



## **Female Characters' Rule in Rise and Fall of Modern American Society: A Case Study of John Steinbeck's Masterpieces**

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### **Abstract**

The reasons of the study are to explore the situations in which women characters exercise power in relationship with men and to investigate in most of Steinbeck's work that the women characters carry dominant and active roles, which they gain empowerment in the selected novels. Although feminists are interested in criticizing the subordination of women, many works concerning women empowerment are also found in the canon. Thus, efforts to look at Steinbeck's works in relation to his women characters and power should also be given importance.

**Keywords:** Female characters, John Steinbeck's masterpieces, American literature

### **INTRODUCTION**

Steinbeck as an author is hard to categorize. He has both been associated with socialism, and he has been advisor to an American president. For a story that so easily can be placed in time and space, the story is very detached from the real world. Steinbeck starts his story by giving a lively description of the environment. Then what we could see in a still webcam. The clear depiction fits well with Steinbeck's naturalistic heritage as environmental depiction was an integral part of the literary genre. Further, the reality during the depression years was that many people dreamt about something of their own, but few could realize their dreams. George and Lennie are a good example of the dreamers of the American Dream, and also a good example of whose life could be changed if the dream was true for everyone. Further, the main characters are from the lower class of society.

From a literary point of view, this is not strange at all. It is an essential part of the genre, although people usually preferred books about people from higher classes. George and Lennie are losers, not at all the fittest survivors, and two people who could be icons of a lost American Dream. They contradict the mythology of America, the belief in freedom,

equality, opportunity, and a social order where people are accepted for what they are. In the tradition of naturalism, Steinbeck depicts his characters thoroughly, and they are portrayed in such way that we shall get an idea what kind of people they are and not only how they look. Lennie is portrayed as huge, shapeless of face, large pale eyes, sloping shoulders, walking heavily like a bear. This is not only a depiction that tells us about how he looks. We also get to know something about him. He is like a bear; he shares similarities with a Steinbeck's choice of language is a way of making the story as realistic as possible. The story takes place among people for whom demotic English is standard. The language is an essential part of the characterization in *Of Mice and Men* as it makes the characters who they are bear. Steinbeck depicts the environment and his characters thoroughly. The main characters are lower class people, and they use non-standard English. While Steinbeck was one of the leftist authors that would not sacrifice aesthetic for didacticism, *The Grapes of Wrath* was a novel that Steinbeck intended as something pointedly concerned with itinerant farm workers.

This novel was designed from the onset to be a social commentary, meant to convey Steinbeck's own moral and political philosophy to the reader. In the journal he kept while he was writing this book, he wrote, "This must be a good book. It simply must. I haven't any choice," and that he must struggle to make it so, "until the whole throbbing thing emerges" (*Working Days*, 25). Steinbeck felt passionately about *The Grapes of Wrath* because he was concerned about the itinerant workers suffering all over California, while the creation of this text also gave him an opportunity to further expound upon his own leftist beliefs and the nature of the phalanx. Perhaps the amount of passion that went into the crafting of this particular novel is the reason Joseph Beach said, "The *Grapes of Wrath* is probably the finest example produced in the United States of what in the thirties was called the proletarian novel" (250). The *Grapes of Wrath* is more widely accepted as a radical novel, but the emerging mysticism concerning the phalanx that Steinbeck ascribes to his more leftist characters, simultaneously serves to uphold the rift between him and the more traditional. Radical novelists. An analysis of *The Grapes of Wrath* will illustrate the evolution of Steinbeck's philosophy, as the tone of *In Dubious Battle* is left behind.

The *Grapes of Wrath* is more widely considered as a radical novel, not just because Steinbeck forgoes the attack on labor organizers and strives to create a more realistic image of his subjects, but because this novel embraces many of the forms that radical novels rely upon. Haut *The Grapes of Wrath* there are an abundance of underlying Marxist principles. This is not to suggest that Steinbeck is reproducing Marx, but rather that there is a basic agreement between the philosophy of Marx and the philosophy of Steinbeck.

