

University of Dayton Review

Volume 23
Number 3 *Proceedings of the Second Annual
Humanities Symposium*

Article 3

12-1-1995

Keynote Address – Our Stories/Our Selves: The American Dream Remembered in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*

Eugene R. August
University of Dayton

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/udr>

Recommended Citation

August, Eugene R. (1995) "Keynote Address – Our Stories/Our Selves: The American Dream Remembered in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*," *University of Dayton Review*: Vol. 23: No. 3, Article 3.
Available at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/udr/vol23/iss3/3>

This Address is brought to you for free and open access by eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of Dayton Review by an authorized editor of eCommons. For more information, please contact mschlangen1@udayton.edu, ecommons@udayton.edu.

Our Stories/Our Selves: The American Dream Remembered in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*

Eugene R. August

Not long ago I visited with a gentlemanly old cowboy in a tavern. He was in town, "buying provender," as he put it, and he sought me out as a member of what he termed "one of the old families," to tell me about a sidesaddle he owns that his great-grandfather made as a present nearly 150 years ago. We mused a while on the subject of our ancestors, who traveled from many places—England, Scotland, Connecticut, Virginia, Iowa, Kansas—to settle on the Plains. Suddenly he said: "Who are we and where do we come from? That's the real question isn't it?" Before I could reply, he smiled slyly and said, "And here we are, telling each other lies." "Stories," I said laughing. "Call them stories." "Stories?" he nearly shouted back. "That's who we are!" Slapping the bar, he repeated, "*Who we are!*"

Kathleen Norris, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* (86-87)

A funny thing happened on the way to the symposium. I discovered that, if the symposium were to focus on stories, this keynote address would require the aid of a storyteller. So I have invited Dr. Jack Rang to join me on stage and to act as storyteller at various points in the address.

This year's symposium is broadly focused on stories—stories that define who we are as individuals and as a community, a people, a nation. More narrowly, the symposium focuses on American stories—and one story in particular, the story called the American Dream. More narrowly still, the symposium focuses on the Great Depression of the 1930s as *the* twentieth-century event that challenged the American Dream, and on the stories that define the Depression era.

Following this pattern, this keynote address explores three related topics: (1) stories, (2) the American Dream and the Great Depression, and (3) John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, perhaps the most memorable of all Depression-era stories, the story of the Joad family and their odyssey from the Oklahoma Dust Bowl to California.

But, since this is a symposium about stories, let's have a story.

*

Once upon a time, long ago, there lived a king of the islands near China and India who had two sons. When the old king died, the elder son, Shahryar, became king in his place. King Shahryar, in turn, made his younger brother, Prince Zaman, the King of Samarcand. Both brothers married beautiful wives.

At the end of ten years, King Shahryar longed to see his brother again and invited Prince Zaman to visit his palace. As Prince Zaman was leaving the city, however, he remembered that he had forgotten something and returned to his palace. There he found his wife in the arms of another man, and in a rage he slew them both.

When Prince Zaman arrived at his brother's palace, he was very distraught. The king tried to cheer up his brother with diversions and one day invited Prince Zaman to go on a hunting trip, but the Prince declined. Once King Shahryar and his hunters had left the palace, Prince Zaman went to his room and looked into the garden. There he saw the Queen, his brother's wife, in the arms of another man.

"Well, I am not the only husband whose wife has been unfaithful," said Prince Zaman. "I will no longer be sad." When King Shahryar returned from his hunting trip, he saw immediately that his brother had recovered his good spirits and asked why he had been sad and why he was now recovered. Prince Zaman then told his brother of their two unfaithful wives.

At this, the King flew into a rage and ordered that his wife and her lover be killed at once. Maddened by his grief, King Shahryar then devised a terrible plan. He determined that every night he would marry a new bride and have her killed in the morning. He summoned his Grand Vizier and ordered him to carry out the plan.

When the people of Shahryar's city heard of the king's plan, they were horrified. Families with daughters cursed the king and began to move out of the kingdom.

Now the Grand Vizier himself had two beautiful daughters. The older girl was called Scheherazade and the younger was called Dinarzade. Scheherazade was clever and wise. She had studied philosophy and the sciences and arts. She also knew by heart the works of the poets and storytellers. Scheherazade devised a plan to save her people from the king's madness.

