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# The Philosophy of Ecology in John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath

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**THE PHILOSOPHY OF ECOLOGY IN JOHN STEINBECK'S *THE GRAPES OF WRATH***

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
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## Abstract

This thesis explores the possibilities for ecocritical study in fiction through John Steinbeck's 1939 novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. Major ecocritical interpretation has yet to gain much traction in novels; by focusing on human nature, this form's "anthropocentric" posture seems itself to be antithetical to ecocritical efforts, which aim to unseat humans as the center of the moral universe. However, by analyzing *The Grapes of Wrath*'s formal, narratorial, and thematic valences, I argue that principles of social justice *concurrently* imply environmental justice in the philosophical currents of the text. Tenets of deep ecology and Aldo Leopold's "land ethic" inform the novel's overall environmental outlook. The key to my interpretation is the value of community at the center of Steinbeck's world. To expand principles of the collectivism and compassion in the social community to include the broader ecological community, I focus on the narrative's unique Judeo-Christian spirituality and humanistic discourse. Ultimately I identify cohesion in *The Grapes of Wrath*'s composition that makes a single narrative of both the natural and the human worlds, and that creates a moral universe that guides ethical behavior towards others, both human and non-human; in doing so, I argue Steinbeck's novel both enacts and represents an ecologically minded ethic.

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## Chapter I: Why Ecocriticism, and Why Steinbeck?

For anyone who identifies as an environmentalist or strives to cultivate an ecological awareness, the fact that humans rely on the environment can create a thorny paradox. Environmental ethicists call this reliance “instrumental”, meaning humans attribute value to the natural world not in and of itself, but because it is a means of survival (Brennan and Lo, “Environmental Ethics”). Instrumental value takes many meanings in society’s dependence on nature for its sustenance, and this is not limited to a material sense. This creates a degree of proximity between the social and natural worlds even though they are often diametrically opposed. However, the tendency to think of the relationship between humans and environment as *interdependent* is perhaps a stretch—does nature need us in the ways we need it? This notion is rooted even in our most essential texts. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, for example, God gives humans “dominion” over the earth as its caretakers (Genesis 1:28). Perhaps we magnify our own importance when we think of our relationship to the environment as symbiotic, given that we have the tools and power to make use of the earth’s resources for our own ends. But there is not necessarily an equivalent reciprocity in what the non-human world asks of us. The question for the environmentalist then becomes, can non-instrumental or “intrinsic” environmental value exist alongside the instrumental? If so, how do we acknowledge it?

Aldo Leopold thinks the answer lies in ecology. A preeminent conservationist, he is one of many who has explored, interpreted, and theorized the nature–society relationship in writing. Despite his desire to “think like a mountain,” the privileged perspective in Leopold’s work, like any other writer’s, is that of the individual (Leopold 137). Thinking *like* a mountain in a figurative sense is really using imagination, observation, and

ultimately conjecture about what a mountain (or the non-human environment) might think. Leopold's argument is meant to promote a self-awareness that recognizes intrinsic value in ecology as a system of which humans are one part, but it also reflects an important point about environmental perception: *all* writing about the natural world is coded in human terms, through human languages. The earth cannot speak for itself in ways that are intelligible to us. Therefore humans, even environmentalists, are limited by their own interpretations of it. To access Leopold's conservationist philosophy or any other particular reading of nature, the environmentalist must first acknowledge the space to which such interpretation is bound: purely *human* readings of the non-human world. But within this space, writers have attributed a multitude of meanings to the environment (and human relations to it).

Leopold's "land ethic", a manifesto of environmental ethics, takes the stance of rejecting human "dominion" as a hegemonic convention that has come to magnify society's subordination of the natural world. He describes his philosophical framework:

All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. His instincts prompt him to compete for his place in the community, but his ethics prompt him to co-operate... The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land. (Leopold 239)

We do not control how nature functions, he seems to suggest, but societies do have a hand in how the broader ecological community functions.<sup>1</sup> The earlier tension returns: can we imagine the terms by which human societies, which are comprised of individuals, might

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<sup>1</sup> Ecology is defined in the realm of scientific and sociologic disciplines as "the branch of biology that deals with the relationships between living organisms and their environment. Also: the relationships themselves, especially those *of* a specified organism," as well as "the study of the relationships between people, social groups, and their environment; also the system of such relationships in an area of human settlement" ("Ecology", *OED*).

more cohesively integrate with the broader ecological community? If so, where does the line between instrumental and intrinsic value come into play? American literature fruitfully illustrates this paradox, particularly in narratives that focus on the purported “escape from” human society into nature. Human ascendancy is inherent to such traditions that focus on man’s (almost exclusively *men*’s) individual encounters with the natural world.<sup>2</sup> James Fenimore Cooper, Herman Melville, Henry David Thoreau, Mark Twain, Walt Whitman: some of America’s most recognized writers turn to the theme of man-in-nature, but frequently by depicting acquisition of resources, rejection of societal values or conventions, or the scramble for control or power. The cooperative ethics that Leopold encourages are not quite at work when nature is present merely as scenery or to provide some other utility to a human subject—such appropriation of the environment is itself instrumentalist, and thus continually relegates the natural world beneath human experiences. My point is, the *way* nature is written matters when we think about human participation in the “land community”, since we will always see it in terms other than its own.

Lawrence Buell importantly notes that anytime nature is represented in writing it is “culturally produced”, and thus inherently political or ideological; recreating how the natural world is “naturally” exceeds the capabilities of language (Buell 17). Writing nature is therefore an anthropocentric effort. So considering our power to manipulate nature in our readings of it, how do our ideas of nature affect our behavior towards it? Or at least,

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<sup>2</sup> An important point about the U.S. literary canon that this thesis recognizes: “Orthodox versions of American literary naturalism, like the myth of the American Adam, have been based on texts by Anglo-American males... No inquiry can call itself informed which does not recognize that idealization of nature in American literary mythography has historically been more a masculine pursuit than a female-sponsored endeavor, and that attitudes towards exurban space differ considerably among American cultural groups” (Buell 16).



what does our literature suggest about how we think of the environment?<sup>3</sup> What philosophies and paradigms do American texts reinforce about the society-nature relationship? These are the questions that inform this thesis.

Environmental ethicists note that many cultural and political readings of nature adopt an economic perspective, focusing on how the land provides instrumental worth to human enterprises. Without always being named as such, the ideology of economic liberalism—complete with Adam Smith’s notion of the “invisible hand”—is probably the clearest target of the environmental critique.<sup>4</sup> Smith’s “economic man” (the “rational creature who invariably seeks his own interest”) is itself a formation antithetical to the communal posture of environmental ethics, as well as to Leopold’s ecological outlook (Grampp 315). The maximization of individual rights has been a core part of economic liberalism ideology since Smith wrote *The Wealth of Nations*, and it continues to play out in dominant capitalist political economy. Of particular concern to the environmentalist is this worldview’s assumption that maximizing natural resources usage is a justifiable means of asserting these rights;<sup>5</sup> of particular concern to Leopold is the idea that an individual’s

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<sup>3</sup> Moreover, what even is literature? Does any writing count? While I am excited about possibilities proposed by these questions, such inquiry will be left out of this thesis. I will take “literature” to refer to forms most frequently recognized in literary tradition—poetry, drama, novels, etc.

<sup>4</sup> Adam Smith’s classical theories of economic liberalism (not to be confused with social liberalism in modern left-leaning politics), particularly those published in *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776, profoundly influenced the formation of American political economy (Fleischacker 899). His metaphor of an “invisible hand” has been widely interpreted but most frequently invoked to argue that “the free market will transform the individual’s pursuit of gain into the general utility of society.” In other words, the metaphor is used as moral justification for the pursuit of self-interest (Bishop 165).

<sup>5</sup> Take W. W. Rostow’s *The Five Stages of Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* for example. Rostow’s argument privileges America’s model of economic growth as the zenith of individualism and prosperity, claiming that the key for other countries to similarly “modernize” is to expand productivity and capitalize on natural resources: “it is

rights should be maximized rather than the collective's. American literature is awash with ideologies that emphasize resource consumption for individual human ends, and oftentimes these themes overlap with other systems of subjugation like racism and misogyny.

Plantation, frontier settlement, transcendentalist, and expansionist narratives provide just a few examples (Buell 16). But the philosophies used to approach the human–nature relationship need not always be couched in economic or individualistic terms. This is the point that the land ethic makes.

Leopold takes care to reject principles of rampant individualism in favor of a more collectivist approach. His main contention is that humans need to change their roles “from conquerors of the land-community to plain members and citizens of it” (Leopold 240). Contemporary critical environmental ethics embodied in movements like deep ecology<sup>6</sup> similarly reject perspectives that promote a transactional or exploitative view of the environment. Deep ecologists aim to create an ecocentric rather than anthropocentric philosophy by recognizing holistic appreciation for the natural world. They believe the environment has intrinsic value—that it is an end in itself apart from individual human interests. The nascent field of ecocriticism in literary studies centers on the many different

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an essential condition for a successful transition [to a modernized society] that investment be increased and—even more important—that the hitherto unexploited back-log of innovations be brought to bear on a society's land and other natural resources” (Rostow 22).

<sup>6</sup> On the scope of the deep ecology's aspirations, Arne Naess explains the movement as containing “concerns which touch upon principles of diversity, complexity, autonomy, decentralization, symbiosis, egalitarianism, and classlessness.” According to Naess's seminal lecture, published in 1973, deep ecology recognizes seven primary tenets: “rejection of the human-in-environment image in favor of the relational, total field image”; “biospherical egalitarianism—in principle”; “principles of diversity and symbiosis”; “anti-class posture”; “fight against pollution and resource depletion”; “complexity, not complication”; and “local autonomy and decentralization” (Naess, “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary” 3-6).

approaches to the conflict of the human–nature relationship as represented in literature. Ecocriticism, a “rapidly changing theoretical approach” that “addresses how humans relate to nonhuman nature or the environment in literature,” is less a fixed category in criticism than an evolving interdisciplinary way of examining environmental representation (Johnson 7). In the same vein as Leopold’s thoughts about ecology, Serpil Oppermann observes that an “ecocritical approach... is one that attempts to transcend the duality of art and life, human and the natural, and to work along the principle of interconnections between them” (Oppermann 9). From economic readings to deep ecology resonances in literature, ecocriticism takes interest in environmental representation and ethics. Going one step further, many ecocritics contend that literary representation has actual significance for the ways people understand the environment and live their lives accordingly. Loretta Johnson notes: “Ecocriticism [asks]... would a shift toward an ecological perception of nature change the ways humans inhabit the Earth?” (Johnson 7).

This thesis is primarily concerned with the ways literature represents—indeed, upholds—particular philosophies that concern the environment (or “ecosophies”, Arne Naess’s portmanteau). In examining representations both of the natural world itself and characters that engage with it, this analysis lends itself to ecocritical discourse. However, I am not interested in constraining my study to moments of direct interplay between human subjects and nature in a text. Rather, I am concerned with how narrative orients systems of thought towards principles that align with environmental ethics (of which ecocriticism is a defining element). For if we accept that anthropologic history is complexly and closely interwoven with natural history, then we must look at what Arne Naess calls “the relational, total field image” that suggests broader philosophies that feed our attitudes on,

and treatment of, the environment. In short, we need to look at representations of human nature to understand humans' treatment of nature.

