

**Disenfranchisement, Violence, and Reform:
John Steinbeck and Pete Hautman's American Families**

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During the 1930's American society was shifting: The Great Depression caused a massive westward migration and resulted in the displacement of many. Families who were once prominent farmers and members of a local society saw their way of life evaporate, and with it, their hopes of ever attaining the American Dream. The problems facing these individuals and the country as a whole prompted John Steinbeck to write *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). In this novel, Steinbeck presents one American family's struggle to survive during the Great Depression. In Oklahoma, where the Joad family starts their journey, technological advances have changed the way of life, now one man can do the work of fifty. Despite the changes being made, the status quo in America persists. That status quo is one of profit, those making profit are in charge, and those without profit remain that way. Similarly, in Pete Hautman's Young Adult novel, *Rash*, another working class American family struggles to survive in a corrupt system. The Marsten family lives in a futuristic society where corporations run the government. Everyday life is regulated and restricted to such a degree that even verbal insults can result in time in prison. Despite these strict rules, society is riddled with moral decay. *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Rash* both demonstrate that the American Dream is out of reach for the lower classes. The sense of powerlessness and a need for revolutionary change persists throughout these two novels, yet by the end of each work there is little hope that this change will take place. By reading both of these works in light of the societal concerns they address, we can see how little society has changed over the last 70 years and how much reform is still called for.

The American Dream, according to James Truslow Adams, is that

Dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement...It is not a dream of motor cars or high wages merely, but a dream of 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 (214-215).

This dream Adams describes what the characters in both *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Rash* are searching for. However, in both novels the necessary social order is lacking in regards to the working classes. Society is designed to empower the wealthy and leave the poor disenfranchised. The use of the “tropes of the hobo-tramp, the road, and the American Dream... [create] renderings of limit, loss, and wandering” (Spangler 308). The freedoms of the working classes are limited, their opportunities, hopes, and their American dream is lost. The lower classed individuals in American society are deprived of all opportunity to reach their fullest potential and are left to wander across the country, or across the continent in *Rash*, in search of new opportunities.

Throughout *The Grapes of Wrath*, the American dream is used as a symbol to capture the attention of the reader. The characters hang their lives on the hopes of obtaining a better life once they reach California. Rose of Sharon, a pregnant young wife, and Ma Joad, the strong motherly presence holding the Joad family together, both repeatedly dream of what they will have once the men find work. Rose of Sharon becomes a symbol of the state of society during the Great Depression. She desperately relies on the stories her husband, Connie, tells her of the house they will have by the time the baby arrives and the work he will do. However, “*The Grapes of Wrath* is a novel

about an old system dying, and a new one beginning to take root” (Railton 28). This new system is still forming. Despite the dreams of the Joad family, there will not be a place for the people they were or want to be in this new society. Unless the Joads can adapt, they will not survive in the new America being created around them. The still born child of Rose of Sharon is symbolic of the new relationship forming between the working classes and the new industrial society from which it is being pushed. “To the lower classes, the industrial revolution is the beginning of their ripeness turning to ruin” (Kanoza 187). Despite the ripe potential of the characters to do the work, the American dream remains out of their reach. The industrial revolution “attempts to make the Joads invisible in the landscape, a cog in the production process” (Henderson 210). These attempts are to some degree successful in causing the disenfranchisement of the migrant workers, but the nature of these workers is never entirely subdued. However, the changing culture forcing the Joad family to become a part of the machine also creates the tensions that will lead towards reform.

In *Rash*, the changing culture also creates a gap through which the Marsten family slips and becomes another part of the machine that is keeping the country moving. Bo Marsten does not understand the capabilities of modern technology. When Bo is provoked into attacking another student, neither he nor his family are able to argue his case. The family is too poor to afford a lawyer and the judicial system is designed to keep people in prison as a vital part of the work force. Bo’s grandfather claims that the legal system is corrupt because “the government sees every minor crime as an opportunity to add another body to the labor force, and to fatten up their coffers” (208). When Bo argues his case in the courtroom, he says, “The judge listened carefully to my side of the story, nodding and shaking his head sympathetically at all the right

places...he thanked me for being so honest and straightforward. He said he understood how a guy could lose control for one brief moment” (82). Despite the understanding of the judge, Bo is sentenced to work in a labor camp where he becomes like a worker drone. For three years, he is expected to do his assigned task for sixteen hours a day without complaint. As with the Joad family, the ability of Bo Marsten to do the work is a ripe and full ability. Unfortunately, there is no reward for the work he does, only further punishment. Feeding on his resentment of the corrupt system responsible for imprisoning him, Bo begins to challenge the status quo.