Scheherazade told her father that she would marry the king. She then made arrangements to have her sister sleep in a room next to the bridal chamber. In the morning before sunrise, Dinarzade made her way into the bridal chamber and asked her sister to tell her a story. With the king's permission, Scheherazade began a fascinating tale. But before she could finish the story, the sun rose and the king had to go to prayers. He ordered that Scheherazade's life be spared until the next day so that he could hear the end of her story.

But on the following morning before sunrise, the same thing happened, and once again the king ordered that Scheherazade's life be spared so that he could hear the end of her tale. And so Scheherazade went on spinning out stories for a thousand and one nights. By this time King Shahryar was cured of his madness. He revoked his murderous decree and resolved never to be parted from a queen who could tell such marvelous tales.

(Cf. Book 1-31)

*

We begin with the story of Scheherazade because it is the quintessential story about the quintessential storyteller. Scheherazade tells her stories in order to preserve her life, her very self, and the life of her community. The name Scheherazade means "Saviour of the City" (Lorimer iii).

August: Keynote Address — Our Stories/Our Selves: The American Dream Reme

Scheherazade has innumerable counterparts in other times and cultures around the world. The storyteller, whether in ancient Greece, Anglo-Saxon England, or present-day West Africa, preserves the deeds of great men and women, rescues from obscurity significant events of tribal history, and secures the very identity of the people as a people (Pellowski 3-42). When a culture is threatened by outside forces, the storyteller becomes more important than ever as a preserver of communal identity. All of which helps to explain why fashioning storyteller figures has emerged as a major art form among Native Americans of the Southwest. (On the podium is a Diné-Navajo cloth storyteller surrounded by her six child listeners. On the screen is a picture of a pottery storyteller by Helen Cordero of the Cochiti Pueblo.) In their own way, these figures extol the storyteller as preserver of the community (Bahti 7).

However it is that individuals and communities attain their identity, story is vital to the process. As individuals, we are born with a need to find meaning in experience, and stories are a primary way of doing so. “We cannot help but see our world through meaning-bearing stories,” says Howard Kamler (27). “After all,” he continues, “our stories *are* our world view, our understanding of life” (90). As the title of Terrence Tilley’s book indicates, our theology is a story theology.

Clearly, it is not just stories about our selves as individuals that matter to us. Awareness of community arises early in life, and we soon track communal as well as private stories (Kamler 99). Perhaps some deep-seated need to avoid isolation drives us to share stories in communal spaces (Kamler 90). As we do, the need to compare stories, to get story agreement, and to reinforce meaning through story either draws individual and community closer together or drives them implacably apart.

Stories and selves share several crucial qualities. Like a story, a self unfolds in time. Both story and self thus embody change. A transformation of self can occur at many life stages, just as twists of plot can occur at many points in a story. Some thinkers, like the philosopher-historian Hayden White, find a similar pattern between individual and group identity (*Tropics* 15-20). This pattern consists of stages of development, that is, change through time. If White is correct, these stages of development may provide the key to why the most popular stories in the world contain two elements—journey and struggle. Journey narratives provide a near-perfect metaphor for the transformation of individual or community that takes place in time and space, while narratives of struggle or battle epitomize the effort needed to bring about this transformation. Through journey and struggle, we attain to selfhood.

As we grow, we revise our stories in the light of further experience. But we never outgrow our need for stories. “The universe,” as Muriel Ruckeyser notes, “is made up of stories, not atoms” (qtd. Nisker 6).

Even so, stories pose problems for us. They can short-circuit critical thought, they can distort reality while symbolizing it, they can reinforce prejudices and inflame hatreds. Stories, precisely because they can be so seductive, must also be questioned. To misquote Plato: “The unexamined story is not worth believing.”

Sooner or later, we ask one key question of a story: is it true? Does this story reflect or distort a reality of some kind?

Inevitably, to ask if a story is true is to raise the whole question of what is truth. Even here, however, stories may clarify the matter. Here is a re-telling of Ryunosuke Akutagawa's short story "In a Grove," which was made into a famous film called *Rashomon*. The story consists of the testimony of seven witnesses:

*

The first witness was a woodcutter, who reported finding a man's body in a grove of bamboo. The dead man had a wound in his chest.

The second witness was a traveling Buddhist priest, who reported seeing the man who was later killed. This man was with a woman, the two of them traveling on the road. The man was a samurai carrying a sword and a bow with arrows.

