay describes Ma Joad as "indestructible" (59), and, indeed, this personal indestructibility is one of the most remarkable features of her character. The following scenes in the novel will show that she is capable of seeing the problems in advance and take care of the Joads in times of danger.

Although Ma Joad is presented as a strong woman right at the beginning of the novel, she recognizes her maternal role in the family according to a patriarchal model. When Jim Casy asks Tom and Ma to follow the family on their journey to California, she gives Tom the opportunity to say something, because he is a man. Tom does not respond to the preacher's appeal, and so she takes the opportunity and accepts Casy's request (93-4). When the family assembles to make the final decisions before their departure, she stays standing, like the other women and the children (100).

The family's assembly in chapter ten is meaningful for the understanding of the Joads' organization before they start to face the first obstacles of their journey, including Ma's position in the family. When the Joads gather near their truck, the men squat, forming a semi-circle. The women and the children stand behind the men. Grampa, being the head of the family, sits before the men and the children, facing them all (100). The patriarchal way in which the decisions are made is a remarkable fact in this passage. Although being too old to make his own decisions in the name of the Joads, Grampa still has a place of prestige in the family. While Pa Joad is responsible for designing the plan with the help of the others, Grampa's opinion is always heard

before the closure of the planning: “Grampa was still the titular head, but he no longer ruled. His position was honorary and a matter of custom. But he did have the right of first comment, no matter how silly his old mind might be” (101). Here, the Joads behave as an ordinary family organized in a traditional patriarchal structure. The men have their central importance in the making of decisions, whereas the women and the children have to stand behind the men, in an overshadowed position that allow them basically the right to observe what the men will decide for everyone.

The above structure is about to break when the family is put into a risky situation. During the family’s convention, Ma Joad seems to accept her place in the gathering. She stands like the other women. When the family is still gathered, she goes inside the house to take care of dinner, but is soon back and demonstrates that she is not a simple observer like the other women and the children. As seen in the third chapter of this thesis, in a very assertive way, Ma convinces the family that Casy has to join them in their journey, and this is the first time she wins over Pa in an argument (102). Her opinion is important to the family, and her word is strong and taken into consideration. When Pa asks Ma if they can take Casy with them she answers back by saying, “It ain’t kin we? It’s will we? . . . As far as ‘kin’, we can’t do nothin’, not go to California or nothin’; but as far as ‘will’, why, we’ll do what we will” (102). As the argument goes on, Pa replies by saying “But s’pose there just ain’t room? . . . S’pose we jus’ can’t get in the truck?” (102). Ma is not intimidated by his words and, once again, answers back, “There ain’t room now . . . There ain’t room for more’n six, an’ twelve is goin’ sure. One more ain’t gonna hurt; an’ a man, strong an’ healthy, ain’t never no burden” (102). Ma Joad’s assertiveness is responsible for Casy’s acceptance in the family. Ma’s retort is already a proof that she will not accept Pa’s decisions automatically. She is more capable of defending her points of view than Pa, which will make all the difference on

the Joads' journey. Besides, in this dialogue the reader has the first vivid image of Ma's inner power, and perceives one of her strongest qualities: her assertiveness. The reader suddenly understands why Ma is characterized as "the citadel of the family," and becomes aware of her ability to convince her own husband to act according to what she thinks is better for the Joads. This dialogue may also work as a foreshadowing device in the novel, since Ma will have many other arguments with Pa throughout the journey, and will win over him in all.

By addressing so strong and decisive words in favor of Casy, Ma becomes a central character up to the end of the story. When she goes back to the kitchen, the family waits for her return to the assembly, for she is "powerful in the group" (103). As the narrative develops, Ma Joad's assertiveness makes her decisions more important to the family's destiny. She is more effective at maintaining the family unity during the journey than Pa or Uncle John.

Although one can note Ma Joad's assertiveness right at the beginning of the novel, the deep changes in her behavior take place during the journey. When the Joads are on the road, they are introduced to the Wilsons (135). They soon become friends and after Grampa's death they decide to pursue their journey together. Later, in chapter sixteen, the Wilsons' car breaks down. They decide to stay on the road, while Tom and Casy try to get the car fixed. Ma Joad does not like the idea; she holds a jack handle and says she will not go. But Pa Joad replies by saying, "I tell you, you got to go. We made up our mind" (168). Suddenly, Ma Joad reveals a new feature in her characterization which will follow her to the end of the novel.

> And now Ma's mouth set hard. She said softly, "On'y way you gonna get me to go is whup me". She moved the jack handle gently again. "An' I'll shame you Pa. I won't take no whuppin', cryin' an' beggin'. I'll light

> into you. An' you ain't so sure you can whup me anyways. An' if ya do get me, I swear to God I'll wait till you got your back turned, or you're settin' down, an' I'll knock you belly-up with a bucket. I swear to Holy Jesus' sake I will." (168-9)

Ma shows that she can use her physical strength to threaten those who interfere in her decision. In the name of the family, she is capable of beating anyone, even her husband. She challenges Pa because she understands the importance of the family's union.

