

Estranged Through Writing

An Analysis of The Written Word in *The Grapes of Wrath*

by Jacob McLellan

Pa Joad “always says what he couldn' tell a fella with his mouth wasn't worth leanin' on no pencil about” (Steinbeck 17). The sentiment points to an important belief in John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*: that written language is a tool of human construction — much like the tractor and the plough — that distances agent from audience, farmer from earth, and human from humanity. Written language is far more than a mere symbol-system or communication tool; it has physical manifestations in society, in the landscape, and in morality. Pa Joad’s dislike of letters alludes to these manifestations which recur throughout the novel — through handbills, laws, and land deeds. In this essay, I will explain the complex physical and social implications of written language beginning with a close examination of the “pencil” as a tool and the characteristics of the written word in Pa Joad’s sentence using structural-linguistic techniques followed by a detailed discussion of the implications of the symbol’s nuances seen throughout the novel.

In Pa Joad’s claim, “what he couldn’ tell a fella with his mouth wasn't worth leanin' on no pencil about,” he cleverly and purposefully uses the word “pencil” as a metonymy to symbolize language as a tool of human construction. By definition, a metonymy — a special case of synecdoche — is a figure of speech that denotes “a thing used or regarded as a substitute for or symbol of something else” (OED), often contrasted with a metaphor because the association in metonymy is by contiguity rather than similarity. Using a specialized rhetorical figure of speech leads the reader to conclude that Pa is by no means a simpleton. That is, Pa could have been quoted saying “I don’t like writing”, but instead, he composed his thoughts artfully with deeply meaningful figurative language signifying a degree of literary

prowess. In fact, Pa is not illiterate because he can “work out a catalogue order as good as the nex' fella” (28), so he certainly is not merely using the claim to feign literacy. Thus, when Pa purposely opts to use spoken language and refuses to rely on written language, it is clear that he does so because he sees important differences between spoken and written language.

The use of the metonymy requires an understanding of the pencil in two senses: one, as a tool, and two, as a symbol contiguous with written language (as distinct from the the spoken word). The first sense is demonstrated by its similarity to tools and machinery in the novel. Tools extend human capabilities in some way (McLuhan 152). The tractor allows man to farm more land by automating the diverse movements of the hand, the automobile through the wheel extends the feet in rotation or sequential movement, and the pencil extends the memory of the brain and the capabilities of the voice. Thus, it gives human thought the ability to live past the present and project into the future. While this extension of human capabilities may seem positive, it can have a negative reading. In Plato's *Phaedrus*, for instance, Socrates recalls the story of the Egyptian god Theuth who invented letters. While Theuth claimed the letters would make the Egyptians wiser and give them better memories, another God Thamus rebuts that the discovery will create forgetfulness because the Egyptians will rely on external writing rather than internal memory. Indeed, he laments they will trust the external letters better than their own memory (91), and this fault of letters is certainly evident in *The Grapes of Wrath*. While the tractor serves as an explicit example of machinery in the novel — depicted as a demonic creature (Machines 571) — written language subtly embodies the inhumanity of machinery. The “pencil” tractors families out of their homes through “orders from the bank” due to unpaid loans (Steinbeck 26) and written eviction notices (179). Indeed, the pencil's word is regarded as a higher authority of who owns the land than the word of the families, as seen when the tenant men argue with the bank man that the labour and

the lives they invested into the land denotes ownership, not a “paper with numbers on it” (23).

Similarly, the pencil’s influence on the mechanization and bureaucratization of the farming industry in America are more entrenched than ever made apparent in the novel. The tractors that put “nearly a hundred people on the road” (26) were invented on paper and the property owner’s motivation to accumulate more acres is characterized by projected profit margins (26). Furthermore, the bank requires the pencil to exist and thrive. Without the spatial separation and mass dissemination of information made possible by the pencil, the bureaucracy of the bank could not exist. That is, the tractor man could not receive orders from the contractor who receives his orders from the local bank who receive their orders from the president and the board of directors who receive their orders from the East, and so on (26). Lastly, the system is unstoppable (like a machine) because it is decentralized and possessed by the pencil. By this I mean, the bank system cannot be stopped simply by killing the “robot in a seat” (24), the tractor man, because new orders will be sent to replace him by the bank manager, similar to how Grampa Joad fails to stop the tractor with a shotgun, a more obvious form of weaponry (Machine 577).

