Nostalgia as Critique: Constructing the American Farmer in John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*

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“And the people listened, and their faces were quiet with listening. The story tellers, gathering attention into their tales, spoke in great rhythms, spoke in great words because the tales were great, and the listeners became great through them.” (Steinbeck 501)
1. Introduction

John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* is often read as a novel about social injustice which works primarily with nostalgia. However, *The Grapes of Wrath* explores much more profoundly the question of identity, especially the question of an American national identity, which is much more complicated than a first read of the novel might suggest. The novel relies on two models which have traditionally competed over defining an American sense of self: the rural, independent, self-sufficient, and virtuous yeoman farmer based on Thomas Jefferson’s vision of America as a rural nation, and the city-dwelling, economically-liberal capitalist based on Alexander Hamilton’s vision of America as a prosperous nation. Although the novel seems to favor the yeoman and depict the capitalist as a threat to communal bonds, it avoids the clichés of sentimental pastoralism which Leo Marx calls “simple-minded wishfulness” (10). Refusing to support either model unconditionally, *The Grapes of Wrath* breaks down this traditional antagonism in the American consciousness and looks to formulate a more inclusive identity. This identity builds on an idealized past but adheres to the reality of the 1930s. In past criticism, identity has often fallen short of attention, partially because critics focused on issues of politics, religion, and economics and partially because questions of identity are more dominant in today’s public discourse, with a host of new theories emerging which help enrich the interpretation of the Joad family and their struggles. In his 2018 book *Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition*, Francis Fukuyama claims that “national identity in a well-functioning democracy requires something more than passive acceptance of a creed” (162); instead, it requires “citizenship and the exercise of certain values” (162). Fukuyama implies that a social community needs shared practical values to provide a common sense of self. Particularly in America, where “Americanism constituted a set of beliefs and a way of life, not an ethnicity” (Fukuyama 170), these shared practical values are highly contested. Compared to its European counterpart, American literature is much more influential in reinforcing or altering a fragile national identity. *The Grapes of Wrath* is one of those attempts to formulate a new set of beliefs, as it breaks down older ones. Both the yeoman and the capitalist figure in the novel and both prove inadequate to navigate
modernity. Although they have dominated the quarrel in the American consciousness for a long time, they are deprived of their strength in the American imagination by modernization, because mass displacement and the accelerating exchange of ideas weaken traditional identities. The novel draws on both models to find a compromise that might better suit its time. It looks briefly to the past to find a solution for the future. The yeoman ideal primarily remains as a useful source to outline values as a response to the growing complexity and threat of cultural isolation in the 1930s. Marx calls this a “tribute to rural virtue as the moral center of a democratic society” (123), because the yeoman ideal provides the values which Fukuyama claims are necessary for a unified democratic society. 

*The Grapes of Wrath* therefore relies on yeoman values to reinvigorate national identity but to make them stick with its larger audience of city-dwellers, it utilizes “an ideology of nationalism based on an intense nostalgia for an imaged past of strong community” (Fukuyama 65). However, this nostalgia is often misunderstood. The novel clearly addresses all the ways in which the yeoman fails as a way of life in modernity; it never tries to sell the yeoman as the one American identity because it knows too well that the yeoman is out of touch with reality. Instead of wishing back or affirming the idealized past, as it usually does, nostalgia for the yeoman here becomes a decoy to deconstruct this traditional dichotomy and create an inclusive national identity.

2.1. **Reading *The Grapes of Wrath* Nationally – Collective Ethos**

*The Grapes of Wrath* focuses intensely on one family – the Joads. They drive the story forward, while a few interchapters intervene at times to provide background information. Consequently, analysis often looks at the social dynamics of smaller groups, like the Joads or the migrant camps which form along the road at night. Others, like critic Stephen Railton, look at the significance of the Joads for larger groups. In his own words, Railton summarizes Jim Casy’s realization that “the only salvation lies in collective effort” (36). Collectivity is a major theme in the novel. Railton essentially recognizes that what our characters learn individually always manifests itself in lessons for a group. That the story
unfolds in smaller settings in no way contradicts this collective ethos. On the contrary, it points toward a collective ethos which integrates the individual in the group, because it shows that group membership is based on reciprocity: dedication to the group benefits the individual. What has struck me during my research is that hardly any critic follows the string of collective thought to its logical conclusion: *The Grapes of Wrath* tests ways of building communities that are large enough to encompass America as a whole. Before I get into how the novels deals with the two competing models of the yeoman and the capitalist in more detail, I will map the themes which frame the narrative from the beginning on in the ambition to pursue a reconciliatory collective ethos.

*The Grapes of Wrath* is a novel about destruction. From the very beginning, Steinbeck grounds his story in loss. The farmers who depend on rain and adequate natural conditions to raise a good crop are powerless against the dust: “Every moving thing lifted the dust into the air: a walking man lifted a thin layer as high as his waist, and a wagon lifted the dust as high as the fence tops . . . the dust was long in settling back” (56). The dry soil threatens the livelihood of many farmers in Oklahoma. The problem of these farmers hinges partially on the destructive force of nature. The novel intelligently suggests that nature can be a destructive force too.

Still, in the typical fashion of a pastoral novel, *The Grapes of Wrath* quickly establishes the arrival of the tractor as the second threat to the farmers. The tractor, a product of modernization, is too efficient to make traditional farming economically competitive. Before, farmers plant and harvest a small farm by hand. With the arrival of the machine, a tractor replaces many small farming families and pushes them off their land. These families not only rely on their land as the source of their sustenance but cultivate a personal, emotional relationship with their land. The land is worth much more than its economic value: “If he [a man] owns property only so he can walk on it and handle it and be sad when it isn’t doing well, and feel fine when the rain falls on it, that property is him, and some way he’s bigger with his property” (Steinbeck 103).
On these small farms, identity is closely linked with land. The farmers maintain an almost romantic relationship with the land, which the machine destroys. One of the earlier interchapters illustrates this change: “But the machine man, driving a dead tractor on land he does not know and love, understands only chemistry; and he is contemptuous of the land and of himself” (211). The choice of words here associates technology with death and the destruction of that which previously gave life meaning. Albeit contemptuously, the interchapter nonetheless acknowledges the presence of technology as a reality. The lifestyle of the farmer is memorized fondly, but the unviability of it emerges clearly. Christopher Salter notices that “the whole tone of movement in *The Grapes of Wrath* is one of regretful departure” (142). The past often returns in idealized form but always remains out of reach.

The farmers eventually have to leave their land. Although the novel indicates that the causes are economic and natural, the real effect of displacement is psychological. As the narrative follows the Joads along the migrant road, they must think about restructuring home, family, and association with other social groups – all of which are clearly defined in small rural areas. There, a smaller population leads to fewer opportunities. An individual accepts her role in the family and town. Without much deviance, people develop an essential attitude toward life, which renders contemplation of the meaning of one’s life redundant. In contrast, the fast-paced life on the road complicates life. The Joads develop “a new technique of living” (277) marked by the highway and movement; they are confronted by the reality that they must change to survive in this new world. From the relatively stable life of the farmer, they enter the transitional phase of the migrant. The meat of the novel is this emphasis on the necessity of change.