The third witness was a police officer who had arrested the notorious bandit, Tajomaru, with the bow and arrows of the dead man.

The fourth witness was an old woman, who said that the dead man was her son-in-law and that the missing woman was his wife.

The fifth witness was Tajomaru himself. He confessed to murdering the young samurai. He said that he passed the couple on the road and was struck by the young woman's beauty. He then lured the couple off the road with stories of buried riches, disarmed the young man and tied him to a tree, and then raped the woman before her husband's eyes. Afterwards, the woman demanded that the two men fight, saying that she would be the wife of whichever man survived. In the battle, Tajomaru stabbed the samurai to death, but during the fight the woman slipped away.

The sixth witness was the woman herself, found at a nearby temple. She reported that after the bandit had attacked her, she saw her husband (who was still bound and gagged) looking at her with loathing and contempt. The bandit had fled. She decided on a murder-suicide and stabbed her husband to death with her own small sword. She then could not bring herself to commit suicide and fled to the temple.

The seventh and final witness was the dead husband, whose testimony was obtained by means of a medium. After the bandit had sex with his wife, the dead man reported, she begged the bandit to take her away with him. She shouted to the bandit: "Kill him! I cannot marry you as long as he lives." In disgust with her, the bandit knocked her down, and she fled into the woods. The bandit then freed the samurai from his bonds and went away. The samurai, overwhelmed by his shame, then committed suicide.

*

In Akutagawa's story, there is little or no external truth to grasp. There are seven stories, but so contradictory that they may reflect lies, distortions, misunderstandings, misrememberings, or some unfathomable mystery of the human soul. All truth is relative, with the possible corollary that there is no communally verifiable truth at all.

Another story, however, tells a different story about truth. This story comes from John Godfrey Saxe's poem, "The Blind Men and the Elephant":

*

*It was six men of Indostan
To learning much inclined,
Who went to see the Elephant
(Tho' all of them were blind)
That each by observation
Might satisfy his mind.*

*The first approached the elephant
And happening to fall
Against his broad and sturdy side
At once began to bawl:
"God bless me! But the elephant
Is very like a wall!"*

*The second feeling of the tusk,
Cried, "How, what have we here
So very round and smooth and sharp?
To me 'tis mighty clear
This wonder of an elephant
Is very like a spear."*

*The third approached the animal
And happening to take
The squirming trunk within his hands
Thus boldly up and spake:
"I see," quoth he, "the elephant
Is very like a snake."*

*The fourth reached out an eager hand
And felt about the knee.
"What most this wondrous beast is like
Is mighty plain," quoth he.
'Tis clear enough the elephant
Is very like a tree."*

*The fifth chanced to touch the ear,
Said "E'en the blindest man
Can tell what this resembles most;
Deny the fact who can
This marvel of an elephant
Is very like a fan."*

*The sixth no sooner had begun
About the beast to grope
Than seizing on the swinging tail
That fell within his scope
"I see," quoth he, "the elephant
Is very like a rope."*

*And so these men of Indostan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right,
And all were in the wrong.*

(Qtd. Berger 7-8; cf. Chesterton 175-76)

*

In this story there is an external truth to be grasped, a truth as solid and large as an elephant. This story suggests (1) no one person may grasp all of the truth, but each person may grasp a part of it; (2) a person can discover more of the truth by listening to as many stories as are relevant; and (3) the search for truth requires a free marketplace of stories. Such a vision of truth lies at the heart of any democratic society.

Like many societies, the United States is a nation founded on stories. What we call the American Dream is a story about American identity, a story that Americans have been telling about themselves in one form or another ever since Europeans first began settling what they called the New World.

Many years ago, while teaching *Death of a Salesman*, I attempted to clarify the term “American Dream” for students and devised the following schema. With apologies to my colleagues in history, let me list what I see as some of the chief mutations of the American Dream.

- **The Promised Land Dream.** In this story, North America is a land of freedom from religious persecution. In the New World, the righteous are new Adams and Eves inheriting a new Eden in which they are God’s New Israel.
- **The Political Utopia Dream.** In this story, North America is a land free from the political persecutions of the Old World. In this democratic utopia, people can begin anew as equals with no monarchies, aristocracies, and so on.
- **The Brave New World Dream.** In this story, North America is a land of unbounded possibilities and opportunities, where individuals can be free to explore the limits of human experience, unfettered by the restrictions of a decadent Old World civilization.