The pencil, similar to a tool, has manifestations in reality. The pencil’s most obvious manifestations is the object itself or traces on a paper; however, the pencil has far greater effects on the physical landscape than initially apparent. The arbitrary lines on a map — defining the borders of a country, of a state, of a city, and of a person’s property — are reflected in the landscape. States surround themselves with signs and “border patrol” (79-80). The town builds outwards from its nucleus and similarly signs itself as evidenced by the stream of city signs along Highway 66 (Chapter 12). The towns need transportation from one to the next, so highways are devised on maps and line the landscape. The property owner whose land is his because of “a paper with numbers on it” (23) defines

his land by a fence and by where he stops planting crop. In this manner, the physical landscape is altered by the pencil.

The lines on a map also inform a hierarchy that assigns identities based on geography and social class. An Oklahoman driver's licence links person to place and serves as a distinguishing marker to "other" — that is, to "conceptualize (a people, a group, etc.) as excluded and intrinsically different from oneself" (OED) — between Oklahoman and Californian. The othering that results from geographic identity is made evident by the term "Okie", which originally denoted "you was from Oklahoma" (139), but in light of the dust bowl migration of Okies to California, it "means you're a dirty son-of-a-bitch. Okie means you're scum" (139). Okies are identifiable only by external factors such as their jalopes, their "hard-looking" outfits (150), and their dirtiness. Otherwise, they are hard to distinguish from the Californians. Indeed, the only true indicator of an Okie is the driver's licence. The link between person and geography can also hinder a person's mobility across the lines on a map. By this I refer to Tom Joad being legally required to stay in Oklahoma because of the written requirements of his parole (76). Thus, the pencil is used to create geographical separations between places and to encourage othering based on geographic identity.

As mentioned the "pencil" can also be understood as contiguous with the written word (as distinct from the spoken word). Although both the written and spoken word are tools of human communication, the tools as mediums have distinct characteristics that inform their effect on humans and on society (McLuhan 57). One such difference is the distancing effect of the written word. That is, the spoken word necessitates personal interaction between agent and audience (77). It allows a dialectic that creates a community of people who know and care for each other (79). The written word, on the other hand, relies on monologism (82) and distances agent from audience because it defers audience

through the spatial and temporal dimensions (114). The distancing effect of the written word illustrates itself in many ways. It can be seen in the “No help wanted. No Trespassing” signs at the the Californians’ entrance-gates that serve to prevent Okies from enquiring orally about work (Steinbeck 217). It can be seen in the “five thousand” (128) copies of one handbill with no named author that were distributed disembodied across the country. While the handbills only called for “eight hunderd men”, maybe “twenty thounsans’ people” read them (128). The unknown author — who consequently does not know his audience due to the temporal and spatial separation of the medium — can distance himself from the disastrous results of the handbill; meaning, instead of seeing the starving, destitute Okies, he can see his labour costs fall and his profits rise. Beyond the manifestations of the temporal and spatial separations of agent and audience, there is an instrinsic spatial and temporal separation in the structure of the written word. Jacques Derrida’s phenomena of “différance”, which plays on the French words meaning to differ and to defer, will help illustrate the temporal and spatial separation of evident in the structure of the written word. According to Derrida, words are deferred presences of the things they mean, and the meanings of words are constituted by their differentiation from other words (Derrida 284). Under this phenomena of language, it is evident that the rules of grammar also create a temporal and spatial separation in language that affect meaning. That is, by necessity of syntactic structure following the syntagmatic axis there is a time delay in reading, writing, and comprehending word x from word y in a sentence. Thus, the distancing effect of agent from audience can be further exemplified by the form of the written word, where spatial separation refers to the physical separation of words on the page and temporal separation refers to the time it takes the reader to arrive at the next word.

