CHAPTER - IV

PERVASIVE MOTIFS, SYMBOLISM, ALLEGORY AND BIBLICAL PARALLELISM UNFOLDED IN THE GRAPES OF WRATH

This chapter is devoted to analyze the form and style of the novel to discover its appropriateness and appeal to the common masses to galvanize them on a socio-political platform to assert their right to livelihood with dignity and respect. It also aims at analyzing all the literary feature of the novel with reference to pervasive motifs, symbolism, allegory and biblical parallelism underlying it.

The enormous contemporary social impact of The Grapes of Wrath can encourage the slippery reasoning that condemns a period novel to die with its period. But continuing sales and critical discussions suggest that The Grapes of Wrath has outlived its directly reportorial ties to the historical past; that it can be considered as an aesthetic object, a good or bad novel per se. In that light, the important consideration is the relative harmony of its structure and materials.

The Grapes of Wrath is an attempted prose epic, a summation of national experience at a given time. Evaluation proceeds from that
identification of genre. A negative critical trend asserts that The Grapes of Wrath is too flawed to command serious attention; the materials are local and temporary, not universal and permanent; the conception of life is overly simple; the characters are superficial types; the language is folksy or strained by turns; and, in particular, the incoherent structure is the weakest point—the story breaks in half, the nonorganic, editorializing interchapters force unearned general conclusions, and the ending is inconclusive as well as overwrought and sentimental. The positive trend asserts that The Grapes of Wrath is a great novel. Its materials are properly universalized in specific detail; the conception is philosophical, the characters are warmly felt and deeply created; the language is functional, varied and superb on the whole; and the structure is an almost perfect combination of the dramatic and the panoramic in sufficient harmony with the materials. This criticism admits that overwrought idealistic passage as well as propagandistic simplifications turn up on occasion, but these are minor flows in an achievement on an extraordinary scale. Relatively detached studies of Steinbeck’s ideas comprise a third trend. These studies are not directly useful in analytical criticism; they do establish that Steinbeck’s social ideas are ordered and legitimate extensions of biological fact, hence scientific and true rather than mistaken or sentimental.
The two evaluative positions are remarkable in their opposition. They are perhaps overly simple in asserting that The Grapes of Wrath is either a classic of our literature or a formless pandering to sentimental popular taste. Certainly these extremes are mistaken in implying that somehow, The Grapes of Wrath is sui generis in relation to Steinbeck’s work.

Trends so awkwardly triple need to be brought into a sharper focus. By way of a recapitulation in focus, consider a few words of outright praise:

For all of its sprawling asides and extravagances, The Grapes of Wrath is a big book, a great book, and one of maybe two or three American novels in a class with Huckleberry Finn.

(Freeman Champney 355)

Freeman Champney’s praise is conventional enough to pass unquestioned if one admires The Grapes of Wrath, or, if one does not, it can seem an invidious borrowing of prestige, shrilly emotive at that. Afterthought emphasizes the seriousqualification of the very high praise. Just how much damage is wrought by those “sprawling asides and extravagances,” and does The Grapes of Wrath survive its structural faults as Huckleberry Finn does, by virtue of its mythology, its characterization, its language? If the answers remain obscure, illumination may increase (permitting, as well as, a clearer
definition of the aesthetic efficacy of Steinbeck’s ideas) when the context of
critical discussion is the relationship of the novel’s structure to materials.

Steinbeck’s serious intentions and his artistic honesty are not in
question. He had studied and experienced the materials intensely over a period
of time. After a false start that he rejected (L’Affaire Lettucburh), his
conscious intention was to create an important literary work rather than a
propagandistic shocker or a journalistic statement of the topical problem of
how certain people faced one aspect of the Great Depression. Therefore, it is an
insult to Steinbeck’s aims to suggest that somehow The Grapes of Wrath is
imperfect art but a big or great novel nevertheless. In all critical justice, The
Grapes of Wrath must stand or fall as a serious and important work of art.

Steinbeck is frequently identified as a proletarian writer of the nineteen
thirties, one whose dominant interest lay in the social and political problems of
the Great Depression. But although In Dubious Battle and Of Mice and Men
might generally seem to justify this reputation, neither work is specifically
dated either by its materials or by Steinbeck’s treatment. Migrant workers and
union organizers had long been part of the California scene—and continued so
to be. Steinbeck’s early short story, “The Raid” (1934), dealing with two labor
organizers, similarly avoids identification with its decade. It was not until
1939, at the very end of the period, that he published The Grapes of Wrath, a work clearly and specifically grounded in conditions and events that were then making news. In fact, so directly and powerfully did this novel deal with contemporary events that it itself became an important part of those events – debated in public forums, banned, burned, denounced from pulpits, attacked in pamphlets, and even debated on the floor of Congress. Along with such works as Upton Sinclair’s The Jungle and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin, The Grapes of Wrath has achieved a place among those novels that so stirred the American public for a social cause as to have had measurable political impact. Although thus associated with this class of social-protest fiction, The Grapes of Wrath continues to be read, not as a piece of literary or social history, but with a sense of emotional involvement and aesthetic discovery. More than any other American novel, it successfully embodies a contemporary social problem of national scope in an artistically viable expression. It is unquestionably John Steinbeck’s finest achievement, a work of literary genius.

To appreciate fully this accomplishment, it is important to keep in mind Steinbeck’s independence from the extensive literary and political proletarian movements of the period. He took no part of the organized efforts of writers, critics, and scholars to promote leftist or Communist theory as fulfilment of
their responsibility to society; nor was he personally committed to any political viewpoint. While this kind of ideological neutrality enabled him to escape the pitfall of being too close to his materials—prejudice and propaganda—Steinbeck’s intimate knowledge of his materials contributes greatly to the novel’s realism and hence to its authority.

This familiarity had started while he was still a boy working on the farms and ranches surrounding his hometown of Salinas; it had grown through his college years during vacation and drop-out periods. More recently, in the autumn of 1936, he had written an article on migrant labor for The Nation, and a series of seven articles on these “Harvest Gypsies” for the San Francisco News. Steinbeck’s fiction had early shown an absorbing interest in man’s relationship to the land. He had explored it in terms of myth and biology in To a God unknown, communally in The Pastures of Heaven, and as a factor of maturation in the short stories of The Red Pony. But through the field trips he made and the reading he did in preparation for his articles, and through subjecting himself personally to the migrant experience by living and working with the labores, he was able to extend considerably the range of his terms to include the economic and, in the largest sense, the political. The truth of his observation in these latter dimensions of The Grapes of Wrath has long been
substantiated by historians, sociologists, and political scientists; the truth of the novel’s vision of humanity has been proven again and again in the hearts of its readers.

The novel’s main characters are the twelve members of the Joad family: Grampa, Granma, Pa, Ma, their children Winfield, Ruthie, Noah, Al, Tom (just returned from prison), Rosasharn and her husband Connie, and Uncle John, joined by the ex-preacher Jim Casy. Dispossessed of their Oklahoma homestead by the banks having foreclosed the mortgage on their property, after the impoverished soil and dust storms made it impossible for them to support themselves, the group leaves for California, where they expect to find work as field hands. Meanwhile their land is joined to that of other unfortunate neighbours and worked with huge tractors. During the long journey the Joads find that they are part of a large migration of people with whom they share dangers and privations—especially the Wilson family. Grampa and Granma Joad die, and Noah leaves the group en route. The rest of them arrive in California to find the labor market glutted with families like themselves, resented and disliked by the inhabitants, exploited mercilessly by the large growers and oppressed by the police. Connie deserts the family; Jim Casy is arrested, appears later as a labor organizer but is killed by vigilantes, one of
whom is in return killed by Tom, who then becomes a fugitive; Rosahsarn’s baby is born dead, and the novel ends with the Joads and their new friends, the Wainwrights, being even more hungry, ill, and impoverished than they were at the start.

All the characters are drawn as fully credible human beings, individuals yet also representative of their social class and circumstances. This is true even of such clearly unusual and strong personalities as Tom Joad, Jim Casy, Ma Joad, and her daughter Rosasharn. Casy, although a vision-Pierced prophet, retains enough elements of his revival-meeting, “Jesus-jumping” retains enough elements of his revival-meeting, “Jesus-jumping” sect and cultural folkways to remain specifically human. Ma Joad’s heroic maternal qualities reflect the strength and character of those migrant wives who not only survived but nourished as well their children and husbands. Steinbeck may have had these women especially in mind when he chose the title “Their Blood Is Strong “for the republication of his San Francisco News articles. Such details as Grampa’s senility, AL’s abilities as a automobile mechanic, Connie’s faith in cheap, correspondence trade schools, Uncle John’s guilt complex, and Rosasharn’s pregnancy personalize each character in turn and contribute to the reader’s involvement. But Steinbeck was not writing a novel of personal adventure and misfortune. His theme is the entire social condition of which his characters are
a part, and it is primarily in terms of the total situation that they have existence. Thus their role is collective, representational of the Okies and migrant workers, just as in the novel the Shawnee Land and Cattle Company represents the evicting landlords, and the California Farmers’ Association represents the growers.

That Steinbeck succeeds in creating characters capable of bearing such wide responsibility is a brilliant achievement, but the novel’s vast subject requires even more. To have put the Joads into the large variety of situations needed to add up a total picture the large variety of situations needed to add up to a total picture would have destroyed their necessary credibility as particular and real people. Rather than vastly increasing the number of characters and thus weakening the readers’ empathetic response and the novel’s narrative line, or digressing from the action with authorial comment, Steinbeck conceived the idea of using alternating chapters as a way of filling in the larger picture. About one hundred pages or one sixth of the book is devoted to this purpose. At first glance it might seem that putting these digressions from the Joad family into separate chapters interrupts the narrative line even more, and that such a device breaks the book into two distinct parts, or kinds of chapters, resulting in a monotonous tick tock effect. Of this danger the author was well
aware, and he avoided it by using in the interchapters a variety of devices to minimize their interruption of the narrative action, temper their expository nature, and otherwise blend the two kinds of chapters in the reader’s mind.

Perhaps the most important of the devices Steinbeck uses is dramatization. Chapter five, for example, deals with the process by which mortgaged lands are taken over by the banks, the small farmers evicted, and these lands combined into vast holdings cultivated with efficient modern machinery by absentee landlords. Whereas such previous writers in the naturalist tradition as Theodore Dreiser and Frank Norris would have addressed the reader directly on these points, giving him a well-researched lecture, Steinbeck presents a series of vignettes in which, through generalized characters, situations, and dialogue, we see these things happening. The device is reminiscent of the medieval mystery plays which dramatized Bible stories and made them real to the common people; or of Greek drama which through familiar figures and a chorus of elder or women gave voice to the people’s ethical and religious beliefs. Even the introduction and the transitions between these vignettes share this dramatized quality, is in the opening paragraph of chapter five, in which “owners” are presented walking, talking, touching things, and “tenants” are listening, watching, squatting in the dust which they mark with their little sticks, their wives standing in the doorways,
the children wriggling their toes. In similar fashion other chapters present further aspects of the total situation: chapter seven, the buying of used cars for trip; chapter nine, the selling of household goods; chapters seventeen and twenty-three, the nature of migrant life along the road.

Another device that Steinbeck uses to integrate the two kinds of material is juxtaposition. Of course, everything included in the interchapters is related to the events of the narrative. And each interchapter is so placed that its content is most pertinent to the action in the chapter that precedes or follows it. Highway 66 is the subject of the interchapter that follows the Joads’ turning onto the highway; the rain and flood of chapter twenty-nine set the stage for the novel’s conclusion. But furthermore, and most effectively, the interchapters are frequently used to develop or complete some specific action initiated in the preceding narrative, or vice versa. Chapter eight ends with the Joads driving off to sell their household goods; the interchapter that follows presents us with generalized characters selling just such goods; in chapter ten the Joads return with the empty truck, having sold their goods, pack the truck, and leave home; chapter eleven describes the gradual deterioration of an abandoned house. A variation of this device is achieved by repetition, in which some specific detail in one kind of chapter reappears in the other, thus further knitting the two
together. The anonymous house in an interchapter becomes the Joads house when, in the following chapter, the latter also is seen with one of its corners knocked off the foundation; the anonymous man with a rifle who is the same interchapter threatens the tractor drives becomes Grampa Joad, which is the next chapter is reported to have shot out the headlight of a tractor.

