

## The Dysfunction of the American dream in Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*

Hussein Nasir Shwein

Al- Qadisiya University /College of Arts/ English Department

Email: [hussein.naser@qu.edu.iq](mailto:hussein.naser@qu.edu.iq)

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### Abstract

This study aims to look into John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*'s critique of the American Dream. Through focusing on such central marks of the American Dream as freedom, equality, and individualism, it will have stated that the Joad family does not fulfil the American Dream of classes and castes. The book was published during the Great Depression, a time of widespread poverty and unemployment in America. The aim is to characterize the American Dream and lay its foundation. In addition, the "self" and "other" pair will be used as a test instrument. Based on a thorough examination of *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck, it is attempted to define and describe recurrent themes and to create the concept of American Dream in this novel with its hierarchy. Steinbeck is respected as the foremost versatile craftsman of contemporary American fiction. He may be an author commendable to be compared with the novelists Anton Chekhov and Anatole France. This paper will address the unfulfilled dreams of the Joad family, who begun their trip from Oklahoma, putting everything they possess into a truck to California.

**Key words:** The American Dream, Freedom, Equality, Individuality, Social Classes

### Introduction

John Steinbeck (1902-1968) was a renowned American novelist and a Nobel laureate who is chiefly well-known for *Of Mice and Men* (1937), *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), and *East of Eden* (1952). *The Grapes of Wrath* is one of the most important literary events in 1939 which caused its author to receive both the Pulitzer and Nobel Prizes. It is the temperament of the wrathful decade that represents other works of the day. The critics have mostly welcomed it as one of the most significant books of the time. Thompson (2007) believes that this novel associates proceedings

and the attitude of its characters with conventional schools of "liberal and neo-liberal political theory: libertarianism, egalitarianism, and utilitarianism" (165).

Nasalevich, T. V., and Yu. V. Bee (2019) also refer to Steinbeck who tried to analyze the main aspects of the concept of the American Dream given by various scholars. They describe the components of the American Dream that different linguists and literary reviews represent. Analysis of "The Grapes of Wrath by Steinbeck gives us reason to believe that the American Dream which is the belief in equal and effortlessly reachable chances to all, in fact represents a powerful idea with frequent topics and an insight into how to preserve the national identity in times of economic crises.

One of the most recognized dreams about starting an unprecedented life and becoming successful is the American Dream. Putnam, R. D. (2016) refers "The American dream is the idea that anyone can achieve their own notion of success in a society where everyone has the opportunity for upward mobility, regardless of where they were born or what class they belonged to". The idea that every American will eventually find refuge in Ireland has long persisted in people's minds as a myth or predetermined destiny. However, this idea and dream are dissimilar to those of American author John Steinbeck, who sees the American dream as a broken promise. Although what is included in the "American dream" is an America with equal opportunities and individual liberty that should guarantee Americans true freedom and happiness, the author correctly asserts that America is still far from achieving these pillars seven. In the 1930s, the phrase "American Dream" was created in order to describe immigrants' hopes and expectations for America, as well as for America itself. Tenants in *The Grapes of Wrath* express their desire for a better life in the following quotation, which depicts California as a utopia. It also guarantees everyone a job and the opportunity to pursue their dreams. In this way, the dream of a better life, which is easily crushed, is associated with California.

"Why don't you go to California? There's work there and it never gets cold. Why you can reach out anywhere and pick an orange. Why there's always some kind of crop to work in. Why don't you go there?" (Steinbeck : *The Grapes of Wrath* 36)

Many Americans were homeless during the Great Depression because they had lost their jobs and money due to the economic recession in 1929. According to Keith Windschuttle, the American Dream must be even more significant for the American public during the Dust Bowl Migration (24). Few critics consider Steinbeck's greatest book to be *The Grapes of Wrath* (Stein 202). In addition, Steinbeck described the book as "a true American novel" (*The Grapes of Wrath*

29). The Joad family is relocated from Oklahoma to the Promised Land of California during the Tidy Bowl Migration, and the novel tells their story when they understand that the things they predicted in near-California aren't actually there. Consequently, they are forced to live in camps and work for a pittance.