John Steinbeck provides a particularly compelling vision of human nature as it relates to philosophical and environmental themes. Largely focused on agriculture and California landscapes, Steinbeck's fiction—and nonfiction—is distinctly setting-driven. His regionalism lends a sense of immediacy to his works, even though this point also became a liability from the perspective of elite literary critics (more on this in chapter III). Setting is paramount to his stories, and in many cases the locations of his novels are based on places where he lived. Born in Salinas, California in 1902, Steinbeck's home was the central coast of California and the farmlands of the Salinas Valley. Works like *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row* take place in nearby Monterey, and others like *The Red Pony* and *Of Mice and Men* are set in Central California's agricultural areas. He once wrote, "I think I would like to write the story of this whole valley... of all the little towns and all the farms and the ranches in the wilder hills. I can see how I would like to do it so that it would be the valley of the world" (qtd. in "John Steinbeck Biography", National Steinbeck Center). Perhaps the best example of this is *East of Eden*, which charts, as Steinbeck later described, "perhaps the greatest story of all—the story of good and evil, of strength and weakness, of love and hate, of beauty and ugliness... against the background of the county I grew up in" (*Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters* 3). Marine biologist Ed Ricketts, Steinbeck's close friend, was a noted influence and collaborator in his work; this is particularly evident in Steinbeck's nonfiction book, *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, which tracks the pair's scientific expedition in the Gulf of California in 1940. These brief biographical points help constellate the worldview that gives rise to Steinbeck's written

works. Frequently saturated with politically progressive messages, Steinbeck's fiction nevertheless pulls from a variety of thought systems to inform its philosophical makeup. These include biblical, scientific, historical, and humanist valences. In this thesis I do not disentangle these strands; rather, I seek to find the shared values among them. The coalescence of different philosophies in Steinbeck's stories provides a good case for reading fiction from an ecocritical—and ecosophical—perspective. I have chosen to focus on *The Grapes of Wrath* for the extent of its narrative reach and the particular ecological resonances it entwines. Published in 1939, this is perhaps Steinbeck's most widely read novel, as well as the most fixed in American literary and cultural imagination.

*The Grapes of Wrath* takes place in the American West during the 1930s Dust Bowl. It charts the migration of the Joad family from Oklahoma to California after the bank repossesses their farm, which follows what Daniel Nealand describes as the “tractoring out” that occurred across the region during this historical moment,<sup>7</sup> as well as crop failure from drought and dust storms (Nealand, U.S. National Archives and Records Administration). The story begins when Tom Joad, the protagonist, is released from prison on parole after serving time for homicide. On his way home he finds the local preacher, now ex-preacher, named Jim Casy, and the two travel on to learn that the Joads have vacated the family farm. They reconnect with the family—Tom's parents, five siblings, brother-in-law, uncle, and two grandparents—at his uncle's home, just as they are about to depart to California to find farm work. In the family's imagination California is a land of promise—indeed, it had been advertised as such in pamphlets that depict lush orange

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<sup>7</sup> The displacement of tenant families and small farm holders in Southwestern states occurred as a result of both environmental factors and changing tenant farming patterns during the Great Depression (Gregory 11-12).

orchards and plentiful work for migrants of their ilk (pejoratively known as “Okies” in California<sup>8</sup>). However, the road to California is rife with hardship, despite the family’s resilience and resourcefulness. When the Joads arrive in California, they find a rigged big agribusiness system filled with none of the promise they expected and far too many fellow migrants starving and looking for work. The only respite comes from mutual care among the impoverished migrants and their organized pushback against the forces keeping them down—colluding corporate farm bosses and the police authorities that back them. “Hooverilles,” the shantytowns built and occupied by migrants, are the centers of such resistance.<sup>9</sup> The Weedpatch Camp, an actual utility-supplied federal facility built by the Farm Security Administration under the New Deal, is the site of a different kind of resistance in the world of the novel. The residents at Weedpatch run the camp democratically and free from the throes of California police; while the Joads can afford to stay here only a short while, Weedpatch reveals the possibilities of a more just, equitable social system (Benson and Steinbeck 154).

The novel’s antagonist is the faceless agro-industrialist, hungry for profit,

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<sup>8</sup> *The Grapes of Wrath* introduces the term “Okies” in dialogue, not as an actual descriptor. Nealand explains that historically, migrants were “stereotyped by mainstream resident Californians as ‘Okies’... [and] furnished a new and major source for traditionally subsistence-level migrant agricultural labor.” Unlike other immigrants who had “come with the dust and gone with the wind,” Nealand notes, “the 1930s Okie migrant influx brought entire families that, having nowhere else to go, remained in the valleys during times of scarce or no employment, generating consternation among valley residents and further straining state and local social services already stressed by the Depression” (Nealand, U.S. National Archives and Records Administration).

<sup>9</sup> Nealand notes that Steinbeck visited California Hooverilles, so-called because President Hoover was blamed for the poverty created by the Depression, and observed “unforgettably haunting, dramatic images of destitute Okie families: journeying in often ramshackle ‘jalopy caravans’ along their ‘desolation road’ to California (Route 66) or ‘wasting away’ within the shockingly squalid California ad-hoc irrigation ditch-bank squatter camps” (Nealand, U.S. National Archives and Records Administration).

mechanically minded, and spiritually detached from the land. Hope is rooted in the Joads' endurance, as well as in their stubborn belief in (and practice of) compassionate humanism. *The Grapes of Wrath* is imbued with the urgency of survival. Frequently placed in the tradition of American social protest stories, the novel's barefaced political messages recall sentimentalist tropes in order to achieve a moving emotional effect.<sup>10</sup> What this simplified characterization leaves out is that, beyond mere thematics, *The Grapes of Wrath* also makes a great effort to expand the Joads' story into that of the broader social and environmental Dust Bowl catastrophe through formal techniques. These include the intercalating chapter pattern, the varied vantages of the novel's narration, and the elevation of natural elements to the forefront of the story that Steinbeck creates.<sup>11</sup> In addition to enfolding narrative themes expressive of environmentalist philosophies, the very structure of the novel enacts an ecological consciousness.

Like all novels, much of *The Grapes of Wrath's* substance lies in its plot and character developments. It is neither a historic account of Dust Bowl migration nor a naturalist<sup>12</sup> analysis of various landscapes, despite its utilization of elements of both forms. Its style and language, characterizations, and overall philosophical composition create a

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<sup>10</sup> In recalling the climate at Oklahoma University immediately after *The Grapes of Wrath's* publication, H. Kelly Crockett remarks that "hardly anyone was neutral or temperate. But one English professor... [argued that] the novel was frankly propaganda, and once the situation which called it into being had passed, it would suffer the fate of novels like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Jungle*, to be read as a historical curiosity rather than for its own value" (Crockett 193). Crockett says the novel's continued eminence proves its escape from the fate this professor predicted, but vehement response to the novel's politics continues to polarize readers.

<sup>11</sup> The significance of this part of Steinbeck's storytelling is elaborated upon in chapter II.

<sup>12</sup> Steinbeck's writing can be interpreted as descending both from naturalism as a nineteenth century literary movement that was interested in realism, as well as from work done by naturalists, who carefully study and record specific biological and geo-scientific phenomena.

story of—and perhaps offer commentary on—a world beyond that of the Joads. Throughout the novel, Steinbeck emphasizes the displacement and decentering of self, perception, home, and power. Community is essential to the moral underpinning of the novel, just as it is in ecological theory. It is within this stratification and storyline that I have found grounds for ecocritical interpretation. I argue that the novel’s environmental ethic aspires to inhabit a deep ecology philosophy while also being precluded from practicing deep ecological ambitions to their “fullest.” This is due to the characters’ instrumental priorities for survival. A crucial point of entry into identifying this ethic is the unique religious tone Steinbeck weaves into the fabric of the story. Judeo-Christian tradition filters through many of Steinbeck’s works; this allows his stories to frame morality in recognizable philosophies while addressing big questions in particular ways—questions like those he admitted to asking in *East of Eden* (good versus evil? love versus hate?). Ultimately, *The Grapes of Wrath*’s environmental and spiritual resonances reflect one another in their emphasis on compassionate human behavior towards others. So while Steinbeck, like any writer (of fiction or not), is bound to interpreting the natural world from his own perspective, this thesis considers the ways his writing suggests “thinking like a mountain” (or perhaps “thinking like a valley”): by realigning human interests to reflect broader, more interrelated and collective sympathies.



## Chapter II: Judeo-Christian Sensibilities and Spiritual Ecology

### Part i: Thematic Roots of Morality

In a surprising moment of modesty, Harold Bloom once called John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* a "compassionate narrative" (Bloom 5). It is an apt description. Indeed, threads of what Bloom calls "compassion" weave into the novel's themes of social justice, and as mentioned before, its ethos rings in the tradition of social protest literatures. Steinbeck's best-known work depicts a critical moment in American social and environmental history: the 1930s westward migration during the Dust Bowl. His window opening into this world is through the Joad family and the landscapes they pass through on their journey to California. The sympathies these subjects stir perhaps led John Ditsky to describe the novel as "a mighty book with a mighty theme" (Ditsky 1). With its inciting social commentary, emphasis on humanity and human nature, vivid illustrations of time and place, and particular approach to spirituality, *The Grapes of Wrath* has come to be something of an American epic—and one that continues to resonate with the contemporary literary imagination.

The philosophical constitution of *The Grapes of Wrath* is part of what makes it a modern-day myth in American literature. As in the fictive world of the Joad family, the ideologies that govern the work itself are multifaceted and many. The morality underpinning Steinbeck's compassionate narrative centers both on the Joads and their interactions with each other, and with a world filled with change and the struggle for survival. This ethical framework directs attention to the "social generosity" aspect of the novel—to the story's moral bent, frequently couched in its religious intensity, that is in many allegorical and thematic ways "overtly biblical" (Bloom 4). But apart from religious and spiritual tones, the novel also rests within environmental frameworks that draw from

the same values to govern its political and social universe—both in its narrative construction and in the ways its characters move the plot forward. Human relationships and human nature are revealed as much in behavior and attitudes within the social world as in characters' treatment of the environment. Reconciliation of the individual to community is part of this ethical worldview.

I argue that the moral sphere of *The Grapes of Wrath* encompasses compassion and interconnectedness in both the social and the natural worlds, throughout the narrative of the Joads' migration from Oklahoma to California. The case for deep ecology, understood in its simplest terms as the appreciation of the intrinsic worth of the environment, appears throughout *The Grapes of Wrath*. Steinbeck achieves this in two primary ways: by creating a formal cohesion that makes a single narrative of *both* the natural and the human worlds, and by creating a moral universe that guides human behavior towards others, both human and non-human. In doing so he stretches the extent to which fiction, especially in the form of the novel, can have an ecologically-minded philosophy despite the anthropocentrism at the core of the narrative form—and at the heart of the humanist principles Steinbeck's morality reflects. Additionally the anti-hierarchy—the anarchy, even, like that which is presented in radical resistance circles of the novel's Hoovervilles—and the premium the Joads place on dignity and strength embody intersecting strands of Christian righteousness and ecocentric thinking.

I suggest that the recognized social justice orientation of Steinbeck's work demonstrates the same principles of human awareness and compassion that environmental justice mandates. Both the communities of migrant laborers struggling for survival and the agricultural landscapes being industrialized suffer oppression, subjugation, and

exploitation at the hands of big agribusiness greed. But paradoxically, the environment is also used as the means of maintaining the status quo that leaves the migrant families at the bottom of social and natural orders. In their struggle for survival, the Joads reveal the relationship within human communities and between humans and the earth draws from a holistic set of principles revolving around intrinsic dignity and worth, a decentering of self, and a focus on the collective rather than the individual. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, spiritual philosophies are also environmentalist, and vice versa—both in the structure of the novel and in its thematic resonances. By recognizing this, I link religious and environmental philosophical ideologies into an interdisciplinary approach to what I call the spiritual ecology of Steinbeck’s “compassionate narrative.” The novelistic form, Steinbeck reveals, can uphold a philosophy that exceeds mere character study; *The Grapes of Wrath* admits scientific, democratic, and indeed mythic qualities to generate its moral message. Ultimately, this examination offers a new mechanism for thinking about operative morality within the worlds of Steinbeck’s novel and other works of fiction—and suggests implications for readers from a world fraught with its own kinds of environmental struggles.