To temper the expository nature of the interchapters and blend them with the rest, Steinbeck works with the prose style itself. The colourful folk idiom and figurative language used by the Joads, Wilsons, Wainwrights, and other migrants reappear in the dramatizations of the interchapters as the language also of the generalized chapters. But (except for a brief oversight in chapter five) the conversation in the interchapters is not marked off by quotation marks, thus emphasizing its generalized nature and at the same time further blending it into other elements in these same chapters, weakening the identity and separateness of the more directly expository passages. Finally, through frequent variations in prose rhythm and idiom specifically pertinent to a particular scene, any tendency to group the expository chapters together as different in kind from the narrative ones is discouraged. Consider, for example, the variety of effects presented by chapter three on the turtle, chapter seven on the selling of used cars, chapter twenty-five on the California harvest.
There is, however, another important element of continuity in the prose style, in addition to the spoken idiom of its generalized characters. From the opening chapter, describing the drought, to the penultimate one, describing the flood with which the novel ends, the syntactical structures and rhythms of the narrative voice are those of the Kinds James Bible: “The tractors had lights shining, for there is no day and night for a tractor and the discs turn the earth in the darkness and they glitter in the daylight.” Almost disappearing in some of the chapters and totally possessing others, this voice, through its inescapable association with the Bible, becomes the moral centre of the novel. It speaks with the force and authority of an Old Testament prophet, some Jeremiah haranguing a sinful people: “There is a crime here that goes beyond denunciation. There is a sorrow here that weeping cannot symbolize. There is failure here that topples all our success. The fertile earth. The earth, the straight tree rows, the sturdy trunk and the ripe fruit. And children dying of pellagra must die because a profit cannot be taken from an orange.”

All this is not to say that the sixteen interchapters are equally brilliant or successful. Perhaps three of them (nineteen, twenty-one, twenty-five), concerned with historical information, and a few paragraphs in two or three others, are too direct. But these are exceptions. For the most part, the problem
raised by the use of interchapters is fully met by the brilliance of Steinbeck’s literary technique.

In themselves, then, the interchapters accomplish several things for the novel. As has been mentioned, they provide an artistically acceptable place for the author’s own statements, and they make possible the inclusion of additional materials without overusing the Joads or introducing many other specific characters. Closely related to this latter function is these chapters’ capacity for amplification. They present dramatically with a sense of real experience what would otherwise be left to inference— that the situations and actions of the Joad family are typical of a large group of people, that the Joads are caught up in a problem of national dimensions. These are perhaps the chapters’ most important uses. In additions they provide information— the history of land ownership and migrant labor in California, for example. Also, though their depiction of American people, scenes, and folkways, there emerges the portrait of a substantial portion of a people— their political and religious beliefs, their music, manners, stories, jokes; their essentially pioneer character, with its virtues and its limitations. The Grapes of Wrath is a “great American novel” in every sense of that phrase.
The brilliance of conception and technique with which Steinbeck manages the larger units of this novel is equally evident in its small details. This is well illustrated by the migrants’ frequent use of animals in their figures of speech, as natural to these people as literary references to professors of English. A tractor pushing over a shed “give her a shake like a dog shakes a rat; when all the Joads are forced to move into one house, Muley describes them as “piled in John’s house like gophers in a winter burrow.” Casy, the most intellectual of the Joad group, sometimes elaborates these simple figures of speech in his attempt to understand a new idea or express it to others—as when he envision the socioeconomic forces in terms of a gila monster with its poison and its unbreakable hold, or compares the plight of the migrants to that of a bird trapped in an attic, trying to escape.

The narrative passages also make use of animals, but tend to employ them symbolically rather than figuratively. At the beginning of their journey the Joads’ dog is killed on the highway by a “big swift car” which does not even stop. Another dog, the “lean brown mongrel... nervous and flezed to run” who upon sight of strangers “leaped sideways, and fled, ears back, bony tail clamped protectively” symbolized the conditions of the “Jooverville,” a group of cardboard and tin shanties, in which his owner lives. A jackrabbit that gets
smashed on the highway, lean gray cats, birds, snakes, and even bugs—all appear under perfectly natural circumstances and yet serve also as symbols. The most extended example of this is the turtle that is accorded the first interchapter entirely to itself. The indomitable life force that drives the turtle, the toughness that allows it to survive predators and trucks, the efficiency of nature that used the turtle to unwittingly carry seeds and bury them, are clearly characteristic also of the Joads. They, too, carry their house (the truck) with them, survive the natural catastrophe of drought and flood and the intimidations of police and vigilantes; they, too, pick up life in one place and carry it to another. This correspondence is further strengthened when in the very next chapter Tom picks up a turtle as a present for the younger children, talks about turtles with Casy, and eventually releases it to travel—as the Joads are to do-southwest.

Steinbeck’s use of machine imagery, thought not so extensive, is similarly brilliant. As the first interchapter was devoted to the turtle, so the second is devoted mostly to the tractor, which through its blind power and lack of feeling comes to symbolize the impersonal industrialization and mechanization which, following the economic collapse of their family homestead, is bringing an end to the Joad’s old way of life: “The drives...
could not see the land as it was, he could not smell the land as it smelled; his feet did not stamp the clods of feel the warmth and power of the earth... No man had touched the seed, or lusted for the growth. Men ate what they had not raised, had no connection with the bread. Behind the tractor rolled the shining disks, cutting the earth with blades - not plowing but surgery... the long seeders— twelve curved iron penes erected in the foundry, orgasm set by gears, raping methodically, raping without passion.” Not that Steinbeck in this chapter, or in the book, is symbolizing the evils of machinery, but rather the evils of its misuse. “It a tractor bad?... If this tractor were ours it would be good... If our tractor turned the long furrows our land, it would be good... We could love that tractor then... But this tractor does two things— it turns the land and turns us off the land.”

The tractor as symbol of a new era appears almost exclusively in the first part of the book; the most pervasive machine imagery is that of cars and trucks, from the shiny red transport which brings Tom home from prison to the broken-down jalopies of the migrants and the sleek new touring cars of the wealthy and the landowners. As a man used to be judged by the horse he rode, so how his social position is revealed by his car; as a man used to have to know about galls, chipped hooves, curb chains, addle sores, he now muc t
know about tires, valves, bearings, and spark plugs. “Funny how you fellas can fix a car. Jus’ light right in a’ fix her,” Casy say to Tom and Al. “I couldn’t fix no car, not even now when I seen you do it.” Got to grow into her when you’re a little kind,” Tom said. “It ain’t jus’ knowin’. It’s more’n that.” Survival, whether of man or animals, rest upon the ability to adapt to or master the new factors of environment. The loads have this ability. Even before the moment comes when they are to leave their home, they instinctively gather around the truck that is to carry them to California: “The house was dead, and the fields were dead; but this truck was the active thing, the living principal... This was the new hearth, the loving center of the family.” From this beginning, through various tire punctures, flickering headlights, and boiling radiators, to the ending, in which “the old car stood, and water fouled the ignition wires and water fouled the carburettors,” the condition of the Joads and their fellow migrants is the conditions of their machines.

Powerful and unstinting as these machine images are in their reflection of the Joads’ physical condition, there is developed at the same time a counterthrust which makes the novel a cry not of despair but of hope and affirmation. This thrust begins with Casy’s early self-questioning and ends with Rosasharn breastfeeding a starving old man. The migrants journey west...
along Highway 66, but also along the unmapped roads of social change, from an old concept of community formulated gradually on the new social realities. In an interchapter (seventeen), Steinbeck gives us this process in the abstract, and it is detailed in both kinds of chapters throughout the book.

Not all, however, can participate in this process. Muley Graves (a suggestive name) stays behind in Oklahoma, living in a ave like an animal because he cannot separate his sense of community and identity from the land and its history of personal experiences: “Place where folks live is them folsk”. As the generalized migrants in one of the interchapters express it to the buyers of their household goods,” you are not buying only juck, you’re buying junked lives... How can we live without our lives? How will we know it’s us without our past?” Grampa Joad, like Muley, cannot bear to leave the land. He is give nan overdoese of painkiller and carried off it, but he does not make it beyond the Oklahoma border. Casy’s little funeral speech assures the foksk that “Grampa didn’t die tonight. He died the minute you took’ im off the place... Oh, he was breathin’, but he was dead. He was that place, an’ he knowed it... He’s jus’ stayin’ with the lan’. He couldn’t leave it.” As it is expressed in one of the interchapters, “This land, this red land is uns; and the Ifood years and the dust years and the drought years are us.”
The old sense of identity and community is invested not only in land and possession, but in social customs and more that also must be left behind; for example, traditional male and female roles. Ma Joad may be consulted briefly concerning food and space in the decision to include Casy in the family group, but once that decision is made she goes back to the house and womanly things. It is Cays who takes his place among the planning men grouped around Grampa, whose patriarchal headship must be acknowledged despite his senility. Similarly, when they take their places on the truck, Rosasharn, although pregnant, cannot sit in the cab on a comfortable seat: “This was impossible because she was young and a woman.” The traditional distinction in social role is also evident in Ma’s embarrassment at Casy’s offer to salt, down the pork. Ma stopped her work then and inspected him oddly, as though he suggested a curious thing... ‘It’s women’s work,’ she said finally.” The preacher’s reply is significant of many changes to come in the sense of community and the individual’s changing role: “It’s all work,” he says. “They’re too much of it to split up to men’s or women’s work.” By the end of the book the male role, deprived of its breadwinner status, loses also its authority. It is Ma Joad who, as woman and Earth Mother, becomes the nucleus of order and survival.
It is fitting that this break with domestic tradition should be announced by Casy, the spiritual leader of his community. He has already abandoned preaching the hell-fire, blood-of-the-Lamb evangelism which is typified in the book through the recollections of Pa Joad, when the spirit took him, “jumpin’ an’ yellin’ “ and Granma “talkin’ in tongues.” This primitive religion is also dramatically presented in Uncle John’s sense of guilt and Mrs. Sandry’s frightening of Rosasharn with predictions of the horrible penalties God visits on pregnant women who see a play or do “clutch-an’-hug dancing’.”

Significantly, during the happiest moment in the book, the dance at the federal migrant camp, “The Jesus-lovers sat and watched their faces hard and contemptuous. They did not speak to one another, they watched for sin, and their faces condemned the whole proceeding.”

Casy’s new direction rejects such theological notions of sin (“There ain’t no sin and ther ain’t no virtue. There’s just stuff people do.”); it defines the religious impulse as human love (“What’s this call, this spirit?... It’s love.”) and it identifies the Holy Spirit as the human spirit in all mankind(“May be all men got one big soul ever’body’s part of “). Casy joins the migration not to escape or to preach but to learn from the common human experience: “I’m gonna work in the fiel’s, in the green fiel’s, an’ I’m gonna try to learn... why
the foks walks in teh grass, gonna hear ‘em talk, gonna hear ‘em sing. Gonna listen to kids eatin; mush. Gonna her husban’ an’ wife poundin’ the mattress in teh night. Gonna eat with’em an’ learn.” What Casy finally learns, in jail after giving himself up to save Tom and Floyd, is that man’s spiritual brotherhood must express itself in a social unity, which is why he becomes a labor organizer. The grace that he reluctantly says before eating his first breakfast with the Joads is already grouping in that direction: “I got to thinkin’ how we was holy when we was one thing, an mankin’ was holy when it was one thing. And it on’y got unholy when one mis’able little fella got the bit in his teeth an run off his own way, kickin’ an’ draggin’ an fightin’. Fella like that bust the holiness. But when they’re all workin’ together, not one fella for another fella, but one fella kind of harnessed to the whole shebang— that’s right, that’s holy.” It is for this belief in a new sense of community that he gives his life, rediscovering for himself his American heritage of Thomas Paine’s The Rights of Man, Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “The Over Soul,” Walt Whitman’s Democratic Vistas.