For the second time in the novel, Ma demonstrates how willing she is to defend her family's union. Her inner strength, which is manifested throughout her assertiveness, gradually becomes a typical characteristic in her behavior. Her threat to Pa is not the last one, but it brings great consequences to the whole family. Aware of these consequences, Ma finally begins a deep process of changes, which allow her to be stronger and more capable of helping her family along their journey. After this threat, Ma acquires the courage to conceal Granma's death from the inspection officers at the agricultural inspection and even from her family in order to help the Joads cross the desert. Granma's death is only revealed when the Joads reach the valleys, and the reason for Ma's attitude is soon explained.

> "I was afraid we wouldn' get acrost," she said. "I tol' Granma we couldn' he'p her. The fambly had ta get acrost. I tol' her, tol' her when she was a-dying'. We couldn' stop in the desert. There was the young ones—an' Rosasharn's baby. I tol' her." (228)

When Ma decides not to reveal Granma's death before the Joads get to cross the desert, she is defending the right of the rest of the family to look for prosperity in California. In normal conditions, a mother would never conceal the death of a beloved family

member. Under new circumstances, the search for survival is capable of changing Ma's attitudes in the name of the entire family's welfare.

Ma's control over the family is, up to a certain extent, necessary and provisory. When the Joads arrives at the government camp, the family enjoys provisional safety. Seeing the human way with which the families are treated in the Weedpatch camp, she mentions that she feels "like people again" (307), but a more interesting comment comes some pages later, when Rose of Sharon mentions that she has to work in the nursery and Ma answers her daughter in wonder.

> "Wouldn' it be nice if the menfolks all got work?" she asked. "Them a-workin', an' a little money comin' in?" Her eyes wondered into space. "Them a-workin', an' us a-workin' here, an' all them nice people. Fust thing we get a little ahead I'd get me a little stove—nice one . . ." (319)

This passage comes at a moment in which Ma feels that her family is safe. The government camp is a new opportunity for the Joads and many other migrant families in the middle of despair. As they are treated decently again, Ma starts to think of the family getting back to life on the old habits. She does not hesitate in assuming her motherly role in this supposed return to the standard patriarchal model of family, and attributes to the men the task of earning the money that will feed the family and even buy her a new stove.

The government camp episode seems, in fact, to work as an interlude to the novel. The migrant families almost get back to their usual life and partly forget the problems they have been facing in California. It is like a rapid return to home and to the old habits they have left behind. The sound of women singing while they wash their clothes can be heard (304), the families are treated like people again (307) and they all get excited on Saturdays, when the preparations for the dance get started (331). With

this interlude-like episode, Steinbeck seems to show that the Joads and the other families are not entirely ready to assume new social roles, and that they still have to face some obstacles before they reach their final transformation.

When Winfield starts to suffer from malnutrition at the government camp, Ma Joad realizes that it is time to do something. She does not get discouraged by the situation and is responsible for motivating the men in the family, who become quiet and speechless towards the problem (350-1). At this moment, Ma's control over the family's decisions grows again, and she becomes more important than any other Joad, because she is able to see the problem and talk it out. As the "citadel" of the Joads, Ma warns the family of the danger of starvation.

Ma Joad sees that her family cannot live in the government camp anymore, and she tells Pa that they have to leave the place soon. So, she gets everything set according to her will. The most remarkable example of Pa's loss of control over his family and Ma's assertiveness as a leader is about to occur. When she says that the family has to leave in the morning, Pa replies saying, "seems like times is changed . . . Time was when a man said what we'd do. Seems like women is tellin' now. Seems like it's purty near time to get out a stick" (352). However, once again, Ma is not intimidated by Pa's threat, and reaffirms her important place in the making of decisions.

> Ma put the clean dripping tin dish out on a box. She smiled down at her work. "You get your stick Pa," she said. "Times when they's food an' a place to set then maybe you can use your stick an' keep your skin whole. But you ain't a-doin' your job, either a-thinkin' or a-workin'. If you was, why, you could use your stick, an' women folks'd sniffle their nose an' creep-mouse aroun'. But you jus' get you a stick now an' you ain't

> licking no woman; you're a-fightin', 'cause I got a stick all laid out too." (352)

What is interesting in this passage is that Pa Joad recognizes the changes in the family structure, and admits that his words are not as important as hers anymore. He does not like it, but he realizes what is happening. In the same way, Ma answers him back by using the same tone. She admits that in other circumstances, Pa might still rule over his family, but, since the family has no definite place to live, or decent food to eat, he is not able to give orders to anyone. On the other hand, Ma Joad seems to be the only one who has not been deprived of her usual duties, and she takes that as a good reason to argue in favor of her decision. Ironically, Steinbeck inserts a new argument between Ma and Pa Joad in a context in which Ma is occupied with her domestic work. When she smiles at her work, she seems to be capable of putting into practice what Casy had previously taught her. What she is doing is work, and what Pa is doing is just complaining. In an unbalanced argument in which the wife keeps working and the husband only keeps complaining, Steinbeck subtly suggests to the reader that Ma Joad finally knows how a family should really work.