## **2. Methodology**

The primary goal of this study is to examine how Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* portrays the dysfunction of the American Dream, as well as the reasons for it. According to what is going to be discussed, California's social classes and castes will prevent Jews from achieving their American Dream. It's challenging to escape one's caste, and this novel's social structures can be seen as a variation on the caste system. Throughout the analysis, the words "social structure," "social classes," "social hierarchy," and "castes" will be frequently used. A distinction is made between Californians and 'Okies' regarding their social structures. People from Oklahoma and Texas who moved to California during the Clean Bowl Movement were dubbed "Okies" (Stein vii). In this way, the distinction can be said to have a significant impact on the Joads' ability to realize their dreams, and thus contribute to the breakage of their American Dream. In this article the main elements of the American Dream are as follows,

### **2.1. Equality, Liberty, and Personality**

Some aspects of dreams (e.g. wealth and the right to education for all) are not discussed in this article, as they do not apply to the purpose of this article and are hardly covered in the novel. The hermeneutic strategy is employed in this paper. According to Thomas M. Seebohm, hermeneutics can be a strategy for elucidating various writings to gain a better understanding of them. According to Seebohm, when using the hermeneutic strategy, there are three steps of examination: 1. the text that was written by the routine; 2. the text's translation or interpretation; 3. the mediator's content which is the result of his or her clarification.

The hermeneutic technique is a strategy that permits the understanding of scholarly messages from an emotional viewpoint. *The Grapes of Wrath* was the primary source for this paper, and The Penguin Modern Classics edition (2000) was also used (Seebohm 93-94). *The Epic of America* (1944) by Jim Cullen and *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation* (2003) by Douglas Adams will be used to define the term "American Dream".

The Joad family, however, is the central figure in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Noah, Tom, Rose of Sharon, Al, Ruthie, and Winfield Joad are the family's heartbeats. Ruthie and Winfield are

about ten years old, but the majority of the kids are adults or teenagers. Uncle John, Grandma, and Grandpa Joad are all members of the Joad family. The family is traveling with Connie, Rose of Sharon's better half, and Casy, a cleric. Additionally, during the journey, Rose of Sharon becomes pregnant with her and Connie's child.

Therefore, the concept "freedom" shall deal first of all with personal freedom and civic freedom as religious freedom in the novel is scarcely problematized and is not adequate for the purpose. The concept "individualism" focuses on the right decisions. The research also provides a talk to individualism with communalism. The Grapes of Wrath goes into great details of the collapse of freedom under the weight of profit-driven market forces. The Joad family and other tenant farmers in Oklahoma's rural area have been required to vacate their land because of default on bank loans attributable to situations beyond their control:

"Well, it's too late. And the owner men explained the workings and the thinkings of the monster that was stronger than they were .A man can hold land if he can just eat and pay taxes; he can do that. Yes, he can do that until his crops fail one day and he has to borrow money from the bank". (Steinbeck :The Grapes of Wrath 34)

Kino's talent to chase the goals that he determines for himself is hindered by the village dealers' more influential profit-seeking drives. In order to escape these forces that limit his freedom, he must flee his home and hearth. Because he is not acting of his own free will, fleeing is itself an act of enslavement. Worse, in his fight against the profit-seeking traders' trackers and henchmen who are commanded to deprive Kino of his freedom, he kills his son. Finally, in order to save his own skin, he must abandon his desire of living a luxurious life by returning the pearl to the sea,

"Such is the reaction to The Pearl of Warren French in John Steinbeck (1961), who finds Kino's disposal of the pearl capable of contradictory interpretations: it may be seen as a "noble renunciation," but it can also be read as defeatism." (Davis 157)

Because of the severe drought, the entire region has turned into a dust bowl, and the farmers' resources have already been stretched to the breaking point. The bank seizes the opportunity and, in collaboration with the government, seizes the land from the farmers, forcibly expelling them. Farmers have no choice but to relinquish their land ownership rights. Farmers are easy prey for California's corporate orchard owners in this desperate situation. Handbills abound in the area, promising the moon if they move to California's orange groves as laborers, tempted and fooled by the publicity.

