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Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath: Structure and Characterization Strategy

Dr. Ahmad Y. Majdoubeh*

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☐ ABSTRACT ☐

The aim of this paper is to shed light on John Steinbeck's characterization strategy as one of the most fundamental bases on which the structure of the argument in The Grapes of Wrath is built. Essentially, the novel revolves around the triangular relationship of the three major characters in it: Tom Joad, Jim Casy, and Ma Joad. While the structure of most novels is either mono-partite, the focus being on the life of one major hero/protagonist (i.e. Robinson Crusoe, Tom Jones, Great Expectations, etc.) or bi-partite, the focus being on the life of two major heroes/protagonists (i.e. Moby-Dick, Heart of Darkness, The Great Gatsby, etc.), the structure of The Grapes of Wrath is tri-partite (or triangular), the focus being on the relation of three heroes/protagonists. The latter three influence each other, but most of the influence falls on the ultimate hero, Tom. In fact, unlike in other novels which emphasize the binary opposition between the so-called hero and protagonist and the inevitable divorce at the end (i.e. Ahab/Ishmael, Kurtz/Marlow, Gtasby/Nick, etc.), the characters of the three heroes in Steinbeck's novel merge (or are fused) in one at the end.

* Associate Professor at the Department of English, University of Jordan, Amman, Jordan

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البنية واستراتيجية التشخيص في رواية "عناقيد الغضب" للكاتب جون شتاينبك

الدكتور أحمد يعقوب المجدوبة*

(قبل للنشر في 2000/6/25)

☐ الملخّص ☐

تسلط هذه الدراسة الضوء على الاستراتيجية التي اتبعها الروائي الأمريكي جون شتاينبك في عرض الشخوص الثلاثة الرئيسية في روايته "عناقيد الغضب" وفي رسم معالم العلاقة التي تجمعهم ، و على أثر تلك الاستراتيجية في بنية الرواية. وفي حين أن بنية الحبكة في معظم الروايات تكون اما أحادية البعد (بمعنى أنها تركز على بطل واحد ، كما هي الحال في رواية روبنسون كروزو، و توم جونز ، والامال الكبيرة) أو ثنائية (تركز علي بطلين ، كما هي الحال في رواية موبي ديك ، وقلب الظلام ، وغاتسبي العظيم) ، فان بنية "عناقيد الغضب " ثلاثية البعد ، أي أنها تركز على ثلاثة أبطال. ومع أن علاقة البطلين في الروايات ثنائية البعد تقوم على التشابه والتجاذب والتباين في ان واحد فانها تنتهي الى الانفصام؛ أما العلاقة في "عناقيد الغضب" فمع أنها تقوم على التشابه والتجاذب والتباين كذلك ، فانها تنتهي بالتكامل ، اذ ينصهر الشخوص الثلاثة الرئيسية في شخص بطل واحد، في النهاية ، وهو توم.

* أستاذ مشارك في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية وآدابها – الجامعة الأردنية – عمان – الأردن.

John Steinbeck's novel The Grapes of Wrath, published in1939, is an all-time masterpiece. Among other things, its principal focus on character depiction and relation is one of its most salient strengths. The argument throughout the novel is not only presented through the interesting story which is being told and the philosophic interpretation of it provided in whole chapters, but it is also, I shall point out, based essentially on the controlling strategy of character depiction through comparison, contrast, and – eventually – fusion. The novel's three major characters (Tom Joad, Jim Casy, and Ma Joad), who are separate entities at the beginning but who merge into one overall entity in the character of the protagonist (Tom) at the end—constitute the backbone of a triangular narrative on which the structure of the novel is primarily based. The form of Steinbeck's narrative, which I am describing as triangular/tripartite, differs remarkably from the two-fold, binary, bipartite or bi-angular scheme of many modern and traditional narratives—i.e. Moby-Dick, Heart of Darkness, or The Great Gatsby, where the emphasis is placed, simultaneously, on the similarity/opposition (but never fusion) between the two main characters, the so-called protagonist and hero.