Although varying considerably in their ability to share Casy’s spiritual vision, it is the Joads’ growing acceptance of the social application of that vision that gives them and the other migrants their strength to endure and their
faith in a better future. Even Muley knows why he must share his stringly wild rabbit with Tom and Casy: “What I mean, if a fella’s got somepin to eat an’ another fella’s hungry—why, the first fella ain’t go no choice.” Mrs. Wilson’s answer to Ma Joad’s thanks for help puts it differently: “People needs (have the need) to help.” A few pages later, Ma Joad’s reply to Mrs. Wilson’s thanks for help gives the concept a further turn: “You can’t let help go unwanted.” It is significant that the first example of spontaneous sharing with strangers on the journey is a symbolic merging of two families: Grampa’s death in the Wilson’s tent, his burial in one of their quilts with a page torn from their Bible; Ma Joad’s promise to care for Mrs. Wilson. As Pa Joad expresses it later, “We almost got a kind bond.” Near the end of the novel, Al Joad tears down the tarpaulin that hangs between themselves and the Wainwrights, so that “the two families in the car were one.” In one of the most hauntingly beautiful scenes of the book, a family spontaneously shares their breakfast with a stranger (Tom), and their hard-found paying job as well, even though this shortens the time between themselves and starvation.

Consider in contrast the Joads’ neighbour who turned tractor driver: “I got a wife an’ my wife’s mother. Those people got to eat. Fust on on’y thing I got to think about is my own folks.” Ma Joad herself starts out on the journey
with a ferocious defence of her own family against all things, because “All we
got is the fambly” four hundred pages later she has learned, “Use’ ta be the
fambly was first. It ain’t so now. It’s anybody. Worse off we get, the more we
got to do.” Tom Joad has learned in prison to mind his own business and to
live one day at a timel As he puts it, “i’m just puttin’ one foot in front a the
other,” and again a few pages later, “I ruther jus’ lay one foot donw in front a the other”; in another image, “I climb fences when I got fences ot climb.” By
the end of the book he says, “A but I know now a fella ain’t no good along” and
he goes out dedicated to work for the improvement of his people, though it
may mean his own death: “Then it don’t matter. Then I’ll be ever’where – wherever you look. Wherever there’s a fight so hungry people can eat, I’ll be there."

These are only a few of the particulars that key into chapter seventeen’s
most abstract statement: “They shared their lives, their food, and the things
they hoped for in the new country... twenty families became one family, the
children were the children of all.” The family of man is established, the change
from “I” to “We,” the new sense of identity and community throught which the
people survive. Those who do not share, who continue selfish and distrustful,
“worked at their own doom and did not know it.”
Of all the abstract statements, generalized examples, and specific acts addressed to this principle of survival, Steinbeck saved the most powerful for the novel’s concluding scene. In Rosasharn’s feeding of a stranger with the milk from her own breast is re-enacted the primal act of human nourishment and the most intimate expression of human kinship. That the stranger is an old man and that, for physical reasons, Rosasharn is glad to give the milk, which continues to gather painfully in her breast although her baby is dead, make its symbolic assertion all the stronger. The significance of this final act is further magnified by the facts that the old man is weak from giving his share of the food to his son, and that the son had “stole some break” for him but the father had “puked it all up.” The ultimate nourishment is the sharing of oneself, as Rosasharn symbolized by literally giving of her body. This act takes on religious overtones by the still, mysterious, and lingering quality of the scene as “her lips came together and smiled mysteriously” (the last words of the novel), suggesting a common subject of religious paintings—the Madonna nursing her child whom she knows to be the Son of God.

These overtones do more than enhance a humanistic symbol, however. They bring to conclusion a whole level of the novel that exists in religious terms beginning with the title itself, The Grapes of Wrath, a phrase from “The
Battle Hymn of the Republic” that alludes to the Book of Revelation in the Bible, containing prophecies of the coming Apocalypse: “And the angel thrust in his sickle into the earth, and gathered the vine of the earth, and cast it into the great winepress of the wrath of God.” The reference is reinforced in one of the novels interchapters: “In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, heavy for the vintage.” From this beginning, the Biblical allusions follow thick and fast, for Steinbeck enlarges the significance of his Okies; experiences by associating them with those of the Israelites (the chosen people) in the Old Testament and thus suggesting their human and historical importance. Although not formally so divided, the novel falls into three parts: the drought and dispossession (chapter 1-11), the journey (chapters 12-18), and the arrival in California (chapters 19-30). This corresponds respectively to the oppression and bondage of the Israelites in Egypt, their Exodus and wandering in the wilderness, and their entrance into the Land of Canaan. The plagues in Egypt, which released the Israelites, have their parallel in the drought and erosion in Oklahoma; the Egyptian oppressors, in the bank officials; the hostile Canaanites, in the equally hostile Californians. In both accounts the Promised Land is first glimpsed from a mountain top. As there were twelve tribes of Israel, so are there twelve Joads (counting Rosasharn’s husband). Even the family name recalls a parallel—the tribe of Judah, or the
Jews. Ma Joad’s simple faith that “We’re the people,” is reminiscent of the Jewish faith in God’s promise that the Jews are a chosen people, as expressed in psalm Ninety-five: “For He is the Lord out God; and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand.” As the Jews formulated new codes of law by which they governed themselves in their Exodus, so the migrants evolve new codes of conduct. When Uncle Joh sets Rosasharn’s baby in an apple box among the willow stems of a stream, “Go down an’ tell ‘em,” it is the counterparts of Moses in a basked among the bulrushes. A Negro spiritual completes the allusion for the reader: “Let my people go.” These are but a scattered sampling of the many, often quite specific parallels through which Steinbeck—in addition to recurring Biblical prose style mentioned earlier—sustains in the novel a strong religious presence.

The Biblical parallels of three of the novel’s characters, however, are of such significance and complexity that they require further discussion—Casy, Tom, and Rosasharn. Jim Casy is, as his initials suggest, in several ways a Christ figure. He breaks with the old religious beliefs and practices, of which he was an advocate, and after a retreat “in the hills, thinkin’, almost you might say like Jesus went into the wilderness,” emerges to preach an initially unpopular new testament, rejecting a god of vengeance for an oversoul of love.
“You can’t hold no church with idears like that,” Tom tells him. “People would drive you out of the country...” He dedicates himself to establishing his “church” among the people and is killed uttering as his last words a paraphrase of Christ’s “They know not what they do”: “You don’ know what you’re a-doin” Tom, who has been a doubter all along, now announces himself as Casy’s disciple. It all fits together very neatly, too neatly. Steinbeck, however, like other modern American writers, such as Faulkner, is not content to use elements of Christian myth on the simple level of allegory. Thus Casy’s Christ role is deliberately confused in two ways. First, he is given attributes of John the Baptist, such as the description of his speech as “a voice out of the ground,” and, of course, his role as a baptizer. One of those he clearly remembers baptizing is Tom Joad, and thus the second area of confusion.

For Tom Joad, too beginning with his baptism by Casy, is given the attributes of a Christ figure. He is even called “Jesus Meek” by his prisoners because of his grandmother’s Christmas card with that phrase on it. Once when he seems to be rebelling against his emerging role and says he wants to” go out like Al... get mad like Pa... drunk like Uncle John,” his mother shakes her head. “You can’t Tom. I know. I knowed from the time you was a little fella. You can’t. They’s some folks that’s just theirself an’ nothin’ more... Ever’thing you
do is more’n you... You’re spoke for.” In other words, his succession to the role of Christ the Messiah, or Saviour, is complete when, in a scene rife with womb imagery (mother, cave, food, darkness), Tom is figuratively reborn and tells his mother of his vocation to preach and live the words of Casy. His speech, quoted in small part above, paraphrases the words of Christ recorded in Luke 4:18 and Matthew 7:3 and 25:35, as well as in Isaiah 65:21-22: “And they shall build houses and inhabit them, they shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat.” Tom Joad is a complex figure, and it is possible to see in him also sufficient attributes (a specific act of violence, for example) to identify him as a type of Moses who will lead his people to a better future, or the apostle Paul, particularly in the specific details of his conversion.

Though not so rich a figure, Rosasharn also gathers to herself multiple Christian aspects. To begin with, her real name, Rose of Sharon, from the Song of Solomon(“I am the Rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys”) is frequently interpreted as referring to Christ. The Song of Solomon also contains the line, “This thy stature is like to a palm tree, and thy breasts to clusters of grapes.” Thus the final scene in which she feeds the old man with her milk is symbolic of the Eucharist: “Take, eat, this is my body...” Through
this identification, the anonymous old man becomes Grampa Joad, whose image for the plenty of California had been a “big bunch a grapes” which he could squash on his face until the juice ran down his chin. As both Chrits and Madonna figures, Rosasharn combines attributes more divergent than does Casy(Christ and John and Baptist) or even Tom( Moses, Christ, Saint Paul).

Probably because of this very diversity of reference, these three characters greatly contribute to the lively tension of Biblical allusions in the novel’s prose style, events, and structure. The novel never falls into allegory. Furthermore, and more important, they bring together and make one in their lives the novel’s social message and certain precepts of Christianity. Whether The Grapes of Wrath as a whole promulgates specifically Christian values is a moot point depending entirely on one’s definition of what is essentially Christian. Both sides have been well argued. There is no question, however, that through the abundance, variety, and intensity of its Biblical allusions the novel imbues its social message with a religious fervor and sanction.

When The Grapes of Wrath was published 1939, one reviewer said that it seemed to him “as great a book as has yet come out of America.” The passing of time has given no reason for correcting that estimate.
The line of descent from *The Octopus* to *The Grapes of Wrath* is as direct as any that can be found in American literature. The journey of the Okies in Steinbeck’s book is certainly in the spirit of one of those “various fighting westward” that Norris identified as productive of epic writing: “Just that long and terrible journey from the Mississippi to the ocean is an epic in itself.” As one would expect, too, the later book reflects a more advanced stage of economic development, presenting as it does the struggle of proletarian masses against capitalist power, while the conflict in *The Octopus* is between two parties of the owning class, the ranchers, or small entrepreneurs, against the trust. Both novels have a universalizing tendency in that they create from a local situation a synecdoche of worldwide import. Thus Steinbeck’s Okies, having all the surface characteristics of rural Americans of a certain region, are essentially farmers suddenly reduced by natural catastrophe and economic process to the status of unskilled labourers. Theirs is a cataclysmic predicament of the twentieth century. In the course of the journey imposed upon them they learn to identify themselves as a separate class and then to discover and develop leaders who will guide them in their effort to re-establish themselves in society. The *Grapes of Wrath* is a thoroughly didactic epic novel: an exploited group discovers that it is being exploited, that it is, indeed, a new class in society, the proletariat; individuals within that class discover the
manner of that exploitation and grope for the means to combat it, or at least protest it; and the reader of the book, presumably, discovers that an alarming world economic condition is now making itself felt in America. The novel has a two-part theme, the education of a people and the education of its emerging leaders, and a three-part action, the dispossesssion, migration, and resettlement of a people.

To dignify his starving sharecroppers and give form to their story, Steinbeck draws upon two epic traditions of migratory peoples, the account of the Israelites in the Book of Exodus and the story of the Trojans in the Aeneid. From the New Testament and the epic tradition he derives the forms of heroism and self-sacrifice that inspire the leaders of these people. Criticism has taken more note of the Bible influence because it is so obvious: there are unmistakable parallels between the trials of the Okies and the Israelites, between preacher Casy and Christ, and between Tom Joad and Moses. It is not surprising that Steinbeck’s language is a close imitation of the English of the King James version. A result of his deliberate effort to adapt style to subject in all his works, it constitutes a much more successful solution to the problem of creating a special style for an epic novel than Norris’s romantic colors in The Octopus. To obtain elevation of style Steinbeck practises his prose by echoing
the phrasing and vocabulary of the King James Version in his descriptive passages and, secondly, by endowing the low-colloquial speeches of Casy and Tom Joad with an unusual amount of passion, imagery, and philosophical comment.