A last example of Ma Joad's control over the situation can be seen in chapter thirty, when the family faces the harsh rainstorm in California. When Ma Joad realizes that the water will flood the old train car the family uses as a house, she decides that it is time to leave it. This time, she counts on Rose of Sharon's help in her decision (450). The Joads, then, abandon the car and flee to a higher land where they can be safe from the flood. Ma Joad, in a brave gesture, puts Winfield set on her shoulder, and conducts the family to an old barn on a higher land (452). When they get to the barn, they find a boy and his father, who is starving to death. In a maternal gesture, Ma Joad looks at her daughter and smiles. Rose of Sharon understands what Ma means and breastfeeds the

starving man (454-5). In this passage, Ma does more than just showing what she has learned along the journey. She shares the learned lesson with her daughter who, even though having almost nothing, is still capable of giving something to those who have even less. The girl, who accepts Ma's smile as a sweet and understanding order, is willing to do what the family has expected from her throughout the whole journey: cooperation. In a demonstration of selfless behavior, Rose of Sharon seems to comprehend everything her mother has gone through, and her mother, in turn, shows to everyone that it is always possible to learn something from the obstacles of life.

The deep transformations in the structural organization of the Joads, associated to the social changes suffered by many families, allow Ma Joad to go beyond the domestic space typical of a patriarchal system. Concerning Ma's role in the novel, McKay states that

> in the face of such disaster, enforced idleness is the lot of men. Their work comes to a halt. The women, however, remain busy, for the housewife's traditional work, from which society claims she derives energy, purpose, and fulfillment, goes on. (55)

McKay's observation is important to understand how Ma gets her new position in the family. As I mentioned before, the first description of Ma already reveals her physical and emotional strength. Life experience—child-bearing and household work—forms the basis for her strength. If it is true that the maintenance of an occupation gives to Ma certain credibility in her arguments with Pa, it is also true that her inner strength is also important in this complex process of transformation.

As Ma Joad conquers the control over the decisions, she also learns a lot about collectiveness. Actually, when Steinbeck shows Ma as a new decision-maker, he is not suggesting that the migrant women have to invert the family organization and found

some kind of "matriarchal system." He suggests that the women also have to participate into the process of collectiveness. Ma never feels comfortable with assuming the responsibility over the family alone. She asks for Tom's help in keeping the family together, because she knows that he has more sense than the other men in the family (391-3), and even apologizes for making the decisions for the family, when she knows that Pa feels that his power over the family issues is gone (422). By highlighting Ma's ability to choose the best for her family, Steinbeck is demonstrating the importance of a more equal organization of the family in which the most prepared member in a given situation should lead the others. The patriarchal system cannot coexist with this kind of organization for too long, because the context of migration depicted in the novel has showed that the men are not always the most prepared members of a family. In the case of the Joads, Ma, together with Tom and Casy, is perfectly capable of adapting to the new conditions more easily, which is why she becomes the new head of the family.

Even though Ma demonstrates some readiness for assuming the responsibility for her family, she also undergoes a deep process of education throughout the novel. Like the other Joads, she has to learn the values of union and cooperation. Her strength and wisdom are important means by which this process occurs. Ma reveals herself to be a good learner, and even teaches her family some important lessons.

At the beginning of the novel, she is still attached to the old patriarchal system. Even though she keeps arguing with Pa, she believes that work should be divided into men's and women's work. After the Joads' assembly, the family starts to work to have everything set for their departure. When she is salting the meat and Casy offers some help, she says that is "women's work," but Casy teaches her that "it's all work . . . they's too much of it to split it up to men's or women's work" (107). Here, she is still convinced that all the work in the family is categorized into what men and women are

supposed to do. Nevertheless, Casy does not believe that, and teaches her that work is work for anyone. That is the first moment of learning for Ma. She comprehends that what she has been doing throughout her entire life as a mother is as essential as any work done by the men in the family, although the patriarchal structure in which the Joads are inserted might deny it. At this point, Ma is motivated by Casy to believe that she has never been inferior to men, but just as human and valuable as them.

The lessons on collectiveness take a bit longer, but they start to flourish on the family's journey, when she gets to see the reality that surrounds the migrants. Ma's overprotective behavior towards her family makes her think of the Joads before any other family in the same situation. When the family stops at a poor camp in California, she is ashamed about the starving children, but she is not willing to take the Joads' food to give to strangers.

