

*The Grapes of Wrath: A Protest Against an Un-American America*

In continuing the legacy of the Founding Fathers<sup>1</sup>, the United States of America champions itself as the paragon of freedom and equality, and as the land where any working hand can find its fortune so long as it is willing to earn its callouses. Since the idyllic composition of the Declaration of Independence, the United States has developed into an international economic, cultural, and military superpower, though the founding documents remain as revered as ever. But, has the American nation strayed from being the land of the free and the home of the brave? Whether or not America has progressed as its forefathers envisioned is a dilemma that Steinbeck tackles in *The Grapes of Wrath*, a novel that illustrates the effects of unfettered capitalism and economic hardship on the lowest of the American classes. Steinbeck presents America as leaving many of its most fundamental, and constitutional, promises unfulfilled, and as being more divided than the name “United States” implies. In his social protest novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck enters into a dialogue of structural oppression. By presenting unfettered capitalism as ignoring or twisting foundational American and Franklinian ideals—such as the pursuit of happiness—Steinbeck argues that an unregulated economy is destructive and un-American. In detailing the oppression and suppression of the migrant workers, Steinbeck espouses literature as a means of reclaiming voices silenced by the free market, and declares that America must redefine the meaning and value of a person if the American poor are to have any hope.

By drawing on Julia Ward Howe’s wrathful “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” Steinbeck immediately imbues his condemnation of unfettered capitalism with a righteous tone.

Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* borrows its title from Howe’s hymn, which was created as an

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<sup>1</sup> There were, of course, Founding Mothers as well, but America has always been male-centric, evidenced by the prominent historical emphasis on figures such as George Washington and the lack of a female president.

abolitionist response to the American Civil War. Howe's penultimate line urges Americans to "die to make men free" just as Jesus "died to make men holy," which is a comparison that places the pursuit and fight for freedom and the coming of the Lord on a fairly even level (19). By borrowing his work's title from Howe's second line, Steinbeck incorporates Howe's tone of righteousness into *The Grapes of Wrath*, and contextually insinuates that the ravages of unfettered capitalism are comparable to the devastation wrought by a divided and self-warring America. Steinbeck captures the Civil War-esque scale of the tragedy of unfettered capitalism when he claims that "a million people [who are] hungry, [who need discarded] fruit... [must watch as] kerosene [is] sprayed over the golden mountains" (349). One million Americans must wage war against starvation, must fight for their right of life, "and the failure hangs over the State like a great sorrow" (Steinbeck 348). Steinbeck's claim that "in the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage," suggests that a new Confederacy is on the horizon, and that its objective of dismantling unfettered capitalism is unabashedly righteous, humane, and, perhaps most importantly, American (349). In order to demonstrate just how destructive unfettered capitalism is, Steinbeck fixates his narrative on only one of the million families pursuing the American Dream, though this family endures more sorrow than the nation can ever justify.

Despite their strict adherence to the Franklinian work ethic, the Joads' pursuit of the American Dream ravages them financially and places them in a worse situation than the one they started in. Steinbeck's narrative is set during the Great Depression and tells the story of the Joads, displaced tenant farmers who leave the Dust Bowl of Oklahoma to pursue California, where they hope to find work and to achieve some semblance of the American Dream. In his

essay “The Way to Wealth,” Benjamin Franklin<sup>2</sup> claims that a mentality of “early to bed, and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise,” and that poverty and hunger “at the working man’s house... [look] in, but [dare] not enter” (par. 5, 6). Franklin lays the groundwork for the popular conception of the American Dream by claiming that a positive work ethic naturally engenders financial success, and by asserting that “God helps them that help themselves” (par. 2). However, in *The Grapes of Wrath* the Joads must incur serious losses in order to set out for prosperity; they must sell “every movable thing” they possess for “eighteen dollars only” (90, 100). In pursuing the American Dream of getting “one of them little white houses,” the Joads actually lose the majority of their scant wealth, even though they bear the loss of everything they had stoically and “never took nothin’ [they] couldn’t pay [for]... [they] never suffered no man’s charity,” just as Franklin would advise (91, 139). Additionally, Franklin’s narrative implies that work is always available, and blames poverty on a lack of motivation to work. Steinbeck reacts against this by depicting the Joads as being unable rather than unwilling to work, as there is “no steady work [in California]... [the Joads must] scabble for [their] dinner ever’ day” despite Franklin’s argument that hunger is unknown to a working stomach (206). Steinbeck dismantles the optimistic naiveté of Franklin’s rhetoric—which continues to delineate the American work ethic despite being antiquated by centuries—and goes one step further by arguing that the American Dream conflicts with the inalienable rights of American workers.