Tom, Casy, and Ma are the three most central characters in the novel. The three form a triangle around which the whole plot is woven and the novel's argument is built. It is essentially through the once-harmonious, once-tense interaction of their viewpoints, values, and positions (often, but not always, dialectical), and the evolution and eventual synthesis of their ideas and approaches, that much of the novel's plot takes shape and many of its meanings emerge.[1]

I

Ma is one of the most interesting female characters in modern fiction. Not only is she atypical (i.e. not typical) female character, and not only does she play a major role in the novel, but she influences the lives of other characters, including Tom's, crucially. She is caring, kind, and loving, but she is also charismatic, assertive, and strong—in addition to being a decision maker.

The narrator introduces her to the reader in sympathetic, but also in telling, terms; her physical qualities and external appearance reveal a lot about her:

> Ma was heavy, but not fat; thick with childbearing and work. She wore a loose Mother Hubbard of gray cloth in which there had once been colored flowers, but the color was washed out now, so that the small flowered pattern was only a little lighter gray than the background. The dress came down to her ankles, and her strong, broad, bare feet moved quickly and deftly over the floor. Her thin, steel-gray hair was gathered in a sparse wispy knot at the back of her head. Strong, freckled arms were bare to the elbow, and her hands were chubby and delicate, like those of a plump little girl.... She seemed to know, to accept, to welcome her position, the citadel of the family.... [2]

As this citation clearly demonstrates, Ma is an exceptional person indeed: the expression "superhuman understanding" is significant in this respect. She is experienced (in the general as well as Blakean sense), and she is steadfast. Even though circumstances have been rough on her ("childbearing," "work," the "washed out" color of her dress, etc.), she does not weaken. It is as if the difficult experiences,

circumstances, and challenges she has gone through (as a wife, female, and mother) were made to work for her, and not against her. She is a true survivor in a world in which nature (the dust storms, absence of rain, then the flood, etc.), the social and economic system (i.e. the machine, the bank, etc.), and fellow man (i.e. the capitalists) all conspire to crush individuals. Nor does she succumb to negative feelings or cynicism; rather, she cheerfully and confidently "accept[s]" and "welcome[s]" her position as a "citadel." As the "citadel" image signifies, she is invincible; her will never weakens and her spirit never daunts. But as the citation on the whole also illustrates, she is down-to-earth, balanced, and realistic. She occupies a staunch middle-ground position, with no extremity of any sort. She is "heavy," the first sentence tells us, "but not fat." And she is neither too feminine, nor too masculine: her "arms" are "strong" but her hands are "delicate."

Ma's physical toughness is symbolic of her moral, psychological, and mental strength. Among her many impressive qualities are her courage, self-assertion, and leadership. She, not Pa, is the real head of the family. Her ability to inspire others, to think, and to decide earns her the supreme status she enjoys within her family and circle of acquaintances. Her active role enables her to affect the course of events and the shape of the plot as much as Tom and Casy do.

She affirms her leadership status, for example, in an important passage in chapter XXVI. Pa, feeling somewhat threatened and jealous no doubt, because of the influence of Ma on those around her, because of the brave/apt decisions she makes, and because of the awe she inspires in others, mutters a few male-chauvinistic remarks about women overstepping their limits and the need for men to resort to the stick: "Seems like women is tellin' now. Seems like it's purty near time to get out a stick" (388), he says. Ma, perceiving immediately that the comments are directed against her, gives him (eloquently and firmly) a piece of her mind, as to who should occupy the forefront:

> "You get your stick, Pa," she said. "Times when they's food an' a place to set, then maybe you can use your stick an' keep your skin whole. But you ain't a-doing your job, either a-thinkin' or a-workin'. If you was, why, you could use your stick." (388).

These words sum up much of Ma's philosophy. And these words illustrate clearly that she is atypical as well as a feminist. Supremacy is not for male or female but for whoever fends for the family (the breadwinner: "food," "a-workin'") and whoever has the ability to make apt decisions (a-thinkin').

Throughout, it is she (not Pa, not Tom, and not Casy) who takes most of the decisions which determine the fate of her family members, the events that unfold, and the rhythm of the whole plot. At the beginning of the story, for example, when the family members—about to start the long trip in an old truck already packed with people—were debating whether to take Casy along or not, she is the one who permits him to come along. When Pa complains that there is not enough room, she says: "There ain't room for more'n six, an' twelve is goin' sure. One more ain't gonna hurt; an' a man, strong an' healthy, ain't never no burden" (111). She is logical, commonsensical and highly practical. But the overriding reason for allowing Casy to come with them is not sentimental; rather, it is one influenced greatly by Ma's realism and pragmatism. Her decision to take Casy is primarily based on the fact that he is healthy, strong, and useful.