## 2.2. The Origin of the Term “American Dream”

"All men are created equal," as stated in the second sentence of the American Declaration of Independence, is the source of the term "American Dream." The statement also mentions "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" as important American rights (Cullen 38). On the other hand, the definition of freedom was based on slavery. It is worth noting, however, that when discussing slavery, the "Founding Fathers" did not refer to South American African slaves, but rather to "Great Britain," where they were to live and die (Cullen 47).

Nasalevich, T. V., and Yu. V. Bee (2019) say as humanity faces a new route of uncertainty, people search for mystical features to endure, preserve their identities, and to counterattack financial, political, social, and cultural stress. Fortunately for the United States, they have the national idea that has inspired and has not been relevant up to date for many generations. The American Dream's tenets will be analyzed in this article, and how they shape the national identity during the crisis. The idea of the "American dream" in America was coined by James Truslow Adams in 1931. During the Great Depression, the book was written and Adams tried to define the struggle of Americans

But there has been also the American Dream that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement. ... It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position". (The American Dream 415)

Adams argues that American dreams are not based on current prosperity. Rather, equality between people, regardless of class, is one of the most fundamental components. Adams also points out that old social classes and structures must be removed. Cullen argues each woman and man cannot develop completely through the preservation of structures. He expresses that it is hard to characterize the fantasy and that the definitions have changed over the long haul ( American dream 7). This critic contends that there can be multiple American Dreams.

In his book entitled American Dream, John Adams asserts that the American Dream is about achieving personal fulfilment rather than material prosperity (Cullen 416). According to Adams, the goal of this dream was "to conclude more than you began" (Cullen 8). The most failing aspect of a dream could be considered equality. The American Civil Rights Movement and

its fight for equality is one reason according to Cullen (8). In contrast, most Americans believe that equality should play a role in everyday life because it is built on the American Dream (Cullen 108). Moreover, Cullen claims that all inequalities are acceptable (i.e. that, because of their social circumstances, people are sometimes treated differently and worse) (Cullen 108).

### **2.3. The Prejudices and Suspicion Justify 'Self' and 'Other.'**

The Joads are met with suspicion and injury in *The Grapes of Wrath* when they arrive in California. In fact, when large groups of strangers go into a community, the inhabitants struggle to realize features common to the invaders to relate to them more straightforwardly. To defend and preserve their social structures and maintain their power, Stein claims that Californians have developed a "self" (Californians) and an "other" (others) (Okies). A "stereotyping" and a "People's" categorization is the division of people into various social groups.

Steinbeck has a knack for genuinely capturing the pith of his characters. It regularly so happens that as a result "Steinbeck exchanges plot complexity for character development," and centers his ability on uncovering the change of character (Fontenrose 70). In any case, the California as well as the Okies are white. Stein depicts distinguishing characteristics like settlements on the discard banks and a flawed nose-drawing stone "for the widespread use of the Okie as a careless, corrupt, primitive white American subspecies" (Stein :*The Grapes of Wrath* 60).

Apathy, savagery, ravenousness, primitivism, and silliness, according to Loomba, are frequently negative characteristics attributed to the "other" (93). It's also worth noting that the various roles that the "other" can play are contingent on the connecting situations (Loomba 85). In this way, the distinction between "self" and "other" legitimizes the partialities and uncertainty with which the Joads are confronted in California.

According to Williams, Steinbeck depicts Ma's job to be as significant or incredibly significant just the same as the men's job. Mama "appeared to know, to acknowledge, to invite her position, the fortress of the family, the solid spot that couldn't be taken... she appeared to realize that on the off chance that she influenced the family shook, and on the off chance that she ever actually profoundly faltered or lost hope the family would fall, the family will to capacity be gone" (Stein 74). Without Ma, the family construction would disintegrate, and this information makes her remain controlled, quiet, and as resolute as a directing star.