Steinbeck presents the pursuit of the American Dream as serving to dehumanize the poor migrant workers and to establish a hierarchy in the fulfilment of human rights. In The Declaration of Independence, it is stated that all Americans—or at the very least all American

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<sup>2</sup> Though Franklin’s essays are often cited as foundational in the establishment of the American work ethic, “The Way to Wealth” is framed as a speech delivered by Father Abraham, and, in the story, Abraham’s rhetoric leads his audience to “immediately [practice] the contrary” of what he preaches, suggesting ineffectiveness in what is typified as “Franklinian” rhetoric (par. 18).

*men*—“are endowed... with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness,” with the latter of the three largely rephrasing Franklin’s idea of the American Dream as the accrument of wealth through lawful employment (par. 2). Steinbeck presents the chiefest of the human rights, those of life, liberty, and pursuing happiness, as being incompatible for the destitute migrant workers. For example, the pursuit of happiness requires the “Okies” to sacrifice much of their liberty, as the landless workers cannot enjoy the freedoms of sleep and respite—elements that may be just as integral to their survival as they are to their liberty—and must continually evacuate their “Hoovervilles” under the police’s threat that they will “burn [the Okies] out if [they] don’t” leave (Steinbeck 271). Steinbeck argues that the migrant worker’s right to life is also violated, as the property rights of landowners are deemed pertinent enough that, if a person intrudes on unused, but not unowned land to plant “a little corn... [the intruder must] go to jail,” even if they trespassed to circumvent their own starvation (205). Steinbeck reveals that the rights of the richer classes are more strictly upheld than those of the poorer castes, and that, when the rights of the rich and poor are simultaneously challenged, the rich have a greater priority in having their needs fulfilled even if it means the poor must die. By presenting the American Dream as a futile endeavour for the lower classes, Steinbeck argues that the American Dream itself is a fictitious concept.

Steinbeck rejects the rhetoric of the American Dream by presenting it as illusionary and oppressive to the working people it is meant to enfranchise. The plight of the Joads reveal that, to the poor, the American Dream is essentially a euphemism for survival, as the Joads must make for the opportunities of the west because “[they] got no place to stay” in Oklahoma; what was once their “lan’ [has gone] under the tractors” (111). The lives of the Joads hinges upon their belief in the American Dream, and as Franklinian rhetoric argues: “he that lives upon hope will

die fasting” (par. 6). Franklin’s claim that “[Americans] may make [their] times better if [they] bestir [them]selves” is highly appealing to Americans who have fallen on hard times, as it promises that the motivated and optimistic poor can transcend their poverty (par. 6). However, Steinbeck counters this by claiming that “only the great owners can survive, for they own the canneries” and every other means of production (348). The “great” owners cannot be challenged because they are too rich and powerful to be opposed, and no poor man can ascend economically when the rich are capable of uprooting their success before it even begins to bud. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the American Dream has failed, for the pursuit of happiness is not a universal right, it is a euphemistic mechanism of control used by the upper classes to contain and placate the poor. While the American Dream serves to oppress and suppress the poor, it is but a single device of the machine that is unfettered capitalism

Through the macroscopic insight of his intercalary chapters, Steinbeck argues that the ideologies of American nationalism and unfettered capitalism cannot coexist, as an unregulated economy divides and conquers the American people. The Declaration of Independence concludes by claiming that Americans “mutually pledge to each other [their] Lives, [their] Fortunes and [their] sacred Honor,” in a way that unifies the otherwise very diverse American peoples (par. 6). However, when confronted with the devastating effects they are wreaking on the lower classes, Steinbeck’s consistently employed workers claim they “can’t think of that... [they have] got to think of [their] own kids... [they have] got no call to worry about anybody’s kids but [their] own” (37). Under the heel of unfettered capitalism, those who are lucky enough to find regular employment must desensitize themselves to the plight of their less fortunate compatriots. Employed Americans must shift the state of victimhood to themselves in order to keep working their jobs and feeding their families. This clash between the market and the nation

is not an exclusively modern phenomenon, as even Franklin claims that “trusting too much to others’ care is the ruin of many,” despite such a mentality serving to divide rather than unify the people of America (par. 9). Steinbeck even goes as far as to claim that the contradictory co-existence of American nationalism and unfettered capitalism creates an America where workers are “men and slaves, while the monsters [of an unregulated economy] [are] machines and masters all at the same time” (32). The economy collects the debts of Americans, and “creditors [have] authority... to deprive [Americans] of their liberty,” regardless of what is stated in the constitution (Franklin par. 12). The obscenity of unfettered capitalism is only magnified when companies begin demanding empathy.