After the Civil War, and particularly since the late nineteenth-century, the story of the American Dream has often hinged on some form of financial or business success.

- **The Success Dream.** In this story, the United States is a land of extensive economic opportunities where a person—even a poor immigrant like Andrew Carnegie—can attain wealth.

Variations on this Success Dream include:

- **The Horatio Alger Dream.** In this story, individual enterprise, courage, and hard work lead inevitably to financial success. A kind of providence sees to it that hard work is rewarded. Those who fail lack the necessary virtues.
- **The Great Gatsby Dream.** In this story, an individual accumulates great wealth by some sort of magic. The hard work, exploitation, or deviousness that some-

August: Keynote Address — Our Stories/Our Selves: The American Dream Reme

times go into amassing wealth are concealed or ignored. The very wealthy are an economic "elect."

Despite its variants, the American Dream has, at base, a single story. Rooted in our biblical heritage, this story is the story of Exodus. Told in the books of Exodus through Joshua, this story combines journey and struggle—a journey out of a land of bondage and a struggle to conquer a promised land of milk and honey. The journey and struggle also furnish a rag-tag collection of outcasts with a new identity as a chosen people. In the American Exodus Story, Old World outcasts become a chosen race by journeying to a New World and conquering it.

As we now realize, the Exodus story has its dark side. One person's promised land has a way of being another person's homeland. At the worst, the story of Exodus has been used to justify genocide.

Also, the American Exodus story contains an unusual twist in its radical attempt to balance individual independence against communal solidarity. This tension between an individual "I" and a communal "we" may cause major problems during crises.

Keeping such perils firmly in mind, one can see much of American history as energized by the story of an American exodus. Certainly, Americans endlessly retold the story of Exodus to define themselves as a people (Cherry vii, 21). In the seventeenth century, New England Puritans proclaimed themselves God's New Israel (Cherry 11-12), and eighteenth-century colonial rebels viewed the American Revolution as God's deliverance of His chosen people from the English pharaoh. George Washington was proclaimed the new Moses and Joshua rolled into one (Cherry 12), and when, on July 4, 1776, the Constitutional Congress wanted an official seal for the new nation, Benjamin Franklin suggested a portrayal of "Moses lifting his hand and the Red Sea dividing." Thomas Jefferson favored "a representation of the children of Israel in the wilderness, led by a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night" (qtd. Cherry 65). For his part, Jefferson never wavered in his vision of America as the New Israel, and he concluded his second inaugural address with a prayer to "that Being in whose hands we are, who led our fathers, as Israel of old, from their native land and planted them in a country flowing with all the necessities and comforts of life" (qtd. Cherry 65).

The story of Exodus also fueled American expansion westward. At first limited to New England, the New Canaan soon expanded beyond those boundaries (Lane 117). Mormons, setting out from New York, found their promised land in the Salt Lake Valley where New World geography mirrored the Old World Holy Land (Lane 137). Even less religiously minded folk drew upon the biblical promises of Exodus. John O'Sullivan, for example, announced that the U.S. claim to Oregon "is by right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given ..." (qtd. Cherry 129).

The story of Exodus was pressed into especially ingenious service during the Civil War. While white Southerners envisioned the Confederacy as escaping the bondage of pharaoh Lincoln (Cherry 177), African-American slaves enshrined Lincoln as the new Moses and the underground railroad as their exodus route to the promised land of the North.

Once the Civil War was over, the wealth to be gathered in the promised land began to loom increasingly large in the American Exodus story. Preached by ministers, Social Darwinists, and entrepreneurs like Andrew Carnegie, the gospel of wealth blessed riches as a mark of the chosen people who had realized the promise of the promised land (Cherry 24). Thousands of late-nineteenth-century immigrants bought into a more modest version of this American Dream—and an amazing number of them actually realized its potential.

And so the story passed into the twentieth century—where the plot developed a stunning and desperate twist. Nothing converted the American Dream into a nightmare more dramatically than the Great Depression of the 1930s. Beginning with the crash of 1929, national morale plummeted along with national income (Kindleberger 95-116). Americans had never seen anything like it—and had never expected to see anything like it: stock market crashes, bank failures, business closings, unemployment lines, soup kitchens, makeshift slums satirically named Hoovervilles, boxcar tramps, Dust Bowl farm failures, and whole caravans of migrant workers prowling the roads for anything resembling a job (Watkins 5-19). For thousands of Americans, the promised land had suddenly become hell on earth (Lange and Taylor 5, 148-49).