## **Part ii. Religious and Ecological Form in Narrative Style and Structure**

The textual structure of *The Grapes of Wrath* includes a story beyond just the Joads’ journey. The form itself thereby creates a more universal cohesion in its ethics, enacting the very philosophical threads it announces. To achieve this, the narration of the novel is alternately omniscient and intervening throughout. Louis Owens and Hector Torres characterize the narrative structure as “the alternation of the story of the Joads with

the story of the Dust Bowl exodus as a whole” (Owens and Torres 119). Chapter to chapter, the novel oscillates between sweeping panoramas and the fictional story of the Joad family’s journey from Oklahoma to California. The format switches from the macro to the micro, from the general to the specific, to create a larger narrative that situates the Joads within their greater historical context as members of specific communities. Namely, they stand for particular groups of Americans, of impoverished laborers, of Oklahomans (“Okies”), of California transplants, of farmers, and of survivors. This structure is itself democratizing and far-reaching in its scope—its characterization extends to human communities beyond the characters at the center of the novel. Indeed, “organized as it is against a backdrop of the panoramic and scenic, the detail, dramatization, and choric effects in *The Grapes of Wrath* are techniques designed for the portrayal of situation, not plot or character. Therefore, description often substitutes for narration” (Swan 300). “Description” is found in quasi-empirical and historical information, lyrically rendered, in the interchapters documenting the whole of the Dust Bowl exodus apart from the Joads’ story.

Peter Valenti observes that the structure of the novel—interchapters containing “documentary material” that alternate with the fictional chapters about the Joads—is a unique part of its overall composition. He describes the documentary chapters as “intercalary”, a term used in astronomy and botany to indicate the unifying of disparate parts into a more complete whole.<sup>13</sup> The only disruption to the novel’s alternation between

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<sup>13</sup> The word “intercalary” has multiple meanings, usually applied in earth sciences. It refers to “a day, days, or month inserted at intervals in the calendar in order to bring an inexact reckoning of the year into harmony with the solar year,” (i.e. “leap days”), as well as to botanical growth: “of the nature of new parts inserted among the old” (“Intercalary”, *OED*). Valenti’s use of the word—and Steinbeck’s physical intercalating narrative

scene-based intercalary chapters and fiction (Joad-focused) chapters is the single instance of two intercalaries in a row, chapters 11 and 12 (Valenti 93). In chapter 11, no specific characters are included in the description of Oklahoma's evacuation. It begins "The houses were left vacant on the land, and the land was vacant because of this" (115). Here, the importance of connection between farmers and the land they cultivate translates through generalized description. This zoom-out technique encompasses broader social commentary, thereby articulating the concerns of the many displaced farmers who lost their farms, livelihoods, and relationship to the land to agribusiness.

Cohesion rather than specificity as a concept is written into the style. This demonstrates the very notion of *The Grapes of Wrath's* form: that a collective is greater than the "analysis" of its constituent parts:

But when the motor of a tractor stops, it is heat that leaves a corpse. Then the corrugated iron doors are closed and need not come back for weeks or months, for the tractor is dead. And this is easy and efficient. So easy that the wonder goes out of work, so efficient that the wonder goes out of land and the working of it, and with the wonder the deep understanding and relation. And in the tractor man there grows the contempt that comes only to a stranger who has little understanding and no relation. For nitrates are not the land, nor phosphates and the length of fiber in the cotton is not the land. Carbon is not a man, nor salt nor water nor calcium. He is all these, but he is much more, much more; and the land is so much more than its analysis. (115)

Just as the land is greater than its utility, intercalating chapters suggest a unity in the novelistic form that is "much more, much more" than just the linear narrative of the Joads' story. Sensational characterizations like that of the "tractor man" help to elicit emotional response to this expanded picture of injustice and inhumanity towards farmers and land alike. This passage, like others in intercalary chapters, achieves such an effect through

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pattern—plays into scientific notions of "harmony," or of the blending of elements from different moments into a cohesive totality.

dramatization of common sympathies by using the verbiage, tone, and rhetoric of a sermon that invokes an insidious evil. These common sympathies ring in a romantic tradition, rejecting the mechanical and sterilized coldness of capitalists' treatment of the land. The narrator issues the same kind of appeal to peoples' sensibilities to understand the wrongness of taking "understanding" and "relation" out of the treatment of land. Preaching a familiar scene—here, of the bad "tractor man"—is a dramatic narrative move to identify evil, to incite, and to unite, perhaps like Jim Casy once did during his days as a preacher. In the outrage directed towards the destruction and chemical artificiality of the tractor image is a galvanizing call to engage—as if the narrator is asking, don't you see? Are you with me? Creating a dichotomy that associates death with the tractor and sets it against the life of the farmer places a premium on consciousness rather than mechanized indifference. The narrator suggests that rationalized scientific reductions overlook the essence intrinsic to the land, which the farmer uniquely appreciates; that is, the "wonder" and "deep understanding and relation" that comes from "working" it.

The intercalary chapters that use general descriptions are written in a tone that elicits collective identification with the sentiments being expressed. The novel's audience becomes like a church congregation nodding as a minister speaks at a podium. By recognizing the universality of the "situation" of industrialization that removes human hands from farming, the reader is in a position to engage with the full text, sympathetic to the plight of the displaced farmer. Chapter 12 also starts with a documentary-esque, scenic situation, beginning "Highway 66 is the main migrant road" (118). The narrator, whose voice reflects a wisdom rooted in an omniscient perspective, catalogs "people in flight" and goes on to describe migrants traveling across the country on the highway: "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... Clarksville and Ozark and Van Buren and Fort Smith on 64, and there's an end of Arkansas..." The list of cities continues until the narrator shifts to the vernacular, entering the scene as one of the travelers: "And now the high mountains... There's California just over the river, and a pretty town to start it... Then suddenly a pass, and below the beautiful valley below orchards and vineyards and little houses, and in the distance a city. And, oh my God, it's over" (119).

This narrator, who understands and speaks with sensitivity to the conditions of the masses, returns repeatedly to colloquial dialogue. The intercalary narrator speaks from above, like an all-seeing God while simultaneously adopting generalized on-the-ground everyman's language. The multidimensional perspective mimics ecological thinking along Aldo Leopold's terms by seeking to "enlarge the boundaries" of the narrative's scope. Ecological consciousness combines the macro, ecosystem-wide lens with the more micro, organismal relations that constitute it. The fusion of these two viewpoints does not refer to anything particular about the Joads' journey but still allows Steinbeck to include quotidian occurrences intimately: "Listen to the motor. Listen to the wheels... And why's the son-of-a-bitch heat up so hot today?" (119). Generic names, of nobody in particular and everybody in general, serve as samples of the many whose situations parallel this scenario: "Danny in the back seat wants a cup a water. Little fella's thirsty. Listen to that gasket whistle. Chee-rist! There she went" (121). The narrator is a proletarian—an everyman who understands the daily realities and struggles of the people s/he describes; the narrator is no one, and therefore transcends individual experience. In these chapters' panoramic generality is an omniscient narration that perhaps divinely exceeds the capability of human

observation, but that channels the narrative energy into the lived experiences of the people of this time and place. The intercalary narrator is like a Jesus Christ of the 1930s: divinely all-seeing, but speaking in the language of the people. In intercalary scenes like chapter 12, a conversational tone and regional jargon situate the narrator firmly within this particular setting while also resonating with broader Christian divinity.

No reference to the Joads in chapter 12 comes until the chapter's end, in a description that shows them as one of many families leaving Oklahoma. The monologue or sermon-style narration becomes emphatically explicit by switching to a dialogue with the reader: "Two hundred and fifty thousand people over the road. Fifty thousand old cars—wounded, streaming... Where does the terrible faith come from? 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" (122). Chapter 13 begins back where chapter 10 left off—with Ma, Al, Tom, and the rest of the Joads in their Hudson, on the road headed. Chapter 14 documents agitation in the changing West, moving back in to the general.

In sum, the novel's panoramic descriptive chapters offer a kind of sweeping morality in their generalizing. Between the sermonizing prose as a means of rallying and unifying behind particular sentiments, the godly yet grounded omniscience, and the everyman language adopted to ground the narrator in the day-to-day experiences of the migrating laborers, Steinbeck's intercalary narrator impresses several thematic points using rhetoric. These include a message of unity between social and natural spheres, a democratic perspective on the issues being described, and a kind of communion between the reader, the narrator, and the arc of history being imagined. Chapter 11 rails against the



cold mechanization of farming by identifying the tractor man enemy; chapter 12 situates the narrator in the scene, as a commoner in the context of the migrant community on the road. The intercalary narrator is not the same as the more traditional omniscient third-person narrator (this voice does reemerge in the straightforward prose of the chapters chronicling the actions of the Joads); in fact, the narrator of the interchapters might not even be consistent throughout. *The Grapes of Wrath*'s panoramic intercalaries break down the hierarchical structure of narration that often privileges an all-seeing narrator at remove from the action of the story. Here, the narrator is included as someone who fundamentally understands and participates in the generalized social scenes s/he describes. In terms of language and form's ability to represent the notion of unity, the "situational" focus of the novel also rings in the tradition of Christian preaching.

Environmental tones also reverberate through the novel's form. Peter Valenti suggests that Steinbeck "achieved the unity of human and physical worlds that constitutes his ecological rhetoric" in the twofold intercalary and narrative "complementary modes" of *The Grapes of Wrath*'s format. This structure enables Steinbeck to enact an "emotional polemic against forced misery and degradation" that comes from depiction of ecology itself, the reader's emotional identification, and the visual representation of landscapes and nature (Valenti 93-94). If ecology is understood as the interlocking elements of a system rather than its individual parts, then the overall form of *The Grapes of Wrath* achieves a kind of ecological unity; its shared emphasis on the Joads and the sweeping panoramas constitute a coherent vision connecting people with their broader world. In addition to the text's formal structure, its treatment of ecology and abundant use of natural imagery bolster Valenti's claims about its "ecological rhetoric." Lawrence Buell, a pioneer in

ecocriticism, argues that “the nature of environmental representation... is at least faintly present in most text but salient in few” (Buell 7). In his criteria for “an environmentally oriented work,” Buell includes the following:

1. The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history.
2. The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest.
3. Human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation.
4. Some sense of environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text. (Buell 7-8)

By devoting long passages just to description of the land and country, the novel elevates the natural world beyond utility as backdrop to human experiences. It is well, however, to remember that *The Grapes of Wrath* is a work of fiction that draws from historical conditions of Dust Bowl America; its intentions extend beyond environmental cataloging, observation, or stated emphasis on nature. Fiction does not easily lend itself to having a primary environmental orientation; the form of the novel and its focus on character development necessarily centers upon man in nature rather than on nature itself. *The Grapes of Wrath* therefore does not perfectly fit Buell’s categorization, but I do not believe this discounts it from being taken seriously by ecocritics. The principles directing human behavior, diverse narratorial perspectives, and dynamism of nature within Steinbeck’s novel all reflect a philosophical capacity for meaningful “environmental representation” by cultivating ecological consciousness. *The Grapes of Wrath* achieves a kind of aspiration towards deep ecology (a philosophy with which Buell sympathizes) with both the intercalary mode and its ethical interests. Further exploration of this possibility in the

novel's thematic interpretation is found in section III.

In many cases, depiction of the land comes in the form of reporting within a mythic, or romantic, tradition. Bloom describes "Steinbeck's biblical style" as working "fitfully" throughout the novel, but most prominently in natural depictions (Bloom 1-4). *The Grapes of Wrath* opens with a meditation on an Oklahoma landscape before the coming storm: "To the red country and part of the gray country of Oklahoma, the last rains came gently, and they did not cut the scarred earth" (1). The narrative attends to the dust storms, and what they do to the earth before even mentioning the people who inhabit it.