Steinbeck argues that unfettered capitalism, though theoretically logical and appealing, quickly becomes absurd when corporations are granted human status. Despite his objections to the effects of American capitalism, Steinbeck does acknowledge that unfettered capitalism appears efficient theoretically, as for an employer, “the more fella’s [he or she] can [gather], an’ the hungrier, [the] less [he or she’s] gonna [need to] pay” his or her employees (190). While the workers suffer, the economy itself remains relatively stable and the employers stand to increase their profits. However, Steinbeck denounces capitalistic titans such as “the Bank[s]—or the Compan[ies] [as]—need[ing]—want[ing]—insist[ing]... as though the Bank[s] or the Compan[ies] were... monster[s], with thought[s] and feeling[s]” (31). Steinbeck also claims that “the monster [of unfettered capitalism] isn’t men, but it can make men do what it wants,” a reality that leaves tens of thousands of “Okies” homeless and despairing (34). Steinbeck illustrates how banks and corporations are treated as though they have the same capacity for “thought and feeling” as a human being<sup>3</sup>, even though banks and corporations are inhuman

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<sup>3</sup> In the courts of the United States, corporations are regarded as persons, and are entitled to some of the basic rights held by flesh-and-blood Americans.

“creatures that don’t breath air, don’t eat side-meat... [these creatures] breathe profits... [and] eat the interest on money” (32). Steinbeck exposes unfettered capitalism as inappropriately demanding empathy, even though those who do its bidding often do so “because it provide[s] a refuge from thought and from feeling” (31). Despite the practice of personifying corporate entities in unfettered capitalism being nonsensical and monstrous, Steinbeck argues that it goes unopposed because the poor feel as though “all of them [are] caught in something larger than themselves” (31). Florian Freitag argues that the poor have been socially conditioned to view corporations as “inevitable and disinterested forces, similar to nature,” and as futile to fight against as the world itself (102). Using some strong pathos of his own, Steinbeck argues that unfettered capitalism denies human dignity.

Through his sentimental narrative, Steinbeck argues that unfettered capitalism is a socio-economic abomination, and that it deprives workers of basic human dignity. In the American literary tradition, sentimentalism is a rhetorical strategy that aims to lead an audience to a moral judgment based on emotional appeals, usually by juxtaposing the subject in question with the image of a fragmented family (Zaidi). Freitag describes *The Grapes of Wrath* as a novel of group defeat, which is a literary genre “in which a powerful social or economic force causes the fall of a particular class or group of men” (101). In such stories, “some members of the [class or] group... [regard] the supposedly intangible and disinterested forces as man-made, interested, and even malevolent construct[s] that... can—and must—be fought,” with *The Grapes of Wrath* having this characteristic ostensibly manifest in Casy and Tom, both of whom reject capitalist rhetoric and defect to the socialist cause (Freitag 102). Steinbeck uses—or perhaps even establishes—the tropes of the group defeat novel to emphasize the destructive capacity of an unregulated economy, which results in “a crime... that goes beyond denunciation... a sorrow...

that weeping cannot symbolize...[and] a failure that topples all our success” (349). In addition to condemning the tragic macroscopic consequences of unfettered capitalism, Steinbeck sentimentally demonstrates its terrible effects on the microscopic scale, such as when Rose of Sharon gives birth to a baby that “never breathed” because its mother could never get enough to eat (444). Steinbeck exposes the dehumanization of the Joads and the migrant workers as so severe that, when confronted with a communal government camp that proclaims itself as the “United States, not California,” Ma Joads claims that she “feels like people again,” as if her pursuit of happiness had diminished her humanity up until this point (334, 307). In an unfettered economy, basic human dignity is taken from the poor and given to corporations, who consume human dignity like they do “the interest on money.” The American land, like the people that live atop it, finds itself abused by the unregulated market.

Despite capitalism’s fixation with protecting private property, Steinbeck presents the unfettered market as belittling American soil, and as resisting a vital tenant of the Jeffersonian cultivation rationale. In Jefferson’s model of the cultivation myth, the land is where Americans’ personal and national identity come together; an idea that is reflected in America’s title as the “land of the free and home of the brave” (Humphreys). However, in *The Grapes of Wrath* the mentality of the capitalists is to “take cotton quick before the land dies... [then to] sell the land” (33). The capitalists trivialize the land as being merely a disposable means of earning revenue, and only feel “the dry earth with their fingers,” when the poor tenant farmers have “[been] born on [the land]... got killed on it, died on it” (31, 33). The capitalists, who cannot make the connection with the land, are portrayed as being un-American, as “guarding with guns the land they have stolen” and as safeguarding their purloined property from the people that have established their American identity by mingling their blood with the earth (Steinbeck 19).