It could have been worse. In the Soviet Union under Stalin, Communist Party mania for “collectivization” of farms in the early 1930s culminated in a horrifying holocaust in which fourteen and a half million farm people were ruthlessly executed, deported to die in labor camps, or systematically starved to death (Conquest 301). These farm people did not even have the luxury of migrating to look for work; forbidden by law to leave their districts, they were left to starve there (Dolot 174-76). Worse, the death toll of the Hidden Holocaust does not even include the millions more who were exterminated during the Soviet Union’s Great Terror of the mid-thirties. When it comes to tallying up the casualties of the 1930s, the Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist Dream of a socialist utopia created havoc on a scale unknown in the United States (Conquest 20-24).

Still, the Great Depression in America was no picnic. Of all the stories that define those hard times for us today, three remain paramount. First is the story told in the photographic collections like those assembled under the auspices of Roy Stryker. Second is the story told in John Steinbeck’s explosive novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, and third is director John Ford’s classic film adaptation of Steinbeck’s novel. Some would add Woody Guthrie’s “Ballad of Tom Joad,” which was played at the start of this program. Such works remind us that in modern society photographers, novelists, film makers, and song-writer performers are among the acknowledged storytellers (Cohan 1).

From the moment of its publication, John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* set off shock waves that are still reverberating. Publicly condemned and even burned, the book also became a best seller and won the Pulitzer Prize.

Nowadays, *The Grapes of Wrath* has achieved the status of an embattled classic. It has sold over fourteen million copies and has been translated into just about every language under the sun (DeMott xxvi). It is one of the most frequently assigned texts in U.S. high schools and colleges, and also one of the most frequently banned

books in America. Among literary critics, the novel still touches off lively academic skirmishes. Nor have its concerns dated: the problems of migrant workers have hardly vanished from the American scene—to say nothing of catastrophic flooding in California. *The Grapes of Wrath* may be a classic, but it is not a museum piece.

To be sure, *The Grapes of Wrath* has lapses that would sink a lesser novel. Logical consistency is not its strong suit. On one page of the novel, Jim Casy (apparently with the author's approval) proclaims that "there ain't no sin and there ain't no virtue" (32), while on another page the authorial narrator declares: "There is a crime here that goes beyond denunciation" (477). Steinbeck's sympathy for the poor is superb, but his stereotypes of anybody but the poor can deteriorate into mean-spirited cartoons of the bloated bourgeoisie (210-12). The novel's acceptance of sexual promiscuity was naive even before AIDS, and Steinbeck's stereotyping of most Christians as uptight killjoys hardly does justice to the subject. And I confess I cringe every time in the novel when ex-preacher Jim Casy begins to sound off like a hill-billy Ralph Waldo Emerson (32-33).

Still, the novel's great-heartedness about the poor and down-trodden covers a multitude of sins. In the great tradition of Dickens and Hugo, Steinbeck humanizes the destitute and the outcast, forcing us to see them as our fellow creatures and not as aliens to be shunned.

Moreover, Steinbeck knew whereof he wrote. In 1937 he had driven Route 66 with its migrants like a nation on the move. He had visited squalid Hoovervilles, worked the fields with migrants, and rescued flood victims at Visalia. He had listened to migrant stories in a government camp run by Tom Collins—who served as the model for the novel's government camp director Jim Rawley (Benson 352-371). When it came to the conditions faced by the indigent, Steinbeck had done his homework.

Finally, despite the lapses that I mentioned earlier, Steinbeck *was* at the top of his form as a artist. He took the grim proletarian novel and invigorated it with all the magic of poetry. The narrative of the Joad odyssey is played off against a series of intercalary chapters that universalize the journey, provide cinematic glimpses of American life and landscape, capture the ring of American speech, crystallize the mood of Depression-era America, and place the Joads' story within the larger story of the American Dream turned nightmare. These chapters provide the novel with an equivalent of the Greek chorus that kept ancient tragedies afloat on a sea of surging poetry. In these chapters, Steinbeck's prose exults and laments, prophecies, captures the landscape in stop-action cinematography, and provides lyric counterpoint to the prose narrative. Perhaps more than anyone else, Steinbeck made the proletarian novel sing.