The dawn came, but no day. In the gray sky a red sun appeared, a dim red circle that gave a little light, like dusk; and as that day advanced, the dusk slipped back toward darkness, and the wind cried and whimpered over the fallen corn.

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. (2-3)

Tension between humans and nature was the impetus for the westward migration, and therefore for the novel; this opening scene presents the conflict of human wellbeing against the intractable power of the environment. Acknowledging the effects of the dust storms on the earth, in addition to the families who live upon it, recognizes the environment as legitimate and beyond the control of humans. Extensive detailing of the natural world exists apart from the Joads' plot, but in fact has everything to do with it: this is the world they live in. By applying emotional descriptions to almost field-note-like prose, Steinbeck dignifies the environment by recognizing it as having value external to that which humans give to it. The storms' *wrath* observed in this passage—complete with the "red sun" and "darkness"—are, however, personified (the wind "cried and whimpered"). Rhetorically, this seems to refute the argument that the environment stands apart from human concerns. Personification is a reminder of the premise I outlined in the first chapter: language codes

nature through writing. However, by acknowledging both the autonomous might of the natural world *in addition to* its understanding in human terms, Steinbeck presents the environment's power as potent without spurning it. Nature is fact, and it is recognized as a phenomenon in itself—thus, it does not incur the same wrath as the tractor man's destructive rationalization of its economic value. This passage opens *The Grapes of Wrath*, setting the interests of the environment to be apart from, but not intentionally antagonistic towards human interest; this enables the narrative to form a kind of sympathy in the mutual relationship between small farmers and the landscape they tend.

If this interpretation of naturalistic description in chapter 1 holds, then the natural world in *The Grapes of Wrath* should have a stake apart from the plot of human activities throughout. Chapter 3, an intercalary chapter, describes nothing more than the “mat of tangled, broken, dry grass” on the edge of the concrete highway and a turtle crossing. Sunlight hits grass, grasshoppers chirp, and this turtle crawls, “his hard legs and yellow-nailed feet thresh[ing] slowly through the grass” (14). Using an excess of detail to emphasize the turtle's movement slows the narrative progression. This gives attention to the most minute of observations: “[its] front clawed feet reached forward but did not touch. The hind feet kicked his shell along, and it scraped on the grass, and on the gravel” (15). As the turtle is nearly hit by a car and then nailed by a truck on the road, its recovery is carefully documented: “lying on its back, the turtle was tight in its shell for a long time. But at last its legs waved in the air, reaching for something to pull it over... the old humorous eyes looked ahead, and the horny beak opened a little. His yellow toe nails slipped a fraction in the dust” (15-16). Why all the detail about the turtle? Some suggest the turtle shows how “biological organisms... play an integral role in shaping their biotic

community” by “foreshadow[ing] not only the determined trek of the Joads, which even death cannot forestall, but also [signifying] the way living entities affect their surrounding environment” (Hicks 110). The turtle’s extensive sketch in chapter 3 seems to serve no narrative function until Tom picks it up in chapter 4. And yet, Steinbeck has centered it at the front of the narrative for a brief moment, giving its seeming irrelevance some inescapable importance. By sheer fact of the turtle’s excruciatingly detailed description, it requires to be examined—and given consequence.

Whether or not its voyage across the highway is symbolic, the turtle demonstrates that nature is not a static or flat presence in the novel—it is dynamic and capable of infinite description, just like the landscapes throughout. Nuances in season and climate, in weather patterns and crop rotations, in topography and geography are also all carefully documented in intercalary chapters. If Steinbeck had wanted, he could have written an entire book observing nature and its constituent creatures (see *Log from the Sea of Cortez*); that is not *The Grapes of Wrath*, but these descriptions are still an essential part of what makes this narrative what it is. What makes the novel a novel and not a naturalist catalog, of course, is its human story; Steinbeck’s characters rely heavily on the conditions of the natural world, and the relationship between these entities constitute the text’s “ethical orientation.” Rhetorically speaking, the condition of the environment is not just a “framing device” for the human characters; while the novel’s social concerns often receive the most critical attention, its very structure questions value systems that privilege anthropocentric concerns above ecological ones. In its form, fiercely meticulous descriptions—sometimes in the style of empirical field notes, other times rendered in narrative illustration—about turtles and dust storms emphasize principles of deep ecology by suggesting that paying attention

to such natural occurrences *matters*. To see value in nature as an “other” to human experience is important. Inclusion of ecological illustrations within a fictive plotline implies intrinsic value of the natural world.

The social and natural worlds are knit together in *The Grapes of Wrath*'s novelistic structure and the language used in the narrative. Invoking religious as well as ecological rhetoric in the alternating chapter format and the prose of the intercalary chapters, Steinbeck achieves a harmonic composition that enacts the idea of interconnectedness—a major theme in the content of the Joads' story. The very construction of *The Grapes of Wrath* recognizes communal experience, egalitarian rather than hierarchical impulses, and a morality of inclusion, all of which hold weight, to a degree, in Judeo-Christian spiritual and environmental ideologies.<sup>14</sup> But the commonalities between these philosophies extend beyond shared values. Indeed, there are fewer commonalities than root tenets grounded within these concepts; the overall foundation of Steinbeck's “compassionate narrative” is premised upon ethical human behavior within a community, which is the concern of both theological and environmentalist principles (and ethical action involves humans' relations both to each other and to non-human entities—namely to a deity and the natural world). Rejecting compassionless principles—greed, selfishness, individual profit, the destruction of an “other” (both human and non-human)—is one and the same for religious and ecological morality. The following section explores the ways in which the novel's thematic expression of religion guides this philosophy.

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<sup>14</sup> At least, in Jesus's teachings as the divine proletariat.

### **Part iii. The Joad Family and Themes of Religious Morality**

“Content” within this novel consists both of the plot tracing the Joads’ westward migration and of the intercalary chapters that offer broader renderings of Dust Bowl America. As just discussed, the interconnected structure and different narrative forms enact the philosophies underpinning *The Grapes of Wrath*’s content. This section now turns to the Judeo-Christian spiritual tones bearing relevance to elements of ecocentric thinking, beginning with the Joads themselves.

Thematically, the Joad family’s own spiritual beliefs and experiences with religion operate in a variety of ways throughout *The Grapes of Wrath*. Each family member presents a unique formulation of religion; but perhaps more significantly, their perceptions of religion designate what morality means within their personal contexts. This morality stretches from the social world to the divine, and beyond into the natural world. At the story’s outset, set in Oklahoma before the westward migration, the family consists of the protagonist Tom Joad, his brothers Al, Noah, and Winfield, sisters Rose of Sharon and Ruthie, Ma, Pa, Granma, Grampa, Uncle John, Rose of Sharon’s husband Connie Rivers, and ex-preacher Jim Casy, who joined Tom on his way home from prison. Of the group, Granma has the most religious fervor; “Pu-raise Gawd fur vittory,” are her first words of the novel, followed by her demand for grace over a meal and subsequent “rock[ing] back and forth, trying to catch hold of an ecstasy” (77-81). Uncle John’s use of alcohol and prostitution are his means of addressing the sins he feels he committed, which stem from guilt that has plagued him since his pregnant wife died years earlier; he grapples with deeds and how they might atone for wrongdoing. Rose of Sharon (“Rosasharn”) is pregnant and perennially agitated about how her surroundings—physical and spiritual—

might affect her baby's development. The rest exhibit a muted religiosity, praying to God as is due, but inhabiting a moral sphere that prioritizes survival over consistent observation of Christian doctrine. Albeit a bit reductively, Woodburn Ross offers a baseline understanding of Steinbeck's ethic by summarizing it as "find[ing] ultimate virtue only in obedience to the natural law which demands reproduction and survival" with altruism as a "second major virtue whose demands must be expected at times to be contrary to those of the former" (Ross 60). Tom and Ma Joad are the most outspoken members of the family during the relocation to California; they are forthright in their beliefs about right and wrong, and their opinions are esteemed by the others. Consequently, they negotiate many of the family's decisions about how to maximize their chances for survival, and how to retain their dignity as human beings in undignified circumstances. Steinbeck devotes a significant portion of the novel's dialogue revealing characters' consciences, but particularly to Tom's and Ma's.

The Joads' story begins with Tom on his way home from prison. He immediately throws orthodox notions of right and wrong into question; a murderer, though a likable one, Tom's take on morality is that goodness is circumstantial. In this sense, he is an interesting kind of renegade: neither abiding by traditional Christian beliefs nor state laws, he is still a model of uprightness in this story. This sheds doubt on conventional ideological authorities—church and state—and radically proposes that integrity can fall outside these realms. Tom is loyal to his family members, who have great fondness for him, and becomes a resourceful asset and leader. His sense of justice is grounded in acting righteously per the situation, which in some cases means eye-for-an-eye retaliation (i.e. when he killed a man in self-defense and landed in prison, and later in California when he



kills the police officer who murders Casy). His motivations throughout, however, are to rectify injustice, not necessarily to incite. “Tommy, I got to ask you—you ain’t mad?” Ma asks him upon his return from prison, worried that her son has become irrationally, irrevocably “mean-mad.” “You ain’t poisoned mad? You don’t hate nobody? They didn’ do nothin’ in that jail to rot you out with crazy mad?” Tom responds: “No-o-o... I was for a little while. But I ain’t proud like some fellas. I let stuff run off’n me” (76). Level-headed, he thinks deeply and is admired by his family, particularly his younger brother Al, for choosing dignity in the face of adversity:

“My brother Tom. Better not fool with him. He killed a fella.”  
“Did? What for?”  
“Fight. Fella got a knife in Tom. Tom busted ‘im with a shovel.”  
“Did, huh? What’d the law do?”  
“Let ‘im off ‘cause it was a fight,” said Al.  
“He don’t look like a quarreler.”  
“Oh, he ain’t. But Tom don’t take nothin’ from nobody.” Al’s voice was very proud. “Tom, he’s quiet. But—look out!”  
“Well—I talked to ‘im. He didn’ soun’ mean.”  
“He ain’t. Jus’ as nice as pie till he’s roused, an’ then—look out.” (255)

He is neither a “quarreler” nor a remorseful killer, and he does not appear to rely on Christian doctrine or a God to guide his sense of model behavior. His relationship with formal religion is tepid, at best: “I never could keep Scripture straight” (91). When asked by Casy if his baptism was important to him, Tom replies, “No-o-o, can’t say as I felt anything” (24). Instead, he exhibits a morality based in allegiance to his relations and in pragmatism (“I’m jus’ puttin’ one foot in front a the other” [173]). This holds until the end, when he becomes a liability after being hunted for killing a police officer in California; he is doubly at fault in the eye of the law for also violating his parole by leaving Oklahoma. A danger to the Joads, he decides he can no longer serve their best interests if he remains with them.

Tom leaves his family and exits the novel by setting out to serve as an allegiant to community-wide justice. He recalls the democratically run Weedpatch Camp that the Joads lived in for a time as a kind of utopic ideal of society to work towards:

“I been thinkin’ how it was in that gov’ment camp, how our folks took care a theirselves, an’ if they was a fight they fixed it theirself; an’ they wasn’t no cops wagglin’ their guns, but they was better order than them cops ever give. I been a-wonderin’ why we can’t do that all over. Throw out the cops that ain’t our people. All work together for our own thing—all farm our own lan’... I been thinkin’ a hell of a lot, thinkin’ about our people livin’ like pigs, an’ the good rich lan’ layin’ fallow, or maybe one fella with a million acres, while a hunderd thousan’ good farmers is starvin’. An’ I been wonderin’ if all our folks got together an’ yelled, like them fellas yelled... long as I’m a outlaw anyways, maybe I could—Hell, I ain’t thought it out clear, Ma.” (419)

As Tom suggests here, the federally sponsored camp represents a kind of Promised Land—similar to the kind the Joads had imagined all of California would be (though ultimately it is unable to fully satisfy their hunger for permanence and community).<sup>15</sup> By acknowledging the discrimination they have already experienced at the hands of the authorities, Tom also denounces the police’s role in dehumanizing impoverished farmers (“Okies”) to keep the migrants at the bottom of the California socio-economic hierarchy. In parting with the rest of the Joads, he describes his intent to join with other insurgents to “yell” against the subjugation of “our people” at the hands of authorities and the interests they protect (industrialist farmers who prey on migrants’ desperation to exploit their labor).