> Ma shook her head. "I dunno what to do. I can't rob the fambly. I got to feed the fambly. Ruthie, Winfiel', Al," she cried fiercely. "Take your plates. Hurry up. Git in the tent quick." She looked apologetically at the waiting children. "There ain't enough," She said humbly. (258)

She has to feed her own folks before she considers sharing the food with strangers, but she shows some compassion and regret for her attitude and shares the little that is left out with the children (258). This passage shows that Ma is not strong enough to face children's starvation and malnutrition. She goes into the tent and refuses to see them fighting for the food (258). It also shows that she is not entirely ready for the most important lesson in the novel. Her regret at picking her family over the children, however, demonstrates that she is closer to learning.

The obstacles of the journey reveal the reality of the migrants' situation. Being able to observe the problems better, Ma starts to learn the essence of cooperation among

the poor people. When she goes to a grocery store and is helped by the store employee, she finally comprehends the importance of mutual help among the needy. The man takes ten cents from his pocket so that Ma can buy the sugar (376). The clerk's gesture is the lesson Ma has waited for too long. Like her, he is poor. He cannot give her the sugar without the money, and the store does not sell for credit. The employee, in a selfless attitude, takes his scarce money and provides Ma with more than the sugar. For Ma, this is also an epiphanic moment.

> Ma studied him. Her hand went blindly out and put the little bag of sugar on the pile in her arm. "Thanks to you," she said quietly. She started for the door, and when she reached it, she turned about. "I'm learnin' one thing good," she said. "Learnin' it all a time, ever' day. If you're in trouble or hurt or need—go to poor people. They're the only ones that'll help—the only ones." The screen door slammed behind her. (376)

Ma seems to have learned the core lesson of the journey at the moment she leaves the grocery store. She knows that she can count on the poor people because they are the ones who help each other in times of trouble. Cooperation becomes part of Ma's behavior, and the idea of the "Holy Sperit" introduced by Jim Casy she also puts into practice. When Mrs. Wainwright offers her some help in the train car, she thanks the woman's help and shares with her what she has learned on her journey.

> The stout woman smiled. "No need to thank. Ever'body's in the same wagon. S'pose we was down. You'd give us a han'."
>
> "Yes," Ma said, "we would."
>
> "Or anybody."
>
> "Or anybody. 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." (445)

The "wagon" to which Mrs. Wainwright refers can be seen as a metaphor for the situation in which the migrant families are found in the novel. They all share the same problems, and that makes them the same. Ma in turn understands this and recognizes the importance of the "anybody." She knows that the Joads are not the only family in this "wagon." Earlier, she would not have the same opinion. When she gives food to the starving children in the Hooverville, she still believes that she has to take care of her family first. After facing all the obstacles of the journey, she comprehends the complexity of the problems that surround the migrant families and becomes more willing to help anyone who is in trouble.

With Ma's capacity for learning more from the situation, she becomes a reference to her own group, the Joads. It is in Ma that the rest of the family looks for comfort, and it is in Ma that they find the needed safety. She is capable of making Tom see that he is the man in the family who has more sense (353), and of showing some affection and consolation to Ruthie when the girl says to other children that her brother has killed another man (414). With Pa's loss of control over the family, she is able to explain to him the difference between men and women, and gently comforts her husband with wise words.

> "Woman can change better'n a man," Ma said soothingly. "Woman got all her life in her arms. Man got it all in his head. Don' you mind. Maybe—well, maybe nex' year we can get a place."
>
> "We got nothin', now," Pa said. ". . . Seems like our life's over an' done."
>
> "No, it ain't," Ma smiled. "It ain't, Pa. An' that's one more thing a woman knows. I noticed that. Man, he lives in jerks—baby born an' a man dies, an' that's a jerk—gets a farm an' loses his farm, an' that's a

> jerk. Woman, it's all one flow, like a stream, little eddies, little waterfalls, but the river, it goes right on. Woman looks at it like that. We ain't gonna die out. People is goin' on—changin' a little, maybe, but goin' right on." (423)

By comparing a woman's life to a river, Ma teaches Pa what she has learned from her life experience. The consolation she offers to her husband is what makes him trust her even more. This way, Ma shows to the Joads that they can feel safe around her. She has both the physical and emotional strength that the family needs, and she never refuses her position of the citadel of the family.

Ma's strength is the base the family finds in times of loss. She becomes more than the family's adviser and helper. She is the Joads' shelter through her multiple virtues. As Perez observes, Ma's positive attributes "are the foundation of "home"-ness—all that will be left when the physical structure of the house has completely disappeared" (847). With the complex characterization of Ma Joad, then, Steinbeck suggests that human qualities are the basis for rebuilding life when desperation seems to take control over people.