*

Highway 66 is the main migrant road. 66—the long concrete path across the country, waving gently up and down on the map, from the Mississippi to Bakersfield—over the red lands and the gray lands, twisting up into the mountains, crossing the Divide and down into the bright and terrible desert, and across the desert to the mountains again, and into the rich California valleys.

66 is the path of a people in flight, refugees from dust and shrinking land, from the thunder of tractors and shrinking ownership, from the desert's slow northward

invasion, from the twisting winds that howl up out of Texas, from the floods that bring no richness to the land and steal what little richness is there. From all these the people are in flight, and they come into 66 from tributary side roads, from the wagon tracks and the rutted country roads. 66 is the mother road, the road of flight.

Clarksville and Ozark and Van Buren and Fort Smith on 64, and there's an end of Arkansas. And all the roads into Oklahoma City, 66 down from Tulsa, 270 up from McAlester. 81 from Wichita Falls south, from Enid north. Edmond, McLoud, Purcell. 66 out of Oklahoma city; El Reno and Clinton, going west on 66. Hydro, Elk City, and Texola; and there's an end of Oklahoma. 66 across the panhandle of Texas. Shamrock and McLean, Conway and Amarillo, the yellow. Wildorado and Vega and Boise, and there's an end of Texas. Tucumcari and Santa Rosa and into the New Mexican mountains to Albuquerque, where the road comes down from Santa Fe. Then down into the gorged Rio Grande to Los Lunas and west again on 66 to Gallup, and there's the border of New Mexico.

And now the high mountains. Holbrook and Winslow and Flagstaff in the high mountains of Arizona. Then the great plateau rolling like a ground swell. Ashfork and Kingman and stone mountains again, where water must be hauled and sold. Then out of the broken sun-rotted mountains of Arizona to the Colorado, with green reeds on its banks, and that's the end of Arizona. There's California just over the river, and a pretty town to start it. Needles, on the river. But the river is a stranger in this place. Up from Needles and over a burned range, and there's the desert. And 66 goes on over the terrible desert, where the distance shimmers and the black center mountains hang unbearably in the distance. At last there's Barstow, and more desert until at last the mountains rise up again, and 66 winds through them. Then suddenly a pass, and below the beautiful valley, below orchards and vineyards and little houses, and in the distance a city. And, oh, my God, it's over.

(Steinbeck *Grapes* 160-161)

*

Parallel with these great intercalary chapters is a superb narrative that traces the desperate odyssey of a Dust Bowl family from Oklahoma seeking California's promised land. The faceless migrants of newspaper accounts acquire almost more-than-human faces in Steinbeck's depiction of the Joad family—Ma Joad, the indomitable matriarch of a beleaguered family; Pa Joad, the family's unheroically heroic patriarch; their angry son Tom Joad, who transforms his anger into a mission to the downtrodden; their daughter Rose of Sharon, who cradles within her body the promise of new life; and a tag-along ex-preacher named Jim Casy, who finds a new vocation as messiah to the poor. The Joads and their story have entered the American consciousness in an enduring literary work that defines the fate of the American Dream during the Great Depression.

Paradoxically, *The Grapes of Wrath* both challenges and reaffirms the American Dream. Clearly, its picture of grinding poverty and suffering among the migrants challenges the dream of America as the promised land of milk and honey, and of California as the new Eden. As the narrator proclaims, "There is a failure here that topples all our success" (477). Yet, at the same time, *The Grapes of Wrath* is fundamentally optimistic about the people, their journey and their struggle (Lisca

“Grapes” 743-45).

Steinbeck achieves this optimism by layering the story of the Joads’ journey over a much older story—you guessed it, the story of Exodus. Steinbeck uses the Exodus story to reinvent the American Dream just when it seems to have collapsed entirely.

The novel opens with the Joad family in the land of bondage, that is, eastern Oklahoma. The Okies’ farms are mortgaged to the banks, who function as the wicked pharaoh in this retelling of the story. The Dust Bowl even provides an updated plague of drought (Fontenrose 790).

Setting out on Route 66, the Joads and other Okies wander through the wilderness of the American southwest, cross the desert, and finally arrive in the promised land of California. Along the way, they set up roadside camps where they devise a code of laws to govern themselves, much like the Mosaic law that forbade “murder, theft, adultery, rape, and seduction,” and included “rules of sanitation, privacy, and hospitality” (Fontenrose 791). Grandpa and Grandma Joad, like the older Israelites, die before they reach the promised land, and this New Canaan, like the old one, is first glimpsed from a mountaintop. As the Joads drive into this lush new Eden, Tom runs over a rattlesnake, suggesting that this Eden is free of evil.