Ma takes many other decisions, of course; because of such decisions and of her overall qualities, she occupies the center. Not only is Pa de-centered and peripheralized, but also almost all other male members of the circle, including Tom and Casy (it is only at the end, as I will show, that Tom moves to the foreground). Much of the plot focuses on Ma's centrality, her rise to eminence, as well as the qualifications which make her outstanding and supreme.

Ma's importance (for the purposes of this study) stems largely from the fact that she influences the character of Tom a lot. For one thing, she (not Pa, not uncle John, not his grandfather, etc.) is the first important role model for him. He looks up to her more than he looks up to any other member of his family. As a result of his admiration, respect, and love of her, he inherits a great deal from her. Thus when one emphasizes her leadership qualities, her realism, her strength of character, her superhuman altruism, it is to suggest the type of positive influence that she has had on the character of Tom. She teaches him a great deal not so much by preaching to him, but by setting herself as an example.

But she does not inspire merely by example. She devotes a great deal of time to working on Tom's undesirable qualities. She knows, for instance, his tendency to lose his temper at times and become violent, and she does her best to teach him patience. She exercises a restraining effect on him:

> Ma said, "You promised Tom. That's how Pretty Boy Floyd done. I knowed his ma. They hurt him."
>
> "I'm a-tryin', Ma. Honest to God, I am. You don' want me to crawl like a beat bitch, with my belly on the groun', do you?"
>
> "I'm a-prayin'. You got to keep clear, Tom. The family's breakin' up. You got to keep clear." (308)

This is just one example of the many encounters between Ma and Tom which illustrate her positive influence on him.

It may be that one of Tom's strengths and saving elements, compared to other heroes in American or non-American fiction, has to do with the fact that not only does he have a mother (unlike Clemens' Huckleberry Finn, Fitzgerald's Gatsby, Melville's Ishmael and Ahab, Ellison's Invisible Man, Bronte's Heathcliff, Dickens' Pip, Conrad's Marlow and Kurtz, etc.), or a mother who is strong, but also a mother whose influence is also positive (unlike the weak mothers of Austin's Elizabeth Bennet, James' Daisy Miller, Dreiser's Clyde Griffiths, etc.)

This is not to say that Tom is an exact replica, image, or shadow of Ma. There are many moments in the novel when he asserts his opinion, persuading her to do things his way. One example is in Chapter XVI. Ma wants the group to camp at a certain spot, but upon Tom's suggestion, which he relays in a convincing manner, she is made to change her mind and have it Tom's way. Tom says to her, "Ma, we can't all camp here. Ain't no water here. Ain't even much shade here. Granma, she needs shade" (108). Ma, who loves and respects the power of his reasoning, gives in: "All right.... We'll go along" (186). Just as Tom loves, admires, and looks up to her, she loves, admires, and looks up to him.

Tom is in fact different from Ma in many ways. Perhaps because he is younger and male, he is more aggressive in dealing with opponents than she; and he is more adventurous. The reference to the mother as citadel is telling again. A citadel is generally used for defensive, not offensive, purposes. While Ma is excellent as a

shield for the whole family, she does not offer them much by way of fighting external danger. At this level, Tom does a lot. It is he who goes outside the camp to explore; it is he who ventures into the enemy's territory; it is he who fights the enemy.

II

While the relation between Tom and Ma is, on the whole, one of harmony and emulation (as well as of complementarity: as clear in the citadel metaphor, the latter defends, the former attacks) that between Tom and Casy is both more tense, intense and complex. Undeniably, Tom and Casy resemble each other in many ways (and therefore agree on many things), but they also differ in others (and therefore disagree). While there is mutual love and respect, there is also throughout a certain level of tension, competition and conflict between them. The mother, as has been pointed out, influences Tom through being an example for him to follow; Casy is followed as an example, but he is also resisted and partly rejected.