The transcendence of the role of a housewife's traditional position to the head of her family in Ma Joad's characterization takes place throughout the novel. Her condition of "the citadel of the family" is proved by the many attitudes she has during the journey. That condition guarantees her importance for the family's survival. Ma cannot keep the Joads together up to the end of the novel, however, and the narrative ends before we know what happens after the flood. Nonetheless, she endeavors to keep the Joads as a whole existing, and she achieves that in the sense that the unity of the family still remains at the end of the novel. As the shelter of the Joads, Ma demonstrates that there are more important values to acquire than the old ones. When she goes

beyond the old patriarchal rules, she shows that the family has to replace these values for more effective and collective ones, if they are to survive. It is the achievement of overcoming patriarchal ideology.

4.2. The Subject, Ideology and Hegemony: A Marxist Reading of Ma's Adaptability

In the previous chapter, I introduced some general Marxist concepts in the novel. Capitalist oppression, class struggle, and the importance of collectiveness were partly dealt with in order to understand the "reformist" tone in *The Grapes of Wrath*. These notions were used in a broader sense, since the intention was to observe the social transformations that occur in the novel as a whole. Marxist critics have always been concerned with trying to explain the socio-economic relations found at a given time in history. For them, these relations are founded upon an economic "structure" that, according to Eagleton, "is more commonly known by Marxism as the economic 'base' or 'infrastructure' " (5). The structure is, in fact, composed of the direct relations of production in which there is always a more powerful group that maintains its control over the masses. In the case of *The Grapes of Wrath*, for instance, one might identify the relations found between the landowners and the migrant workers as the socio-economic structure.

At the same time as the social relations, certain "regulations" emerge in order to guarantee the control of the ruling class over the oppressed. These regulations belong to what is usually referred to as the "superstructure," which, according to Eagleton, is composed of "certain forms of law and politics," and "also consists of certain 'definite forms of social consciousness' (political, religious, ethical, aesthetic and so on), which is what Marxism designates as *ideology*" (5). According to Raman Selden, Marx and

Engels saw the dominant social class as the determinant of the way people face human existence. For them, legal systems and politics are structured upon the socio-economic relations established at a particular moment of history. "Ideology" is, thus, for Marx and Engels, the collection of assumptions and beliefs that are built upon the relations between the dominant and the oppressed social classes (89). As they state in *German Ideology*, "we do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive, . . .We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process" (768). Every idea that cooperates to inculcate the supremacy of a given class can be seen as ideology. Ideology, then, is a complex set of values that work in order to assert the dominance of a certain group in society. It has a negative connotation for Marxist critics, since it is used as a means of oppression in favor of a minority. In addition, it is usually passively accepted and practiced by the oppressed groups, who are not always capable of identifying the maintenance of dominance through it.

Strongly influenced by Marxist thought, Louis Althusser became interested in how ideology is established at a given time and in a given society. According to Catherine Belsey, in "Constructing the Subject Deconstructing the Text," Althusser, differently from Marx and Engels, did not see ideology as "a set of illusions . . . but a system of representations (discourses, images, myths) concerning the real relations in which people live" (657). In his well-known essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Althusser is concerned with the social relations among the different classes and how the State exercises its power over people. He points out that the State power is exercised through a "Repressive State Apparatus" (the alliance among public forces such as the Government, the Administration, the Police, the Army, and so on) and of what he calls the "Ideological State Apparatuses" (ISAs), which are private

institutions such as the different churches, the public and private schools, the family, and other cultural institutions (1488-89). The difference between the Repressive State Apparatus and the ISAs is that the former basically "functions 'by violence'" (1490), while the latter "function 'by ideology'," unified by the ideology of the "ruling class" (1491), which means that every ISA reflects the ideology of the dominant groups. Ideology "'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among individuals" (1504) and people are subject to the ruling ideology when they respond to its interpellation. For instance, when individuals respond to God's invitation to be His subjects, they recognize and accept their subjection to God and to the religious ideology that assures their belief in God as the Supreme Being (1506). When the mother accepts her position of nurturer of the family, the one who takes care of the household chores while her husband provides the money for the family's expenses, she is also accepting or responding to the call of the patriarchal ideology in which she is inserted. Through the ideology of the ruling class, therefore, we are called to assume our places in society. In religion, we are subject to the rules of God, in the family environment, we assume our roles as fathers, mothers, sons and daughters—and the implications of those roles. If we refuse its invitation, its interpellation, we become "bad" subjects within society, the moment when the Repressive State Apparatus come into play.

Although the religious and the family ISAs have an important position in the relation between classes, it is, according to Althusser, the "educational ideological apparatus" which is "in fact the dominant ideological State apparatus in capitalist social formation" since it reproduces "the relations of production, i.e. of capitalist relations of exploitation" by teaching the child "a certain amount of 'know-how' wrapped in the ruling ideology, or simply the ruling ideology in its pure state (ethics, civic instruction, philosophy") (1494). What Althusser is trying to explain is that the repressor-repressed

relation is guaranteed through education, since it is at school that individuals are instructed to behave according to the rules of the dominant class. The values and assumptions of those who are in charge are inculcated in individuals, who learn to answer to the call of the ruling ideology without easily questioning it.