In his second method of aggrandizing the prose style of his novel, Steinbeck tries to intensify with poetic expressiveness the crude speech of his Okies. The result, as illustrated in an informal sermon by Casy, resembles the style of Huck Finn in his lyrical moments:

“I ain’t sayin’ I’m like Jesus,” the preacher went on. “But I got tired like Him, an’ I got mized up like Him, an’ I went into the wilderness like Him, without no campin’ stuff. Nighttime I’d lay on my back an’ look up at the stars; morning I’d set an’ watch the sun come up; midday I’d look out from a hill at the rollin’ country; evenin’ I’d foller the sun down. Sometimes I’d pray like I always done. On’y I couldn’t figure what I was prayin’ to or for. There was the hills, an’ there was me, an’ we wasn’t separate no more. We was one thing. An’ that one thing was holy.” (GW 110)

Between these two extremes, the thick Biblical and the poetic low colloquial, lies the narrative style in which the bulk of the Joads’ story is told.
It retains some of the deliberate rhythm of the Biblical and some of the realistic vocabulary of the colloquial styles. The three is no weakness in the book on that score, but there is some question about the appropriateness of the exalted styles altogether. Just an in the ritual behaviour of the Okies, so in the exalted language that describes them and in the impassioned speech that they sometimes use, there is considerably pompousness. In both gesture and speech Steinbeck occasionally comes too near to a burlesque tone’ his seriousness becomes excessive, and he commits the prime error of many writers who attempt the epic, swelling and grandioseness. He lifts the Joads, in particular, and the Okies, in general, too quickly and abruptly from their realistic existence to the level of epic heroism.

There is no question of the influence of the Old and New Testaments on The Grapes of Wrath. Parallels with the Aeneid are hardly as deliberate, but are worth pointing out as evidence that the whole ancient heroic tradition contributes to the materials of the epic novel. In the American work the three-part narrative scheme of the Aeneid appears again in the record of a people who lose their homeland, make a perilous journey to a promising new land, and fight against the hostile natives there for a chance to begin a new life. The first two parts are more tightly woven than the third because the family stays
very close together as they leave home and travel the road across the country, but after their arrival in California the pressures pulling them apart multiply. Uncle John’s guilt gets worse, Rosasharn’s time is drawing near, Al’s desire to strike out for himself is intensified, the youngsters Ruthie and Winfield are less controllable, Casy and Tom are being drawn into the larger community. The Joad family’s mode of travel, the improvised car-truck piled high with household goods, can no longer serve as a striking central image after the journey is over and the family lives in a more complicated social setting. The result of all this individual stress and social complication is an increased variety of material and a more episodic structure in the third part of the novel. There is still strong line of action in the economic struggle, but it does not have the clear goal of the earlier drive towards freedom in the West. The same blurring of the narrative line, the same sense of confused action, is to be noted in the last part of the Aeneid; but whereas this falling-off of intensity is a fault in the Aeneid because it does not accord with the triumph of Trojan arms, in the novel it is in perfect accord with the frustration of Okie ambitions. Undoubtedly, interest in the third part of the Aeneid flags because attention is turned away from sharply focused individuals, Aeneas himself and Dido, to more generalized accounts of tribes and warring nations. Similarly, in The Grapes of Wrath the exclusive interest in the family sustains the first two parts
better than the last part, in which there is scattering of interest among larger social units.

Narrative structure is the most accomplished aspect of The Grapes of Wrath. Steinbeck achieves a successful solution to the chief structural problem of the epic writer, whether it be Homer or Tolstoy: the harmonization of the general social action involving masses of people and major issues with particular actions involving closely examine individuals and their concerns. Steinbeck simplifies his problem somewhat by restricting himself to the members of one family and their few close associates, Casy and the Wilsons, and to a few quickly drawn agents of their enemies. His Joads serve the same synecdochic purpose of Zola’s Maheus in Germinal, but it is to be noted that Zola does not confine himself to one side of the struggle alone nor to one family of miners. The Joads exemplify in detail what is presumably going on in thousands of similar families. Moreover Steinbeck supplies a more explicit link between the general and particular actions by using “interchapters” or panoramic narrative in which the activities of all the Okies are summarized, sometimes from an objective viewpoint and sometimes as collective monologue from the viewpoint of representative Okies. Enough details are common to both kinds of action to give the sense that the Joads are living the
same kind of life and having the same thoughts and feelings as the masses described in the interchapters. Except for the interruption they make in the story of the Joads, the interchapters are readily assimilated for their thematic and material relevance.

A few minor echoes from classical epics may be cited. The patriarch of the family whose fortunes we follow, the Joads, has to be carried onto the truck when they are forced to leave home; he dies on the way, and a pause in the journey is made to bury him with solemn rites in a strange land. After the feast of pork and potatoes, Ma Joad declares, “Grampa- it’s like he’s dead a year.” A granddaughter consoles the dead man’s grieving old wife; she lies “beside the old woman and the murmur of their soft voices drifted to the fire” where the men were sitting. At the place where Grampa dies the Joads make friends with another family of Okies, the Wilsons, whose car has broken down. The two Joad boys undertake to repair it and they find the necessary parts in an auto graveyard presided over by a one-eyed “spectre of a man,” who cries miserably as he tells them his sad plight. This scene, according to an early commentator on Steinbeck, “afterwards floats in the mind like a piece of epic.” The car is repaired and the two families now join forces as they proceed on their journey
together. These are but faint echoes of the story of Aeneas’s father, Aeneas at Eryx, and Odysseus’s tale of Polyphemus.

The ceremonial solemnity with which the Joads perform certain family functions suggests a more general epic quality. The frequent councils, the ritual killing of the pigs before the departure, the burial of Grampa, and many other activities are executed by Steinbeck’s American sharecroppers with all of the ponderous care and sacred protocol of noblemen out of the heroic tradition of the past. Such attempts to aggrandize the folk, also to be found in The Octopus and For Whom the Bell Tolls, often fall into bathos in Steinbeck. Much more effectively done are the many prophecies of disaster uttered all along the road to California, particularly one by a kind of Teiresias whom the Joads meet in one of the improvised campsites. A “ragged man,” his coat a mass of “torn streamers,” he at first refuses to say what lies in store for the Joads in California. “I don’t wanna fret yo,” he tells Pa. What he finally does reveal is exactly what happens to the Joads in the remaining half of the book—their being exploited in an economic situations in which thousands of men compete for a few jobs. He finishes his prophecy, “and then he turned and walked quickly away into the darkness.”
Jim Casy is a prophet in another, more hopeful, tradition, that of Christ in the New Testament. Disturbed by the economic plight of the farming class he serves as a Baptist preacher, he makes a retreat in order to ponder their situation and decides that he cannot help by continuing in the ministry. Actually, his Christianity is simply broadened by the sudden growth of his social consciousness. He becomes inspired with the idea that the brotherhood of all men must work together for social justice, and to this he adds a more abstract idea of the holy relatedness of mankind in a kind of Emersonian oversoul. This doctrine he preaches as a new revelation to save the Okies from destruction and the world from economic warfare. He dies preaching for the cause and saying to his assailants, “you don’t know what you’re a-doin!” But he leaves behind a disciple in Tom Joad, who at once begins to tell the story of Casy and even thinks he sees him after his death.

If Casy is Christian and socialist, Ma Joad is pagan and primitive. If Casy adds the spirit of a New Testament prophet to the doctrine of a twentieth-century class-conscious revolutionary, Ma Joads is in the ancient tradition of the kore-goddess protecting her hero-son and her people. She is splendidly revealed to Tom when he returns home, a stranger, after spending four years in prison for having killed a man in a Quarrel:
Her full face was not soft; it was controlled, kindly. Her hazel eyes seemed to have experienced all possible tragedy and to have mounted pain and suffering like steps into a high calm and a superhuman understanding. She seemed to know, to accept, to welcome her position, the citadel of the family, the strong place that could not be taken... And from her great and humble position in the family she had taken dignity and a clean calm beauty. From her position as healer, her hands had grown sure and cool and quiet; from her position as arbiter she had become as remote and faultless in judgement as a goddess.

She moved toward him lithely, soundlessly in her bare feet, and her face was full of wonder. Her small hand felt his arm, felt the soundness of his muscles. And then her fingers went up to his cheek as a blind man’s fingers might. And her joy was neatly like sorrow... (GW 100-101)

The only embrace between mother and wandering son is the touch of her hand to his face; between mother-goddess and human son is the same gulf that we see between Venus and Aeneas in book one of the Aeneid: “Oh, why may we not join/ Hand to hand, or ever converse straightforwardly?” Like Pilar in
For Whom the Bell Tolls, like Dilsey in The Sound and the Fury, Ma Joad is richly endowed with the awesome, divine presence of the goddess who presides over the generations of the family and the cycle of life. Her ever action - except one, as we shall see - is motivated by the instinctive desire to keep the family together for the purpose of mere survival. She cradles the dying Granma Joad in her arms, she protects and nourishes her pregnant daughter, she restores her son Tom to life.

Produced by the influences of a Christ-like companion, Casy, and his mother-goddess, Tom Joad is indeed a hero of divine origin. He is moved to heroic acts by the spirit of anger and revenge which the murder of Casy stirs in him, and on the other hand by the spirit of compassion and love for mankind which his mother so well demonstrates in her selfless devotion to the family. Images of death and rebirth mark Tom’s relations with Casy and Ma Joad, as in their different ways they strive to bring him to the role of a hero. There is something terribly grim and sad about the career of Tom. Never allowed a romantic interlude, he is plunged into the troubles of his people upon his return from prison and slowly comes to an awareness of his responsibilities of leadership. Almost glumly, with little expression of personal feeling, he does not only what is expected of him but more besides. A peak in his development
occurs when, in the manner of a classic brother-in-arms, Tom at once kills the strikebreaker who has killed Casy; Tom is then himself struck, escapes from his pursuers, and comes to an irrigation ditch, where he bathes his torn cheek and nose. Casy, when he was a preacher, used to baptize people in irrigation ditches; he is killed as he stands beside a stream. Tom’s introduction to the bitter struggle of worker against producer dates from the violent experience beside the stream. The stinging baptism at the irrigation ditch, after he has fled, does not lead him into his new life at once, however. He must die before he can be wholly reborn, and he must make a retreat to consecrate himself to the cause in his soul as well as in his arms and receive the blessing of his goddessmother as well as the example of his surrogate father. He rejoins the family, but because he is being sought by the police and can easily be identified by his wounds, he must remain hidden: he is as one who no longer exists in the Joads family. To get past the guards who are looking for him, he lies between two mattresses in the Joad truck, and then he takes refuge in the brush near the boxcar that the family is now inhabiting. After Ruthie has told her playmates about her big brother Tom, Ma decides that she must release Tom from his obligation to the family for his own safety, and she goes to the “cave of vines” he has improvised. Tom, in the meantime, has come around to a sense of his
duty to “fight so hungry people can eat” and it ready to begin a new life away from the family.

The scene in which Ma and Tom part is the climax of Tom’s career as a hero and the very heart of Steinbeck’s point that class must replace family as the social unit worth fighting for. It is high point in Steinbeck’s writing, and some of its strength comes from the association of rebirth imagery and myths of the mother-goddess and her hero son with the crude story of an organizer of farm labor in twentieth-century America. Carrying a dish of “pork chops and fry potatoes,” Ma walks at night “to the end of the line of tents” in the camp of fruit pickers and steps “in among the willows beside the stream” until she reaches “the black round hole of the culvert where she always left Tom’s food.” She leaves her package at the hole and waits a little distance away, among the willows:

And then a wind stirred the willows, as though it tested them, and a shower of golden leaves coasted down to the ground. Suddenly a gust boiled in and racked the trees, and a cricking downpour of leaves fell. Ma could feel them on her hair and on her shoulders. Over the sky a plump black cloud moved, erasing the stars. The fat drops of rain scattered down, splashing loudly on the fallen
leaves, and the cloud moved on the unveiled the stars again. Ma shivered. The wind blew past and left the thicket quiet, but the rushing of the trees went on down the stream.