*The Grapes of Wrath* picks up on this theme on a larger scale too. The necessity of change derives from the rampant industrialization in the 1930s. To be clear, industrialization changed the lives of many even before 1939. The reality of technological development so saturated urban life that the novelty with which the effects of industrialization appear in the novel is somewhat exaggerated. Still, the large-scale interchapters help create a sense of scope which always underlies the small-scale chapters. The drama of the characters comes to matter beyond the confines of their small
2.2. Reading *The Grapes of Wrath* Nationally – Solutions for the Future

Though steeped in nostalgia, *The Grapes of Wrath* is very much a novel which looks toward the future. After depicting much destruction and tension between nature, machine, and man, the novel begins hinting at possible solutions. Already in the third chapter, the novel associates the movement which soon comes to characterize the life of the Joads with seeds. The wind uproots these seeds, which are “sleeping life waiting to be spread” (72) and “all passive but armed with the appliance of activity, still, but each possessed of the anlage of movement” (72). The seeds are a natural metaphor of renewal. The Joads must spread just like the seeds. Even though they lose their land, in the wake of this loss something new emerges.

The Joads best capture the focus on renewal and growth out of the destruction of the old. As their lives begin centering on the road and all the new requirements that come with it, the younger family members learn to accept and embrace the new opportunities and challenges. In their ability to adapt, the Joad family members are listed in descending order from “Ruthie and Winfield first, then Al, then Connie and Rose of Sharon, and, last, the older ones” (277). Because they are so young, Ruthie, Winfield, and Al best fit the novel’s tone of transition. Their identities have not yet fully crystallized, which in the cases of the older family members leads to imperturbable identification with the farming lifestyle. In contrast, the younger ones offer the prospect of merging. They are yet flexible enough to reconcile parts of their identity as farmers with the realities of a modern world.

In fact, Al is the best example of the possibility of growth. He most easily and willingly attunes his behavior to the focus on technology. He almost merges with the car, becoming what might today be called a cyborg or a hybrid: “Al was one with his engine, every nerve listening for weaknesses . . . He had become the soul of the car” (220). Al
becomes a figure of optimism, suggesting that a new identity which combines practices in concord with technology and yeoman values can work out. And although Al has a naïve dream about working in a garage in the West, his dream nonetheless incorporates aspects of modernity; Al fuses modern aspirations and rural values. The novel never reveals what happens to Al after its ending but through Al it takes a first look at a possible reconciliation.

The older characters that cling to the past are either lost or die. For example, Pa Joad frequently laments the social changes which result from their life as migrants. He loses his place as the decision-maker of the family to Ma Joad. Ma understands that new times necessitate the structural reformation of social hierarchies. For her, it is not even as much a matter of making a social statement than catering to the practical necessities of the moment. Pa simply fails to redefine his own role in the family. Consequently, his attempts to summon former role distributions prove inadequate in addressing the requirements of their new life. Pa’s weakness renders him unable to play any major in part in the adaptation to a new lifestyle. Another example is Grampa; he is so deeply rooted in the identity of the farmer that he cannot make the transition. After Grampa’s death, Casy traces the causes for the death back to disconnection from land: “Grampa didn’t die tonight. He died the minute you took ‘im off the place” (253). Likewise, Granma dies before they reach California. And the aptly named Muley Graves falls into this category too. Because he refuses to leave the land, he leads a life of isolation spiritually fed by reminiscences of the past. Muley stands as the last brave protector of the land against the heartless intrusion of the corporate sponsored machine; yet it is implied that his resistance will just lead to him getting shot. The only practical solution lies in a compromise between past and future, between the farmer and the realities of modernity. The mortality in the novel serves to check the idealism of the bucolic image, accentuating the novel’s ambition of confronting the realities of industrialization. Leo Marx claims that “among the more effective of the traditional counters to the pastoral dream have been certain stylized tokens of mortality” (25). *The Grapes of Wrath* tries hard to depict enough suffering to make it impossible to lull in the
dream of an idealized life on a farm. Instead, it grounds the narrative in violence, evoking questions about the practicability of the ideal.

2.3. Reading *The Grapes of Wrath* Nationally – Threat of Cultural Isolation

So far I have briefly examined the Joads and their uprooting, because *The Grapes of Wrath* typifies the Joads; they echo the mood of society at large – clinging to the past, yet confronted by a confusing change of lifestyles and values, not sure what to make of it. Whatever happens to the Joads also affects Steinbeck’s vision of American society. The Joads simulate the challenges of society, and their solutions represent a regenerative template. The novel’s biggest threat in an increasingly fragmented and divisive society is cultural isolation. The novel portrays different forms of such isolation, from individuals who are disconnected from their fellow humans to the dissolution of small communities.

Francis Fukuyama discusses the social consequences of industrialization, arguing that “economic modernization and rapid social change undermine older forms of community and replace them with a confusing pluralism of alternative forms of association” (58). In the 1930s, especially in rural areas, older forms of communities are small communities like the family or a small county of farmers. These communities bind the individual to the group, because they are small enough to clearly define relations, responsibilities, and identities. The displacement of farming families removes individuals from a large part of their source of meaning in life. Chapter 21 illustrates the newly-widened scope which confronts the migrants: “Those families which had lived on a little piece of land, who had lived and died on forty acres, had eaten or starved on the produce of forty acres, had now the whole West to rove in” (440). This extension of life’s boundaries threatens to destroy small communities. Family ties weaken, as family members scatter or go looking for opportunities outside of the restrictive structures of small communities. Even constant attempts to form new small structures along the road at night turn into temporary one-night endeavors. The migrants have an enormous difficulty in creating lasting social bonds. They are successful temporarily, but the external pressures of the economic system
and the need for survival render any lasting community futile for now. The dangerous consequence of this is increased isolation and fragmentation of society.

The solution to the problem lies not in reconstructing small communities but in creating a larger community which members can identify with. An increased sense of commonality helps strengthen relationships between people. The narrator even steps in to formulate such a solution. In an interchapter about the threats of social division, the divisive technology can become a tool for healing, if used for the benefit of all. Although capitalists are depicted as the cause of the uprooting partially, the machinery they employ is not condemned inherently; it is about how the machinery is used. In service of only a few, it poses a threat but it has the potential to unify if used for the benefit of everyone. Assuming an unspecific voice, neither clearly accepting the role of narrator nor speaking as a specific character but rather echoing the thoughts of all farmers, the narrator utters the longing for inclusion and participation: “If this tractor were ours it would be good – not mine, but ours” (259). To be fair, this one statement is made in the context of economic injustice, lending some legitimacy to those who are reading the novel as a communist call for the centralization of property. However, the novel never asks for systemic change but, instead, focuses on how characters form relationships. Consequently, this passage is best read as asking for an inclusive community, so that, specifically, individuals can see the tractor as an enrichment of the community to which they belong and which functions as an extension of self. The tractor then would represent a benefit to the individual and would be less of a threat to communal bonds.

Questions of identity first arise overtly as migrants must sell their belongings to finance the trip to California. Although these questions arise in the context of the loss of property, the novel portrays different causes. The loss of land and past, which is materialized in property, leads to questions about the things which make up identity. The anonymous voice of the migrants asks “how can we live without our lives?” (174) and “how will we know it’s us without our past?” (174). Here, migrants show first signs of awareness of the imminent problems which transcend basic physical needs. Losing physical
property comes to carry more weight as the signifier of identity. The sudden realization of displacement reveals the underlying gravity of identity problems.

Simply put, identity is granted in stable circumstances, particularly in small communities. As mass movement diversifies experience, the assumptions behind a mutually granted identity are challenged; what Fukuyama calls “competing value systems” (56) requires engagement with these assumptions. For example, an easily recognizable dichotomy is the farmer and the capitalist. Whereas the former represents honesty and hospitality, the latter represents cunning and selfishness. To be fair, while the novel often makes itself vulnerable to the accusation of generalization, the reason for this emotionally loaded dichotomy is to confront mutually shared assumptions with alternatives. This creates opportunities for reconsidering, intertwining, and mixing identities, ultimately shattering the assumptions on which formerly stable identities rely.