As the Joads' journey happens over the scene, a few of the family members peel absent from the core, either from passing or plain deserting of the travel and as the remaining family members meet other transients, it gets to be clear that the changing social structure will become fundamental to the novel. The changing social structure is key to the migrants' freedom from social persecution through the interconnecting of all vagrants. This interconnectedness permits them to have more prominent saliency in their character as an individual of difficult work and nobility.

Susan Opatow (2003) examines the concreteness of identity, citing Martha Minow's ideas that "[Identity] becomes more salient when it becomes fluid, such as when individuals or groups experience geographical, social, or psychological shifts" (5). At first, identity seems counterintuitive; for instance, when a woman wakes in the morning she recalls who her heart is, even though her conscience goes into sleep every night; it becomes more fluid than her fluidity because the identity has often the connotation of permanence and stability. In addition, conclusions about a character may be made based on the knowledge of the reader.

This applies in particular to the exchange of languages with a second language speaker. When speaking with people, the exchange of language turns into more than a conversation and becomes a person who knows each other. René Descartes wrote, "I think, so I am". When one identifies himself/herself with someone else, s/he can say that they think the same way, so they are the same. And identity is created immediately by defining oneself as another.

### **3. Discussion and Results**

Liberty is probably a major aspect of the American Dream, meaning nothing more than freedom from slavery for the "founding fathers" (Cullen 41). This dream is still linked with freedom today (Cullen 9-10). Pells claims that liberty is relative, depending on who exerts strength and how it is used (113). Liberty in several ways can be assumed. For example, Cullen believes it could be religion (57). Nolan refers to the freedom of individuals and citizens, and according to him, personal freedom is when a man is "free" to do anything he wants, irrespective of what others think (Nolan 45).

Moreover, Opatow (2003) contends that personality is continuously a human-centric quality of an individual, whether in inactive or liquid settings, interpsychic or intrapsychic appearances; however, "a conceptualization of identity in a changing social context is more complex," and this complexity entails a changing culture, society, and geography that ultimately fall within the framework of "place" (5). The dilemma of the Joad family in *The Grapes of Wrath*

by Steinbeck was instigated by the fluctuating circumstances of their motherland in Oklahoma, throughout the epoch of the Dust Bowl as a result of the multifaceted vicissitudes of the system, boiling back to the construction of the family.

Furthermore, Wright claims that "men must not exercise power over one another, so power must be limited and diffused as much as possible" (35). Reagan has also asserted that "[f]reedom is the right to question and change what we do" (Wright 493). Al is a person whose freedom is constrained from his own families and society. He expresses a desire to leave his family and work in a garage on many occasions (Steinbeck 383). Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* tells the story of an Okie boy who wants to leave his Californian family. Since he is an "Okie," the Californian society limits his personal choices and freedom. Al's father, Tom, stops him from leaving because he knows that the family must stay together (409-411).

It is therefore in the best interests of Californians for 'Okies' like Al to remain where the social structures are for Californians' power to be maintained and unchallenged. As a result, their freedom should be restricted, and they should not be allowed to advance socially. The government camps are beneficial to the "Okies" because they allow them to maintain some freedom despite their low social status. Identity appears to be largely determined by one's family's role. Man's identity, for example, is inextricably linked to her role as the family's maternal anchor; after all, she is the family's powerhouse (Steinbeck 103)

The "Okies" of California are often spoken of when the police attempt to dismantle a government camp. The Californians believe that they have to break them down, thus undermining their control. It is questionable that the 'civic freedom' of the Okies is delimited by the social arrangements and states of mind in California. Tom experiences Casy in *The Grapes of Wrath*, who left the family when they appeared in California outside a work place where the family remained. Casy revealed to them that he is currently engaged in a business guild and is engaged in a strike to improve the conditions for experts. Nevertheless, police officers are disintegrating the strike (Steinbeck 399-403). This happens when labour associations question the ways Californians treat the Okies and the social structures established (Wright 493).