This agreement is one of the reasons that Steinbeck occupies such a precarious position in relation to the radical tradition of the 1930's. Steinbeck's philosophy is more similar to the Marxism on which the philosophy of the Party is based, than it is with the philosophy of the Party being illustrated in most radical novels. As illustrated earlier in this chapter, Steinbeck depicted the agrarian lifestyle as the heart of the American dream. This image is present throughout a majority of his novels, most poignantly in his depiction of the American dream in *Of Mice and Men*, which presented an image of group-man's ability to exist without being reliant on the capitalist system. In *The Economic and*

Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, Marx suggests that, "Agriculture is the only productive labor" (130), and this basic principle sets up the correlation between Marx's argument and Steinbeck's commentary on the industrialization of farming.

Feminist literary criticism is a branch of interdisciplinary inquiry that studies gender as an important category of analysis. There are two premises about gender: the first one is that the inequality of the sexes is a cultural construct and not a biological imposition; the second is related to man's power that has dominated knowledge and imposed his beliefs as universal, shaping methods and paradigms of human relationships. The feminist point of view really enriches this analysis because feminist criticism has two important concerns, one is to revise concepts thought as universal, and the other is to restore a female perspective more deeply. Feminist criticism has shown that traditional criticism reinforces images of women and behavior and encourages them to accept subordination by praising women for virtues like humility, passivity and subordination. It is through feminist criticism that women confront patriarchal values and unveil the prejudices against them expressed in male texts.

Men often felt burdened with the responsibility of being the breadwinner, and women often felt trapped within the limiting domestic roles of wife and mother. Within the text of *East of Eden*, Steinbeck reimagines the sexual tensions and cultural dynamics in America during the 1950s. Specifically, he critiques the constructions and limitations society imposes upon women by basing their identity and femininity on domesticity. According to Wyatt, "While busy fighting wars, both cold and hot, the 1950s invested its conscious energy in the domestic pursuit of happiness, and the structure of *Eden* reflects this" (xviii).

*The Grapes of Wrath*, one of John Steinbeck's great experiments, explodes upon the American conscience in 1939, picturing the intimate reality of the Joads' suffering and the plight of the dust bowl, Oklahoma Migrants. It is a tale of oppression and endurance, Louis Kronenberger remarks the novel as —the most moving and disturbing social novel of our time. *The Grapes of Wrath* starts with the land—the red and gray land, turning cracked and dry—and the young corn, bending slow and despondently back toward the earth. The narrator's eye rises from the ground, as wind kicks dust from the earth and the sharecroppers cower inside their small houses, fearing for the land that is their lifeblood.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Introducing and familiarizing the readers with the importance and paradox of the siren ladies position in modern American society and literature. The parasitic, manipulative Cathy is the embodiment of evil in the novel and the most static of the main characters. Her evil seems to be innate and all-consuming, as she displays murderous and sexually perverse tendencies from an early age. A figure of infertility and destruction who kills her parents and attempts to kill her own unborn children, Cathy is a debased version of the biblical Eve, whom the Christian tradition sees as the mother of all humankind. Like Eve, Cathy is associated with sin, Cathy embraces it wholeheartedly and commits evil simply for its own sake. Ma Joad is the emotional and physical backbone of the family, Ma's primary obligation is to take care of her family, to provide them with nourishment,

comfort, healing, and, support. Her family will only know fear and pain through her, so she works hard to deny these emotions in herself. Likewise, they look to her for laughter, so she builds joy out of small moments. Above all, however, her calm, unflappable strength binds everyone together. Ma finds this strength in love.