Considering that America regards itself as the “*land of the free*,” the refusal of the capitalists to connect with the earth is rather serious, as they reject rather than embrace that which provides American liberty. Perhaps of even greater concern is that the capitalists participate in the death of the land, again suggesting that capitalism does not fit with America, as it wishes to literally destroy the American soil and kill the freedom that it grants. However, the land is not the only thing that the capitalists aim to kill.

Steinbeck, in capturing the Oklahoma dialect, refuses to allow unfettered capitalism to silence the voices of the migrant workers. In the third chapter of his critical work *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson argues that “print-capitalism<sup>4</sup> create[s] languages-of-power... [meaning that the] largely spoken [languages are] thus [rendered] sub-standard” (1921). As a spoken dialect, the Oklahoma accent would normally fall into the tradition of going unrepresented in literature. However, Steinbeck refuses to perpetuate the structural oppression of spoken languages, and this manifests in *Grapes* with “Okie” dialogue such as “you’re bound to get idears when you go thinkin’ about stuff” (20). Steinbeck demonstrates the othering effects of official languages when he has Ma Joad claim that the California police “made [her] feel mean... [and] made [her] feel ashamed” for speaking and living like a “goddamn Okie” (307, 214). The Joads are othered by the authorities in California, who claim that they “ain’t in [their] country now... [they are] in California,” where poverty-stricken Oklahomans are regarded as intruding foreigners despite their American status (Steinbeck 214). While the authorities and capitalists regard the “Okies” as backwards and inferior, Steinbeck has the Oklahoma-native and ostensible union leader Casy claim “maybe all men got one big soul ever’body’s a part of,” an egalitarian and unitary idea that captures the idea of “all men being created equal” much better than the

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<sup>4</sup> Based on the idea of “print as commodity,” where written works are disseminated in accordance with market demand (Anderson 1916).

social-hierarchy-creating languages of power (24). Casy's idea, when coupled with Franklin's proclamation that "a small leak will sink a great ship," does not bode well for the American nation, as the destruction of the "Okie" voice may usher forth the fall of the entire nation (par. 11). In capturing the plight of the poor, Steinbeck reveals that unfettered capitalism does not just aim to destroy the poor's voices, it also works to destroy their very lives.

By sparing no atrocity in his depiction of the plight of the migrant workers, Steinbeck reveals that unfettered capitalism advocates genocide. In her article "John Steinbeck's 'The Grapes of Wrath': A Call to Action," critic Kristine Yee claims that the migrant workers are "burdened with continuous debt to the farm owner[s] [they work for]" (266). Franklin warns that "when [Americans] run in[to] debt; [they] give to another power over [their] liberty," which reinforces Steinbeck's idea that employer-dependent workers are slaves to an unregulated economy (par. 12). However, Yee argues that Steinbeck takes this idea even further when she claims that unfettered capitalism's "means of segregate[ing] and oppress[ing] [the poor] were nearly identical to those employed by Hitler during the Holocaust" (257). While this idea may initially seem extreme, the twenty-fifth chapter of *The Grapes of Wrath* depicts chilling and gruesome scenes such as "potatoes [being dumped] in[to] the rivers... [with guards] place[d]... along the banks to keep the [one million] hungry people from fishing them out" (349). Steinbeck presents capitalists as going to such extremes as to allow poor American "children [to die] of pellagra... because a profit cannot be taken from an orange," a scenario that uses sentimental rhetoric to render the structural genocide of the poor all the more outrageous, if such a thing is even possible (349). The methodic destruction of a class of American people is impossible to reconcile within the framework of American nationalism, which suggests that unfettered capitalism has successfully displaced and defeated the ideology with which it cannot coexist.

Perhaps the poor are destroyed because they capture the American spirit that capitalism so despises.