Tom and Casy have a lot in common.[3] Despite their apparent vices, which the novel also highlights and condemns, they are warm, caring, kind-hearted, and good persons deep-down. Tom is hot-tempered at times and is ready to fight (and even kill) when he is provoked or insulted, especially if he happens to be drunk. However, throughout the novel, he proves to be both extremely giving and loving. He is supportive not only of his own immediate family members but also of others. As for Casy, even though he has committed many "sins" (24), as he himself admits, he harms no one. On the contrary, he withdraws from society, after abandoning his calling as a minister, precisely because he does not like to go on deceiving his parishioners and playing the role of the hypocrite who practices the opposite of what he preaches. It is in fact his good nature, honesty, and love of people that compel him to drop his calling.

Among their many positive qualities, Tom's and Casy's altruism stands out. Unlike Connie, Rose of Sharon (who changes only at the end of the novel), Noah, Al (even), and many others, Tom and Casy are never self-centered. Tom, unlike Connie, who actually deserts his devoted wife and loving in-laws, and unlike even Al, who stays with his parents until the opportunity arises for him to marry Aggie and leave, sticks it out with his parents and with others. He never contemplates leaving; when he departs toward the end of the novel, it is because he is forced to.

> I'll be everywhere—wherever you look. Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever they's a cop beating up a guy, I'll be there. (463)

Casy's altruism is reflected, for instance, in his decision, against his desire, to play the role of the preacher and the comforter to people throughout the journey, but also, more visibly, in his decision to hand himself to the police in place of Tom to save the latter's neck. He is willing to sacrifice himself to save a fellow human being and a friend; and he does it willingly and "proudly":

> Between his guards Casy sat proudly, his head up and the stringy muscles of his neck prominent. On his lips there was a faint smile and on his face a curious look of conquest. (294)

And it is also most evident in his death episode, where he dies trying to explain to the guards and caretakers of the inhuman capitalist system the inhumanity of what they are doing to people.

Like many other characters in the book, Tom and Casy have their own dreams and aspirations. But, unlike many others, they are so profoundly reasonable and commonsensical as to understand that dreams are not easily realized. Not only does one have to work hard to fulfill such dreams and aspirations, but the dreams and aspirations themselves have to be realistic. Tom says in one of his immensely profound and prophetic statements, one which reflects the influence of Ma's philosophy on him clearly: "Never roust your hopes birdhigh, and you do no crawling with the worms" (98). As for Casy, whenever he thinks of a future wish or plan, he uses the word "maybe" or "may": "Maybe there is a place for a preacher" (60).

Indeed, Tom and Casy share numerous other traits and characteristics: perceptiveness, creativity, charisma, self-reliance, responsibility, etc. At the same time, however, the novel does present them as noticeably different and even diametrically opposed in other equally crucial ways.

The first significant assertion of the difference/opposition appears in the narrator's portraiture of the two characters' physiology. Generally, our understanding of characters in literary works depends, to a great extent, not only on how well we dig into the hidden realities of their hearts and minds, but also on how skillfully we read and interpret their physical features. The character's external description, which is the first thing we usually come across, is a must to dwell upon because it is often strongly indicative of internal character traits. This is especially true in a realistic/naturalistic novel like The Grapes of Wrath in which physique/biology remarkably determine one's moral strengths, weaknesses, or limitations.

Tom is introduced to us in chapter 2. He has all the desirable features of a hero: young, strong, tall, and extremely handsome:

> He was not over thirty. His eyes were very dark brown and there was a hint of brown pigment in his eyeballs. His cheek bones were high and wide, and strong deep lines cut down his cheek, in curves beside his mouth. His upper lip was long, and since his teeth protruded, the lips stretched to cover them, for this man kept his lips closed. His hands were hard, with broad fingers and nails as thick and ridged as little clam shells. The space between thumb and forefinger and the hams of his hands were shiny with callus. (5)

There is hardly anything either negative in such description or indicative of something negative.

Casy is presented in chapter 4 in less affirmative, and somewhat pejorative, terms:

> It was a long head, bony; tight of skin, and set on a neck as stringy and muscular as a celery stalk. His eyeballs were heavy and protruding; the lids stretched to cover them, and

> the lids were raw and red. His cheeks were brown and shiny and hairless and his mouth full—humorous or sensual. There was perspiration on the face, not even on the tall pale forehead, lined with delicate blue veins at the temples. His stiff gray hair was mussed back from his brow as though he had combed it back with his fingers.(19)

Without a doubt, both portrayals reveal extremely interesting, worthwhile personae. Neither Tom nor Casy, as clearly evident in the two carefully-phrased passages above, is in any way common, average, or ordinary. The two have well-defined, well-articulated facial marks which denote outstanding, exceptional personalities.