(Ibid 567)

A “dark figure” finally appears at the culvert; it is Tom and after her plea to talk with him he leads Ma to his hideout, across a stream and a field filled with “the blackening stems” of cotton plants. Ma Crawls into the “Cave of vines” and there in the dark they talk. She explains that she did not let him go earlier because she was afraid for him; with the touch of her hand she discovers that he has a bad scar on his face and his nose is crooked. Again, as in the first scene of recognition between mother and son, the hand of the mother lingers lovingly on the face of the son, just as Thetis “took her son’s head in her arms” before she releases him for battle in book 18 of the Iliad. Ma Joad forces her gift of dollars on Tom to help on his perilous way. Full of his new mission in life, he does not respond to the love his mother expresses for him, but simply says, “Good-by.” Ma returns to the camp, and Tom presumably will go on to his doom as Casy did before him but also to a sort of immortality for men who have fought for social justice:
“Then I’ll be all aroun’ in the dark. I’ll be ever’where— wherever you look. Wherever they’s a fight so hungry people can eat, I’ll be there. Wherever they’s a cop beatin’ up a guy, I’ll be there. If Casey knewed, why, I’ll be in the way guys yell when they’re mad an’— I’ll be in the way kinds laugh when they’re hungry an’ they know supper’s ready. A n’ when our folks eat the stuff they raise an’ live in the houses they build— why, I’ll be there.”

(Ibid 572)

This is a kind of immortality that Ma “don’ un’erstan’,” although it is she who confers it on him by making his heroism possible. It is not enough to say that this wonderful scene is inspired by the New Testament story of Christ’s resurrection from the tomb. The “Caves of vines” and the tomb are the womb from which the hero is delivered to a new life, but the landscape in Steinbeck’s scene is more nearly that of the classical underworld. The nourishing of the hero-son by the earth-goddess mother until he is strong enough to leave her suggests the myth of Ishtar and Tammuz, and the commitment of the son of war and eventual death recalls the sad exchange between Thetis and Achilles. Tom Joad’s “death” brings an end to his ordinary existence as one of thousands of Okies; he is reborn into the life of the epic
hero, who dooms himself to an early death as soon as he elects a deroic course of actions. His consecration is affirmed by his discipleship to Casy and the ritual release performed by his mother. If there is a resurrection, it is the resurrection of Casy in Tom. Tom’s rebirth through the agency of Casy and Ma Joad has a striking antecedent in the experience of Henry Fleming in Crane’s Red Badge of Courage. The change in Henry’s attitude toward heroism—from callow sentimentality to a mature sense of its real consequences—is in part wrought by the example of Jim Conklin, another Christ-like figure, and Henty’s encounter with death in the forest, alone, and rebirth among his comrades.

The rebirth of Tom as hero is emphasized by the ironical implication of another incident. Shortly after Ma Joad has returned from the stream and the willows, the pregnant Rosasharn distractedly seeks refuge in the very same place, along “the stream and the trail that went beside it.” She lies down among the berry vines and feels “the weight of the baby inside her.” Not long after this the rains come. Pa Joad and other men in the camp work feverishly to hold back the swollen stream from flooding their miserable living quarters; they build an earth embankment, but it is swept away and the water washes into the camp. At the same time Ma Joad and some neighboring women are helping
Rosasharn deliver her baby, but they meet with no greater success—the baby is stillborn. Uncle John is delegated to bury the “blue shrivelled little mummy”; instead, he takes the apple box it is in and floats it down the river, hoping that it will be a sign to the California landowners of the Okies’ sore affliction. “Go down an’ tell’em,” he says, in words echoing the Negro spiritual “Go Down, Moses” and thus linking three oppressed peoples—Israelites, American Negro slaves, and the Okies. The river is the same that saw the rebirth of Tom, who is a kind of Moses to his people, and now it receives the dead infant.

In Tom the Biblical and epic traditions of the hero came together to make a proletarian leader of the twentieth century. The man of anger and the quick blow of revenge is also the disciple devoted to self-sacrifice in the cause of the downtrodden and deprived. The son of the spouse-goddess is released from the death that is the family in order to do battle for the class that will possess the future. The man of violence bred from personal pride— Tom killed his first man in a tavern brawl—is baptized in the violence of class struggle, and he turns, like the classical hero from the defense of his own rights to the defense of all men’s rights. Like Presley in The Octopus, Tom is an apprentice-hero who learns from a man more experienced in warfare, in class warfare. What Presley learns from his mentor, the anarchist barkeep, is in the same
political tradition as what Tom learns from Casy; the leftist attack on
capitalism is rejected by Norris, however, and seemingly accepted by
Steinbeck after it is filtered through Christian feeling and presented in Biblical
and epic images.

The Grapes of Wrath begins with a drought bringing death to the land
and dispossession to its inhabitants and ends ironically with a flood that again
destroys the land and disperses the people. Nature as well as society dooms the
Okies, who fall from one catastrophe into another, losing their land their
belongings, their livelihood, and finally even their miserable shelters. But in
spite of homelessness and despair, the Joads have succeeded in making an
important journey, passing from one bond, the family, to another, mankind.
“Th'ys changes— all over,” it is said. “Use' ta be the fambly was fust. It ain’'t
so now. It’s anybody.” In place of the family a new form of social organization
is tentatively envisaged on the model of a small socialist community. Not all
can see the promised land— only Casy, who does not live to enter it, and Tom,
who is on the verge of entering it at the close of the book. Pa Joad's symbolical
attempt, in fighting the river, to unite the community after the old style of
neighbourly cooperation comes too late and fails. Having long since
relinquished control of the family to Ma, Pa Joad is a man without a role to
play in the world. He joins Magnus Derrick in the company of those in the
older generation who, unable to accommodate themselves to a new situation, are only pitifully heroic. Others, those who seek individual solutions, are shown to be equally futile. Muley Graves stays on the abandoned farmlands in Oklahoma and must live “like a coyote” on the trash left behind and the wild animals still surviving on the plains. Uncle Noah wanders away down a river he half-wittedly fancies, and Uncle John gets drunk when he can sneak the money. Al, Tom’s younger brother, strikes out for himself, ironically to start another hapless family. While Ma cannot understand Tom’s social idealism, she and Rosasharn do come around to the side of humanity in the closing scene of the book when Rosasharn, with her mother’s prompting, feeds to a dying old man, a stranger, the milk her body had stored for her child. With neither child nor husband Rosasharn must abandon the idea of family. Ma’s family has disintegrated, Rosasharn’s has not even had a chance to begin.

The images of the community and the hero that dominate the ending of The Grapes of Wrath are pitiful enough: a fugitive coming out of hiding to do unequal battle with an infinitely superior enemy and two frightened women trying desperately to save a dying old man in an empty barn. It seems to be an image of miserable survival in the face of awesome odds. Still, out of the sordid circumstances of a purely naturalistic life a hero is born in a manner
reminiscent of great heroes of the past. The affirmation of a better future seems groundless, but there is affirmation nonetheless, and a hero is ready to attempt its achievement by leading people who have prepared themselves for a new kind of society. “The book is neither riddle nor tragedy,” insists Warren French, “it is an epic comedy of the triumph of the ‘holy spirit.”

Norris explores the possibilities of heroism in one novel, Steinbeck and Hemingway in a whole succession of novels. Steinbeck seems to want to believe in heroic behaviour and the ideal community, yet in one novel after another he submits a negative report as to the chances of either in our time. His first novel, Cup of Gold (1929), in Warren French’s summary, “asserts that there is no place for the swashbuckling hero in the modern.” In Tortilla Flat (1935) Steinbeck lovingly presents the irregular habits and amusing antics of a number of paisanos, but at the same time, by stressing a mock-heroic parallel with Malory’s Morte d’Arthur, he insists upon our viewing their attempts to be heroic as ridiculous. In the end, Danny, the Arthur of a paisano Round Table, armed with a broken table leg, goes out to do battle and dies in a duel with “The Enemy” in the “gulch,” a place which he and his companions used for want of an outhouse. Although the hero in the next novel, In Dubious Battle (1936), bears a slight resemblance to another figure from the Arthurian
legend, Percival, the mood of this work is starkly naturalistic. Jim Nolan’s attempt to become the leader of embattled labourers is soon ended by the blast of a shotgun that renders him, horribly and quite literally, a hero without a face. His epitaph is spoken by his mentor, Mac, and is necessarily brief: “Comrades! He didn’t want nothing for himself-.” Lennie, the hero in Of Mice and Men (1937), is a feebleminded gaint, “shapeless of face,” and obviously incapable of responsible behaviour. In this time of trouble he takes refuge in a place near a river where a path winds “through the willows and among the sycamores.” But Lennie is not reborn there; his best friends must become his executioner there because Lennie cannot control the great strength he has and it consequently a menace to the community.

In The Grapes of Wrath, for the first time, Steinbeck offers a not altogether forlorn image of the epic hero. Tom Joad is a hero with a face, badly battered though it is; he survives the assault upon him, his spirit is revived at a place where willows grow by a stream and, presumably, he is embarked upon a heroic career. Jim Nolan finishes before he ever really begins, and the possibility of rebirth never materialized. Just before his death Mac advises him of a place of refuge should the occasion ever arise, “a deep cave” hidden by willows near a stream. But Jim never gets to the cave; he dies actually, not
symbolically as Tom does. Nor does Jum have Ma Joad as is protective
goddess and Casy as his martyred mentor. Mac, a hardheaded and cautious
labor organizer, does not have the mythical credentials to inspire a hero.
Lennie also has a cave to retire to if he becomes too much of a burden to his
friend George, but there is no returning from it. Only Tom returns from the
cave and the willows, the place of death, to present the face of a hero to the
world, a face so bacly scarred that he can no longer be recognized as Tom
Joad. Of all Steinbeck’s heroes, he is the only one who affirms the possibility
of a hero arising out of the anonymity of twentieth-century economic and still
bearing the signs of an ancient dedication.

Critics generally agree that the parable of the turtle presented in chapter
three of The Grapes of Wrath foreshadows and parallels the adventures of the
Joad family. Almost as unanimously, they agree that the concluding scene of
the novel dramatized Steinbeck’s theme that, as Ma Joad states it, “the
people... go on (Ibid 383). To be sure, there has been considerable controversy
about the propriety of the conclusion—whether it is dramatic, poignant,
sentimental, vulgar, or obscene. But most scholars agree about its meaning. I
am inclined to believe that the critics have correctly assessed Steinbeck’s intent
in both instances. But whatever his intent, this is not what he accomplished.
For the affirmative parable of the turtle provides a contract, not a parallel, to the tragic story of the Joads. And while the scene in which Rosasharn nurses the old man is certainly a logical ending to the novel, it is a much more pessimistic conclusion, thematically, than the phrase “the people go on” connotes. Had Steinbeck truly wanted a parable complementary to the story of the Joads and to the theme of the novel, he would have done better to have inserted the story of the gopher which appears, instead, in Cannery Row. For the point of that parable is that peace and prosperity are attainable only if one is willing to sacrifice love and companionship. The price one pays for community in the threat of famine, flood and violent death. That is a drastically simplified, but not inaccurate summary of a major theme in The Grapes of Wrath.