Fukuyama proposes that this “crisis of identity . . . leads to the search for a common identity that will rebind the individual to a social group” (56), providing “the groundwork for nationalism” (56). If nationalism is understood to mean a strong sense of national community, the rampant threat of isolation lends credibility to this argument. The main figure of isolation is Uncle John. The novel traces Uncle John’s failures to connect with other people and portrays his subsequent internal suffering. The narrator emphasizes early on “the barrier of loneliness [which] cut Uncle John off from other people” (183); he explains that the “death of his wife . . . had marked him with guilt and shame and had left an unbreaking loneliness on him” (184). Although this guilt is often discussed in religious terms, its ramifications concern the problem of communication. Uncle John retreats into himself because he cannot communicate his guilt to the family. The problem of separation thus revolves not as much around the inadequacy or difference of an individual as around the lack of a common emotional language. Uncle John wants to reach out and explain the causes for his retreats into isolation; after witnessing Casy’s sacrifice to save Tom, Uncle John tries to explain that he “can’t say her [the confession of what he believes to be his crime]” (422), prompting Pa to say “I don’t see why you got to tell” (422). The answer is simple: Uncle John’s absolution from guilt depends on the external recognition of his sin
and repentance. A group thus has the potential to heal the isolating pains of a morally complex and fragmenting world and must be looked to as a tool of reintegrating the individual. Still, this requires a shared language, be it linguistic, emotional, or moral. To return to Fukuyama’s claim, a national identity which provides the framework for recognition and communication helps solve the threat of isolation; to do so, it needs to bridge polarizing value systems such as Jefferson’s yeoman and Hamilton’s capitalist, utilizing “this inherent feeling of “Manself” . . . which forges the link of community, making out of all the scattered, lonely individuals a huge and irresistible “WE”” (Lisca 91).

*The Grapes of Wrath* understands itself as a tool of healing. Several times, it references the power of narratives to solidify communities. The narrator describes the activities over which the migrants bond on the road: “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” (500). The novel itself similarly derives from a need; it is self-conscious about its ambition to bring people together. Instead of the migrants, the audience need to hear a story which provide shared meaning. Fukuyama emphasizes the importance of narratives in constructing a national identity too: “National identity also extends into the realm of culture and values. It consists of the stories that people tell about themselves: where they came from, what they celebrate, their shared historical memories, what it takes to become a genuine member of the community” (126). The United States has always struggled with agreeing on one national narrative, because the premise of the country is its citizens’ liberation from other, mainly European authoritarian, national narratives. America’s freedom complicates the union of many citizens under one narrative, because many rally behind one of the competing narratives, and community membership depends on recognition of the legitimacy of one narrative. *The Grapes of Wrath* tries to break this abstract culture war in order to address the issue of cultural isolation and engage its reader in a useful, practical process of change. The reader must therefore consider that the novel by its numerous self-conscious references to the function of literature allegorizes the Joads; the Joads are not meant to represent real people – a charge often brought against the novel,
for instance by critic Jessica Teisch, who thinks of *The Grapes of Wrath* as a “monolithic story” (155). She asserts correctly that most migrants of the Dust Bowl migration were in fact middle-class citizens, but she fails to pick up on the Joads’ function to represent a larger problem of national identity in American society.

*The Grapes of Wrath* also realizes that this deconstruction of old systems and the replacement by new identification which follows in its wake will be a lengthy, strenuous project. It is conscious of its high ambitions and stresses throughout the story that change needs time. The chief symbol of slow and steady progress is the turtle, which appears early in the story and returns throughout. The turtle stands out because of its resilience. No matter what obstructs its way, be it Tom, a cat, or a truck on the road, the turtle insists on its enigmatic path. It derails at times but always comes back to its path. Strikingly, the turtle seems to lack agency. Some external force pushes it forward. This attribute lends itself well to the understanding of the turtle as a symbol of the collective. In a collective, no one single individual decides which path the collective takes. True, in a political sense, there exist leaders who influence the collective more so than others. Still, in terms of the unconscious narratives a collective tells about itself, arbitrariness often disrupts linear progress. This conforms to the theme of another chapter in which the narrator describes how society and humankind evolve: “Having stepped forward, he may slip back, but only half a step, never the full step back” (259). Still optimistic in humankind’s ability to improve over time, the narrator recedes that progress is frequently interrupted by failures and difficulties. The main takeaway from this quick detour into the novel’s view on progress is that whatever new the novel is trying to formulate will be difficult to implement, but society should nonetheless aspire to it.

The final reason why *The Grapes of Wrath* should be understood as addressing the nation is its emphasis on victimhood. Another literary device, victimhood is portrayed in various forms. The farmers are victims to nature, police brutality, economic exploitation, and regional xenophobia; naturally, they receive much of the reader’s sympathy, if not pity. According to Francis Fukuyama, victimization can strengthen nationalism. He claims that “both nationalism [in predominantly Christian countries] and Islamism [in predominantly
Muslim countries] . . . provide an ideology that explains why people feel lonely and confused, and both peddle in victimhood that lays the blame for an individual’s unhappy situation on groups of outsiders” (73). He adds that “both demand recognition of identity in restrictive ways” (73). Essentially the kind of nationalism he discusses, a resolute subscription to a national identity utilizes the emotional force of victimization too. Still, *The Grapes of Wrath* works differently in some key areas. First, blame is assigned to outsiders in Fukuyama’s explanation, whereas the novel lays blame on internal forces. All essential antagonists like capitalism are American too. As I will discuss at a later point in more detail, the novel hesitates to point fingers at a definite target, careful not to upset the audience. For now let it suffice to say that the novel focuses less on the causes of suffering than on the condition of suffering. Victimhood becomes a tool to convey urgency and move the audience to act. Secondly, Fukuyama suggests that victimization or nationalism cause restrictive recognition of communities. This would mean for the novel that it tries to solidify the migrants as essentially American and brand their antagonistic forces as un-American. However, as explained before, the Joads are not representative of the migrants who actually migrated to the West as a consequence of the Dust Bowl and depression years. Most contemporary readers identify with the Joads only emotionally, but sympathy does not equal recognition. What can be easily recognized, however, is the Joads’ problem. If one understands the Joads as an exemplary family who undergoes the same struggle of identity as American society as a whole, one can recognize the accomplishments which the novel invests in them: the ability to transcend restrictive community structures.

3.1. **Deconstructing the Yeoman and the Capitalist – The Yeoman**

To understand the conflict which the novel has to resolve, it is imperative to analyze how the novel portrays the two traditionally competing models of American identity: Thomas Jefferson’s yeoman farmer and Alexander Hamilton’s capitalist. If at earlier points in the country’s history they represented clear ways and philosophies of life, they have through the technologically-powered blurring of rural and urban areas dissolved into faint
myths, creating the proliferation of identity crises in the 1930s. The yeoman survives primarily as a template for values, whereas the capitalist benefits from modernization, determining lifestyles more adept to the requirements of business. In the 1930s, they both suffer from a significant shortcoming. They leave out a convincing national narrative. Before I get into how the novel envisions a compromise, I have to explain what both models represent.