However, a closer look at the language of the two passages shows a clear bias toward Tom. Of course, the latter citation does contain some substantially favorable depiction of Casy. His neck, we are informed, is "muscular," denoting toughness, forbearance and tolerance of hardships; his cheeks are "brown" and "shiny," implying (respectively) exposure to experience and goodness of nature; his forehead is high, signifying confidence and pride; his hair is "mussed back" revealing fully his brow, thus symbolizing clarity of vision and sharpness of expression.

While it is immensely difficult to find any derogatory remarks in the narrator's account of Tom's physical portraiture, there is a great deal in his portraiture of Casy's. For example, Casy's head is "long" and "bony" (i.e. somewhat deformed), his neck is "stringy" and like a "celery stalk" (i.e. awkward and funny-looking), his eyeballs are "heavy and protruding" (i.e. ugly), his cheeks are "hairless" (i.e. feminine), his nose is "beaked," etc. Stressing the awkwardness and deformity in Casy's physical being, the narrator informs us that "half of his face" is "above the eyes."

By contrast, Tom's features are more attractive, more symmetrical, and more assertive. There are no reservations or qualifications in the descriptive terminology. We read, for instance, that Tom's eyes are "very dark brown" (my emphasis), that his cheek bones are "high and wide," that the lines which "cut down his cheeks" are "strong" and "deep," that his hands are "hard," etc. All of these adjectives and adverbs signify a forthright character, an outgoing personality, an adamantly staunch nature, and an unyielding will.

While Tom out-excels Casy in physical appearance, and in many moral qualities signified by physiological traits, this is not the case in all other respects. Not only is Casy more outspoken (being a preacher), but he is also intellectually superior.

One of Casy's most impressive qualities is his perceptiveness, broadmindedness, and depth of vision. When the reader first meets him, he is out in the wilderness, rambling but also meditating and pondering. He has not been satisfied with life as it looks, with the appearance of things. At a surface level, his life looks completely satisfying; he is a successful preacher: eloquent, respected, and recognized.

But he discovers a little later in his career that he can't take what he believes for granted. He begins to think about what he reads and what he preaches to people, and finds out that he is not satisfied with the standard, conventional meanings of the scripture and with the outer, external form of religion. Sin is not what people generally believe it is; neither is virtue. His dissatisfaction with conventional modes of thinking and believing leads him (like Ralph Waldo Emerson when he was a

Unitarian minister) to reject the somewhat hollow, shallow, and narrow-minded methods of reading and interpretation, and to seek nature. Like Emerson, he is deep-down an iconoclast and a rejectionist of hollow rites and rituals: "I went off alone, an' I sat and figured" (88). Like many romantics, he comes out into nature to "figure," to think, and to seek more satisfying answers. Indeed, critics, like Frederic I. Carpenter (1941), who compares him to Emerson, and emphasize Casy's transcendentalism, are correct in so doing.

But Casy is also well-read and knowledgeable, significantly more so than Tom. His thorough familiarity with Christianity enables him to acquaint himself firsthand not only with many thought-provoking theological questions, but also with several cosmic and philosophic matters. His erudition and his creative thinking make him very appealing to the reader and very instrumental in articulating many of the novel's meanings. It is he, for instance, who brings to the reader's attention, and to Tom's, the metaphoric dimension of the turtle's journey (which is one of the principal metaphors in the book): "Goin' some place," he says. "That's right, he's [the turtle] goin' someplace" (22). In his opinion, the turtle represents man's determination or will, at its best (Levant, 1974). Despite the diversions and the obstacles, it always heads in the same direction. The lesson which all characters in the novel have had to learn is that nothing counts more than the will or determination to keep going. Casy's metaphorization, allegorization of the turtle is to be contrasted with Tom's matter-of-fact opinion. For the latter, a turtle is merely a turtle. Tom picks it up because he "Thought I'd take 'im to my little brother. Kids like turtles" (21).