But it isn’t. Instead, the new Eden is like the old land of bondage. It is filled with Californian Canaanites who oppress the newcomers with poverty wages, intermittent work, vigilante deputies, and strike-breaking violence. Nevertheless, the ultimate victory of the chosen people is assured. Ma Joad’s famous statement is prophetic: “Why, we’re the people—we go on” (Steinbeck *Grapes* 383).

Towards the end of the novel, Steinbeck pulls out all the biblical stops to imply this optimistic conclusion to his tragic story. Jim Casy, who combines elements of John the Baptist and Jesus, is killed by strike breakers, but his mantle descends on Tom Joad, whose character combines elements of Jesus and Moses. When Casy is struck down, Tom kills his attacker. In doing so, Tom significantly chooses Mosaic retaliation over Christian forbearance. At the moment of betrayal, one recalls, Jesus told his followers to put up the sword (Matthew 26.52), in contrast to Moses, who—when he saw an Egyptian strike an Israelite—promptly killed the Egyptian (Exodus 11-12). As Tom goes forth to preach Casy’s new gospel to all nations, he is transformed into a Moses-Joshua who will lead his people to fight the Canaanites for the promised land. As Tom proclaims: “Wherever they’s a fight so hungry people can eat, I’ll be there” (572).

When Tom leaves his family it is winter time, and the California rains soon swell into a second Noah’s flood (Owens 72). (Incidentally, television coverage of the 1995 winter flooding in California looked for all the world like an instant replay of this part of the novel.) The remnant of the Joad family shelters in an abandoned boxcar which stands in as the new Noah’s ark, and Pa Joad—like a second Noah—is able to stave off the rising waters when Rose of Sharon goes into labor. Her child is born dead, however, and is put, Moses-like, into a basket which Uncle John launches upon the flood waters. “Go down and tell ‘em,” Uncle John implores the tiny corpse, sending it off as an ironic messenger to prosperous folk. Moses is dead, long live Moses.

As the waters begin to recede and spring approaches, the Joads leave their boxcar and shelter in an abandoned barn, the novel’s equivalent of the stable at Bethlehem.

Here a miraculous birth occurs. In the barn, the Joads meet a desperate boy whose father is dying of starvation. Realizing that the man is unable to take solid food, Ma Joad urges Rose of Sharon to feed him with her breast milk. As Rose of Sharon does so in the novel's final scene, she is transformed from a self-centered girl into a proletarian earth mother.

Few literary scenes have stirred more controversy than this one. Steinbeck's publishers, sensing the oncoming thunderclaps, urged him to alter the final scene, but he adamantly refused. "There are no new stories and I wouldn't like them if there were," he snapped. "The incident of the earth mother feeding by the breast is older than literature" (Steinbeck 178).

This retelling of the old story marks the birth of a new communal identity for the outcast migrants. When Ma Joad says, "Use' ta be the fambly was fust. It ain't so now. It's anybody" (Steinbeck *Grapes* 606), she is not ringing the death knell of the nuclear family but expanding its sympathies beyond the family boundaries. Rose of Sharon, having given birth to a dead child, is herself reborn as a Great Mother of an extended community when she gives life to a complete stranger. This stranger is the old patriarch who has offered his life to save his son. As he is nursed by Rose of Sharon, he becomes an infant again, reborn as a new patriarch in a larger family.

As the novel ends, the Joad family is moving closer to re forging its identity as part of a greater communal family. For many of the Okies, this process had begun earlier in the novel, in the roadside camps along Route 66.

*

The migrant people, scuttling for work, scrabbling to live, looked always for pleasure, dug for pleasure, manufactured pleasure, and they were hungry for amusement. Sometimes amusement lay in speech, and they climbed up their lives with jokes. And it came about in the camps along the roads, on the ditch banks beside the streams, under the sycamores, that the story teller grew into being, so that the people gathered in the low firelight to hear the gifted ones. And they listened while the tales were told, and their participation made the stories great.

(Steinbeck *Grapes* 444)

*

The roadside storyteller helps to transform the individual "I" into a communal "we" (Steinbeck *Grapes* 204-6). At the end of Steinbeck's novel, individuals may have fallen, but the people as community are still going on. The women continue to nurture, the men do not break under pressure, and (as the novel says) "the break would never come as long as fear could turn to wrath" (592). The grapes of wrath continue to ripen.