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<sup>15</sup> For a short time, the Joads join this self-governing, democratic community of migrant families. Weedpatch offers access to better amenities and stands outside the jurisdiction of local police. It presents an idyllic vision of civil society and collective space with an alternative conception of human dignity to match. Perceiving the federal camp as dangerously anarchistic, outsiders seek to disrupt its success. George Henderson states the following about the camp’s impermanence: “Its settling resonated with a secure and bound rural propriety. It was a point from which the power of the migrant ‘folk’ could emanate amidst the enveloping enterprise of agribusiness... however, Weedpatch remained a marginal place” (Henderson 112). This marginality paints a world that *might* exist, but only external to the powers that be (i.e. agriculture capitalists). Unable to afford to stay, the Joads eventually leave.

Fittingly, Tom's final scene, which takes place in thick willows along a stream as he prepares to join the opposition against the California police-backed industrialists, is a conversation with Ma. He articulates a newly realized creed adopted from a line from the Bible Casy once invoked (but "no[t] hell-fire Scripture"): "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, the one will lif' up his fellow, but woe to him that is alone when he falleth, for he hath not another to help him up" (418).<sup>16</sup> Tom's code of ethics is neither consistent nor prescriptive. Initially presented as a staunch individualist, he flouts typical Christian expectations of behavior—his first conversation with Casy is about sex, life in prison, and involves drinking. And yet, as in Christian tradition, he has both a retributive sense of justice and respect for ethical treatment of others. But by the end, he sheds his individual identity and fuses into a broader collective of labor organizers with aspirations towards social justice. He places his faith in humanity rather than a higher power. Ma tells him, "Ever'thing you do is more'n you" (353). At the heart of Tom's ethic is an appreciation for the collective rather than the individual. In "The Philosophical Joads", Frederic Carpenter argues that *The Grapes of Wrath's* human-centric rather than God-centric philosophies align Steinbeck with a Walt Whitman-esque America wherein "the individual may become greater than himself... [where] his strength derives from his increased sense of participation in the group" (Carpenter 11). Tom's leadership and aspirations reiterate a kind of humanism found in the Golden Rule, which he applies first to his family and eventually to the community beyond.

Tom's personal ethics also extend to environmentalist thinking. Despite the inherent tension between humanism and ecocentrism, the respect Tom gives to his

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<sup>16</sup> Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

community and to the world beyond his individual experience suggests the “compassion” that is fundamental to the development of an ecosophy.<sup>17</sup> Tom exhibits a kind of ecological thinking by moving beyond himself to see his actions as part of a larger system. At the novel’s conclusion, he has effaced his personal interests in favor of those of his community, and of the greater whole. This is an aspiration of deep ecology: to focus on the “relational” versus the individual. Additionally, Tom’s belief in the local—of determining right from wrong by the circumstances—resonates with principles of deep ecology that encourage awareness of immediate material conditions of existence. Tom’s relationship to his environment is never exploitative and is premised upon survival. As a character, he might not be called an environmentalist given that his priorities lie wholly within the social sphere; however, he sublimates his own needs into those of the collective and thereby identifies with the kind of contextual awareness requisite of one who adopts a deep ecology sensibility.

Ma Joad is the pillar of righteousness in the Joad household. She, like Tom, inhabits a moral universe that does not subscribe entirely to a Judeo-Christian vision of faith. In this sense she is selectively religious, invoking God in scenes of death, tremendous suffering, and expression of thanks. She is as loosely familiar with formal teachings as her son: “That’s Scripture, ain’t it?” (91). Instead, she is concerned predominantly with the well being of her family, and with selfless generosity. Like Tom she perceives the world with a heavy moral subjectivity that considers right and wrong in the context of survival. However, she sees unity as a value that is objectively important.

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<sup>17</sup> A reminder that “ecosophy” is Naess’s term for “ecological philosophy.” Naess claims that the meaning of ecosophy varies by person and is not a one-size-fits-all system of values (Naess “Ecosophy T: Deep Versus Shallow Ecology”).

She staunchly refuses Tom and Casy's plan to go separately to California when the car has a mechanical failure. She argues, "What we got lef' in the worl'? Nothin' but us. Nothin' but the folks" (169). Her insistence is clearly unprecedented, as "Pa was amazed at the revolt" (168). By determinedly asserting her command, she topples the authority traditionally ascribed to men in the domestic sphere, a fact ruefully acknowledged by Pa, who notes, "Seems like times is changed... Time was when a man said what we'd do. Seems like women is tellin' now" (352). Ma's willingness to destabilize hierarchical relations in the family sphere reveals that her priorities do not necessarily fall in the dominant order. Equally subversive is Ma's view of generosity: "If you're in trouble or hurt or need—go to poor people. They're the only ones that'll help—the only ones" (376). Ma herself is empowered to act altruistically despite having the humblest capacity to do so, and she also attributes the poor and dispossessed with the capacity for grace. Such anti-hierarchical sympathies glimmer beneath the self-sacrifice that defines Ma's character. Personally she gives everything she can for the betterment of the family by caregiving, cooking, maintaining morale, and even keeping Granma's death a secret until the Joads crossed the California desert so they would not be impeded.

At the end of the novel, after Grampa, Noah, Connie, Granma, Casy, and Tom have died or left and Rose of Sharon's baby is stillborn, Ma remains unbroken because she holds on to the hope offered by cohesion. The novel's final scene is Ma nodding to Rose of Sharon to share her breast milk with a starving man, saying, "I knowed you would. I knowed!" (454). Ma invests her faith in a God out of propriety, but more intentionally she invests her faith in the power of unification and determination, even as it fails with the tragic breakup of the family. Carpenter describes this as such: "the new moral of this novel

is that the love of all people—if it be unselfish—may even supersede the love of family. So Casy dies for his people, and Tom is ready to, and Rose of Sharon symbolically transmutes her maternal love to a love of all people. Here is a new realization of ‘the word democratic, the word en-masse’” (Carpenter 12). Ma’s resounding optimism echoes in her daughter’s generosity, which projects love and unity into the community beyond the Joad family unit. Ma resolves that keeping the family together will allow them to survive; by trying to overcome the subjugation imposed by a socio-economic hierarchy together, she argues that they can maintain a humanity and dignity that will keep their will to survive alive. In confronting adversity, her spiritual philosophy proffers power at the local level. The warmth of her humility also makes her the political antithesis to the coldness of the “tractor man,” and of the individualistic and greedy agribusiness ruling class. By leveraging power through firm decision-making and fierce protective instincts, even when doing so upsets traditional gender and class paradigms, Ma grounds her ideology in opportunity for the people she loves. Personal action, in her case, stands against the political momentum that threatens her community; she rejects this by maintaining compassion until the end.

Ma humanizes through her struggle for humanity. She therefore presents a kind of saintly ideal about what it means to be human (perhaps unrealistically so<sup>18</sup>), and how to think ethically as a result. She clings to community and asserts the intrinsic need for

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<sup>18</sup> Alfred Kazin says that “Steinbeck’s people are always on the verge of becoming human, but never do.” Morris Dickstein responds by noting that Kazin “was pointing to a weakness that was also, on some level, a deliberate intention [by Steinbeck]. Steinbeck touches on this point in *Working Days*, the journal he kept while writing *The Grapes of Wrath*: ‘Make the people live,’ he says to himself. ‘Make them live. But my people must be more than people. They must be an over-essence of people.’” (Dickstein 118). Perhaps Tom, Ma, and Casy have an “over-essence” of humanity and are caricatures of goodness rather than believably human subjects. The point remains that their morality guides the morality of the novel, and thus they can be seen as exemplars of human behavior in Steinbeck’s worldview.

human kindness, thereby calling attention to a system of oppression that treats humans like cogs in a machine designed for profit. By way of contrast, she opposes dehumanization. Simultaneously she reveals the true maliciousness of the capitalist industry, which is structurally hierarchical. In many ways, Ma's characterization enacts a kind of Marxist sympathy. She recognizes practical needs first and believes in the rights that the working class. Her answer to capitalist exploitation and greed is compassion, and in numbers; this philosophy also forms the base of an environmental ethic, at least within Naess's deep ecology that rejects any hierarchical order. While she (like Tom) is no environmental advocate, her worldview admits ecological thinking even though her circumstances cannot.

Whereas Ma's spiritual philosophy focuses on a decentering of self and traditional economic relations, Jim Casy's is one of reconciling the self within a collective. An unofficial member of the Joad family, Casy the ex-preacher is treated with particular respect as a moral authority from Oklahoma to California. He is concerned with ideas around sin and virtue, as well as God and people, beginning with his first appearance:

"I was a preacher," said the man seriously. "Reverend Jim Casy—was a Burning Busher. Used to howl out the name of Jesus to glory. And used to get an irrigation ditch so squirmin' full of repented sinners half of 'em like to drowned. But not no more," he sighed. "Just Jim Casy now. Ain't got the call no more. Got a lot of sinful idears—but they seem kinda sensible." (20)

At the center of the identity crisis that changed Casy's thinking is the sense that "his words have become simple and his ideas unorthodox" (Carpenter 8). The former preacher sees the place where religion and life conflict—when the Christian explanations of salvation he once sermonized, which sent sinners "squirming", are no longer as "sensible" as "sinful idears" to address the plight of his Oklahoman congregation. In the context of his place among this populace, he explains, "I got the sperit sometimes an' nothin' to preach about. I

got the call to lead the people, an' no place to lead 'em" (21). Jim Casy is perhaps an allegorical representation of the other "JC," Jesus Christ, and reveals himself as such to the reader through his many philosophical musings.<sup>19</sup> But, again, his brand of Judeo-Christian spirituality and ideas about the Holy Spirit stray from convention. He notes: "There ain't no sin and there ain't no virtue. There's just stuff people do... I don't know nobody name' Jesus. I know a bunch of stories, but I only love people" (23). Casy's reconfiguration of "sin" considers populist experiences with poverty, suffering, and, eventually, exodus at the hands of the evildoers controlling the economic system. If Ma Joad represents the politics of Marxism, then Jim Casy is the leader of the Revolution. In fact, right before he is killed doing the work and expressing the words that mobilize Tom into joining the pushback efforts against the police and the farming executives, Casy mentions the French Revolution; even though "them fellas that figgered her out got their heads chopped off," it was the spirit in which previous revolutionaries aspired towards a more just social system that Casy seeks to mobilize efforts to upset the current status quo (384).