The pastoral ideal existed well before the creation of the United States of America and dates back to ancient Greece, but Thomas Jefferson first defined the pastoral ideal in an American context, creating the myth of the yeoman farmer. The farmer was first formulated in one of the most quoted passages of Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Jefferson writes that “those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue” (175). This set up the tradition of America as a rural nation. Back then, reality lent itself well to the implementation of this tradition: geographically, America possessed an abundance of farm land which rendered America the most adequate place for the materialization of a farming nation demographically as well. As Jefferson points out, the farmer becomes the focal point of the newly-formed nation especially in terms of values. To protect him means to shield society from the “corruption of morals” (Jefferson 175). The health of a society thus depends on these four parts which the farmer encompasses: God, land, industry, and independence. They are harmonized in the myth of the yeoman. Still, this is only the highly idealized origin of the yeoman ideal, which *The Grapes of Wrath* complicates enough to depict it in a way more attuned to the realities of the 1930s.

The problem of the yeoman myth hinges on its incompatibility with a world of technological development, which particularly in the 1930s began expanding from urban to rural areas. Writing in 1964, Leo Marx contends that the “pastoral ideal has been used to define the meaning of America since the age of discovery, and has not yet lost its hold upon the native imagination” (3). Despite the leaps in technology which developed between the 1930s and the 1960s, especially destructive forces like the atomic bomb, the yeoman
continued influencing the national consciousness as the symbol of harmonious life with nature. This suggests that many a piece of literature revels in fond recollection of farm life and tends to ignore all the ways in which modernization undermines the yeoman myth. Sometimes falsely placed in this “popular and sentimental” (Marx 5) category of pastoral literature, which reflects “an inchoate longing for a more “natural” environment” (Marx 5) and is created “wherever people turn away from the hard social and technological realities” (Marx 5), *The Grapes of Wrath* acknowledges these realities. The novel still prefers rurality, because it praises the wholeness of those who cultivate an intimate, emotional relationship with their land, conforming to the notion that the “pastoral often entails a contrast between urban and rural life, usually but not exclusively in favor of rurality” (Barillas 12). But, the novel equally acknowledges that the land impoverishes the farmer and sets him on the path of suffering. The opening chapter depicts a barren and dry land. The “scarred earth” quickly shatters any hope that the story might affirm a harmonious life on land. In fact, the story stays true to the actual causes of the Dust Bowl, implying that the farmers plowed their land so excessively that they contributed to its infertility. Far from harmonious, the relationship between land and farmer is mutually abusive in the 1930s, even though the sentimental value of land remains high. *The Grapes of Wrath* belongs to more complex pastorals which stress “the tenuousness of rustic felicity in an industrialized society“ (Barillas 12).

Yet, the novel delicately balances its portrayal of the yeoman’s shortcomings with its reluctance to discard the yeoman as utterly useless in enriching modern life. What still lends credit to the yeoman “is not merely the agricultural economy but its alleged moral, aesthetic, and, in a sense, metaphorical superiority to the urban, commercial forces” (Marx 99). Leo Marx understands that the yeoman’s advantage over his capitalist rival lies in the imagination – how Americans perceive the yeoman as an ideal type as opposed to an economic or political model of success. Firmly rooted in rural land, the yeoman reflects the economic failure of farming in the Southwest. Many critics point to capitalism as the novel’s cause of the economic failure of the small farmer. *The Grapes of Wrath* blames capitalism partially but it pushes the reasoning further. The farmers have to loan money
from the bank and thus become involved in the financial system, because the scarcity of good harvests necessitates it. Still, in spite of the infertility of the land, Marx emphasizes the land’s “function as a landscape – an image in the mind that represents aesthetic, moral, political, and even religious values” (128). The novel adheres to this tradition: the land never serves as a proposal of an agrarian economic model but signals Jeffersonian values because it plays such a vital role in Jefferson’s vision. Nonetheless, Jefferson’s values of religion, land, industry, and independence are located in the farmers who inhabit the land. Throughout the novel, the farmers, who then become migrants, keep adhering to these values despite leaving the land. The farmers thus take on the function of value-signaling; the land on the other hand is disconnected from the values it traditionally represents. Jefferson’s yeoman must engage industrialization and adapt to displacement. It is not a case of simple nostalgia which attempts to revive tradition. Now that Jeffersonian values are no longer exclusively linked to the activity of farming, a larger part of American citizens who are not farmers can more easily identify with them.

3.2. Deconstructing the Yeoman and the Capitalist – the Capitalist

If the yeoman promises a moral revival in the future, capitalism threatens this moral order. Emanating from Hamilton’s vision of a prosperous nation based on a liberal market, capitalism appears both in large-scale and small-scale chapters, yet receives its most condemning treatment in smaller settings which depict exploitative business practices. There, business corrupts moral character. As the novel portrays it, business is an expression of unhinged capitalism, reducing people to numbers on a sheet of paper and attending exclusively to the calculation of profits. From an economic point of view, these practices make sense: to replace small farming families with a tractor is a sound proposal, if the goal is to maximize profits. However, most characters who embrace the economic opportunities afforded by the mass displacement of farmers come across as selfish, deceitful, and abusive. For example, the tractor driver responds to the charge of destroying the livelihood of many other families with a selfish evasion of moral accountability: “Times are changed,
don’t you know? Thinking about stuff like that don’t feed the kids . . . You got no call to worry about anybody’s kids but your own” (103). Of course, this selfishness is accentuated by the impoverished migrants on the road, who, even though they have nothing, offer a coin for the funeral of dead child they don’t even know. In another example, a salesman exploits the kindness, and in a sense naivety, of a farmer who needs to buy a car. Explaining his sales tactics, he says “people are nice, mostly. They hate to put you out. Make ‘em put you out, an’ then sock it to ‘em” (137). The novel subscribes to Jefferson’s claim that a society which revolves around business as opposed to agrarianism becomes morally corrupt. By the same token, the novel operates under the assumption that a society marked by moral accountability and altruism is worthier to aspire to than a society marked by maximization of profits. The reader should therefore consider that the novel tries to persuade her to grant this assumption.

Even more important still is that business pressures human relationships. Those who maximize profits often cause conflict because they view others either as competitors or victims to be gained from. For instance, the proprietor of a road side camp justifies charging Tom extra even though the Joad family already resides in the camp by saying “well, we all got to make a livin’” (310). Tom promptly defines the problem of this attitude: “On’y I wisht they was some way to make her ‘thout takin’ her away from somebody else” (310). To succeed economically inherently means exploiting somebody else. The interchapters echo this on a large scale too. Assuming the perspective of the great owners, the narrator describes the effects of a large number of migrants competing for few, low-paid jobs: “And this was good, for wages went down and prices stayed up. The great owners were glad and they sent out more handbills to bring more people in . . . And pretty soon now we’ll have serfs again” (442). On the trajectory which the novel delineates, the narrator envisions a country which heads toward economic slavery. Exploitation fosters contempt and mistrust, aggravating the reintegration of a fragmented and polarized society, because business reduces relationships to their utilitarian value. The novel portrays the dangers of social interactions in which participants aim to gain something from somebody else or protect themselves against exploitation. The solution to the increasing presence of
utilitarian judgement is simple yet complicated: financial merit must not be the cornerstone of community. How this might be implemented will be discussed later. Still, for example, the closing scene captures this sentiment well. Rose of Sharon breastfeeds a starving man in an act of pure giving. She expects nothing in return and opens up from her previous self-containment to ultimate intimacy. Her smiling “mysteriously” (678) is a triumph of life and human bonding, opposing how business perverts human relationships.