In addition, he often strikes us as not only older and more experienced but also more mature than Tom. The latter is at times playful, careless, and reckless. This is obvious throughout the meeting with Muley. When Muley, who is hiding from his hunters, suggested to shoot a bullet at those who were tracking him down thinking that they would not see, it being dark, Tom seconded his suggestion without giving it much thought: "Sure, go ahead," said Tom (62). Casy, however, is the one who objects strongly: "Don't do it," Casy whispered. "It won't do no good. Jus' a waste" (63).

As the novel progresses and events unfold, however, the contrast between the two characters begins to be drawn more sharply and begins, slowly and ultimately, to tip in Tom's favor. Throughout, Tom is presented as more practical than Casy, more skillful at handling (or even manipulating) people and getting things done, and more diplomatic (Carpenter 1941; Levant, 1974). The first evidence of the tactful way in which he deals with people emerges in his encounter with the truck driver in the opening scene. Tom is in dire need of a lift. He sees a truck on which a "No Riders" sign is affixed. Clearly one is supposed not to ask for a ride. Nevertheless, he decides to ask the driver anyway. The driver immediately responds: "Didn't you see the No Riders sticker on the windshield?" The manner in which Tom then responded is particularly noteworthy, revealing his tactfulness, intelligence, and power of persuasion : "Sure-I seen it. But sometimes a guy'll be a good guy even if some rich bastard makes him carry a sticker" (7). The narrator explains the shrewdness and effectiveness of Tom's strategy as follows:

> The driver, getting slowly into the truck, considered the parts of this answer. If he refused now, not only was he not a good guy, but he was forced to carry a sticker, was not allowed to have company. If he took in the hitch-hiker

> he was automatically a good guy and also he was not one whom any rich bastard could kick around. He knew he was being trapped, but he couldn't see a way out. (7)

Such down-to-earthness and commonsense are a great asset in the context of the situation. Yes, idealists and transcendentalists like Casy are of great importance to society; they are needed to open people's eyes to things which they do not normally see. But under the circumstances, society wants practical, pragmatic, shrewd and even manipulative individuals (people of the world) much more. Idealists, transcendentalists or dreamers—as Herman Melville insists repeatedly in Moby-Dick—may fail miserably in dealing with concrete things and with people around them. That is why, in Moby-Dick, Ishmael lives and Ahab dies. Similarly in Heart of Darkness, Marlow lives and Kurtz dies. The Grapes of Wrath, at the end of which Casy dies and Tom lives, makes the same distinction and declares the same preference.

Such preference is articulated in several episodes, two of which are particularly revealing. The first, where the conflict is expressed most directly and overtly, is in chapter 16. Tom and Casy are discussing westward migration, in particular the gloomy fate of the hundreds of thousands of migrants heading west. Casy, though generally an optimist, is thinking of the unpleasant consequences of such migration. Casy says, "Well—s'pose all these here folks an' ever'body—s'pose they can't get no jobs out there?" (190). Tom, who does not like to think too far ahead and who tries to look at the bright side, replies uncomfortably: "Goddamn it.... How'd I know. I'm just puttin' one foot in front a the other." Casy is not happy with the reply; in fact, he makes fun of it—thus challenging Tom: "Them people layin' one foot down in front of the other, like you says, they ain't thinkin' where they're goin', like you says—but they're all layin' 'em down the same direction, jus' the same" (my emphasis). Tom is not convinced and insists on his position: "I'm still layin' my dogs down one at a time." Casy makes fun of Tom's position again and rejects it, reaffirming his point: "Yeah, but when a fence comes up at ya, ya gonna climb that fence." Tom, being the realist and practical person he is, responds convincingly: "I climb fences when I got fences to climb ... " (191). Casy, forced to modify his position a little by the force of Tom's logic, agrees with Tom, even though he still reminds of the importance of looking far ahead. "It's the bes' way. I gotta agree. But thy's a different kinda fences. They's folks like me that ain't even strang up yet—an' can't he'p it" (190-91).

The obvious conclusion to draw here is that Tom's and Casy's positions are, at a certain level, extremely at odds with each other and that their points of view are sharply in conflict. The other is that even though the two are compelling, Tom's is the more realistic.[4] Under the circumstances one should not look too far ahead. Yes, one needs to look ahead once in a while, but the best way is to take things step by step. Casy almost always philosophizes matters. Tom is more pragmatic; his, like his mother's, is a middle-ground position.