Casy moves between Christianity and Ralph Waldo Emerson's secular "transcendental mysticism", Frederic Carpenter argues, particularly in respect to Emerson's idea of the "oversoul" (Carpenter 8-9). Casy calls the "Holy Sperit" the "one big soul ever'body's a part of" (24). Thinking in terms of "one big soul" rather than on an individual level resonates as much with Christian generosity as with the theory of ecology;

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<sup>19</sup> As Tom and Casy meet up at a meeting of labor organizers, before police interrupt and Casy is killed, Casy even makes the comparison: "Here's me, been a-goin' into the wilderness like Jesus to try find out somepin" (381). After being arrested and released, Casy says his cell is the very place where he accessed his agency. He decided he finally understands what was good versus what is evil, without any of the earlier confusion he felt about what his purpose is if not to preach. His epiphany leads him to strike, because it is "jus' as natural as rain. You didn't do it for fun no way. Doin' it 'cause you have to" (384).



both ideologies outline ethical behavior by considering the self as part of a system rather than independent from it. A major catalyst in Tom's self-realization at the end of the novel, Casy finds the place between preaching about life (theory) and actually living the messages he preaches (praxis); he sacrifices himself for the Joads by taking the blame for a petty offense Tom committed, and later he joins a group of labor strikers who push back against authority (symbolized in the police force that instills fear in migrant communities as a means of keeping them in line). Before he is killed, he quotes a "fella [from] jail" in conversation with Tom: "ever' time they's a little step fo'ward, she may slip back a little, but she never slips clear back... an' that makes the whole thing right. An' that means they wasn't no waste even if it seemed like they was" (384). Making social progress towards some eventual deliverance negotiates the idea of personal redemption at the center of Christianity, and offers it to the collective rather than the singular. However, Casy's nonconformist view of the oversoul also reflects an Emersonian individualist sensibility that roots faith in an American "religious feeling of identity with nature ... the religion of love" (Carpenter 9). The value of the individual's participation in a system and within a community, therefore, is essential to Casy's philosophy—a sentiment that he eventually passes on to Tom.

#### **Part iv. Biblical Parallels and Humanistic Philosophy**

These characters and their actions (both political and personal) form the backbone of the novel's ethical orientation. The values they embody uphold a morality that is circumstantial rather than rigidly prescriptive, is based in the strength and unity of community, and centers on compassion—and all this in the context of tremendous struggle

and sacrifice. They mute personal needs for the general wellbeing of those around them. Their sense of allegiance is not primarily to God's will, nor to the promise of salvation—they have seen hopes thwarted when they believed that California would be their saving grace, and so all they are left with is each other and their community of dispossessed migrants. The characters' virtues emerge in their understanding and dignity, as well. They are, essentially, nouveau-Christian humanists. The result is that their spiritual philosophies create a moral atmosphere within *The Grapes of Wrath* that is decidedly eclectic, as far as religious orthodoxy is concerned. However, before exploring this point further, it is important to note *how* biblical resonances and philosophies are operative over the course of *The Grapes of Wrath's* narrative, and why the alignment of Judeo-Christian values is important for reading Steinbeck.

The novel intersects an eclectic blend of allegorical references, which destabilizes tradition while still recalling recognizable stories and tropes found in the Bible. Even though the Joads are not conventionally religious themselves, a distinctly Judeo-Christian sensibility pervades the novel in its echo of familiar stories and parables. Indeed, the title *The Grapes of Wrath* has roots in the Bible.<sup>20</sup> Biblical allegories persist throughout, including in the premise of migration to a perceived Promised Land. Ken Eckert summarizes this symbolic gesture of “reenactment”:

The Joads end the story not in a promised land but destitute. The novel [represents] a reversal of Exodus. The Joads progress from a despoiled but occupied promised land (Oklahoma) toward bondage in Egypt (California). This extended image pattern permits Steinbeck to draw a larger thematic vision in which material

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<sup>20</sup> From the footnote of the DeMott edition: “*The Grapes of Wrath*: From the second verse of Julia Ward Howe’s abolition song, ‘The Battle Hymn of the Republic’ [which reads] ‘Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;/He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored’ ... Cf. also Deuteronomy 32:32-33, and Revelation 14:18-20” (DeMott 457).

poverty teaches the Joads a broadly Christian worldview. Far from ending in despair, the novel closes in the Joads emerging from a self-satisfied and legalistic moralism into a new ethos of universal love in the pattern of Christ, culminating in Rose of Sharon's spiritual maturing in her selfless act at the novel's end when the family finally moves from "I" to "we." (Eckert 340)

I disagree that the essence of "we"<sup>21</sup> only "finally" materializes at the end of the book with Rose of Sharon's act of giving; instead, I have argued that the principle of community is actually fundamental to the Joads' philosophy from the beginning. However, Eckert's explanation of the function that Scriptural references play throughout the novel provides a useful framework to understand the allegorical nature of Steinbeck's narrative. The theory of the Joads' "inverted" exodus is one of many biblical tropes; Uncle John also sends Rose of Sharon's stillborn baby through water à la Moses down the Nile; Jim Casy, if taken to be a Jesus figure, is killed for his beliefs and message as Jesus is in the Gospels; Casy is spiritually reincarnated by Tom, a kind of converted disciple, who remarks, "seems like I can see him sometimes" after Casy's death (419). With clear resonances of classic parables and biblical stories—but clear departures as well—Steinbeck uses allegory to ground the novel in a certain Judeo-Christian tradition. In so doing, he situates the novel in familiar theological and philosophical territory (at least, to an American reader<sup>22</sup>). The move to "invest [the Joads] and their story with biblical elements" uniquely makes "their characters more universal than they otherwise could have been" (Crockett 194). The conspicuous linkage to the Judeo-Christian tradition creates the parallel between *The Grapes of Wrath's*

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<sup>21</sup> Reference to an oft-quoted line in chapter 14: "For the quality of owning freezes you forever into 'I,' and cuts you off forever from the 'we'" (152).

<sup>22</sup> That American sensibilities are steeped in Christian values in national literature is not a new observation—not only in the sense of "one nation under God", but as part of a wide-reaching national identity. Crockett argues Steinbeck has "made the Joads representative of the American pioneer," forging a link between the American frontier and pioneers' reliance on the Bible as a cultural touchstone during their westward movement (Crockett 194).

spirituality and a broader system of ethics.

Generally, religious sensibility relates to a deity or essence that transcends humanity. The natural world—the environment—also stands outside the human realm that the Joads occupy. But the parallels between the spiritual and natural worlds extend beyond their relationship to the human world—religious and ecological identity center upon concern for the “other” that is external to individual conditions. The philosophy of the fictionalized non-intercalary chapters lies within the Joads’ communion with the divine, with the people in their community, and with the environment. In the previous section on the novel’s form, I discussed how the attention Steinbeck pays to the landscape and natural world in scenes without people elevates it to an end itself (that is, outside of its import or utility for humans). However, in depicting the relationship the characters of the novel have with the environment, and how oftentimes that relationship is fraught with selfish exploitation and disrespect, Steinbeck prescribes a potential environmentalist ethic that is tied strongly to the examples of model human behavior towards others outlined here.

To take up the nouveau-Christian humanism the Joads embody once more: in what ways does Steinbeck’s unique formulation of spirituality, beyond just religion, create possibilities for guiding human behavior? For “thinking like a mountain”? Despite the anthropocentrism inherent to a humanist ethic—and to the form of the novel, with its central emphasis on human characters—*The Grapes of Wrath* invites possibilities for ecocentrism by proposing that organic conceptions of morality are viable. The novel relies on the individual negotiation of ethics *based* on unique context, not the strict adherence to norms, laws, or organized religion. Steinbeck flirts with the idea that what counts as moral depends on situation, on the individual, on the choices available at any

given moment, etc. The problem with this logic is, if Tom's murders do not make him unethical, or if Casy's cherry-picked version of Christianity is not sinful, then is *anything* bad? To keep its system of ethics controlled, *The Grapes of Wrath* emphasizes community wellbeing and collective care as the most important principles a society can prioritize. In this formulation, members of the community hold each other accountable. Tom and Casy become heroes because they have dedicated themselves to the cause. What is moral, therefore, is not just what one person thinks—it is far more inclusive than that. This ensures that the perspective of the novel is an ecological one. Ethical behavior *is* what benefits the common good. This requires having the same kinds of aspirations as Arne Naess does for the deep ecology movement: “diversity, complexity, autonomy, decentralization, symbiosis, egalitarianism, and classlessness.” Again and again, forces antithetical to community interests (i.e. the economic and social conditions maintained by the agribusiness industry that perpetually keep migrant communities starving and unemployed) are shown as the real evil. Steinbeck has chosen to create a world that recognizably draws moral behavior from several tenets of Christian thought, but interpretation of the novel as a mouthpiece for Christian doctrine would be a mistake—spirituality here is on its own terms. *The Grapes of Wrath's* reinterpretation of humanism invokes the ecological community formally and thematically, by considering the natural world to be a stakeholder in the common good.

Traditional humanism can admit “shallow ecology”, an outlook that, unlike deep ecology, advocates for the environment when doing so benefits humans and not because

nature has inherent value.<sup>23</sup> In some ways farming can be seen as a form of shallow ecology. However I believe that *The Grapes of Wrath* reaches deeper into environmental ethics than this. The narrative pays careful attention to contact between the natural and social worlds most clearly displayed in the intercalary chapters, wrapping the environment into *The Grapes of Wrath*'s moral universe. The Joads' inextinguishable humility and dignity suggest a kind of compassion that resonates more with deep ecology than shallow, by recognizing nature as an inherent part of their system of ethics. In chapter III, I explain how the Joads' compassion for others, and their recognition of the intrinsic worth of all people, is based within the same kind of compassionate human perspective that values the intrinsic worth of nature.

The environment suffers as the poor farmers suffer, each entity stripped of its dignity (righteously bestowed by Steinbeck) by the unfeeling "tractor man" who continues "raping methodically, raping without passion. The driver sat in his iron seat and he was proud of the straight lines he did not will, proud of the tractor he did not own or love, proud of the power he could not control... The land bore under iron, and under iron gradually died; for it was not loved or hated, it had no prayer or curses" (36). Here, compassion (or lack thereof) extends from humans to the land itself rather than between people. The common enemy is mechanical iron, which Steinbeck metonymically uses to represent the unfeeling agribusiness executive hell-bent on maximizing individual gain at

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<sup>23</sup> Naess states that "the shallow ecological argument carries today much heavier weight in political life than the deep. It is therefore often necessary for tactical reasons to hide our deeper attitudes and argue strictly homocentrically" (Naess "Ecosophy T: Deep Versus Shallow Ecology" 222). Humanism is "homocentric," or anthropocentric, because it concerns the interests of humans above all else. It therefore values the environment differently from the philosophy deep ecology, but can admit shallow ecology when the interests of the environment are also the interests of humankind.

the expense of others (especially abominable given the general austerity in Depression-era America, and the abundance of produce from California's fields that was left to rot). Greed is the ultimate evil, and the unchecked self-interest of the profit motive is problematic both for religion and for the natural world and its resources. Industrialists (whose wealth gives them dominion) also use the environment as a tool to keep the impoverished suppressed—by keeping the poor from accessing it except as it serves to profit their own business. Money maintains this status quo, and the love of it is the root of the evil that separates people from each other, as well as from the earth. Steinbeck also suggests it separates people from their own humanity. The narrative of chapter 19 (an intercalary chapter) speaks to this sin: “crop failure, drought, and flood were no longer little deaths within life, but simple losses of money. And all their love was thinned with money, and all their fierceness dribbled away in interest until they were no longer farmers at all, but little shopkeepers of crops” (232). This economical focus on excess transgresses the novel's (and the Joads') spiritual philosophy, which advocates a kind of symbiotic union both within social communities *and* with the land: “if a man owns a little property, that property is him, it's part of him, and it's like him” (35). Here, “a little” emphasizes sustenance without acquisitiveness (to borrow from the language of economic liberalism); it emphasizes *scale* as a measure by which human presence in the ecological community ought to be measured. Harkening back to Emerson's concept of the oversoul, unequal land ownership and abuse reflects a breach in the “religion of love”.