Even though the novel chastises the consequences of Hamilton’s vision, it remains obscure about who should take responsibility. The characters that embody this exploitative and corrosive attitude always operate against the background of larger, vague structures like the bank or great owners. They are symptoms, not causes. They may evoke disgust, but the novel keeps implying that they are also caught up in a system they cannot control. The novel is careful about assigning specific blame because it has an audience to appease. The readership consists mostly of city-dwellers who in the 1930s constitute a larger number of Americans than rural farmers. Notably, the novel omits urban settings; the events unfold on farms, in camps, and on the road, whether in California or Oklahoma. True, the city appears in Al’s and Rose of Sharon’s naïve dreams as a place of potential, but these dreams are crushed by the dire circumstances of their lives. To understand this omission, the reader must consider the purpose of the novel. The vast majority of middle-class, urban citizens in the 1930s tend to identify with Californians who in the novel “wanted many things, accumulation, social success, amusement, luxury, and a curious banking security” (373), thereby contributing to the economic and technological advancement which causes much of the suffering and moral decay. If the novel had attacked them directly, they would have reacted so defensively as to reject any lesson the novel imparts. Instead, The Grapes of Wrath remains vague in addressing the causes, and the villains of the story are never developed and usually stay within the confines of one chapter. The purpose of the novel is persuasion, not vilification.
3.3. Deconstructing the Yeoman and the Capitalist – Reconciliation and Inclusiveness

The novel takes on more reconciliatory tones and positions itself on the realistic side of Leo Marx’s spectrum of different approaches to the bucolic image. Marx distinguishes between pastoral and primitive literature. Both “originate in a recoil from the pain and responsibility of life in a complex civilization” (22), but “the primitivist hero . . . eventually locates value as far as possible . . . from organized society” (22). Tom acts in some ways like a primitivist hero: in a cave, he resolves to dedicate his life to active resistance. The cave symbolizes the utmost extreme of isolation and is thus removed as far as possible from “organized society”. True, the location might link Tom with primitivist literature, but the purpose of his resolution is to fight injustice. Tom momentarily looks inward to find that his purpose lies outside of himself. Therefore, he would be more closely linked with the shepherd, the Greek literature’s symbol of the “opposite of the homo oeconomicus” (Marx 127), which the American cultural tradition translated into and disguised as its own husbandman. The shepherd “seeks a resolution of the conflict between the opposed worlds of nature and art” (Marx 22) in pastoral literature; in other words, he aims to bridge the dichotomy between urbanity and rurality, because urbanity and rurality are perceived as the seats of art and nature respectively. The shepherd “has a stake in both worlds” (Marx 22). Chapter 14 in The Grapes of Wrath equally emphasizes the ambition to reconcile opposites. The narrator directly addresses the reader and particularly people with property who tend to belong to the urban spectrum of readers: “we must think about this” (260). Just three sentences before, the narrator assumes the voice of the migrants. Then, he switches voice to include everyone in the all-encompassing “we”. Overtly, the narrator implores the economic integration of migrants. However, marginalization and group expulsion govern the discussion of possible consequences. As the rich ignore the poor, the poor develop a communal identity based on shared loneliness, confusion, and hunger. The narrator calls this form of identity a “dangerous thing” (260) for the rich. Although the possibly violent consequences are left to the imagination, the chapter concludes with a
warning about valuing individuality and isolation over community: “the quality of owning freezes you forever into “I,” and cuts you off forever from the “we” (261).

As a piece of pastoral literature which moves away from rurality because of the spoiled landscape and violence of nature, *The Grapes of Wrath* occupies what Leo Marx calls the “middle link” (100). The middle link is “a moral position perfectly represented by the image of rural order, neither wild nor urban, as the setting of man’s best hope” (Marx 101). It describes what some philosophers believe to be the optimal human condition which compromises civilization with nature. Chapter 14 illustrates this compromise again. After implicitly condemning civilization – which is the origin of the technological and moral forces which threaten rurality – for most of its beginning, the novel recognizes mankind’s natural tendency to civilize and cultivate. According to the narrator, humans all desire to “build a wall, to build a house, a dam, and in the wall and house and dam put something of Manself” (258). Even building a farm corrupts pure nature – a sentiment which is accentuated earlier when wildlife settles the Joads’ vacant house and metaphorically reclaims nature from humanity. The novel itself is fascinated by the idea of untouched nature, but civilization, even on a small scale like the abandoned house, pervades every place humans settle. This resonates with a general tension of the novel; it looks toward the future and believes in progress yet laments the rampant capitalism and the arrival of the machine – both effects of previous developments. The ensuing tension leads to the novel’s careful attempts to explore new territory. It is an intensely present endeavor. The novel neither dwells in dreams of the past nor of the future. The ending testifies to this presence. The novel ends abruptly, providing absolutely no insight into what might happen to its characters and how their struggles could resolve. Just like it stays between past and future, the novel stays between urbanity and rurality.

Just as it depicts the flaws of Hamilton’s vision, the novel equally portrays the flaws of the pastoral ideal. Next to capitalism, nature poses the biggest threat to the Joads. As alluded to before, in the opening chapter heat, drought, and wind cover the land in dust. The language lends a vicious agency to nature: the wind “dug cunningly among the rootlets of the corn” (57), and the sun “was as red as ripe new blood” (58). Nature, often the
counterpart to the city, betrays the bucolic image of peace and harmony; in fact, nature seems to fight against farmers who try to cultivate the land. Likewise, a flood threatens the Joads’ survival at the end. The beginning and the end frame the story against the background of external, uncontrollable, and inhuman forces. This naturalism directs attention to the way the characters psychologically deal with subjection and powerlessness to superior natural forces. The effect of this is twofold: firstly, the novel distances itself clearly from “an inchoate longing for a more “natural” environment” (Marx 5) which figures in “the contemptuous attitude that many Americans adopt toward urban life” (Marx 5). The novel precludes a return to nature at least in the rural Midwest, which is the principal locality of the yeoman. Secondly, this softens the contempt many readers might feel toward capitalism in the novel, because nature and capitalism share blame for the suffering. Nonetheless, nature is much more observable compared to the bank for example, which hides agency and responsibility in an obscure hierarchy. By implementing two threats – nature and capitalism - which constitute a major part in one of the two models respectively, the novel emphasizes that it supports neither model unconditionally, recognizing the practical shortcomings of both.

The flaws of the migrants are reiterated throughout the story. Although they evoke sympathy on account of their virtue, they also prove inadequate in navigating an increasingly competitive world. Especially, their naivety in believing the promises of the handbills and idealized California attests to their ignorance. True, this claim would not survive the charge of generalization. There are plenty of exceptions. For example, Ma Joad affirms the sincerity behind the handbills, because it is her social responsibility to maintain optimism in the family. Still, many of the Joads and migrants heading west truly believe these promises. Characters who warn about the false promises of California never cause enough doubt to check susceptibility to wishful dreams. The large-scale interchapters provide the audience with enough insight to know that these promises conceal nothing but abusive business strategies. Similar to a horror film where the viewer, unlike the characters, sees the monster around the corner, this knowledge victimizes the migrants. While allowing the reader to care for the migrants emotionally to a greater extent, this victimization reduces
many of the migrants to dumbed-down vehicles of sympathy. To be fair, some characters like Tom and Jim are much more realistic and escape this pitifulness through active resistance. Still, the novel is confident in highlighting the flaws of its main characters. Although it casts them in a favorable light, it nonetheless stresses that the migrants suffer, because they are slow to pick up on the cunning and falseness of the modern world.