In order to understand the kind of transformation undergone by Ma Joad in the novel, it is necessary to transfer the Marxist notion of ideology to the family sphere. If it is true that the family is also an ISA, as pointed out by Althusser, then the roles of the individuals in the family are established by the ideology that governs that given society in which the family is inserted. At this point, I do not intend to use the term "ideology" to define the relations between dominant and dominated classes, but those relations between genders and gender roles. In my opinion, Steinbeck seems to be criticizing both the ideology of the economic dominant class and the ideology of the gender-dominant class in his novel, suggesting a new organization in which men and women are both responsible for the survival of a whole community.

Although Ma Joad is described as a strong woman, she occupies, at the beginning of the novel, the place that is designed for women in a patriarchal society. Ideologically speaking, Ma Joad has to exercise the typical work assigned to traditional mothers, and, so, responding to the subjection of the prevailing ideology of her time. She may have her words heard in the family's assembly, but she has to stay standing like the other women and the children in the family. At the same time she participates in the decisions, she has to take care of the kitchen and make dinner. Ma's interference during the Joads' assembly brings some discomfort and shame to Pa, who should be responsible for making all the decisions for the family (102). This shows that Ma Joad is already willing to break with the patriarchal rules in order to do what she believes to be more sensible to be done. She believes the family has to carry Jim Casy with them,

whereas Pa disagrees. Pa's reaction is the proof that patriarchal protocols have been broken. That will happen constantly in the novel up to the moment the old system (patriarchal) is completely overcome.

As soon as Ma Joad assumes the responsibility over the family, the patriarchal rules cannot be put into practice anymore. It is time to break with the oppressive ideology that underestimates women in favor of men. During the journey, Ma Joad is never intimidated by Pa's comments, so much so that when they argue at the government camp, Pa does not succeed in repressing her. When she answers Pa back, challenging him, she demonstrates that in such a harsh situation, the patriarchal model is not acceptable. Differently from Pa, Ma is still working. She keeps on doing her usual work and, at the same time, becomes the shelter of the whole family. The relation of dominance once established between men and women cannot exist when the only person in the family who is still accomplishing some work is the mother. In an extreme act of liberation, Ma makes it clear to Pa that the old patriarchal prerogatives do not have any value in the face of male's forced idleness.

As I have already pointed out, Ma Joad undergoes a deep process of learning by the tough circumstances of migration. Her attitudes towards her family are deeply connected to her ability to understand that her role and the roles of the other Joads are those of cooperation and mutual help, and no longer those patriarchally established. When Ma starts to argue with Pa, and shows no subjection to him anymore, she also leaves her subjection to the patriarchal model behind. Even though it seems hard to break with the established ideology—it is inculcated through the discourse of social institutions such as religion, education, and the family itself—Ma seems to be capable of overcoming it by her increasing importance to the Joads throughout their journey.

In a gradual process of learning, then, the Joads, especially Ma, understand that a family is not made of mothers or fathers only, but of people who need to cooperate in times of necessity. That is the lesson taught by Casy to Ma Joad before the family leaves their homeland. In this sense, Ma Joad is able to break with the old patriarchal ideology which excludes women from the main decisions, assigning different roles to men and women, and expecting that they rule or are ruled over, respectively. Ma Joad is not simply a woman who overcomes natural or socio-historical obstacles in a constant search for her family's survival. She is also a woman who fights against the ideological patterns that privilege men and treat women as inferior.

Another Marxist concept important to this analysis is that of "hegemony," as proposed by the Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci. For Gramsci, hegemony takes place when the "great masses of population spontaneously" consent to the way of life imposed by the dominant class. When a given group refuses to consent to the ideas of the dominant group, the "apparatus of state" comes into play and "'legally' enforces discipline" (1143). According to Gramsci, consent must be historically won, and it is assured by the work of intellectuals, who are trained to do specific tasks that guarantee the maintenance of the hegemony of the "civil" and "political" societies that govern a given way of production (1143).

For Gramsci, there are no non-intellectual individuals, but individuals who perform "intellectual" or "muscular-nervous" work within a given context. Basically, every individual can be regarded as an "intellectual" in this sense, according to his or her role in society (1140). He sees two different kinds of intellectuals. The traditional intellectuals are those who represent social, political, and cultural institutions, for instance. The organic intellectuals emerge from the various social groups that usually establish an antagonistic relation to those institutions, and are responsible for organizing

the aspirations of these groups. It seems that traditional intellectuals, as Gramsci proposes, usually act according to the rules of the dominant group, guaranteeing this group hegemony, and do not have the autonomy to go against the rules of the State. The organic intellectuals, on the contrary, usually work in favor of other social groups that intent to assume the power over the dominant class. This way, Gramsci recognizes that not only is it possible for any social group to work toward overcoming dominance (hegemony), but also it is important for that group to succeed "in elaborating its own organic intellectuals" at the same time it conquers "ideologically" what he calls "traditional intellectuals" (1141). Hegemony will exist as long as class struggles exist, as it seems to happen with the ideologies as defined by Althusser.