The sense of the collective, of union, and of democracy that the Joads purport in their personal morals directly feed into a philosophy of universal interconnectedness, of justice as dependent upon the elimination of hierarchy and corporate ownership, and of

respect and compassion towards the natural world that pervades the novel. But more than just establishing the grounds of a moral relationship between humans and the environment, *The Grapes of Wrath* suggests the intrinsic value of the non-human world in its overall vision of an ecosophy, per Naess's definition as "a philosophy of ecological harmony or equilibrium" (Naess, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecological Movement" 8). Naess elaborates upon this definition in 1985, explaining ecosophy to be "inspired by the deep ecological movement. The ending *-sophy* stresses that what we modestly try to realize is wisdom rather than science or information. A philosophy, as articulated wisdom, has to be a synthesis of theory and practice" (Naess, "Ecosophy T: Deep Versus Shallow Ecology" 223). In the next section, I will draw more explicit attention to these ecological principles in order to connect them to Steinbeck's wider wisdom in the spiritual ecology of *The Grapes of Wrath*.



## Chapter III: Embodied Ecocriticism and Deep Ecology

### Part i: Ecosophy and Ecological Principles in Plot

Steinbeck's profound emphasis on place, and the relationships humans of the novel have with the world they live in, highlights the primacy of establishing an ecosophy in *The Grapes of Wrath*. The landscapes the Joads pass through on their journey to California from Oklahoma are sites of struggle, beauty, hunger, desolation, and ultimately survival. The natural environment is where the spiritual converges with the physical; it affects humans and is affected by human actions in fields, over mountain passes, in pop-up Hoovervilles, and along the road. Agriculture offers the possibility for ecological awareness through the proximate and material relationship it forges between people and environment. Although planting and harvesting crops is for human benefit, the novel treats farming as the most intimate way to cultivate awareness of environmental concerns, and for care to exchange between humans and the land. Additionally, when taken in opposition to exploitation of both resources and labor, the sustaining and life-giving nature of farming offers new possibilities for identification with environmental concerns. To understand farming as a means of expanding an ecosophy, we must first identify this subject's moral argument.

Inherent to the process of farming is a recognition of generative circularity in seasons and rotations, as well as the acceptance of forces beyond human control. Kathleen Hicks argues that

*The Grapes of Wrath* explores the paradoxical nature of the earth's natural processes, which are cyclical, but chaotic and unpredictable at the same time. It also centers, however, upon the highly paradoxical nature of human beings. The problem is that the human animal, like all animals, is driven by instincts that prompt it to do whatever is necessary to ensure the biological success of both itself

and its entire species, yet the lifestyle it leads often destroys the earth on which its life depends, ultimately guaranteeing its own destruction. (Hicks 107-8)

If we take the stance that promoting life is justified and *right* (thereby falling in line with most humanist reasoning), then we must accept that such a vision of morality cannot be purely ecocentric. Subsisting off the earth's resources (without being rapaciously, individualistically greedy) is necessary—an “instrumental” good. But what of non-human life? To what degree do the interests of the natural world need to be protected? In ideological terms, the difference between humanist and environmentalist thought is on a sliding scale; where one falls on that scale depends on the degree to which their ethical priority is placed on humans rather than other forms of life. If humanism is not necessarily understood to mean human-centrism, for example, a humanist could theoretically support environmentalist actions if not doing so would be detrimental to humans.<sup>24</sup> Such a possibility might mean asking questions like, “why should we ground values in the welfare of human beings rather than in the welfare of all beings capable of having a welfare at all?” (Singer, “Taking Humanism Beyond Speciesism”).<sup>25</sup> While an entirely ecocentric worldview that privileges nature above all else can never be fully achieved in the quest for human survival, Singer shows that an *anthropocentric* one need not be the only alternative. Ethical modes of compassion, collectivism, and awareness can mediate and decenter

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<sup>24</sup> Said another way, a different kind of humanism can exist that rejects “the thoroughly religious idea that humans are at the center of the moral universe [that] still seems to be alive and well in humanist circles” (Singer, “Taking Humanism Beyond Speciesism”).

<sup>25</sup> In Western theology, “the natural world exists for the benefit of human beings. God gave human beings dominion over the natural world, and God does not care how we treat it,” according to Peter Singer. Therefore, in this formulation, “human beings are the only morally important members of this world. Nature itself is of no intrinsic value, and the destruction of plants and animals cannot be sinful, unless it leads us to harm human beings” (Singer, “Taking Humanism Beyond Speciesism”). This fundamentalist Christian humanism inadequately presents a complete philosophy on what compassionate humanism can look like, both for Singer and the scope of this thesis.

individualistic ideals to create a more harmonic, holistic conception of moral virtue. This kind of philosophy would need to recognize both human and non-human interest as legitimate and significant, factoring in how each bears upon the other.

Indeed, perhaps even “the achievement of the ecological Self is a precondition for being a truly moral person” (Reitan 411). Eric Reitan claims that “while deep ecology recommends that the scope of one’s concern be extended beyond the human community to the whole of nature—and thus is distinct from Kantian and Aristotelian ethics which are concerned only with the human domain”—ultimately “the *kind* of concern for other beings that is recommended by deep ecologists” involves developing an ecological philosophy from self-realization (Reitan 413). He concludes that this involves “transcending the narrow ego and identifying with others” and developing a “firm disposition to perform moral acts from the sheer love of doing so” (Reitan 424). We see such self-realization and decentering of self in Casy and Tom, who take up arms against the powers that be in order that the communities to which they belong, and for which they care deeply, might have a better shot at equitable access to food, shelter, and work. *The Grapes of Wrath* works in a world of contradictions—human communities are part of, but displaced by, the ecological community; the individual must shed individuality; Christian humanism is presented without orthodoxy. But within this philosophical hodgepodge is a morality that relies on refocusing perspective: how are right and wrong depicted? And right and wrong for whom, or for what? As discussed in chapter II, the novel’s narratorial view is positioned ecologically, which seeks to observe the “relational, total field image” of moral existence posed by Naess. It is incumbent upon the *individual* to achieve the self-realization Reitan describes so as to invite a consciousness reflective of deep ecology. Part of this realization

is coming to terms with one's position within a community of other members. The farmer is the lens through which Steinbeck posits the moral relationship between humans and nature in *The Grapes of Wrath*, as agriculture is a main thrust of ecocritical interpretation throughout the novel as a whole.

Intercalary chapter 25 best expresses the moral sentiments and acts of love held at the center of *The Grapes of Wrath*, as regards the relationship between individuals and the land. The chapter begins "the spring is beautiful in California." A profusion of evidence follows, including descriptions of "the first tendrils of the grapes," "full green hills," and "mile-long rows of pale green lettuce." And alongside the earth's bounty are the "men of understanding and knowledge and skill": farmers, who have skills that "can make the year heavy. They have transformed the world with their knowledge" (346-347). Farmers' intimate relationship with the land, it follows, enables them to see it, to know it, and to care for it in particularly gentle ways—moreover in ways that are *good*. Their work is generative, and cultivation is compassionate. The act of farming is an act of reverence and respect, not necessarily for the natural world as it is, but for the power it possesses to bloom, provide, strengthen, and be beautiful in itself. In accordance with Reitan's assessment of the ecological self, the farmer is attuned to the earth, its capabilities, and its needs, and is satisfied with what it creates.

The fruitfulness of this perspective is ruptured by the destructive intrusion of capital at the harvest: "and first the cherries ripen. Cent and a half a pound. Hell, we can't pick 'em for that... The purple prunes soften and sweeten. My God, we can't pick them and dry and sulphur them. We can't pay wages, no matter what wages" (347). And as fruit begins to fall and decay, "the little farmers watched debt creep up on them... this vineyard

will belong to the bank,” and “the decay spreads over the State, and the sweet smell is a great sorrow on the land” (348). In shifting from the tender details of California’s beauty to the violent powers of price-driving landowners and agribusiness capitalists, the account moves from the love of producing to the love of products. This change in narrative centers power in the elites who overpower independent farmers, and whose ultimate wrongdoing rests in their focus on the economic bottom line rather than any kind of social equity. Such an outlook seems to be in cahoots with the “economic man” of capitalist ideology, and the lacking compassion that accompanies his purported rationality. Consequently, tragedy befalls both the small farmer and the earth: “There is a failure here that topples all our success. The fertile earth, the straight tree rows, the sturdy trunks, and the ripe fruit. And children dying of pellagra must die because a profit cannot be taken from an orange. And coroners must fill in the certificates—died of malnutrition—because the food must rot, must be forced to rot” (349). The process of helping plants grow produce to eat is seen as a “success”—as a good. This is the natural way of things. Immorality in the form of buyouts and price driving disrupts this symbiosis. The industrialist turns agriculture—the migrant families’ means of relating to the land—violent. The dependence farmers have on the natural world is premised on their respect for what nature can do by creating and sustaining. Within the world of the novel, natural spaces are life-giving on all fronts—planting, cultivating, and harvesting is seen as a crucial element of tending to the earth compassionately so that all may live. The industrialist prevents the natural order from taking place by bringing undue decay and suffering with the imposition of mechanized monoculture, pesticide use, and harsh labor conditions. Under the executive’s land ownership, both the social and natural worlds are subjugated. As the emotional

descriptions of the farmer–land connection suggest, the decay of social justice is entirely aligned with the decay of environmental justice.

In many ways, “the Joads maintain a system of core cultural values that privilege agrarianism, independence, and toughness, but they face an increasingly frightening and increasingly more powerful culture of technology, progress, and capitalism” (Willis 359). As this thesis has argued, these “core cultural values” are transmitted in the spiritual sphere, in their interpersonal relationships within their communities, and in the book’s representation of the environment. The enemies of the natural world are, again, the same enemies of the social one: “faceless conglomerates (the business forces that displace them from their farm) and cyborg men who, merged with tanklike tractors, literally drive the family from its land” (Willis 359). The Joads’ egalitarian posture, which is fueled by collective action and wellbeing, opposes the economics that have allowed industrial agribusiness to exploit nature’s processes and human labor. The ideology of the migrant farmer is based in materiality—in material communion with the natural world, and both the economic and physical oppression by the wealthy agribusiness industry. As the above reading purports, the inception of wrongdoing is when the “man of knowledge” can no longer employ his understanding of the land to help it flourish, and both are left purposeless, at the behest of the “tractor man” and his thirst for profit.

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the Joads recognize the inherent value of the environment, and their respect for life extends beyond their priority to survive. This outlook informs their entire ethical orientation, not just towards the environment but to human communities too. Hicks begins to expand the theme of harmony and balance beyond the agricultural sphere and into the greater natural world:

Ultimately, the novel argues that the development of a relationship between humans and the land, guided by an ethical consideration based on reverence for all life “may be the only way to reestablish harmony between people and the biotic community as a whole, to which people belong” (qtd. Callicott). The novel makes it amply clear that the destruction of an ecosystem’s delicate balance is an immediate cause of human strife, suffering, and misery. The important implication then is that establishing ethical and harmonious relationships among humans is contingent upon humans developing and adhering to a land ethic. (Hicks 108)

The Joads’ commitment to upholding generosity and dignity, even in the last rainstorm of the novel when the remaining family members are without shelter or food, suggests their holistic ecological worldview. After Rose of Sharon’s baby arrives stillborn and before her final proffering of milk to a dying stranger, Ma Joad thanks Mrs. Wainwright, a friend, for helping care for her daughter:

“You been frien’ly,” [Ma] said. “We thank you.”  
The stout woman smiled. “No need to thank. Ever’body’s in the same wagon. S’pose we was down. You’d a give us a han’.”  
“Yes,” Ma said, “we would.”  
“Or anybody.”  
“Or anybody. use’ ta be the fambly was furst. It ain’t so now. It’s anybody. Worse off we get, the more we got to do.” (445)

The hope of the novel, in all its emphasis on injustice and suffering, is the resilient compassion held until the end. Even where life ends—as long as it exists elsewhere. In the final intercalary chapter, as rain is pouring down on California and migrant workers are either starving or joining the organized opposition movement like Tom, the narrator states, “the women sighed with relief, for they knew it was all right—the break had not come; and the break would never come as long as fear could turn to wrath.” And, at the same time, “tiny points of grass came through the earth, and in a few days the hills were pale green with the beginning year” (435). Even in the face of death, rain, and the sharpest corporeal and emotional forms of suffering, their continued mutual support retains their moral high ground. By never accepting defeat by the paradigmatic structures that entrap them in

poverty and homelessness—even just spiritually—the Joads and their peers enact a resistance to power in their collective persistence.