There are certain similarities between the turtle and the Joads, of course: it is heading southwest, as will they; the highway (but not the same highway) is a formidable obstacle to both; and the overloaded Hudson certainly travels at a turtle’s pace. But consider the very real and thematically more meaningful distinctions. The turtle has an instinctive sense of purpose and direction; it turns “aside for nothing”. And while one cannot know for certain where the turtle is going or what it intends to do when it gets there, the context clearly
implies that it will get there and accomplish whatever it has instinctively set out to do. The Joads on the other hand, head southwest due to circumstances beyond their control. They have at first no desire to move at all, and throughout a nostalgia for the Oklahoma farm they were forced to leave. And only an unflagging optimist would connect their concluding situation, or for that matter their future prospects, with any concrete achievement. But perhaps the most significant distinction between the turtle and the Joads is that, whereas the former plays a fertilizer role to the “sleeping life waiting to be dispersed”, the life that Rosasharn carries is delivered premature and stillborn. Twelve Joads spanning three generations (thirteen spanning four if one counts the unborn baby) begin the journey; although ten presumably survive, only six are together at the end. The emphasis is on attrition, not continuance.

If one examines subsequent passages in the novel where the turtle is alluded to, the difference between the positive thrust of the parable and the negative thrust of the narrative becomes even clearer. Two characters, Tom Joad and Jim Casy, are specifically associated with the turtle, Tom picks it up and carries it with him for a while (to the northeast, opposite the turtle’s intended direction); and Casy’s physical description is suggestive of a turtle. He has a “long head, bony, tight of skin, and set on a neck as stringy and
muscular as a celery stalk.” His “heavy... protruding” eyeballs with lids stretched to cover them” (25) are decidedly reptilian. That Tom and Casy should be closely associated with the turtle is appropriate inasmuch as, of the thirteen people who trekwest in the Hudson, these two do develop a sense of purpose and direction akin to the turtle’s. But the analogy has its limits. The turtle survives its encounter with the hostile forces of civilization. Indeed, the truck which swerves to hit it actually flips it across the highway, aiding it in this hazardous crossing. Casy, who has no protective shell into which he can withdraw his head, has it crushed by a pick handle wielded by the leader of the mob at the Hooper ranch. And while Tom survives on this occasion, his future—a hunted ex-convict turned labor agitator—bodes nothing but ill. The text suggests that the turtle will survive because it expends its energies totally in its self-interest; casy dies because he devotes his energies to help others.

This distinction between self-interest and humanitarianism is further illustrated in another brief-interest scene in which Granma is associated with the turtle. The red ant which crawls “over the folds of loose skin on her neck” (20) while she is dying recalls the ant the turtle crushes inside its shell. But, whereas the turtle reacts savagely and effectively, Granma is able to do no more than feebly scratch her face. To be sure, Ma Joad crushes the ant
“between thumb and forefinger” (286) in a gesture reminiscent of the turtle’s action. But this only reinforces the point that, as Tom Joad states later, “a fella ain’t no good alone” (570).

The point of difference can be illustrated in terms of one other dominant motif in the novel. Animals are indifferent to and can survive the damage done by machines. The Joads’ house cat turns wild and remains on the tenant farm. The turtle is actually aided by the truck whose drives try to kill it. The Joads, by contrast, are first displaced by machines, the rendered helplessly dependent on the Hudson to get them to California. And while an occasional persons like Muley Graves may exist as does the house cat, there is no character whose pattern of behaviour is suggestive of the indomitable will of the turtle. If there is one character in the novel who seems most likely to survive and make a decent life for himself, that would have to be AL Joad. But AL will succeed only if he has the callousness to wrest himself free of family dependence on him—he is the only remaining member who can drive the truck—and get himself that dreamed-of job in a garage. That is to say, he can survive by joining the side that owns and runs the machines; by acting, in short, a little less like a decent human being and a little more like the turtle.
Yet there is no denying that a central theme in the novel is, as a number of reputable critics have noted, “the education of the Joad family... towards an ideal of cooperation.” (Jules Chametzky 305) But this theme is essentially contradictory to the turtle parable which is most certainly a statement in praise of rugged individualism. Is is possible, then, that Steinbeck intended the turtle interchapter to be thematic counterpoint rather than parallel? The evidence suggests the contrary. As Edmund Wilson noted, the Joads exist “almost on the animal level.” Their progress to California “is accompanied and parodies... by animals, insects and birds.” (Farrar, Straus & Co, 35-36) And Steinbeck obviously views with benevolence their instinctive attitude toward sex, death, and the natural functions of the body. Thus, we are led to the conclusion that the contradiction illustrated, not Steinbeck’s control of his material, but a fundamental and irreconcilable ambivalence in his philosophy: his sympathy for communism combined but not compatible with his nostalgic admiration for Jeffersonian agrarian individualism, his trust in “the people” and his equal distrust of any kind of organization.

And this brings us finally to the question of the effectiveness of the concluding scene in the barn—a scene which presents a dramatic tableau of the trap the Joads are in. Theodore Pollock has argued that the episode
successfully completes the novel’s thematic movement from a beginning point of sterility to a concluding point of fertility or reproduction. I would suggest the case is precisely the opposite. The rain produces not an end to the drought, but a life-destroying flood. This is not gentle spring rain, but a winter downpour. And while, afterward, nature may be “pale green with the beginning year” (592), the Joads will have “no kinda work for three months”. (591) Furthermore, while Rosasharn’s nursing the old man may cause us to marvel at the human capacity for love under the most adverse circumstances, there is nothing to suggest continuance of life on the human level. I can perhaps best make my point by way of analogy. William Faulkner’s Light in August concludes on an affirmative note because the symbolic connection stemming from Mrs. Hines’s confusion of Lena Grove’s newborn baby with Joe Christmas suggests that a new generation may rise above the errors and frailties of the old. In The Grapes of Wrath, the inverted-Madonna symbol suggests no such affirmation. There is a salvaging of a life, but no re-birth. All of the first and fourth generations of Joads are dead, a detail which implies that the rest are trapped in their present circumstances. The Moses who might have fulfilled some future promise floats stillborn in the willows.
The conclusion to *The Grapes of Wrath* functions much as does to conclusion to Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*. As readers, we may respond positively to the last few sentences. But if we consider the conclusion in relation to the total context of the novel, we see it as a thin veneer of affirmation concealing a logical and inexorable movement toward tragedy or pathos. Intended as positive upbeat, the episode only illustrates the more forcibly Steinbeck’s inability to see where his novel came out, thematically. But in his unawareness or ambivalence, Steinbeck demonstrates himself a writer highly reflective of the American culture. Like him, American society has never been able to integrate or resolve its contradictory impulse to admire the self-reliant man, while at the same time it pressures him to conform or, at the least, to be considerate of the needs and wishes of his fellow men. Individualism is not compatible with cooperation. As countless works of literature from the time of Sophocles’ *Antigone* to Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* have demonstrated, the individual must always suffer some measure of conflict with social order. Therefore, it each man is, as Casy speculates, a small part of “one big soul” (33), then his path through life can never be as simple or as successful as the turtle’s. Like the gopher he must pay a price for love. In the fact that “a fella ain’t no good alone” lies both his tragedy and his humanity.
Once the hubbub over John Steinbeck’s “propaganda tract” began to die down—there are still those who refuse to let it die completely—critics began to pay serious attention to The Grapes of Wrath as a work of art. Such aspects of the novel as its characterisation (whether or not the Joads are “cardboard figures”), the prose style (actually the several prose styles but particularly the poetic effectiveness of the descriptive passages), and the interrelationship of the different kinds of chapters have been discussed at some length. In this paper we should like to concentrate on two pervasive motifs in the novel, namely, the crucially important motifs of machines and animals which contribute considerably to structure and thematic content. We may call these two the “dominant motifs,” but we must remember that extracting these elements is necessarily an act of oversimplification; it is only through their complex relationships with subsidiary motifs and devices, and with the more straightforward narration and exposition and argumentation, that they provide major symbols integral to the art and substance of the novel. With this qualification in mind, we may proceed to a consideration of machines and animals as sources of tropes, as signs and underscoring devices, and ultimately as persistent symbols.
Very few of the tropes of the novel—the metaphors, similes, and allusions—make use of machinery as such. “Tractored out” is of course a prominent figure of speech repeated several times to express the Okies’ plight in being forced from their plots of land by the mechanical monstrosity of industrialized farming (“tractored off” also appears a couple of times.) But otherwise about the only instance of a metaphorical use of machinery is a single simile late in the novel: the weary men trying to build a bank of earth to hold back the flood “worked jerkily, like machines” (John Steinbeck, Modern Library, 1939, 600). There are a good many metaphors applied to mechanical apparatuses—that is, tropes in which machinery is characterized by some non-mechanical phenomenon as the vehicle of the metaphor. Generally this metaphorical characterization of machines emphasizes animalism, or the bestial side of human affairs, as the seeders are said to rape the land. Fundamentally these metaphors appear designed to contribute to a general sense of tragedy or disaster indicated by such secondary motifs as the blood tropes—“the sun was as red as ripe new blood” (6), “the earth was bloody in setting light” (129) and the frequent recurrence of “cut”—“the sun cut in the shade” (10), “the road was cut with furrows” (23).
While there are very few machines tropes, animal tropes abound. Often animals are used to characterize the human sex drive: Muley Graves (whose name is not inappropriate here) refers to himself during his first experiences as “snortin’ like a buck deer, randy as a billygoat” (69) young, virile Al Joad has been “a – billygoatin’ aroun’ the country. Tom-cattin’ hisself to death” (111). And the sexuality of animals several times appears as the vehicle of a metaphor: Casy refers to a participant in a revival meeting as “jumpy as a stud horse in a box stall” (38). Animals tropes frequently serve to denote violence or depravity in human behaviour: fighting “like a couple of cats” (27), a tractor hitting a share-croppers’s cabin “give her a shake like a dog shakes a rat” (62), Muley used to be “mean like a wolf” but now is “mean like a weasel” (78) and Ma Joad describes Purty Boy Floyd’s career as comparable to a maddened animals at bay- “they shot at him like a varmint, an’ he shot back, an’ then they run him like a coyote, an’ him a-snappin’ an’ a-snarlin, mean as a lobo” (103). Animals tropes may simply indicate a harmless playfulness or swagger. Winfield Joad is “Kid-wild and calfish” (129) and Al acts like “a dung-hill rooster” (575) But the most frequent and significant use of the numerous animals tropes is to characterize the Okies’ plight: the Joads are forced off their forty acres, forced to live “piled in John’s house like gophers in a winter burrow” (63), then they begin an abortive trip toward what they hope
will prove to be a “New Canaan” in California, and Casy uses this tacit analogy to describe the impersonal, industrial economy from which they are fleeing:

Ever see one a them Gila monsters take hold, mister? Grabs hold, an; you chop him in two an’ his head hangs on. Chop him at the neck an’ his head hangs on. Got to take screw-driver an’ pry his head apart to git him loose. An’ while he’s layin’ there, poison is drippin’ an’ drippin’ into the hole he’s made with his teeth. (175)

Casy argues that the wrong results from men not staying “harnessed” together in the common effort (“mankin’ was holy when it was one thing”); one man can get “the bit in his teeth an’ run off his own way, kickin’ an’ draggin’ an’ fightin’ (110). Consequently the roads to California are “full of frantic people running like ants” the “ants” simile appears again, for instance. In California the Okies work, when they can get work, “loke draft horses” they are driven “like pigs” and forced to live “like pigs” (571). Casy has been observing and listening to the Okies in their misfortunes, and he knows their fear and dissatisfaction and restlessness: “I hear ‘em an’ fee ‘em; an’ they’re beating their wings like a bird in a attic. Gonna bust their wings on a dusty wind a tryin’ ta get out” (34).
It should be noted that the animalistic references to people are pejorative in Steinbeck’s lusty lexicon. The few derogatory animal tropes are almost all applied to the exploiters (banks, land companies, profiteers) and not to the exploited (the Joads and other Okies). That these latter must behave like the lower animals is not their fault. Their animalism is the result of the encroachments of the machine economy. Machines, then, are frequently depicted as evil objects: they “tear in and shove the croppers out” (13) “one man on a tractor can take the place of twelve or fourteen families” (44), so the Okies must take to the road, seeking a new home, lamenting, “I lost my land a single tractor took my land” (206). Farming has become a mechanized industry and Steinbeck devotes an entire chapter (nineteen) to the tragic results:

The tractors which throw men out of work, the belt lines which carry loads, the machines which produce, all were increased; and more and more families scampered on the highways, looking for crumbs from the great holdings, lusting after the land beside the roads. The great owners formed associations for protection and they met to discuss ways to intimidate, to kill, to gas. (325)

The Okies are very aware of the evils brought about by mechanization. Reduced to picking cotton for bare-subistence wages, they realize that even
this source of income may soon go. One asks, “Heard’ bout the new cotton-picking’ machine?” (556)

The Joads find themselves living—trying to live—in an age of machinery. Machines or mechanized devices quite naturally play important roles in the symbolism of the novel. (“Symbolism” is here understood to mean the employment of concrete images—objects and events—to embody or suggest abstract qualities or concepts.) Some machines serve as “interior” symbols; they are, that is, recognized as symbolic by characters in the novel. Still others, largely because of the frequently with which or crucial contexts in which they appear, can be seen by the careful reader to take on symbolic significance. The “huge red transport truck” of chapter two, for example, can be seen as a sort of epitome of the mechanical-industrial economy—the bigness, the newness, the mobility, the massive efficiency, even the inhumanity and lack of trust—“a brass padlock stood straight out from the hasp on the big back doors” (8). It is a mobile era in which one must accommodate to the mass mechanization in order to survive. Farmers can no longer to get by with a team and a wagon. And Steinbeck finds in the used-car business, preying on the need to move out and move quickly, an apt representation for the exploitation of those who have not yet been able to accommodate: “In the towns, on the edges of the towns, in
fields, in vacant lots, the used-car yards, the wreckers’ yards, the garages with blazoned signs- Used Card, Good Used Cars, Cheap transportation” (83). The Joads’ makeshift truck aptly represents their predicament- their need to move, their inability to move efficiently or in style their over-all precariousness: “The engine was noisy, full of little clashing, and the brake rods banged. There was a wooden creaking from the wheels, and a thin jet of steam escaped through a hole in the top of the radiator cap”(135). Steinbeck makes overt the symbolic nature of this truck; when the members of the family meet for their final council before migrating, they meet near the truck: “The house was dead, and the fields were dead; but this truck was the active thing, the living principle” (135). Here, as throughout the novel, the Joads’ predicament is a representative instance of the predicaments of thousands. Highway 66 is the “main migrant road” and on this“long concrete path” move the dispossessed, the “people in flight”: “In the day ancient leaky radiators sent up columns of steam, loose connecting rods hammered and pounded. And the men driving the trucks and the overloaded cars listened apprehensively. How far between towns? It is a terror between towns. If something breaks-well, if something breaks we camp right here while Jim walks to town and gets a part and walks back” (161). Along this route the dispossessed farmers find that they are not alone in their troubles. The independent, small-scale service station operator is being squeezed
out of his livelihood just as the farmers have been; Tom tells the poor operator that he too will soon be a part of the vast moving. And the various types of vehicles moving along Route 66 are obvious status symbols. Some have “class an’ speed” these are the insolent chariots of the exploiters. Others are the beat-up, overloaded conveyors of the exploited in search of a better life. The reactions of those who are better-off to the sad vehicles of the Okies are representative of their lack of understanding and sympathy.

The Okies are conscious of vehicles are status symbols and automatically distrust anyone in a better car. When a new Chevrolet pulls into the laborers’ camp, the labourers automatically know that it brings trouble. Similarly the condition of the Okies’ vehicles provides perfect parallels for their own sad state. As the Joads are trying to move ahead without being able to ascertain exactly where they are headed—“even if we got to crawl”—so their truck’s “dim lights felt along the broad black highway ahead” (384). As the Joads’ condition worsens, so naturally does that of their truck (e.g “the right head light blinked on and off from a bad connection” (548). In the development of the novel their vehicles are so closely identified with the Okies that a statement of some damage to the vehicle becomes obviously symbolic of other troubles for the owners. When the disastrous rains come, “beside the tents the
old cars stood, and water fouled the ignition wires and water fouled the carburettors” (590). The disastrousness of the ensuing flood is quite clearly signalled by mention of the “trucks and automobiles deep in the slowly moving water”.

As the Okies’ vehicles provide an accurate index to their circumstances, so do the animals they own, particularly their pets. The deserted cat that Tom and Casy find when they survey the Joad’s deserted farm represents the forlorn state of the dispossessed – the cat actually foreshadows the appearance of Muley Graves with his tales of lonely scavengering. The dogs that appear when Tom and Casy reach Uncle John’s place are indicative of human behaviour in the face of new circumstances (one sniffs cautiously up to examine the strangers, while the other seeks some adequate excuse for avoiding the possible danger). After the company’s tractors move in add the share-croppers are “shoved off” their land, the pets that they left behind must fend for themselves and thus gradually revert to the primitive state of their ancestors – a reversion not unlike the desperate measures that the Okies are driven to by adversity and animosity: “The wild cats crept in from the fields at night, but they did not mew at the doorstep any more. They moved like shadows of the cloud across the moon, into the rooms to hunt the mice”(159).
The Joads take a dog with them on their flight to California, but he is not prepared to adjust to the new, fast, mechanized life thrust upon him; when his owners stop for gas and water, he wanders out to the great highway—“A big swift car whisked near, tires squealed. The dog dodged helplessly, and with a shriek, cut off in the middle, went under the wheels”(177). The owner of the dilapidated independent service station comments on the sad scene, “A dog jus’ don’t last no time near a highway. I had three digs run over in a year. Don’t keep none, no more” (177). After the Joads have been in California for a while and discover the grim facts of life for them there, the move on to another “Jooverville” camp of migrants. They find their fellow job-seekers hungry, fearful, and distrustful; the single pet there vividly expresses the general attitude or atmosphere of the place: “A lean brown mongrel dog came sniffing around the side of the tent. He was nervous and flexed to run. He sniffed close before he was aware of the two men, and then looking up he saw them, leaped sideways, and fled, ears back, bony tail clamped protectively” (341). Yet having pets is indicative of the love and sympathy of which man is capable when is favourable circumstances. The simple, “natural” Joads never lose their appreciation for pets. When their fortunes are at their lowest ebb, Ma still holds hopes for a peasant future: “Wisht we had a dog,’ Ruthie said. ‘We’ll have a dig; have a cat too’” (596).
Pets, then, serve as symbolic indices to human situation; and other animal symbols are used to excellent advantage. One of Steinbeck’s favourite devices is the use of epitome—the description of some object or event, apart from the main movement of the narrative, which symbolically sums up something central to the meaning of the narrative. Toward the end of The Grapes of Wrath the migrants are gathered about a fire telling stories, and one of them recounts an experience of a single Indian brave whom they were forced to shoot—epitomizing the indomitability and dignity of man, and foreshadowing Casy fate.

We have already noted the use of animals for symbolic foreshadowing (for instance, the dispossessed cat and Muley Graves). Probably Steinbeck’s most famous use of the symbolic epitome is the land turtle. The progress of the Okies, representative of the perseverance of “M anself,” is neatly foreshadowed in the description of the turtle’s persistent forward movement: he slowly plods his way, seeking to prevail in the face of adversities, and he succeeds in spite of insects, such obstacles as the highway, motorists’ swerving to hit him (though some swerve to avoid hitting him), Tom’s imprisoning him for awhile in his coat, the attacks of a cat, and so on. Steinbeck does not leave
discernment of the rich parallels wholly to the reader’s imagination. There are, for instance, similarities between Tom’s progress along the dirt road and the turtle: “And as the turtle crawled on down the embankment, its shell dragged dirt over the seeds... drawing a wavy shallow trench in the dust with its shell” (22) and “Joad plodded along, dragging his cloud of dust behind him...dragging his heels a little in the dust” (24). Casy remarks on the indomitability of the turtle, and its similarity to himself: “Nobody can’t keep a turtle though. They work as it and work at it, and at last one day they get out and away they go— off somewhere. It’s like me”. But at this point in the novel Casy is not altogether like the turtle, for he has not yet discovered the goal to which he will devote himself unstintingly: “Goin’ someplace,’ he repeated. ‘That’s right, he’s goin’ someplace. Me—I don’t know where I’m goin’” (29).

Animal epitomes, such as the turtle and the “lean gray cat,” occur several times at crucial points. And frequently a person’s character will be represented by his reaction to or treatment of lower animals. As Tom and Casy walk along the dusty road a gopher snake wriggles across their path; OTm peers at it, sees that it is harmless, and says, “Let him go” (93). Tom is not cruel or vicious, but he does recognize the need to prevent or put down impending disaster. Later, a “rattlesnake crawled across the road and Tom hit it
and broke it and left it squirming” (314). The exploitation of the Okies is symbolized by the grossly unfair price paid a share-cropper for the matched pair of baby horses he is forced to sell. In this purchase of the bays, the exploiters are having a part of the croppers’ history, their loves and labours; and a swelling bitterness is part of the bargain: You’re buying years of work, toil in the sun; you’re buying a sorrow that can’t talk. But watch it, mister”(118).

Animals convey symbolic significance throughout the novel. When the Okies are about to set out on what they are aware will be no pleasure jaunt to California—thought they scarcely have any idea how dire will be the journey and the life at the end of it—an ominous “shadow of a buzzard slid across the earth, and the family all looked up at the sailing black bird”(227). In the light of the more obvious uses of animals as epitomes or omens, it is easy to see that other references to animals, which might otherwise seem incidental, are intentionally parallel to the actions or troubles of people. Here is a vivid parallel for the plight of the sharecropper, caught in the vast, rapid, mechanized movement of the industrial economy.
As the weary Okies gather in a Hoovervilled to try to find some way out of the disaster they have flown into, moths circle frantically about the single light: “A lamp slammed into the lantern and broke itself, and fell into darkness” (255). While the way mongrel at the camp represents the timorous doubts of the Okies, the arrogant shunks that prowl about at night are reminiscent of the imperious deputies and owners who intimidate the campers. The Okies are driven like animals, forces to life like animals, and frequently the treatment they receive from their short-term employers is not as good as that given farm animals.

We have seen that both machines and animals serve as effective symbolic devices in The Grapes of Wrath. Frequently the machine and animal motifs are conjoined to afford a doubly rich imagery or symbolism. Thus the banks are seen as monstrous animals, but mechanical monsters: “the banks were machines and masters all at the same time” (43). The men for whom the share-croppers bank isn’t like a man” (45). The tractors that the banks send in are similarly monstrous—“snub-nosed monsters, raising the dust and sticking their snouts into it, straight down into the country across the country, through fences, through dooryards, in and out of gullies in straight lines” (47). And the man driving the tractor is no longer a man; he is “a part of the monster, a robot.
Their inability to stop these monsters represents the frantic frustration of the dispossessed; Grampa Joad tries to shoot a tractor, and does get one of its headlights, but the monsters keeps on moving across their land. The new kind of mechanical farming is contrasted with the old kind of personal contact with the land (62). The new kind is easy and efficient. “So easy that the wonder goes out of works, so efficient that the wonder goes out of land and the working of it, and with the wonder the deep understanding and the relation”(157).

We have seen that machines are usually instruments or indices of misfortune in Steinbeck’s novel. But to assume that machinery is automatically or necessarily bad for Steinbeck would be a serious mistake. Machines are instruments, and in the hands of the right people they can be instruments of good fortune. When the turtle tries to cross the highway, one driver tries to smash him, while another swerves to miss him; depends on who is behind the wheel. Al’s relationship with the truck in indicative of the complex problems of accommodating in a machine age. He knows about motors, so he can take care of the truck and put it to good use. He is admitted to a place of responsibility in the family council because of his up-to-date ability. He becomes “the soul of the car”. The young people are more in tune with the
machines of their times, whereas the older ones are not prepared to accommodate to the exigencies of the industrial economy.