In short, *The Grapes of Wrath* seems upon first inspection to rely on and confirm the traditional American antagonism of urbanity and rurality. The novel adheres to many stereotypes about either. However, it complicates this idealization as part of a literary genre that seeks to reconcile the two. It weakens the strengths and casts aside the destructive consequences of the models respectively, instead zooming in on the Joads and their representative condition of suffering and transition. Consequently, points of contention and boundaries become blurred to allow for more inclusiveness. Nevertheless, this approach suffers from a significant shortcoming: it leaves a void to be filled. While it deconstructs old dichotomies well, it provides little insight into which identity should take its place. A new identity must be distilled from the Joads, with whom the novel spends most of its time.
4.1. Proposing a New Identity – Pragmatic Altruism

The Joads are the tool and substance of a new identity. The characters and their actions embody a new morality which Frederick Carpenter argues develops into “a new kind of Christianity – not otherworldly and passive, but earthly and active” (325). Besides the transformation of traditional values, Carpenter also implies a change in how these values are implemented: they call for action and manifest themselves in meaningful, pragmatic, and immediate social behavior. By contrast, moral virtue often depends on the individual’s relation to values. For example, the question of can I convince myself that I have fulfilled abstract expectations about a moral doctrine overrules the question of have I helped better the lives of the people who surround me. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, this “isolating self-consciousness is raised up . . . into an invulnerable realm of concern” (Wyatt 23). The Joads illustrate that moral virtue much more depends on the individual’s pragmatic relation with the group. *The Grapes of Wrath* is not afraid to break down social conventions to emphasize the necessity of pragmatism either. After the Joad family accepts Casy into their initially exclusive intimacy, Casy offers to help Ma salt the pigs to speed up the family’s preparations for leaving. Somewhat bewildered, Ma replies that “it’s women’s work” (199). Jim rebuts her reasoning: “It’s all work . . . They’s too much of it to split it up into men’s or women’s work” (199). Ma accepts reluctantly; Casy initiates the breakdown of social conventions in favor of more practical responsibilities. His reasoning relies less on generally accepted rules than on the actual needs of the moment.

What Jim exemplifies, the Joads learn to act out. They gradually learn to extend their concern toward others if the situation demands it practically. The first opportunity to implement this outward-reaching, active attitude presents itself in the Joads’ encounter with the Wilsons. Because Grampa dies on a mattress in the Wilsons’ tent, Ma offers to replace this quilt with one of their own; she still thinks in terms of utilitarian exchanges: everything exchanged between two groups must be of the exact same value to make it fair. Sairy Wilson responds with the altruism which then becomes to define most interactions between the migrants: “You shouldn’t talk like that. We’re proud to help. I ain’t felt so – safe in a long time. People needs – to help” (246). Giving without calculating the return bonds the
Joads to the Wilsons, and the extension of community becomes more valuable than financial gains or losses. This outward-looking practicality materializes a few pages later when the families share dinner – a communal event which symbolizes association throughout the novel. The two families’ association solidifies to the extent that Pa refuses to leave the Wilsons in California because they “got almost a kinbond” (282). Kinship is the strongest possible bond between humans for Pa, who personifies the pre-displacement values and tradition. The example of the Joads and Wilsons demonstrates that human bonds can develop to the point of perceived kinship even outside of biological families, if association is based on active, pragmatic care.

The narrator steps in to provide further examples of how people bond over mutual help. Music and dancing console migrants, bringing together people who before shared no association. Because of the music, “people have to move close” (505) and “they can’t help it” (505). Music and dancing are active and personal; people establish intimacy as a result of physical closeness and attention. The migrants are attracted to this, because it makes them happy and provides them dignity and meaning. Musicians and story tellers thus assume a moral responsibility over their power to unite people. They can help by creating simple pleasures that merge many strangers into a group. In contrast, preachers, who symbolize abstract virtue, condemn music and dancing. They frighten migrants with threats about deviance from Christian values: “beside an irrigation ditch a preacher labored and the people cried. And the preacher paced like a tiger, whipping the people with his voice, and they groveled and whined on the ground” (506). The same dynamic occurs at Weedpatch; the dance unites people, while religious fanatics foster division. The novel challenges traditional morality and suggests the adaptation of a pragmatic approach; moral is what helps others, encourages them, and enriches life with community.
4.2. Proposing a New Identity – Internal Accountability and Construction of Meaning

Part of the new morality is also developing a new mode of judging and expressing what is right or wrong. Religion proves inadequate, because it provides virtue to a few at the expense of the rest and asserts its moral authority through fear rather than hope. Although Casy comes from a Christian tradition, he develops a critical attitude toward sin and the moral weight attached to it. Reflecting on sexual intercourse with a girl after preaching, which he felt to be the right thing but knew to be the wrong thing according to Christian morality, Casy concludes: “Maybe it ain’t a sin. Maybe it’s just the way folks is. Maybe we been whippin’ the hell out of ourselves for nothin’” (83). The narrator agrees with Casy; he announces Casy as preacher or reverend continuously throughout the story and thus attests to Casy’s moral authority. Casy then goes on to deconstruct the reasoning behind the religious understanding of right and wrong. In its wake, a more intuitive and inward understanding emerges. Shame replaces the seemingly arbitrary set of external rules as the indicator of wrongdoing. This particular emotion occurs when characters feel guilt. For example, Tom “was ashamed” (146) for sharing too intimate a story with Casy when they meet for the first time; Pa “was ashamed” (159) because he believes that his rash actions at Noah’s birth make him responsible for Noah’s social withdrawal; Tom “ashamedly” (228) apologizes to a gas station owner; and Pa “ashamedly” (244) proposes not to bury Grampa, because the family needs the money to get to California. The novel manages to portray this form of moral control successfully, because these characters mostly act as moral exemplars. The reader is likely to grant the assumption that they are honest with themselves and that the narrator provides an unbiased view into the emotional state of the characters. They rarely do any wrong and if they do, the internal disappointment in the betrayal of their values is enough chastisement to sustain their moral character. To be sure, this perception of moral accountability requires a great deal of honesty with oneself. Still, it aligns with the novel’s theme of looking inward to find values or purposes which concern the external world.
Consequently, morality becomes much more complex. Violence often seems justified; especially characters like Tom and Casy evade morally unambiguous judgement. They act so altruistically in spite of the abuse they suffer that they evoke sympathy. Their acts of violence and even murder seem legitimate. This derives not as much from an endorsement of sociopathy as a thorough explanation of the circumstances which legitimize the reasoning. Tom explains the homicide which had him incarcerated: “I’d do what I done – again . . . I killed a guy in a fight. We was drunk at a dance. He got a knife in me, an’ I killed him with a shovel that was layin’ there” (87). Tom acted in self-defense – a reason many readers can sympathize with. Similarly, Tom describes the moral ambiguity he feels after avenging the murder of Casy: “If – this fella [speaking of himself in the third person] done somepin wrong, maybe he’d think, “O.K. Le’s get the hangin’ over. I done wrong an’ I got to take it.” But this fella didn’t do nothin’ wrong. He don’t feel no worse’n if he killed a skunk” (603). The novel weaves subjective morality into less grievous events too. Al “stole a fence rail and made a ridge pole on the truck” (276), and Tom pays way too little for a socket wrench, justifying it with the same business philosophy that is previously called “curious ritualized thievery” (265): “That’s his screwin’ . . . We didn’t steal her” (305). No doubt, the novel makes itself vulnerable to charges of hypocrisy. However, the reader must understand this as an attempt to liberate from even more distortive external measurements of right or wrong. Then she will see that the novel tries to loosen the grip of religion and unjust state laws in order to show the possibility of a more simple, universal, and internally accountable code of ethics.