In order to express the need for reform in America, both Hautman and Steinbeck represent the status quo as lacking in equality and freedom for all Americans. The current state of society is not changing, despite the advances being made in technology and industry in both novels. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck emphasizes the status quo through the use of rich symbolism. He intricately weaves water symbolism throughout his novel to express the plenitude the characters lack. Water becomes a signifier of the privileged. It shows wealth, power, and progress. David Cassuto relates the symbolism of water to the myth of the American garden. The fertility of the Midwest, the garden, was dependent upon water. Through the misuse of this natural resource fertile land became the desert known as the dustbowl. However, according to Cassuto, “the regions aridity made water an absent signifier. Both in the novel and in the desert itself, water’s conspicuous absence is what makes it so powerful” (69). Similarly, in *Rash*, the working classes are also alienated from the American garden because their camps are built in desolate locations in the Canadian tundra. The stark tundra represents what the prisoners are denied. It is a barren place, inhabited only by the starving polar bears that stalk the camp waiting for someone to make his escape. In each

of these novels, the status quo is marked by the have's and the have not's. In *Rash*, the privileged have warmth and safety, the less fortunate can only dream of such things. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, there are those who have water and those searching for it.

The search for water, and all the things water means to the Joad family, is a search in which many migrants joined. Anticipating arguments that the case of the Joads is a particular one, and not indicative of the average migrant experience, Steinbeck crafted his novel with inter chapters that contain the views and opinions of the people watching the flow of people move from Oklahoma to California. These chapters give alternate perspectives on the event of the migration and the conditions of the Okies. Generally, each chapter of the Joad story is paired with the previous inter chapter and they both make the same point- one about conditions generally and one about how they specifically affect the Joads. According to Warren French, Steinbeck “use[s] both in an effort to leave nothing undone that might put his point across” (96). He wanted to be sure that the story of the migrant workers would not be overlooked as a story about the Joads. He also did not want the affects of the things experienced by the Joads to be viewed on so large a scale that they lost their personal meaning. By using this double method, Steinbeck forces the reader “to visualize the problems as they affected particular persons and [denies the reader] the consolation of the sociology textbook that treats depressed groups in numbers too large to be individually meaningful” (French 96-97). In this way, Steinbeck is able to comment on the status quo through the experiences of the Joad family and through the general experiences of the migrant workers.

One common experience of the migrant workers is the break-up of families, one echoed throughout the novel in the Joad family, a constantly changing unit. The Joads

redefine the family unit by adopting non-biological family members, such as Jim Casy, a former preacher who travels west to observe the people. As the family moves westward towards California, they add a few more members to the family. However, along the journey they also begin to lose family members. The family crumbles slowly at first, and then rapidly. Grandpa and Grandma Joad die shortly after the journey begins. Connie, Rose of Sharon's husband, abandons the family. Ned, one of the Joad brothers, and Uncle John decide the family would be better off without them. Jim is arrested, and later killed. Al, another Joad brother, decides to marry and join the family of his bride. Finally, Tom must leave the family to protect everyone and Rose of Sharon's child is stillborn. The last two losses in the family seem to be all that Ma Joad can take. She is determined to keep the rest of her family together. Ma Joad realizes that in order for the members of the family to survive, they must stick together. Rebecca Hinton claims that the

changing concept of family is closely allied to Steinbeck's allusions to socialism and unionism...The author seems to say that disenfranchised people such as the new migrants can survive only by pulling together, assuming authority when necessary, and regarding each other as kin (102-103).

Survival, according to Hinton, becomes contingent on the ability of the people to pull together. The Joads are unable to stay together and are, therefore, unable to survive without adapting.

When the biological family fails, the migrants must adopt new members into their families in order to survive. The allusions to socialism and unionism Hinton points out can also be seen in the efforts made by the men with whom Jim Casy is imprisoned.

Jim notes that when the prisoners were given rotten food, “One fella started yellin’, an’ nothin’ happened...Then another fella yelled.., then we all got yellin’. And we all got on the same tone, an’ ...Then somepin happened! They came a-runnin’, and they give us some other stuff to eat” (490). This observation gave Jim the idea to organize a group rebellion. The men participating in the rebellion act as a family unit. They want what is best for all members of the family, not just themselves. Relationships such as this are necessary for survival. The disenfranchised migrant workers adopt each other as family in order to ensure the survival of the greatest number of individuals.