In *The Essential Criticism of John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men* (2009) Meyer believes that though all of these critics analyses the same character, the differences in the conclusions drawn about her are obvious. These discrepancies in interpretation of Curley's wife may be attributed to the fact that the novel itself does not offer an authoritative or absolute statement on the woman's character. It goes without saying that Steinbeck, too, was aware of her "incomplete" portrait. If not, why would he have written to the actress Claire Luce, who was performing the role of Curley's wife during the New York run of the stage play *Of Mice and Men*, that to "know this character would be to love her"? And for what other reason would he have then countered this conviction with the forlorn declaration that "such a thing can never happen", giving us in this way perhaps the most authoritative statement that he can about Curley's wife? (What can and does happen in *Of Mice and Men*, which was originally titled "Something that Happened", is that no one loves Curley's wife. She does not even love herself.) And it is more than that. Several revisions in the story for the play no doubt attest to the author's attempt to add an assertive dimension to her character in the play. These revisions were made under the guidance of a veteran playwright, George S. Kaufman, who also believed that "the girl should be drawn more fully, since she is the motivating force of the whole thing". Considering the impact she makes, it is surprising how brief a role Curley's wife has in the novel. Before the chapter when Lennie kills her and where she is actively present on more than six pages (86-91), she has only two short appearances, one for one page (31), another for five (77-81), for a total of twelve out of one hundred and seven pages of the entire book.

In both of the novels men blame women, as Adam did Eve, blind to their connections to each other, ignorant that selves are mirrored in each other, and competitively abusive of each other as a result. The girl and Curley's wife are women who not only revel in being freed from that "garden," but who also celebrate the knowledge acquired and absorbed. Curley's wife does not survive her story; she never leaves the space occupied and defined by the anxieties of the patriarchy. The girl does ultimately withdraw from traditional society into a small commune fashioned solely by women. The girl had proclaimed, "I had got desires now. It all broke on my tongue as if my bark was breaking.... I felt a great root springing down and a great blossom springing up" (Le Sueur 72). This humanistic response allows that it is human experience that creates identity; that personal pride comes with the knowledge that experiences of work and sexuality provide; and that a sense of community, equal and uncensored, offers a sublime satisfaction. According to these authors we must first know and honor ourselves in order to build a real community with each other, and then the simple and edenic pleasures of the "garden" could be integrated with the mature and experiential knowledge required to most fully Possess.

Bamarani (2014) presents the portrayal of women in literature was inevitably not balanced. From Old Testament to the present day literature the array of women characters teems with mother figures, women of power and mettle whether negative

examples or positive ones. Certain characters of women exhibit considerable prominence. Women are depicted either as saints totally or as the very embodiments of temptation. Throughout American Literature, women have been depicted in many different ways.

The portrayal of women in American Literature is often influenced by an author's personal experience or a frequent societal stereotype of women and their position. Steinbeck's novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, Ma Joad and Rose of Sharon graphically portray the theme of women as self-sacrificing and nurturing mothers in the migrant family during the great depression. John Steinbeck has portrayed women in different avatars. The Joad wome, Rose of Sharon and Ma can rightly be said as the ideal women who are placed in the pinnacles for their self-sacrifice and endurance. Ma Joad especially stretches the radiance of love and care by helping the fellow travelers. She is crowned with her leadership roles and determination. She can be compared to the Mother earth. Steinbeck's men are outwardly poor but are exalted with glaring inner strength. The characters in the novel though ruled by self-arrive at a meaningful existence as they comprehend the concept of group. Keywords: Ma Joad, metamorphosis, Steinbeck, women. The poor are not aware of the holy deed they perform. But it leads them to the gradual discovery of the reality. The novelist holds the selfless poor in high esteem. James Gray stresses the dignity of beautifully brings it out in John Steinbeck, *Wide in the range of their interests, diverse in mood, passionately concerned in their sympathies, they (the novels) all celebrate the worth of man. . . Much more clearly than in the instance of any other American writer of his time. Steinbeck consistent effort to establish the dignity of human life offers the measure of the man. Steinbeck's men are outwardly poor but are exalted with glaring inner strength. The characters in the novel though ruled by self-arrive at a meaningful existence as they comprehend the concept of group.*