The second, the episode describing Casy's death, is in chapter 26, toward the end of the novel. Casy is with a group of rebels who are trying to organize a massive strike. He has talked a great deal and has joined a number of strikers who took him (because he speaks well) to be some sort of a leader. Casy and some of the strikers are meeting outside a farm in which Tom and his family are picking fruit. Tom, who takes a walk to breathe some fresh air and to check the neighborhood, happens to come to where Casy and his peers are meeting. While they are chatting, a group of

guards, in hot pursuit of strikers, come upon them. The details of the tragic encounter are significant:

> A sharp call, "There they are!" Two flashlight beams fell on the men, caught them, blinded them....
> Casy stared blindly at the light. He breathed heavily. "Listen," he said. "You fellas don' know what you're a-doin.'"
> ...
> A short heavy man stepped into the light. He carried a new white pick handle.
> Casy went on, "You don' know what you're a-doin'"
> The heavy man swung with the pick handle. Casy dodged down into the swing. The heavy club crashed into the side of his head with a dull crunch of bone, and Casy fell sideways out of the light." (426)

This incident is very telling. First, it shows Casy's inability, as mentioned above, to deal with villains. Of course, Casy has exercised some influence on the strikers. However, the real challenge or test of leadership is the ability to deal with the "enemy." It is not enough for a leader to be a fluent speaker; he has also to be qualified to face danger and survive. The mistake Casy makes here lies in the fact that he thinks he can deal with villains the way he deals with good people, that evil people listen to the voice of reason.

The second mistake is that he fails to anticipate danger and to avert it. Commenting on Casy's death, Tom later on points out that Casy "didn't duck quick enough." This assessment is important in many ways. For one thing, it reveals Casy's slowness in responding to danger and to villainy. Secondly, it shows the difference between Tom and Casy; the former is shrewd, while the latter isn't. Indirectly, Tom is criticizing Casy for not being shrewd enough in a tough, evil world which presupposes shrewdness.

Tom, then, learns from Casy a lot, in a direct and in an indirect way. Directly, he emulates him in his helpfulness to others, in his willingness to sacrifice himself for the sake of the group, in his sincerity and devotion to the principles he believes in, and (as will be seen shortly) in his ideas about the world and in his vision of the things to come. Indirectly, he learns to avoid his weaknesses and mistakes.

III

The ultimate excellence and strength of Tom lies not just in his inherent characteristics and excellent potential, but also, more importantly, in his ability to learn. As a result of such an ability, he develops, grows and (like heroes of the Bildungsroman genre) transforms himself at the end into something categorically different from what he is at the beginning. Tom listens, watches, observes carefully, and takes in. In addition, Tom's excellence and strength (culminating in the said transformation and rebirth) are due to his ability to encompass, embody, and internalize others, especially Ma and Casy. By the end of the novel, he is a totally well-rounded person. More importantly, he is also not one but three: he is his old self modified, plus Ma, plus Casy (minus Casy's weaknesses). Instead of being simply a

third angle in a triangle (as the case is at the beginning or middle of the novel), he becomes a whole triangle.

Tom, in other words, internalizes both his mother and Casy. From his mother, he takes a lot: he inherits her toughness (she is a citadel), perceptiveness (she is prophetic), her perseverance (she never complains of hardships and never gives up), her generosity (she is a giving person), and her wise skepticism (she dreams but never gets carried away).

He owes her a lot. Among the many prophetic things that she has said to him, which Tom internalizes and makes part of his own ideology, is, for example, the following: "Tommy, don't you go fightin' 'em alone. They'll hunt you down like a coyote. Tommy, I got to thinkin' an' dreamin' an' wonderin'. They say there's a hundred thousand of us shoved out. If we was all mad the same way, Tommy—they wouldn't hunt nobody down" (310). Tom takes this advice to heart, and it becomes an essential part of his vision.