It might also challenge the caste system in California, as the unions are seeking to establish a higher society and start making progress on working conditions. In addition, the end of the grievance may be a way of keeping the Okies from progressing socially and sustaining the caste system and indicating their control. However, Wright (1996) claims that men should not



exercise control over each other (35), which is precisely what occurs here. Consequently, Californians have the authority to limit the Oklahomans' freedom.

Equality is what drew people to America in the first place (Adams 416). According to Adams, people should be judged due to their abilities rather than their social standing or class (416). Warner also points out that, "The principle of equality is necessary to provide all men with a sense of self-respect" (128). Greene reaffirms his commitment to equality,

"The very idea, however, that people were entitled to equality was a dramatic break with tradition in a world where most people were frozen in place by class differences, poverty, confining traditions, resignation. It was apprehended many times as a kind of description of the way human beings were about one another". (180)

When the Joads go to California, they quickly find out that two distinct groups of individuals exist there: Californians and "Okies." This occurs when they see a nearby police officer for the first time. When Ma and Rose of Sharon appear, the episode quickly catches up and they are in a tent. A police officer appears and tells them that they cannot stay in their present place. At the end of his visit, he says "Well, you're not in your country no." You goddamn Okies don't want us to settle in California" (Steinbeck 223).

The cop assigns to Ma and Rose of Sharon features that he considers synonymous and distinguishes between 'self' (Californians) and 'other' (Okies), which is, stereotyping and categorization, as they are used by all immigrants. It seems that he doesn't care that Sharon's Ma and Rose could be different from a 'typical' 'Okie' picture. The police officer also points to a high level of socialite, since he is a Californian, and they are Okay. The cops are also very exact. In the entire novel, the Californians are distrusted and opinionated. This is especially evident when Tom asks, "Who are you in hell?" one of the guards answers, "[s]ay, J.P. Morgan? Second. Second" (Steinbeck 395).

Rose of Sharon Joad went on to talk about the 'Okies' after Tom left the guards. According to one of the guards, "The Okies, the Okies, the Okies, the Okies, the Okies, the You have to keep an eye on them all the time!" (Steinbeck 395). The guard demonstrates their distrust of the "Okies" by saying so. Stein explores how Californians and 'Okies' interact. He claims that the interactions between the two groups were restricted to employees/workers and sellers/clients (59). In fact, officers/victims can be included in this list, because they are dealt with in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Besides, the Okies are disconnected from the rest of the community (Stein 59).

This is seen as a way of keeping 'Okies' out of society, while preserving the 'self' and 'other' social structures. As a result, the meetings with Californians by the Joads and other 'Okies' in the novel are established under excessive conditions. Californians who meet the Okies, on the other hand, have a different perspective. While the police officer, who has already been discussed, appears to be punitive and antagonistic toward the "Okies," at first Tom appears to be more positive. He makes an unfavourable first impression, but after a while, Tom explains why he and the other workers are unable to pay him more than 25 cents per hour (Steinbeck 307-310). He also seems concerned about their family's situation. "I don't know how you men can feed a family on what you get now," he says (Steinbeck 309).

While the employer seems very friendly to the applicants, he emphasizes clearly that he is superior to them and fits in another social class. Since his social class is "more" than "Okies," he is responsible for their pay and can do whatever he wants (Steinbeck 307-310). According to Warner, social class is visible in the way people interact with one another and their social attitudes "Social class refers to levels that are recognizable in the general behaviour and social attitudes of the people of the entire community where the levels exist" (72).

Tom and other 'Okies' are assessed on the basis of their social standing. Adams believes that it is important to be judged on your ability (416). The social hierarchy in *The Grapes of Wrath* also has caste-share properties. If you want a higher social status, castes are not allowed to move between social classes (Warner 71). Nevertheless, it is essential to bear in mind that social classes also assign higher and lower classes although the position is not as fixed as the ranks (Warner 73). Furthermore, fixed situations, methods of acting, and perspectives are hampering social change.