The distancing effect of the written word contributes to what Stephen Toulmin refers to in *The Tyranny of Principles as a society of strangers* (34). Because the written word separates agent

from audience (and the written word becomes the soul of the author in their absence), people begin to favour uniformity over responsiveness in rules and law. That is, a society of strangers is less inclined to allow for discretion in ethical decisions because equality is the only virtue left. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the impersonable nature of the written word creates the society of strangers. So, regardless of whether the store clerk wishes to help the destitute Okies, the codified, unbendable system of laws and rules separates him from his ethics (34). Steinbeck also illustrates the principles of the society of strangers through the bank monster (Chapter 5). The bank monster represents a company of individuals who all dislike the bank but are forced to work within the system of created rules. The owner men strictly abide by the rules and take land away from people who cannot repay their debt to the bank monster rather than make exceptions to the rules. The owner men become cold (23) to the family because their moral centre is replaced by the bank monster's codified system of rules that prefers equality over equity. The individuals in the community of the bank monster are distanced from making ethical decisions and thus resort to apathy and coldness. Simply, the system of rules takes the human-factor out of ethical decision making. So, the tractor man does not consider the plight of his community when he displaces "twelve or fourteen families" (22) for three dollars a day, and the store clerk, due to the fixed rather than negotiable price tags on items at the local store (257), ignores the pleas of starving people.

Of course, some Californians (usually the poor ones) still wish to help the Okies. Typically these Californians interact with the Okies face-to-face and understand their plight. For instance, the previously mentioned store clerk loaned Ma Joad ten cents to buy sugar because the store's rules would not allow him to sell on credit (258). Furthermore, the ranch owner Mr. Thomas wished to pay the Okies a fair wage, but the Farmers' Association sets the wage forcibly (201). Instead, he warned the workers that the association planned to instigate a fight at the government camp during a dance

(202). While the society of strangers creates an environment where people ignore their humanity, personal interaction and face-to-face communication can counteract its effects. The reader can additionally look at these exchanges the way machinery is viewed in the novel: machinery (and the written word) is not inherently bad. Instead, it depends who is at the wheel (Machine 578). One driver can try to kill a turtle crossing the road but the other can swerve to avoid it (Steinbeck 11-2). One person can take advantage of the lower class and the other can be sympathetic.

Naturally, Pa Joad's quotation includes the idea that he will use the written word if necessary. When the Joads illegally bury Grampa Joad on the side of the road, for instance, they "put a note of writin' in a bottle an' lay it with Grampa, tellin' who he is an' how he died, an' why he's buried [there]" (94) — interestingly written with a borrowed pen because "that's one thing [they] did not bring" (96), which is subtly indicative of the Joads' politics. This act signifies that the Joads view the written word as virtuous by nature, perhaps due to its perceived connection to the Word of God. They trust that leaving a note (instead of burying Grampa Joad as a John Doe) will adjudicate them as innocent of murder if his body is unearthed because it will be perceived as a virtuous act. The note is doubly virtuous (and asserts the connection between the written word and the word of God) because they include Scripture in it.

The written word is also tied to the word/world of God because anything said to be Scripture is instantly agreeable. For example, although Tom's use of the passage is ambiguous, he discusses the principle that "two are better than one" (288) because they can help each other, and Ma is more inclined to agree with it when he cites it as Scripture (specifically Ecclesiastes 4:9-12). Similarly, when Ma Joad is worried that the job prospects in California are too good to be true, Tom Joad says "Don't roust your faith bird-high an' you won't do no crawlin' with the worms" (60). Ma believes it to be

Scripture and says “I know that to be right” (60), despite the quote being from *The Winning of Barbara Worth* by Harold Bell Wright.

The written word’s connection to hierarchy is another reason why it has power in the novel. Certainly, God is hierarchically above all in the eyes of the Joads, and so the written Word of God is virtuous and infallible; however, the trust of the written word is not limited to Scripture. The Joads similarly immediately trust the orange handbills which professed there was good, well-paid work in California because “they [the authors] wouldn’t go to that trouble if they wasn’t plenty work” (61). Indeed, the Joads continue to believe the written word despite hearing multiple accounts against the handbills — that the handbills are used as bait to lure desperate, destitute families into California so that the price of labour can be lowered to match the demand for work. Admittedly, the Joads’ decision to continue on their way to California is likely due to their lack of options at the time; however, the handbills and the newspaper ads also carry a certain ethos with them because it “costs ’em good money to get them han’bills out. What’d they want ta lie for, an’ costin’ ’em money to lie” (61)? Simply, the ethos of the written word is derived from the cost of printing and distributing and the assumed credibility its author(s) and publisher(s).