Equally important to the internalization of Ma, or perhaps more important, is that of Casy. Though Tom disagrees with Casy, vehemently at times, he nonetheless respects his intellect and his overall philosophy. In addition, he has learned a great deal from him. Casy is more erudite and learned than Tom. Tom has courage, a first-rate intellect, a good heart, a good approach to life (at the individual level), a perceptive eye, and a shrewd perspective. What he lacks—prior to his rebirth at the end of the novel as a possible leader—is an encompassing, overall vision. As pointed out earlier, he keeps repeating that he is only "just puttin' one foot in front a the other." He has to look far ahead and he has to have a vision. He takes his vision from Casy. Chapter 22 reveals the emergence of such vision. In his last meeting with the mother, the climax of the story, Tom asks his mother: "Guess who I been thinkin' about?" He then adds, "Casy." He tells his mother that Casy "talked a lot" (461), that at times he used to be bothered by Casy's talkative manner, but that now Tom is thinking about all of what Casy used to say and that, more importantly, he "can remember—all of it" (462).

> " ... Says one time he went out in the wilderness to find his own soul, an' he foun' he didn' have no soul that was his'n. Says he foun' he jus' got a little piece of a great big soul. Says a wilderness ain't no good, 'cause his little piece of a soul wasn't no good 'less it was with the rest, an' was whole. Funny how I remember. Didn't think I was even listenin'. But I know now a fella ain't no good alone ...."
>
> "Goes. 'Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, the one will lif' up his fellow, but woe to him that is alone when he falleth, for he hath not another to help him up. 'That is part of her.'" (462)

It is clear here that Tom owes Casy a lot . But what needs to be underscored, too, is the fact that while Tom borrows the vision from Casy, he transforms it into an ideology, a program of action, a strategy, and a plan. Tom does not become just a philosopher at the end; he is also an activist, basing his plan of action on a philosophy—rather than a preacher mistaken for a leader, such as Casy. Tom describes his program of action thus:

> "I been thinkin' how it was in that gov'ment camp, how our folks took care a theirselves, an' if they was a fight they fixed it theirself; an' they wasn't no cops wagglin' their guns, but they was better order than them cops ever give. I been a-wondern' why we can't do that all over. … All work together for our own thing—all farm our own land'." (462)

In light of the foregoing discussion, it is clear that the plot in The Grapes of Wrath revolves essentially around the triangular relationship between its three major characters (a plot which is tripartite in shape, unlike many novels in the Bildungsroman genre which are either bipartite—Moby-Dick, Heart of Darkness, The Great Gatsby, etc. or mono-partite, such as most others: Robinson Crusoe, Great Expectations, Tom Jones, etc.). Tom is the protagonist who emerges, due to the influence of the other two characters, as the possible hero in whose new character the three parts of the triangle are fused. Viewed from this angle, the plot will be seen as more coherent than viewed otherwise. The ending will appear as more optimistic: Casy (though killed physically) will live in the character of Tom; Ma and Tom (though separated physically), are spiritually and mentally together. More importantly, the best qualities of the three protagonists are nicely fused in the end in the character of one hero and potential savior and leader of the people, the new Tom. The good news lies in the synthesis either of opposed and conflicting personalities and approaches or of disparate, fragmented efforts.

Endontes:

[1] My understanding of Steinbeck's novel has, in part at least, been shaped by several studies, among which are all the articles in Harold Bloom (ed.), John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath: Modern Critical Interpretations (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988); Peter Lisca's The Wide World of John Steinbeck (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1958); Howard Levant's "The Fully Matured Art: The Grapes of Wrath," in The Novels of John Steinbeck: A Critical Study (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1974); James D. Brasch's "The Grapes of Wrath and Old Testament Skepticism," San Jose Studies 3, n 2 (1977): 15 – 20; Sylvia Jenkins Cook's "Steinbeck, the People, and the Party," in Literature at the Barricades, (eds) Ralph F. Bgardus and Fred Hobson (Birmingham: University of Alabama Press, 1982); Donald Pizer's "The Enduring Joads," in Twentieth-Century American Literary Naturalism: An Interpretation (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982); and Louis Owens' The Grapes of Wrath: The Trouble in the Promised Land (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989).

[2] John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), p. 79. All subsequent references, hereafter, will parenthetically be incorporated in the text and will refer to this edition.

[3] As Brasch points out, some critics see "Casy as the fulcrum around which the characters and events revolve" (45). I am arguing that Tom is the fulcrum.

[4] Levant has the following to say about the relation of Tom to Casy: "One might say that if Casy is to be identified with Christ, the almost human God, Tom is to be identified with Saint Paul, the realistic, tough organizer" (24).

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