Even though Gramsci's concept of "hegemony" is applied in a broader scope of social relations, namely economic ones, it may also be applied to an analysis of the family relations in *The Grapes of Wrath* because it seems to be intimately related to the issues raised in the novel. When Ma Joad suggests a break with patriarchal ideology, she is also suggesting the overcoming of patriarchal hegemony. She makes it possible for her family to perceive and embrace a new way of union in which the dominance of stronger over weaker gives way to a more democratic collectivity. One may see Ma Joad as a kind of "organic intellectual" of the migrants, like Jim Casy and Tom Joad, because she becomes a spokesperson of the desires of that group. At the same time, she helps Casy and Tom articulate the family in order to form a more collective organization of the Joads in the face of unforeseen obstacles. It is worth mentioning at this point that, when Ma Joad embraces Casy's ideas of union and mutual help, she is not speaking for a male intellectual, but for anyone who believes in the equality of people, regardless of their gender or social status. She is not reproducing the discourse of a male character, but of a human being, and putting into practice the knowledge she

has also acquired from her experiences in the journey. She is capable of learning together with Casy and Tom, and not just being inferior to them in this learning process. Her own experience on the road is extremely important to the transformation of the other Joads. This way, she earns more than the fixed patriarchal role of nurturer and housewife.

Gramsci's view on "hegemony" makes it clear that domination is a constant part of the relations established among classes. At the moment a new group emerges as the dominant one, other groups have to stay in an oppressed and deprived position. Hegemony is historically maintained by class struggle. It only stops existing if class differences also vanish. In the case of *The Grapes of Wrath*, one may see that class struggle is far from being replaced by a more equalitarian organization of society. The migrant families have to face a lot of obstacles before they can succeed in their hope of having a fixed place to live and plant, and the novel ends before that occurs. In the family sphere, however, Ma Joad assumes a more influential position as the Joads' saga goes on.

It is worthy of mention that the process of exercising a dominant role in the family is, for Ma, unwilling and provisory. She makes it clear in one of her last conversations with Pa Joad that their lives are not over, and that they still have a lot to live for (423). With her apologetic tone in this conversation, Ma suggests that she is never satisfied with making the decisions alone. As already demonstrated, she also desires a more collective way of organization. Since the novel has a laconic ending—it never shows what happens to the Joads after the breastfeeding scene—there is no way to affirm for how long Ma will keep on exercising a leading role over the Joads. Nevertheless, from her desire to put into practice the values of collectiveness and

mutual help, one may conclude that this role will only exist as long as the Joads need a stronger and more capable leader in their struggle for survival.

The Marxist concepts of “ideology” and “hegemony,” then, transferred to the family sphere, are important theoretical references to the analysis of the changes Ma Joad undergoes throughout the journey. They help one understand how she becomes more than the strong woman who takes cares of the household chores and also assumes a position of leadership in the family. In the face of the obstacles of the Joads’ migration, Ma Joad has to break with the patriarchal rules and ideology, as well as to transfer to herself the domain over the family in order to keep the family existing. This shows the major importance of Ma Joad to the novel, not only as a character, but also as a woman who goes beyond the patriarchal position assigned to her to play a more effective role in her family’s issues.

Conclusion

As I have attempted to show in this thesis, the migratory movement depicted in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* contributes to the establishment of new relations and social values. In the face of loss and desperation, the migrant families find in union and mutual help the strength they need to survive. Individualism is gradually replaced by collectivism, and the family structure is reorganized in order to bring everyone together. In their struggle for survival, the migrants learn that they have to leave old values behind and embrace the cause of the whole group. In this context, the Joads undergo a profound process of education, and Ma Joad emerges as the new head of the family.

Ma Joad's first description allows one to perceive her physical firmness and mental strength. These attributes are essential—but not sufficient—in her transcending the housewife function in the family in order to play a more important role in the Joads' lives. Even though Ma is already described as a strong woman at the beginning of the novel, she is not capable of entirely breaking with the patriarchal rules before the family sets off on their journey to California. With the emotional instability of the men in the family and the acquisition of new values, she soon emerges as the one responsible for the Joads welfare. Ma becomes the new decision maker in the family because the circumstances allow her to do so. The changes around Ma Joad, then, figure as the causes of her inner transformations. These transformations, consequently, are important to her most striking actions in the novel.