Sandra Beatty (2008) adds to the limited characterization of Steinbeck's women that "many of [his] wives seem to be domesticity personified. Beatty indicates that Steinbeck's women often possess "unshakeable strength" and "knowledge". Of all of his female characters, Beatty believes Ma Joad "epitomizes what Steinbeck seems to view as a distinctly female wisdom," and she goes so far as to propose that Ma is a "philosopher". However, Beatty diminishes this claim by suggesting that Ma's role as "philosopher" is merely a method through which she can "assume the male role for a time" rather than become a separate strong female role. Despite her reduction of Ma's "philosopher" position, Beatty argues that Ma Jaod's true strength of character lies in her role as mother, and she even suggests that Ma is "the epitome of motherhood". Beatty finds, at the root of this motherly fortitude, "some strain of knowledge in women," but that "knowledge" is not the result of reason, logic, or intellect; instead, at the heart of women's innate wisdom and will to survive is "the procreation of the species". her argument is important because she introduces the notion that Steinbeck is particularly apt to portray women as strong and "knowledgeable" in their roles as wife and mother.

Nellie Y. McKay addresses (2013) "female oppression under patriarchy dictates an institution in which the heterosexual family is at the center of the social system . . . and sex-role stereotyping separates the social expectations of women from those of men,"

which presumes "woman's ideal social, emotional, and psychological state" is that of mother and wife. (Heinz 2011)

McKay's notions of wife and motherhood stem from a similar idea that suggests men's "support" in their roles as "husband/father" is "expected to be largely material" whereas women's "support" as "wife/mother" is purely "emotional". In light of these gender role theories, McKay notes that the manner in which women are historically portrayed in literature, especially literature written by men, are "subscribed almost exclusively to the ideology of locating women's place in the domestic world," and any women countered this characterization were "stigmatized as unfeminine, bad mothers and wives, and social deviants".

Adair (2007) views Ma Joad as regressive not progressive because her promotion to authority figure during the novel only serves to reestablish balance in the accepted male-dominated social order. In the end, Ma Joad and other wives and mothers must "return" to their rightful submissive place to show the restoration of American values. In addition to using Ma Joad as a means to return America to its traditional social order, Adair also suggests that Steinbeck's portrayal of her is not akin to the "Great Mother" or novel itself, Adair's consideration of both will play a crucial role in understanding how the real women of the Great Depression view their own struggles because her conclusions about Ma's motives for asserting herself to "re-empower man" could easily apply to the real migrant women's own motives. Briffault's assertion that "primitive medicine is . . . for the most part a department of . . . women" is also manifest in Ma's tendency to pass on knowledge of "medicine" or care to her oldest daughter, Rose of Sharon.

Steinbeck's unique approach to the themes of homelessness and loneliness, where he places two men who have a very special friendship, despite being very different both mentally and physically, in the center of the story, distinguishes him from other writers. Furthermore, Meyer believes that Lennie and George demonstrate that "character is the engine of a plot". (Halldórsdóttir 2017)

Even if Steinbeck was requesting that his contemporary society become aware of the severity of the restrictions it had imposed upon women and that this society establish a new, less oppressive idea of femininity that would allow for equality among men and women, one must wonder if his audience regarded his appeal.

The main female character in Steinbeck's novel that suffers from severe loneliness is Curley's wife. She is very lonely because she is the only female on the ranch and is not allowed to talk to any of the men due to her husband's extreme jealousy. Like Crooks, she reveals her isolation and loneliness to Lennie because she knows he will not judge her: "Why can't I talk to you? I never get to talk to nobody. I get awful lonely... I get lonely... You can talk to people, but I can't talk to nobody but Curley. Else he gets mad. How'd you like not to talk to anybody?" (Steinbeck 98). Instead of withdrawing, like Crooks does, she seeks the men's attention and shows a forceful and confident personality in an attempt to deal with her loneliness and isolation.