Ultimately, *The Grapes of Wrath* suggests the possibility of creating an ethic that incorporates care for the non-human world not merely for its utility, but because it is a life-giving good. More particularly, it is a good in its harmonic, coexistent relationship with humans. By painting this relationship as natural and morally sound, Steinbeck’s work achieves an environmentalist ethic focusing on cohesion, not manipulation. Deep ecology is the understanding of the natural world’s intrinsic worth. It is a philosophy that fails to fully comply with humanistic thought, just as *The Grapes of Wrath*—like any novel—cannot fully free itself from anthropocentrism; but through their approach to survival through continued generosity and resilience, the Joads and migrant farmers show the importance of extending a philosophy of care to the environment as well as to others. Through the lens of agriculture and the farmer’s love for the land (and for working with the land), Steinbeck’s novel creates a new inclusive humanism; this is one that expands beyond the traditional humanist belief that the natural world exists solely to cater to humans. Instead, *The Grapes of Wrath*’s philosophy suggests that the death of nature is the death of the individual—if the earth does not provide for humans and humans do not care for the earth, then neither can support the other in creating new life. Such a notion upends capitalist philosophies that assume limitless access to resources for exploitation and profit. The basis of Christian humanistic goodness has the same focus on the total field image, on solidarity, in this moral orientation.



## Part ii: Reception and Critical Interpretation of *The Grapes of Wrath*

*The Grapes of Wrath* was awarded the National Book Award, the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, and was a major element in Steinbeck's receipt of the 1962 Nobel Prize in Literature. Despite the popularity the novel has enjoyed since it was first published in 1939, it has, like its author, retained a degree of ambivalence in literary criticism. Regional biases initially led influential East Coast academic traditionalists to discount Steinbeck, like other Western writers, immediately following *The Grapes of Wrath*'s publication (Ditsky 1-2). But more than this, Peter Lisca notes that dismissive mid-twentieth century attitudes towards Steinbeck were products of the fact that he "deal[s] with proletarian materials" and therefore was "both accepted and rejected on sociological rather than aesthetic terms" (qtd. Ditsky 8). Mary Brown summarizes that "many academics express the general negative critical opinion of *The Grapes of Wrath* that it is 'sentimental'... whether one finds [Steinbeck's prose] 'cloyingly precious' or regional and authentic may color an overall judgment of the book's quality and its suitability for serious literary study" (Brown 288). Perhaps early critics thought that "one might desire *The Grapes of Wrath* to be composed differently, whether as plot or as characterization, but wisdom compels one to be grateful for the novel's continued existence," as Harold Bloom once said (Bloom 5). But, "While Steinbeck's fiction is consistently taught in America's secondary schools, he has yet to penetrate the gleaming halls of academe with much success," as Louis Owens commented in 1985 (*John Steinbeck's Re-vision of America* xi). Regardless of Steinbeck's place in the literary canon, not much has changed in the university since.

Aside from its polarized response in critical circles, *The Grapes of Wrath* remains one of "the most enduring—and controversial—works of fiction by any American author"

that has “resolutely entered both the American consciousness and its conscience” (DeMott xi). Its reception, or more specifically its *reputation*, has implications for how this “compassionate narrative” is read, understood, and considered against the landscape of American literature. If the novel and author occupy a familiar, perhaps mythic, space in literary imagination, then the environmental and philosophical ramifications of *The Grapes of Wrath* are relevant as well—at least according to Lawrence Buell’s ecocritical argument. In *The Environmental Imagination* he asserts that,

If, as environmental philosophers contend, western metaphysics and ethics need revision before we can address today’s environmental problems, then environmental crisis involves a crisis of the imagination the amelioration of which depends on finding better ways of imaging nature and humanity’s relation to it. To that end, it behooves us to look searchingly at the most searching works of environmental reflection that the world’s biggest technological power has produced; for in these we may expect to find disclosed (not always with full self-consciousness, of course) both the pathologies that bedevil society at large and some of the alternative paths that it might consider. (Buell 2)

Steinbeck makes no explicit claims about advancing an environmental agenda in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Indeed, threads of deep ecology or a coherent ecosophy can only be pulled from the fabric of this novel from a retroactive perspective. Such philosophical values not only emerged long after Steinbeck’s writing, but also have not typically been applied to works of fiction. Buell’s study of Thoreau’s work in *The Environmental Imagination* underlines an important point about ecocriticism and genre; “less interested in Thoreau per se than in the American environmental imagination generally, meaning especially literary nonfiction,” Buell’s interests extend beyond “environmentally directed texts in other genres also” (Buell 2). Within the convergence of form and content, Steinbeck’s story draws upon philosophies of moral human action, both from a spiritual perspective and an environmental one. As I have argued in this chapter, these ethical

contents contain recognizable ideological frameworks within a fictional narrative.

Therefore, Steinbeck's novel provides a new lens for readers to perceive ethical human behavior towards the natural and social worlds.

Optimistically, then, the ramifications of Steinbeck's philosophies are considerable; for if the American "environmental imagination" Buell describes is traceable within national literature, then the possibilities Steinbeck offers to his extensive readership are worth considering in the emergent field of ecocriticism. By creating the possibility for deep ecology interpretation in *The Grapes of Wrath*, and connecting threads of moral human behavior to not just the social world but to the spiritual and to the environment as well, Steinbeck pushes the extent to which fiction and the form of the novel can contain certain environmental ideologies usually reserved for nonfiction texts. The moral impulses of this novel enfold these principles within the sphere of spirituality by drawing from a common set of ethics recognized in strands of the Judeo-Christian tradition. The "sentimental" and "social generosity" elements that characterize the novel might be attributed to its religious moralism and politics of social justice. However, these frameworks offer recognizable patterns that allow an environmental ethic (which shares many values about human behavior) as well.

Therefore, the overall spiritual ecology of *The Grapes of Wrath* offers another dimension of understanding Steinbeck's sympathies and philosophies throughout his work. While maintaining the novelistic form's central concern of human nature and character development, *The Grapes of Wrath* also presents another consideration through and with its focus on religion: it validates the environment as a worthy entity dignified not just by its relationship to human interest, but as morally defensible in its own right. Even if the

actions of the plot, which centers on the Joads and other migrant families as they strive for survival, do not protect the interests of the environment, the novel lends itself to identification with deep ecology by suggesting the morality of such an ideal philosophy. The text achieves this by pinning unethical human behavior (embodied by the greed and selfishness within the structural oppression and hegemonic inequality that uphold the capitalist agribusiness industry) as the enemy of both religion and environmentalism, and by recognizing dignity, respect, community, and equality as intrinsically valuable principles on which to model ethical human behavior towards all human and non-human entities.

## Conclusion

*The hell with it! There ain't no sin and there ain't no virtue.  
There's just stuff people do. It's all part of the same thing.  
And some of the things folks do is nice, and some ain't nice,  
but that's as far as any man got a right to say. (JC, p. 23)*

There is never a moment, either in literature or in life, when one has *finally* perfected a fully formed deep ecology perspective. Such a philosophy has no terminal point—it exists as a spectrum. The same thing is true of being an “ethical” person: one can always find ways to be more ethical. To return to Aldo Leopold’s model of an ecological system, there is always more to do in order to practice a more holistically minded, more cooperative, more compassionate lifestyle. In fact, deep ecology can only ever be aspirational; it is a way of seeing and behaving, while balancing instrumental and intrinsic value in the natural world, that humans can continually work towards. This means that one’s ecosophy changes depending on their circumstances. Clearly, the context in which one begins to develop an ethical relationship with others—both human and non-human—matters. For the Joads and the other migrants whose material reality is centered upon survival, philosophical attitudes expressed in interactions with others reflect the capacity to possess an environmental ethic without necessarily enabling action upon it. In other words, their instrumental value of nature might take precedence over intrinsic value, but their particular worldview as farmers in communion with the land, as members of a social community that prioritizes mutual support and equity, and as people whose spiritual and philosophical outlooks are rooted in a collective lived experience; this is what enables a perspective fostering ecological thinking.

Arne Naess’s layout of the important principles of the deep ecology movement points to where environmental practice ought to develop across society. Community, more

than any other concept, is at the heart of *The Grapes of Wrath*'s philosophy. The unification of groups of individuals, the decentering of individual desires, and the push towards the collective common good—*this* is what constitutes a compassionate narrative, and a compassionate ethic. Thinking like an ecocritic means recognizing that the ability of a work of fiction to inhabit and suggest such values, particularly a novel as beloved (and disputed) as *The Grapes of Wrath*, rests in how it is read. Lawrence Buell has conceptualized a helpful framework for designating environmentally oriented representation in literature; however, as this thesis has sought to reveal, my interpretation of the philosophical aspirations of Steinbeck's fiction allude to even broader themes of ecological awareness in the text.

*The Grapes of Wrath* breaks new ground by situating its morality in a world of paradoxes. The supreme paradox is that the novel's love for land and its love for people cannot always be in alignment. However, powers that disenfranchise others for individual profit are clearly immoral. The unit of analysis in the world of this novel is not the individual, as in certain economic ideologies—it is the community in which that individual participates. Perhaps the relations of *The Grapes of Wrath* can be defined in terms of a moral economy rather than a capitalistic one—this would at least resonate with certain spiritual traditions that are echoed in the novel. The individual's choice to participate in community is a major thrust of Steinbeck's inquiry into human nature... but certainly this theme is not isolated to *The Grapes of Wrath*. Against American literary traditions, however, Steinbeck's answer to individual action is especially evocative and fruitful in terms of ecocritical potential:

The conditions of the Depression were so overpowering that they brought traditional American individualism into question. Both *In Dubious Battle* and *The*

*Grapes of Wrath*, in different ways, were experiments at seeing humanity in the collective terms that the Depression seemed to demand: first in biological terms, almost as a scientific experiment conceived by Steinbeck's marine biologist friend Ed Ricketts, then in an epic and biblical mode, as Steinbeck used one family to stand for a mass migration, and added sweeping interchapters that generalize this movement into a vast social phenomenon. Both of these literary approaches conflict with America's ingrained individualism, to say nothing of the traditional novel's need for distinct, well-defined characters who stand some chance of being agents of their own destiny. (Dickstein 118)

For Tom, Ma, Casy, *and* the reader from the world outside this story, reconciliation between the individual and society, and beyond that into the broader ecological community, is the centerpiece of establishing a system of ethics. Such a worldview perhaps evolves from organized religion, political inclinations, lived experiences, *texts read*, etc., but "thinking like a mountain"—a lofty aspiration—is ultimately grounded in individual experiences.

To finally return to the earlier question about how literature shapes our perceptions of the environment: what does Steinbeck give to us, as readers? If one believes as Buell does that the philosophies in literature are integral to how nature is understood both individually and culturally, then this seems an important sentiment to reflect on. My answer would be that the novel's ecological discourse—including everything from the reverence in its description of the natural world to the different angles of narration—suggests a multifaceted approach that we might take to reconsider how we interact with the natural world. Part of this means becoming defamiliarized with our own positions and attitudes. After all, *The Grapes of Wrath* focuses on compassionate actions, but it also focuses on personal humbling. "It's all part of the same thing," Casy claims. Perhaps Steinbeck gives the ecocritic, as well as the reader, the task of finding which "parts" we add to our community—and to evaluate how we might better cooperate (intercalate) so as to realize the greatest good for every member within it.

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