The tractors that shove the croppers off their land are not inherently evil; they are simply the symptoms of unfair exploitation. In one of the interchapters, Steinbeck expresses the thought that the machiners are in themselves of neutral value.

Machinery, like the science and technology, that can develop bigger and better crops, is not enough for progress; there must be human understanding and cooperation. The Okies—through a fault not really their own—have been unable to adjust to the machinery of industrialization. Toward the very last of the novel Ma pleads with Al not to desert the family, because he is the only one left qualified to handle the truck that has become so necessary a part of their lives. As the flood creeps up about the Joads, the truck in inundated, put out of action. But the novel ends on a hopeful note of human sharing, and we may surmise that the Okies (or at least their children) can eventually assimilate themselves into a machine-oriented society.

Some critics have noted Steinbeck’s preoccupation with animal images and symbols, and labelled his view of man as “biological.” This label is gross oversimplification, responsible for a good deal of misreading of Steinbeck’s
work. The animal motif in Grapes does not at all indicate that man is or ought to be exactly like the lower animals. The Okies crawl across the country like ants, live like pigs, and fight amongst themselves like cats, mainly because they have been forced into this animalistic existence. Man can plod on in his progress like the turtle, but he can also become conscious of his goals and deliberately employ new devices in attaining those goals. Man’s progress need not be blind; for he can couple human knowledge with human live, and manipulate science and technology to make possible the betterment of himself and all his fellows. Steinbeck does not present a picture of utopia in his novel but the dominant motifs do indicate that such a society is possible.

It has been a fundamental assumption of this study that dominant motifs are of central importance in the form and meaning of certain works of fiction. In this particular case we would contend that Steinbeck’s intricate and masterful manipulation of the various references to machines and animals is an essential factor in the stature of The Grapes of Wrath as one of the monuments of twentieth-century American literature. By their very pervasiveness the recurrence of the components that constitute the motifs- the references contribute significantly to the unity of the work; they help, for instance, to bind together the Joad chapters with those which generalize the meaning that the
Joads’ story illustrates how certain animals and machines play important parts on the literal level of the story, and these and others serve to underscore principal developments or “themes” in the novel. Certain animals and machines are recognizably symbolic within the context of the story, and still others (the epitomes for example) can be discerned as much more meaningful than their overt, apparently incidental mention might at first seem to indicate. Both the interior and the more subtle symbols—as reinforced by the recurrence of related allusions or figures of speech—are interwoven and played off against one another to such an extent that the overall meaning is not merely made more vivid: it is considerably enriched. A consideration of these motifs does not begin to exhaust the richness of the book; but this discussion can contribute to a fuller understanding of Steinbeck’s novel as a consummate complex work of art.

It is commonly acknowledged that traditional American modes of thinking can be observed in John Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath. With their journey to California, the Joad family follow the examples set by the pioneers who left the disagreeable conditions in their home states and looked for the fulfilment of the American dream in the rich opportunities of the West. Like the pioneers that Joads still believe in the prospects of the frontier and hope to acquire a small piece of land, which can till with their own hand. In their
visions of the boundless fecundity with which California is blessed, they revive what Henry Nash Smith has called “the myth of the garden”: the old dream of an agricultural paradise in the West, which is here transferred from the Mississippi Valley to the fertile land of California.

These ideas reveal the strong influence of agrarian thinking which can be traced back to Benjamin Franklin, J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, and especially to Thomas Jefferson, who gave it classic expression in Query XIX of his Notes on Virginia (1784-85). Like Jefferson and his nineteenth century followers, Steinbeck favours the widespread ownership of land holdings and believes in the dignity and virtue of the independent farmer who can live by the fruits of his labour and is nobody’s servant. In his support of small scale farming, he was also influenced by the back-to-the-soil movement, which found so many adherents for its programme of Five Acres and Independence in the Depression Era.

The impact of the idea figure of the Western yeoman farmer is also discernible in the characterization of the Joads and other tenant farmers, who, regardless of their coarse and unrefined speech and manners, appear basically good and virtuous. They are portrayed as generous and helpful people, adhering to their moral code, displaying considerable strength of character in
the face of constant adversity and preserving their dignity in spite of growing hostility. Through his sympathetic treatment of the Joads and other dispossessed farmers, Steinbeck has created a more appealing picture of the Western farmer and his plight than did his nineteenth century forerunner Joseph Kirkland E.W. Howe and Hamlin Garland.

Steinbeck’s agrarian ideals apparently made him also resent the mechanization and industrialization of agriculture with its concomitant absentee ownership. In The Grapes of Wrath machines destroy the close bond between Man and Nature, make the tenant farmer redundant the force him off the land so what he becomes a shiftless migrant workers. It is above all the tractor which threatens the self-sufficient and satisfying way of life of the small farmer and which becomes something approaching a new symbol of the traditional “anti-pastoral counterforce of industrialism,” which Leo Marx has described with such wealth of detail in his investigation of the impact of modern technology of American thinking.

Nevertheless, nineteenth century ideals could not provide adequate solutions to the problems posed by the agricultural revolutions. Steinbeck, too, had to acknowledge this at the end of his novel—in spite of his agrarian predilections. For in California the Joads are soon confronted with the situation that half a century before prompted Frederick Jackson Turner to write this
great essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (1893): the
t frontier is closed, the dream of owning a small piece of land must be buried as
wishful thinking. Even worse, living conditions deteriorate all the time and the
family slowly dissolves in spite of Ma Joad’s efforts. Tom, their leader, who
feels such strong attachments to the soil, is forced to flee, and the novel ends
with the remnants of the Joad Clan trying to survive the flood-like rains in the
box car and barn. True, critics are agreed that The Grapes of Wrath ends on a
somewhat optimistic note: Rose of Sharon’s gesture of help can be understood
as a sign of the indestructible life force of the people. But is undeniable that
such an interpretation has to rely heavily on the symbolic aspects of this
conclusion, whereas on the level of concrete action the Joads’ situation is quite
hopeless.

There are, however, some indication that Steinbeck not only concedes
the impossibility of realizing agrarian concepts, but that he also beings to
accept the opportunities offered by modern industrial society as a possible
solution to the migrant worker’s problems. One point is the shift in attitude
woward the application of modern technology in agriculture which occurs
between chapters 5 and 25. True, a major topic of chapter 5 is the criticism of
absentee ownership and of the unscrupulous methods of the banks. At the same
time, however, the use of machinery in agriculture is strongly condemned:
machines sever the emotional bond between Man and Nature, which can only exist where farmers till the soil with their own hands. It is particularly the imagery which betrays Steinbeck’s distrust of mechanization in agriculture. The tractors with their ploughing and sowing implements are likened to insects and monsters raping the land. They corrupt the drivers, who become their slaves and act like robots without a will of their own.

In chapter 25, however, Steinbeck lauds the achievements of chemistry, experimental farming, and modern technology in agriculture. The highest praise again goes to the men who work with their own hands grafting the fruit trees. But the dichotomy between people who have direct contact with soil and plants and those who work in the laboratory or use machines is no longer maintained. The cultivators are now described as beneficial implements which help to increase fertility.

This praise of technological progress in agriculture serves to heighten the accusation of deliberate waste of agricultural goods in California. But at the same time it is a clear indication of Steinbeck’s realization that undeniable advantages can be gained for the population at large by applying modern technology to agriculture.
These ideas expressed in chapter 25 could be considered as an isolated phenomenon without further relevance to the line of thought in the novel, were they not supported by an interesting development in the consternation of the characters. When the former male leader Tom Joad, who feels so strongly attached to the soil, is forced to leave the family, his position is taken over by Al Joad, the mechanic, who has no interest in agriculture and dreams of working in a garage in the city. Decidedly a minor figure in the early parts of the novel, he constantly gains in stature and maturity during the wandering in California.

At the beginning, Al is introduced as a “smart aleck” and a “randy boy” who spends most of his time chasing girls. He is a good mechanic and has bought a usable car for the trip to California, but has delayed making the necessary improvements because of this time-consuming adventures with girls. He does not object to playing the role of the little brother to Tom, whom he admires and whose orders he willingly obeys. And though he is admitted to the family council, he is only consulted in matters concerning the truck. On the trip along route 66 no significant development is yet discernible. Al is a competent mechanic and a conscientious driver, who is not really to blame for the burning out of the connecting-rod and the break-down of the car. It is in California,
then, where those changes occur which make him a leading member of the family.

Al begins to act independently and shows circumspection and foresight when he secretly keeps back a barrel of petrol so what the family can leave the government camp. Without asking his father’s and uncle’s permission he picks up a man from the camp and decides to return there because their search for work is futile. He keeps his head and thinks up a clever excuse for Tom’s disappearance when the guards at the Hooper ranch have to be deceived in order to save his brother’s life. He is also able to procure the petrol necessary to drive north. Finally, when Tim is forced to hide, it is he, and not Pa Joad or Uncle John, who becomes his mother’s main support. He takes care of the car as best he can, and tries, though in vain, to save it from the rising water. He defends his father against an enraged man who wants to beat him up, and it is he who proposes to build a platform in the box car from the sideboards of the truck. Also, instead of continuing to chase girls, he himself decides to get married to Aggie Wainwright so that the insinuations that Ma Joad and Mrs. Wainwright had planned to make are no longer necessary.
The clearest sign, however, that he is acting responsibly is his willingness to help him family. He is not overjoyed at staying with them, because he is determined to look for a job in the city. But unlike Connie Rivers, who deserts his pregnant wife when things get really bad, he remains with his people and supports them as best as he ban until he is left behind in the box car to look after the truck. Connie Rivers, too, is attracted by the idea of making a living in the city and actually puts this notion into Al’s head, but he is weakling who just talks about studying books at night and becoming an electrician. With Al, however, we can be sure that he will make this way in the city, for he has already proved himself a competent mechanic and a responsible man on several occasions.

Thus a further thread is discernible in the complex textures of the ending of The Grapes of Wrath. The Joads’ hopes of owning a small piece of land are shattered, and worse than that, their attempts to subsist as migrant workers have failed. From their bitter experiences they have learned that the solidarity of all oppressed people is more important than loyalty to the family and that joint actions of all the migrant workers are the only means of improving their living and making conditions. But a concrete solution is not in sight so that
Steinbeck to resort to his symbolic conclusion in order to avoid complete pessimism.

A practical way out is suggested, however, in the figure of Al Joad. He no longer believes in making a living as a farmer, but looks to the city and the chances offered there. The frontier does not influence his thoughts; he trust in making headway by staking his calms at the frontier of opportunity. Though he does no aim at becoming a millionaire like Henry Ford, he is confident that he can earn a decent wage as a mechanic. The further developments in California proved that only such a move to the city could alleviate the miserable living conditions of the “Okies”. The Second World War provided sufficient jobs in the industries of San Francisco and other industrialized locations. Thus, by placing Al Joad increasingly in the foreground and by conceding in chapter the advantages to be gained from applying modern technology to agriculture, Steinbeck qualified his one-sided agrarianism and begins to accept the positive aspects of mechanization and industrialization. Even though his almost mystic love of nature makes Steinbeck tend to retain nineteenth century ideals, he is not so backward an old-fashioned as some critics suspect him of being.

In concise, the literary genius of John Steinbeck consists in his consummate craftsmanship to employ a plethora of literary devices symbolism,
allegory and biblical parallelism to highlight the plight of the migrant labourers in quest for job. His literary sensibility and adaptability of his art to embrace the growing technology to foster agriculture economy and industrial production is commendably blended with his initial reluctance of mechanization of agriculture to breed unemployment among the sharecropper but his gradual acceptance of inevitability of technological breakthrough in chemical production to enhance agriculture output manifold bears testimony to his innovative vision coupled with realism to protect the interest of proletarian class whom he vociferously represents. Such a marvellous stylistic quality has, indeed, put him in the gallery of frame in the realm of literary world.
References:


Moore, Harry Thorton. The Novels of John Steinbeck: A First Critical Study.
Chicago: Normandie House, 1939.


******