Internal accountability also follows the deeply-embedded national theme of skepticism toward centralized power. Typically, this concerns the extent to which institutions affect the individual. In our case, *The Grapes of Wrath* attacks the centralized power of religion over morality. Similarly, the novel attacks the legitimacy of the law, distinguishing between written laws and unspoken rights. Casy approves of Pa overruling the law for a moral necessity: “Law changes . . . but ‘got to’s’ go on. You got the right to do what you got to do” (244). Here, the novel alludes to the Enlightenment tradition; he favors minimal government, understanding the legislative and execute in the Lockean
framework of the social contract to primarily ensure the freedom of the people. The novel subscribes to the legal philosophy that laws can be unjust; it depicts the system as perverting its legal authority. For instance, Tom questions the legitimacy of the police: “If it was the law they was workin’ with, why, we could take it. But it ain’t the law. They’re a-workin’ away at our spirits . . . they comes a time when the on’y way a fella can keep his decency is by takin’ a sock at a cop” (436). Police, the physical extension of the law, abuse the power invested in them by the state to wear down the dignity of the migrants. The executive becomes a tool for large business owners to intimidate those who resist exploitation. To reestablish purpose to rules and make their benefits more apparent to the people who have to adhere to them, the novel shifts legitimacy to what it calls “rights”. These are principles, often unspoken and consequences of real practical necessities, that a group of people agree on and abide by. For example, on the grounds of communal consensus, Muley Graves absolves Tom from the guilt of killing a guy: “Ever’body knowed it was no fault of yours” (125). Additionally, the two guys who go to prison, Tom and Casy, develop into the most altruistic characters. The novel’s new morality and values are found outside of laws and institutions; the people themselves define them through their actions. While this may seem digressive, it helps understand how The Grapes of Wrath carves out a path for the reformulation of values, as readers are given a sense of empowerment to define experience for themselves.

4.3. **Proposing a New Identity – Jeffersonian Values**

By doing so, the novel discredits many ideologies which structure life - be it religion, capitalism, or law. These points all in one way or another determine who we are. Even if we choose to reject the mainstream adaptation, we then unwittingly define ourselves as members of sub- or countercultures. If we merely deconstruct, we will never overcome that which we condemn so strongly. The Grapes of Wrath is aware of how it might slip into unconstructive deconstruction. The novel creates a void which it then, significantly, tries to fill; it draws on yeoman values to tentatively formulate a new identity.
Simply put, the novel wants Americans to behave according to yeoman values. In an increasingly divisive, morally decaying modern world, it asks Americans to be honest, just, independent, and self-sufficient – all traits which the Joads personify. As discussed before, the Jeffersonian lifestyle is no longer fit to navigate life in a modern world. But these values are based on Jeffersonianism and must be recalibrated to accord with modern life. By no means do I wish to suggest that Jefferson invented these values. He merely merged them into an identity which, crucially, many Americans believe to be fundamentally American. To recall briefly, these values which are attributed to the husbandman include a close relationship with the earth, religion, industriousness, and independence or self-sufficiency. Some of these clearly do not work in a modern setting. For example, the migrants lose their connection to the land. Nonetheless, the vitality and individuality which arise out of the relation with land persist in new forms. The migrants are extraordinarily active in seeking out work, and physical tasks, which mark life on a farm, dominate their existence as migrants. By contrast, the anemic and physically feeble wealthy couple at the gas station represents the decay of vitality and fertility as a consequence of a leisurely, consumeristic lifestyle: “A bag of bottles, syringes, pills, powders, fluids, jellies to make their sexual intercourse safe, odorless, and unproductive” (265). Another value which fades away in its traditional form is religion. As explained previously, it is replaced by a practical, internally-looking code of ethics and judgement.

_The Grapes of Wrath_ emphasizes two Jeffersonian, inherently intertwined values which are essential counterforces to modernity: industry and independence. They appear mainly in the Joads’ quest to regain self-sufficiency. Herein lies a problem too: the tenant system and contracted, temporary work rule out self-sufficiency. Still, the novel links attempts to attain self-sufficiency with dignity. The indignant way the Joads and the women’s committee at Weedpatch, for example, react to accusations of dependence and homelessness supports this connection. Responding to the charge of begging, Tom “dropped angrily to the ground” (224), asserting that “we’re paying our way” (224) and later arguing that “we ain’t no bums” (388). Likewise, Pa says: “We done it clean . . . We never took nothin’ we couldn’ pay; we never suffered no man’s charity” (244). In spite of
their circumstances, the Joads take pride in providing for themselves, exhibiting relentlessness in seeking out work which instills virtue through industriousness and hard work. This earthy virtue, which is independent of status in society and property, manifests itself even more clearly at Weedpatch. There, no corruption and indignity from the outside world can enter. The camp is organized entirely by its residents. This self-sufficiency turns the camp into a beacon of Jeffersonian values. Members improvise to help each other and organize responsibility for one another through committees. This aligns with Mary Weak-Baxter’s claim that “through characteristic ingenuity and practicality, and taking responsibility for self and family, the yeoman could be the salvation for America” (8). Self-sufficiency is thus expressed in two ways: first, by hard work which allows for independence from modern forces which drive society toward a hierarchy of dependence. Outside of Weedpatch, elaborately vague economic systems allow individuals to refer responsibility to superiors but rob them off their choice. Even benevolent farmers in California have to depend on the choices of higher systems. Or as Mr. Thomas puts it: “Ain’t you got it yet? Mr. Bank hires two thousand men an’ I hire three. I’ve got paper to meet. Now if you can figure some way out, by Christ, I’ll take it! They got me” (458). Secondly, self-sufficiency is expressed by acting in the interest of the group in order to create a harmonious communal living. This already entails that self-sufficiency never pertains to one individual but to the group which ensures the freedom of its members.

4.4. Proposing a New Identity – Transcendental Communities

Casy embodies the philosophy of love, along with a corresponding philosophy of altruism that develops as the story progresses. Early in The Grapes of Wrath, Casy detects the need for a sense of belonging among the migrants, which can be fulfilled by a secular form of preaching, even though he uses the word “preaching” reservedly: “Maybe there’s a place for a preacher. Maybe I can preach again. Folks out lonely on the road . . . they got to have some kind of home” (129). The story unties home from a specific place; home becomes wherever people live together. As the marker of home, locality is replaced by
community. This community is fluid, as others come and go and even the Joads join and leave other communities. Casy is the first to grasp this flowing sense of human community, albeit formulating it in religious language initially: “The hell with it! There ain’t no sin and there ain’t no virtue. There’s just stuff people do. It’s all part of the same thing” (84).

Strangely enough in the otherwise realistic novel, Casy believes in an essential core of human experience which connects everyone. At core, Casy says “it’s love” (84). As the story follows the interlocking lives of the Joads and other migrants, love – that is to be good to others – overcomes barriers of origin; in rural areas, origin defines one’s immediate community. People are too disjointed geographically to participate in multiple flowing communities. Therefore, rurality in a way obstructs the expansion of community. Casy’s idea that “maybe all men got one big soul ever’body’s a part of” (85) crystallizes toward the end as a counterforce to restrictive communities and drives Tom to dedicate his life to the service of others.