Steinbeck presents the migrant workers as the most ardent supporters of foundational American ideals, and argues that their suppression spells the complete abandonment of American principles. Steinbeck presents the migrant workers as perceiving a divide between themselves and the capitalists, such as when Ma Joad claims “we’re the people that live...they ain’t gonna wipe us out... we’re the people—we go on” (280). The migrant workers are the backbone of America, the people that perform the labour that keeps the nation alive, and as such their death would mean the death of the nation. Freitag argues that “the survival of the [migrant] people depends on their ability and willingness to share and cooperate, resulting in a “pluralization” of the people” that the capitalists cannot match (111). Steinbeck claims that “those who own the things people must have... the quality of owning freezes... forever into ‘I,’” while the disenfranchised migrant workers transform “from ‘I’ to ‘We’” (152). The capitalists, in becoming an “I,” exclude themselves from the collective “we” that the Declaration of Independence uses to describe the American people. The Declaration of Independence also asserts that “whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive [towards life, liberty, and happiness], it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it, and to institute new Government” (par. 2). By presenting unfettered capitalism as destroying the lives, liberty, and happiness of the migrant workers, Steinbeck argues that it is the responsibility of the American people to dispose of it, and that any American government that permits unfettered capitalism is unconstitutional. Steinbeck’s narrative suggests that, for the poor to have any hope, a rethinking of the term “person” is required.

Steinbeck argues that unfettered capitalism grants super-personhood to corporations and to working automatons while shaping the poor into objects of blame that are stereotyped as nation-destroying “reds.” In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck has the owner men claim “the bank [and other corporations] [are] something more than men,” which elevates corporate entities to a state of “super-personhood” (33). When describing the men who drive the tractors, Steinbeck claims that “the [men who] [sit] in the iron seat [do] not look like [men]... [they are] a part of the monster, [robots] in the seat” (35). If a robot-man is destroyed, “there’ll be another guy on the tractor” as if nothing happened at all (Steinbeck 38). The people that are employed by “the monster that [is] stronger than they [are]” cannot be responsible, just like the “the fifty-thousand-acre owner[s] can’t be responsible” (Steinbeck 38, 34). Steinbeck describes the wage workers as gaining super-personhood status by being “part of the monster,” but unlike the corporations, the wage workers can lose their status if they “worry about anything but [their] three dollars a day” (37). The capitalists transplant their accountability onto the migrant workers, and claim that it is the “goddamn reds [who are] drivin’ the country to ruin” and not the economic policies of unfettered capitalism (Steinbeck 298). By referring to the migrant workers as “reds” or “Okies,” the capitalists strip them of personhood status, and implicate all of them in the failure that should belong exclusively to corporate executives. Steinbeck rejects the idea of corporations as greater than men, and argues that the capitalists are the ones undeserving of personhood status.

Steinbeck argues that only those who share in the human spirit, such as the poor, are deserving of personhood status. Steinbeck emphasizes the importance of Casy’s ideas about the human spirit when he has Tom Joad repeat Casy’s theory that “a fella ain’t got a soul of his own, but on’y a piece of a big one” (419). Steinbeck has Tom take this idea even further by having him argue that a person’s “little piece of soul [is] no good ‘less it [is] with the rest, an’ [is]

whole” (418). The capitalists, “for [all their money] may all be blasted without the blessing of Heaven,” which is a grace that the capitalist cannot claim, given that they work to fragment rather than unify the human/American spirit (Franklin par. 13). Additionally, Freitag argues that “Rose of Sharon... symbolically becomes the foster mother of all mankind through her breastfeeding a starving stranger” (108). The selfless act of Rose of Sharon suggests that the poor, rather than the rich, deserve some form of super-personhood status, as the poor feed the nation with their work and serve as the human pillars that keep the nation from falling into ruin. Tom proposes re-enacting the social unity of the government camp on a national scale, which would be achieved by “throw[ing] out the cops that ain’t our own people... [and by having] all [people] work together for [their] own thing” (Steinbeck 419). Steinbeck concludes that, by discarding unfettered capitalism and the aristocratic status of American capitalists, America moves one great step closer to bringing the whole of its soul together.

Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* presents unfettered capitalism as besieging Americans and American values. By illustrating how the unregulated market deceives, dehumanizes, and destroys the American poor, Steinbeck’s text erupts with the suppressed outcries of the lowest of the American classes, and sentimentally demonstrates how the poor are just as human as their socio-economic superiors. By capturing the historical plight of the Oklahoman migrant workers in narrative form, Steinbeck exalts literature as a means of supporting positive social change, and cements his text as one that will “respectfully [be] quoted by others” for years to come (Franklin par. 1). The question of whether or not America has retained its status as “the land of the free and the home of the brave” is answered by Steinbeck with a resolute “no,” for the unfettered market has reshaped America into a nation where all citizens are slaves to a fickle master. However, Steinbeck proclaims that America has not yet fallen so far from grace that it cannot be saved, as

the nation now has a deep wellspring of failures to draw upon in its efforts to shape future successes. One can only hope that America can reclaim its status as “the land of the free and the home of the brave” before the grapes of wrath grow too heavy, for the trampled American poor may desire the blood of the nation as their vintage.

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