In order to have Ma Joad's transformations investigated and understood, I have established an outside-inside analysis of the novel, from the historical context in which the narrative takes place to the specific changes observed in Ma Joad. The troubled 1930s brought unemployment, extreme poverty, and starvation to many real American families. The consequences of the Great Depression were larger for the families who

lived in the plains, for they also had to face the Dust Bowl phenomenon and the loss of their lands. With no place to stay, these families had to risk a new life in the western states, especially California, the "promised land." The real families who had to leave their homeland found no more than harshness in the west, and, it is within this context that Steinbeck presents the Joads and other fictional families.

The migrant families depicted in *The Grapes of Wrath* undergo a process of extreme loss and desperation that forces them to change their attitudes. The men, used to rule over their families, feel displaced when their lands are taken away from them. Their feeling of connection to the land is so intense that they become paralyzed by their new condition. The land is part of their body and their soul and, for that reason, they feel impotent. Women and children, for their part, still have their usual roles to develop in their families. Initially without action, the migrant men lose control over their families but soon recognize in togetherness the strength they need to face their problems. The families, then, draw on collective experience to build new social relations and values that allow them to keep on existing as a larger group.

The Joads do not behave differently from the other families in the novel. First portrayed in a patriarchal model, they are individualists and do not see the importance of union for their struggle for survival. The appearance of the preacher Jim Casy represents the beginning of the changes in the way the family faces their world. Not knowing exactly what he himself means, Jim Casy teaches the Joads the significance of collectiveness, represented by his concept of "Holly Sperit." Preparedness figures as an essential factor in the family members' transformations. Starting from Tom and Ma, the Joads learn that they have to abandon selfishness if they are to overcome the obstacles of their journey. For Ma Joad, the social changes also mean her transcendence to a more effective position in the family. With Pa's loss of control over the situation, Ma Joad

has to stay firm and decisive in order to guarantee the welfare of her folks. With time, she also learns a different concept of family, which includes everyone in the same situation as the Joads, and takes up more determined behavior towards the condition of loss.

As the Joads' new decision maker, Ma is capable of rupturing the patriarchal rules and ideology. She transfers to herself the responsibility for the family, because she is the only adult member who possesses the needed integrity to do so. In this way, Ma Joad emerges as an important character in the novel, and demonstrates how devoted Steinbeck is to her construction and to the novel as a whole. Ma Joad represents thousands of real women and people who had to adapt their lives in order to fight for better living conditions during the economic downturn of the 1930s. Moreover, the characterization of Ma Joad and her family is the way Steinbeck finds to share with his contemporary reader the necessity of adaptation to break with the unfairness of the capitalist system of his time.

Even though *The Grapes of Wrath* cannot be labeled as a Marxist novel, I have showed in my thesis that it is possible, and important, to do a Marxist reading. When the author points out the reorganization of the migrant families in order to fight against the inequities of the economic American system, he also suggests the social transformation of the United States, for that might be the proper way to avoid new social catastrophe, such as the one the 1930s' migrants experienced. By portraying the exploitation of the rural families and the repressive way in which the landowners (basically represented by the police force) treat the migrants, Steinbeck establishes a parallel with the Marxist analysis of socio-economic relations. By showing the deep process of change and reorganization of the families, he proposes a solution to the inequities through family adaptation and social action.

The process of social transformation to which Steinbeck devotes his novel is cyclical and depends on the action of each and everyone. Stimulated by the harsh changes around them, the Joads are obliged to change their thoughts and attitudes, and to react to the harsh changes in order to bring harmony into their lives again. The transformation of the Joads into more collectively minded family is the start of the larger change with which Steinbeck is concerned. Railton suggests that rather than "Paine, Marx, Jefferson, Lenin," Steinbeck's novel "is best identified with a different list: Winthrop, Edwards, Emerson, Whitman," for its main focus is on the inner change of people as the means of "social salvation" (45). The main characters first go through a deep inner process of transformation that allows them to act towards the difficulties of their journey.

The process of inner transformation undergone by Ma Joad leads one to believe that it is possible to break with the inequities of society, starting from the family sphere, if internal readiness is also fulfilled. Ma's physical firmness and mental strength are not enough to break completely with the patriarchal rules and ideology. Spiritual vigor is the third factor necessary to this rupture. Ma's spiritual growth occurs at the same time she experiences the most austere obstacles in her particular journey to the west and learns the lessons taught by Jim Casy.

Finally, it is worthy of mention that *The Grapes of Wrath* is more than a novel about social transformation. It is also a novel about personal inner changes, or, as Railton points out, a novel about "conversion" (29). My analysis of the Joads' changes, especially Ma's, therefore, leads to the conclusion that the integration of internal readiness and external action is the first step to the overcoming of social instability of the oppressive system portrayed in the novel. It also indicates the viability of

establishing a dialogue between social revolutionaries and transcendentalists as a future topic of study of the novel.

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