Although a clear definition eludes Casy and must be distilled through various acts of altruism, Casy comes closest to formulating what Carpenter detects as “mystical transcendentalism” (316). Echoing the interrelatedness of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “The Over-Soul”, Casy explains the revelations of his social withdrawal: “I got thinkin’ how we was holy when we was one thing, an’ mankin’ was holy when it was one thing” (164). Casy believes that humans become holy, if they recognize their connection to one another. He assumes that all people depend on one another, suggesting that giving equals receiving, because dedication to others leads to reciprocal benefits. If one follows this to its logical conclusion, sympathy toward others best improves oneself. On the other hand, the pursuit of self-interest harms self. On a small scale, the ending exemplifies this “mystical transcendentalism”. Throughout the novel, Rose of Sharon lacks agency; she always acts reactively and rarely takes on responsibility. But, as “she looked up and across the barn, and her lips came together and smiled mysteriously” (678), she is actively in control. Although the actual circumstances promise nothing but bitterness, the novel cuts out on a note of triumph and control. The intense focus of perspective in a way apotheosizes her as a
giver of life. Her unconditional love for a stranger ultimately salvages her character. By helping others, Rose of Sharon really helps herself.

Rose of Sharon’s example is truly “mystic” because it speaks to vague, unformulated emotions and lingers as an intuitive feeling. However, transcendentalism also appears much more observably. As the narrative progresses, the Joads learn to stretch the boundaries of their family. Close to the end, Ma encapsulates the opening of tightly guarded community: “Use’ ta be fambly fust. It ain’t so now. It’s anybody” (665). This loosening of social boundaries derives from the realization that the actions of one group affect another group; therefore, the logical consequence is to act with the collective in mind. For instance, Joads and Wilsons learn to improve their odds of arriving in California through sharing their resources. Additionally, as the flood endangers Rose of Sharon in the freight car, many strangers help building a small dam even though their own chances of survival would increase by leaving. Strikingly, the novel also depicts how selfish behavior, which is the expression of not knowing one’s connection to others, can harm the group and thus ultimately comes back to haunt the individual. In homage to the tragedy of the commons, the novel shows that farmers on the Hooper Ranch can sustain their relatively high wages only at the expense of other workers. As soon as the other workers stop striking, the wages will fall even lower than if they had acted collectively. Small groups of interest like workers or the family restrict the fusion of many people into one group. Warren French argues that “the Joads have failed to achieve full self-realization, not because of their persecution by a soulless society, but because they themselves have had the expansion of their consciousness limited by the reductivist concept of “family”” (160). To enable this “expansion of consciousness” and to enlarge concern for others, *The Grapes of Wrath* breaks down small communities and integrates them into larger ones. Stephen Railton argues similarly that “their [the migrants’] new lives, their very losses, lead them toward the potentially redemptive discovery of their interrelatedness, their membership in a vastly extended family” (33).

While this takes on mystical tones in the voices of Casy and Tom, Carpenter recognizes it is intertwined with an ambition of “earthy democracy” (316). The narrator in
one particular large-scale interchapter transforms the mystic transcendentalism into what could be called social transcendentalism – that is a template for actual social policy based on the abstract ideal. Especially within the large project of constructing a sense of nationhood, the narrator echoes Casy’s realization that “the only salvation lies in collective effort” (Railton 36). Chapter 17 experiments with the construction of communities on a small scale – how they are created by people who by their circumstances are thrown together and need some governing structure. The migrants establish new communities every night. This “technique of building worlds” (Steinbeck 319) focuses chiefly on the necessities of a safe community. Saturated in the philosophy of government of Abraham Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address”, this interchapter captures the American ethos of government created by and for the people: “the families learned what rights must be observed” (319). Notably, the narrator employs the term “right” over “law” when he talks about how to regulate social behavior in a community effectively, implying that laws may interfere with harmonious social structures. Likewise, “these rights [adultery, theft, murder, rape, and the like] were crushed, because the little worlds could not exist even for a night with such rights alive” (319). These communities work well, because all rules aim at harmonious living; true, the communities last only one night but for this period they exhibit how functioning and united communities form. The significance of these small examples lies in illustrating which principles must underlie the reconstruction of community on a large scale: a basic social contract aimed at safety, reciprocity, and communal well-being. This allows strong identity groups to bridge social divides: “The families, which had been units of which the boundaries were a house at night, a farm by day, changed their boundaries. In the long hot light, they were silent in the cars moving slowly westward; but at night they integrated with any group they found” (Steinbeck 321).

If we try to understand this in political terms, the migrants demonstrate the process by which nations are formed. However, the United States is a nation already formed. Far from demanding a reconstruction of the political order, *The Grapes of Wrath* demands the formation of a common identity to overcome social divisions; it uses farmers who become migrants to warn about the threats of marginalizing a large group. The novel focuses almost
exclusively on the marginalized migrants, recognizing them as a vital part in the past and future of American identity. Fukuyama claims that such “politics of recognition” (57) have traditionally either led to “liberal societies” (57) or to “assertions of collective identity” (57). The former recognizes individual autonomy, whereas the latter recognizes the individual as part of a large group. True, the novel criticizes the violation of an individual’s rights and autonomy, especially the perversion of police authority. But these instances serve to intensify the condition of suffering rather than delve into the corrupt workings of the executive branch. The focus always reverts right back to the migrants and how they solve systemic problems outside of the system itself. Human interactions become the main source of healing. Out of Fukuyama’s two possibilities, the novel thus takes the path to collective identity. This collective identity, albeit removed from its contemporary system, is nonetheless saturated in American philosophical and political thought. *The Grapes of Wrath* draws on the ideas of many American icons – like Jefferson, Locke and Lincoln – to reinvigorate American nationalism. Not in the sense of aggressiveness toward other nations, this nationalism instead aims to create a strong sense of American self.
5. Conclusion

Cultural analysis looks at a variety of themes. Depending on what matters most to us in a given moment in time, some themes govern our understanding of culture more so than others. What might have been important yesterday seems outdated tomorrow, and today’s knowledge provides new insights into older texts. The work will never be complete, but we should continuously aspire to revise older texts with new models of thoughts to enhance our understanding. So has the emergence of new political theory laid its claim on the interpretation of *The Grapes of Wrath*. In 2018, Francis Fukuyama has produced a modern perspective on politics which allows us to peel off more layers of meaning. Eventually, we arrive at the core of political and social matters: identity. Fukuyama convincingly explains how most ramifications of political and social action can be boiled down to underlying issues of identity. At core, identity matters more than policies by which it materializes. Therefore, I try to look beyond the issues of politics, religion, and economics interwoven in *The Grapes of Wrath* and dissect how identity governs the text. A thorough account of the text helps us understand how Steinbeck envisioned America. Upon first inspection of the novel, the emotional language beguiles. Steinbeck’s novel features a narrator who describes complex systemic problems in the 1930s chiefly through the lives of one family. The Joads seize the reader’s sympathy and attention. The intense focus and vernacular language all position us right next to the Joads. Initially, the novel invites us to experience the novel emotionally rather than rationally. However, the novel weaves many subtle contradictions into the story, which betray the bucolic image on which the Joads are based; it forces us to reevaluate the Joads and recognize that they represent a far greater problem. Reintegration – that is group membership, or, in other words, identity – becomes the driving force of the story, be it in small or large communities. In this way, Steinbeck’s vision goes against those of many of his contemporary modern writers: he moves away from the complex and fragmented and heads toward the simple and unified. Steinbeck reasserts the “united” in the United States of America.
Works Cited


Carpenter, Frederic. „The Philosophical Joads.“ *College English*, vol. 2, no. 4, 1941, pp. 315-325.


Deutsche Zusammenfassung