In refashioning the American Exodus story, Steinbeck suggests that the American Dream itself can be endlessly refashioned as long as the American people can refashion the stories of who they are. Like the people, the dream goes on.

Alumni Chair in the Humanities
University of Dayton

WORKS CITED

- Akutagawa, Ryunosuke. "In a Grove." *Rashomon and Other Stories*. Trans. Takashi Kojima. New York: Liveright, 1952. Rpt. *Rashomon*. By Akira Kurosawa. Ed. Donald Ritchie. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1987. 102-109.
- Bahti, Mark. *Pueblo Stories and Storytellers*. Tucson, AZ: Treasure Chest, 1988.
- Benson, Jackson J. *The True Adventures of John Steinbeck, Writer: A Biography*. New York: Viking P, 1984.
- Berger, Arthur Asa. *Blind Men and Elephants: Perspectives on Humor*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1995.
- Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night, The*. Trans. Richard F. Burton. N.p.: Burton Club (private subscription), n.d. Vol. 1.
- Cherry, Conrad. *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971.
- Chesterton, G. K. *Robert Browning*. New York: Macmillan, 1903.
- Cohan, Steven, and Linda M. Shires. *Telling Stories: A Theoretical Analysis of Narrative Fiction*. New York and London: Routledge, 1988.
- Conquest, Robert. *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine*. New York: Oxford UP, 1986.
- DeMott, Robert. Introduction. *Working Days: The Journals of The Grapes of Wrath, 1938-1941*. By John Steinbeck. Ed. Robert DeMott. New York: Viking, 1989. xxi-lvii.
- Dolot, Miron. *Execution by Hunger: The Hidden Holocaust*. New York: Norton, 1985.
- Fontenrose, Joseph. "The Grapes of Wrath." 1963. Rpt. Steinbeck. *Grapes*. 784-800.
- Kamler, Howard. *Communication: Sharing Our Stories of Experience*. Seattle, WA: Psychological P, 1983.
- Kindleberger, Charles P. *The World in Depression 1929-1939*. Rev. ed. Berkeley: U of California P, 1986.
- Lane, Belden C. *Landscapes of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality*. New York: Paulist P, 1988.
- Lange, Dorothea, and Paul Schuster Taylor. *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion*. New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1939.
- Lisca, Peter. *John Steinbeck: Nature and Myth*. New York: Crowell, 1978.
- . "The Grapes of Wrath as Fiction." *PMLA* 72 (March 1957): 296-309. Rpt. Steinbeck. *Grapes*. 729-47.
- Lorimer, E. O. Introduction. *Tales from the Arabian Nights*. New York: Henry Z. Walck, 1962. i-iv.
- Nisker, Wes. *Crazy Wisdom: A Provocative Romp through the Philosophies of East and West*. Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed P, 1988.
- Norris, Kathleen. *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993.
- Owens, Louis. *The Grapes of Wrath: Trouble in the Promised Land*. Boston: Twayne, 1989.
- Pellowski, Anne. *The World of Storytelling*. New York and London: Bowker, 1977.
- Steinbeck, John. *The Grapes of Wrath: Text and Criticism*. Ed. Peter Lisca. New York: Penguin, 1972.

University of Dayton Review, Vol. 23, No. 3 [1995], Art. 3

- . *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters*. Eds. Elaine Steinbeck and Robert Wallsten. New York: Viking, 1975.
- . *Working Days: The Journals of The Grapes of Wrath, 1938-1941*. Ed. Robert DeMott. New York: Viking, 1989.
- Tilley, Terrence W. *Story Theology*. Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1985.
- Watkins, T. H. *The Great Depression: America in the 1930s*. Boston: Little Brown, 1993.
- White, Hayden. *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1978.

Panel:

Meeting of Minds:

“Life Stories”:

Famous Americans Tell the Stories of Their Lives

With Patricia A. Johnson (Chair, Department of Philosophy) as moderator, five members of the University of Dayton faculty in full costume participated in a Meeting of the Minds panel discussion on the American Dream. As preparation for the panel discussion, each faculty member wrote an essay on some aspect of his or her character's perspective on the American Dream. These papers follow.

V I V A
Humanitas!