## CONCLUSION

## Sexuality, Myth, Symbol, Allegory Feminism

In an early analysis of Steinbeck's female characters, Sandra Beatty notes that the author "reduced the multiplicity of female roles to basically two, that of wife and that of mother, with all of his female characters fulfilling, in varying degrees, either one or both of these functions". Beatty adds to the limited characterization of Steinbeck's women that "many of [his] wives seem to be domesticity personified". However, despite the initial narrow image of Beatty's of Steinbeck's women, she suggests that Steinbeck does not understand "this role as menial or degrading". On the contrary, Beatty indicates that Steinbeck's women often possess "unshakeable strength" and "knowledge". Of all of his female characters, Beatty believes Steinbeck's women "epitomizes what Steinbeck seems to view as a distinctly female wisdom," and she goes so far as to propose that Steinbeck's women are "philosophers". However, Beatty diminishes this claim by suggesting that Steinbeck's women role as "philosophers" is merely a method through which she can "assume the male role for a time" rather than become a separate strong female role. The societal "institutions" simply supported the prejudicial beliefs of a large group of individuals. One could, in fact, suggest that historically, overt racism and institutional anti/feminism were one and the same. Institutional anti/feminism exists because flawed individuals still control the system. For the most part, individuals prefer to work with other individuals who make them feel comfortable, and those who make them feel comfortable are those who look like them. That is a human condition most cannot deny. The problem is, of course, that when only one gender or ethnic group enjoys a position of power, then that group will welcome to its ranks only those persons with similar qualities.

McKay (1990) maintains that in times of crisis, Steinbeck suggests, the survival of the family and, by extension, the social order, depends on the wisdom and strength of the mother, whose interests are always those of her husband and children. In conclusion, McKay purports that Steinbeck sees "happy-wife-and-motherdom" as the central role for women," and in this Ma Joad is the "epitome of Earth Mother" and reiterates the "stereotypical parallels between woman and nature". In essence, Ma Joad is an awe-inspiring depiction of women's strength and endurance, but she does not serve to transform social definitions that limit women to their functions as wife and mother. (Heinz 2011)

In many ways, Lorelei Cederstrom's (1997) exploration into the representation of the Great Mother provides the counterargument to McKay's conclusions about the literary characterization of women as Earth Mother. Like McKay, Cederstrom uses Steinbeck's portrayal of Ma Joad to support her analysis of the role of women in the novel. At the center of her investigation is what she views as Steinbeck's application of "the archetypal feminine".

According to Heinz in *Mothers of the Great Depression: A Esthetic Intent of Ma Joad in The Grapes of Wrath*: Cederstrom (1997) explains that: Steinbeck draws upon the "archetypal feminine" and promotes "matriarchal cultures" in order to highlight the result of "the patriarchal structures and attitudes that are destroying the earth". Essentially, Cederstrom argues that by employing the "archetypal "Great Mother" Steinbeck uncovers "an alternative to the dominant structures of Western Civilization" She points out that in

his application of the social "alternative," Steinbeck's message is clearest in the victimization of "the migrant families" who are the first to suffer as a consequence of "the failure of Western civilization". Without a societal structure to guide them on their migration, Cederstrom asserts that the migrants form a more primitive social order based upon feminine values and matriarchal structures.

The main female character in Steinbeck's novel that suffers from severe loneliness is Curley's wife. She is very lonely because she is the only female on the ranch and is not allowed to talk to any of the men due to her husband's extreme jealousy. Like Crooks, she reveals her isolation and loneliness to Lennie because she knows he will not judge her: "Why can't I talk to you? I never get to talk to nobody. I get awful lonely... I get lonely... You can talk to people, but I can't talk to nobody but Curley. Else he gets mad. How'd you like not to talk to anybody? (Steinbeck 98). Instead of withdrawing, like Crooks does, she seeks the men's attention and shows a forceful and confident personality in an attempt to deal with her loneliness and isolation (Meyer 1981).

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