Although unspoken, the buried note could betray the Joads if Grampa Joad is ever unearthed by the police. Leaving the note demonstrates a certain naivete on the part of the Joads. They assume that because they see the written word as virtuous, their note will be seen as virtuous. Instead, it is more likely that the lower class Okies do not have access to the power of the written word. The letter buried with Grampa Joad — written on a torn piece of a paper and scribbled in semi-literate English with a borrowed “half pencil” (96) — does not hold the inherent ethos of the job advertisement in the newspaper despite the scrawled note being truthful and the advertisement being dishonest. The

difference between the two is that the letter has no monetary value attached to it to give it credibility. Indeed, the readers of the note could deduce the note was written by destitute people (if they assumed the note's validity), because rich people would not need to bury a body at the side of the road due to lack of money, and, similarly, rich people would write the note with better grammar. Therefore, the note would likely be viewed as an act of trickery rather than virtuosity, in part, due to the lack of monetary value attached to the note and its authors.

The Okies' lower class also prevents them from inverting the power of the written word. Floyd, for example, tries to escape the cycle of migrant labourers being tricked into unfavourable working situations by asking to see the contractor's license (180). In this case, Floyd attempts to use the law that requires people to possess a contractor license to hire workers against the upper class. He subsequently requests for the price of labour to be written down. The attempt failed, however, because Floyd lacked the power bestowed by class and large numbers. The contractor, being a member of the upper class, was connected to the local deputy sheriff who overlooked the law and ended Floyd's one-man rebellion. The other reason that Floyd could not use the power of the written word was because he was an individual, and as an individual he was powerless. As Tom Joad later concludes "Two are better than one" (288) because people collectively have the ability to enact change, to access the power of the written word.

Pa Joad's preference of the oral over written tradition is a form of rebellion against the written word. It is a stance against the system of absolute ethics between strangers where distance and diversity foster mutual distrust and adversarialism (Toulmin 36). It is a protest against a system in which hierarchically subordinated people have no access to the written word's power. Pa Joad (and Okies alike) prefer what Toulmin calls the "friendly society" (36), the society of the spoken word. The friendly

society emphasizes the importance of “tellin’ a fella with his mouth” (Steinbeck 17). In this society, rules are not codified in letters, so it is impossible to have a “cult of absolute principles” and inflexible rules (Toulmin 37). Thus, the friendly society is characterized by uniformity which creates intimacy, trust, and cooperation (37). In this manner, equity and discretion are valued.

The ad hoc creation of communities on the road (Chapter 17) and the government camp “Weedpatch” (Steinbeck 172) are appropriate representations of friendly societies, where multiple families are interconnected and co-dependent, rules are unwritten, and ethics are case-based. Due to the migrant families’ collective loss of home and their shared experiences on the road, when they stopped at the side of the road, “twenty families became one family” (131). The people shared experiences, conversations, and song, and through their uniformity, they created a friendly world where people cared for one another. Each night, leaders are established in new communities, new laws are formed, new rights are established, such as the right to privacy in the home, the right to offer, refuse, and accept help, the right of “the hungry to be fed”, and so on (131). This is a congress and government without written laws; the rules are spoken to each other and enforced on a local scale. People cared about one another because their world depended on the exchange of courtesies and human decency, and it worked, despite the lack of codified laws because people interacted personally with one another, favouring the spoken word its flexible ethics, as Pa Joad does.

Pa Joad’s disapproval of the pencil is not a simple objection to writing. It is an artfully worded recognition and protest against the pencil’s physical and attitudinal manifestations on the landscape, on society, and on humanity; and it is a call for the relapse to a society that favours the close-knit nature of the spoken word. By the end of the novel, the Joads finally begin to discover that the migrant workers must band together as one to make their collective voice heard by the society of

strangers. That is, Pa Joad's individual disapproval of the pencil (and its physical and social implications) will not suffice in creating the close-knit nature of the spoken word. Instead, the migrant labourers need to collectively protest the society of strangers, for "two are better than one... For if they fall, the one will lif' up his fellow, but woe to him that is alone when he falleth, for he hath not another to help him up" (288).

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