Although the Joads are not naturally inclined to stand, they have no chance of escaping their "position in California. The government camp is characterized by a model from the novel that shapes how the 'Okies' are kept from developing in the public eye. Tom discovers that the police will attempt to stir up some dust in the camp one night when a dance is planned. The purpose of this is to obtain a pardon so that the camp can be dismantled as ordered by the Farmer's Association (Steinbeck 309-310).

This is why employees in California are unable to organize themselves to challenge the state's social structures. One of the camp workers that Tom meets has an opinion on the matter, "They're scared we'll organize, I guess. An' maybe they're right. ... Figger maybe if we can govern ourselves, maybe we'll do other things" (Steinbeck 311). The social class classifies people into several levels, as is also the case for castes (Warner 72).

Because of California's caste-like system, the Joads and the "Okies" cannot move between social groups. Furthermore, as long as the social structures remain, the Joads cannot match Californians. As Greene points out, poverty causes people to behave in certain ways toward one another, and as a result, social classes are sometimes fixed and considered (Steinbeck 180). This is true in California, where the "Okies" are holed into a social class because of their lack of jobs.

Since the Okies are also responsible for defining various classes, they offer assistance in maintaining the distinction between self and other. It is reasonable to assume that society's division into distinct classes and castes serves a purpose and serves a function. Someone must be at the bottom of society because of social hierarchy, and in this case, it is the 'Okies.' According to Warner, these are the types of events that cause society to be divided (69). He also gives examples of how the American upper class prevents slum children from progressing in society (105). The Californians are like this in *The Grapes of Wrath*, whereas the Joads and the 'Okies' are the purlieu and thus incapable of making any progress.

However, the Okies do everything they can to preserve equality amongst themselves. Following a vacation near Bakersfield, California, the family has arrived at Hooverville 3, a government camp run and upheld by the Okies. Furthermore, the camp's administration consists of a camp director and four committees with various titles (elected by the committees). Steinbeck notes one thing in particular with camps and equality,

"The sullen and frightened expression that is the rule among the migrants has disappeared from the faces of the Federal camp's inhabitants. Instead, there is a steadiness of gaze and self-confidence that can only come from restored dignity". (Steinbeck 1007)

According to Steinbeck, the distinction seems to be due to the migrant's novel situation in the neighbourhood.. Before he came to the camp he had been regulated, loathed, and moved about. It had been made clear that he was not desired (1007). In the novel, an employer also approves of this by saying that, "Those folks in the camp are getting used to being treated like humans" (310).

#### **4. Concluding Notes**

The "American Dream" can only be summed up as a single, optimistic dream that necessitates a great deal of effort. Fantasy has come to mean many distinct things to a variety of people over time, and it still does. Each of the American Dream's examples owns a home and freedom to do whatever is desired. The difference between "self" and "other" allows distinguishing between

people. Like the Californians and the Okies in California, this preserves the distinction between social groups and how they interact with one another. Furthermore, the 'self' group assigns negative characteristics to the 'other' group. California's attitude toward the Okies is largely negative in terms of equal opportunity. For example, a workplace guard accuses Tom of agreeing, and a cop disrespects Ma and Rose of Sharon. Some Californians, such as an employer that Tom meets, are fonder of Okies. The Okies also view themselves as a distinct Californian social class. California's social system can also be measured as some kind of caste system because the Joads are "Okay" and have no way out of their social class. As a result, there is a restriction on social mobility. This affects how Californians behaved. Autonomy should be viewed as one of America's most significant features, but the Joads fall short. The American Dream is considered to be a viable option for all Americans. That's not the case, of course. Different social groups seem to be tangled in the dream, making it difficult to overcome. For some, it is a viable concept, but for others, it's just an unfulfilled promise. Because the great dream of equal opportunity is not equally accessible, the "American Dream" should be viewed as a dream that is just for a select few, rather than a utopia for the vast majority of people. Every event that led up to the conclusion of *The Grapes of Wrath* laid the groundwork for the Joads' American Dream in California to fail, as well as any hope of success. The Joads were well aware that the journey to California would be long and potentially disastrous, full of hopelessness and poverty.

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