Coincidentally, the Marsten family in *Rash* is also unable to stay together. Both Bo’s father and brother are a part of the penal system, working at different prison camps. Bo is left with only his mother and his grandfather. Bo’s mother says “I just feel like all my men are being taken away from me” (63). When Bo is sent to prison, his family is shattered. As with the Joad family, he tries to regard his fellow sufferers as kin and pull together with them. His friend and cell mate, Rhino, becomes like family to him. Even after Bo and his father and brother are released from prison, the family still cannot stay together. The lack of reform in their corrupt society ensures that Bo’s brother, Sam, is arrested on new charges before ever making his way home. Their father, who has been in and out of prison for most of his life, finds that he can no longer function in normal society. He says, “in the penal system I did what I had to do to get by. Now I’m back in civilization and look at me. I’m not fit to live in society” (224). He chooses instead to leave his family and return to prison. Since the Marsten family cannot stay together their future, too, becomes uncertain. Unlike *The Grapes of Wrath*, the Marsten family is unable to form lasting family connections with non-biological members. Although Rhino is like family to Bo, once they return to the “United Safer

States of America”, the two are separated. Ultimately, this novel lacks a strong character to unite the people to push for reform. Once Bo returns home he views his options as accepting the status quo or moving to a less developed country where safety and work are viewed in a different light.

Unlike *Rash*, *The Grapes of Wrath* has a motivating character willing to push for reform. That character is Jim Casy, a thinking man. He is one of the first characters to realize the inevitable outcome for the working classes if the current conditions remain the same. Jim begins to actively pursue social change. Steinbeck also uses Jim as a symbol throughout the novel. In the beginning, Jim is introduced shortly after a turtle. Joyce Compton Brown argues that this is because Jim and the turtle represent the same things. The land turtle, another prominent symbol in the novel, bears some striking resemblances to Jim Casy. As Brown cites, Jim comments “Nobody can’t keep a turtle though. They work at it and work at it, and at last they get out and away they go-off somewhere” (28). This statement draws attention to the fact that Jim has also been “off somewhere” and that he will be going across country in the direction that the turtle is headed. Brown states that it is more significant that Steinbeck describes Jim as turtle like in appearance as well. Steinbeck describes Jim’s head saying,

It was a long head, bony, tight of skin, and set on a neck as stringy and muscular as a celery stalk. His eyeballs were heavy and protruding; the lids stretched to cover them, and the lids were raw and red. His cheeks were brown and shiny and hairless and his mouth full- humorous or sensual. The nose, beaked and hard, stretched the skin so tightly that the bridge showed white. There was no perspiration on the face, not even on the tall pale forehead (p. 26).

Brown determines that it is probable that Steinbeck designed Jim and the turtle to be interchangeable symbols based on the following Bible verse:

My beloved spake and said unto me, rise up, my love, my fair

One, and come away.

For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone;

The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing of the

Birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land. (Qtd in

Brown 51; the Song of Songs, 2:10-12).

Although the word turtle in this verse actually refers to turtle dove, it probably suggested to Steinbeck the symbolism of the turtle and of Jim. Brown goes on to explain that “the turtle imagery, especially in the context of its Biblical basis, assists in conveying allegorically the concept of Casy as the lonely wanderer who serves as the reluctant voice of the people” (51). As the voice of the people, Jim becomes the symbol for hope throughout the novel. As in this verse, it is Jim, the turtle, who is heard in the land. Despite the power of persuasion Jim has over his fellow men, he does not choose to preach about reform until he is provoked. He tries to participate in the status quo, but the continual disenfranchisement of migrant workers by wealthy farmers forced Jim to call for a strike against one California peach farm. Initially, it appears that the strike is working. The men who are brought in to break up the strike are being paid the amount the strikers want and the level of security around the farm shows that the oppressors are afraid of this organized rebellion against their tyranny. Unfortunately, the nonviolent protests of the workers fall on deaf ears. A violent retaliation against Jim successfully silences the voice of the people. “A short heavy man steps into the light. He carried a new white pick handle. [He] swung with the pick handle...and Casy fell sideways out of

the light” (495). The death of hope accompanies the death of the former preacher. This event eliminates any lingering optimism that the situation faced by the working classes will get better. This event forces the reader to question the allusions Steinbeck makes to the Bible and to the Song of Songs.

Throughout the novel various allusions to the Bible, and to the Song of Songs in particular, appear. The structure of the novel parallels the structure of the verses of the Bible in many places. According to Peter Lisca, “the extent to which this style is indebted to the Old Testament can be strikingly demonstrated by arranging a similar passage from the novel according to phrases, in the manner of the Bates Bible, leaving the punctuation intact” (Davis, 88). An example of such an arrangement can be seen in the following passage:

*The Tractors had lights shining,
For there is no day and night for a tractor
And the disks turn the earth in the darkness
And they glitter in the daylight.*

*And when a horse stops work and goes into the barn
There is a life and a vitality left,
There is a breathing and a warmth,
And the feet shift on the straw,
And the jaws champ on the hay,
And the ears and the eyes are alive,
There is a warmth of life in the barn,
And the heat and smell of life.*

*But when the motor of the tractor stops,
 It is as dead as the ore it came from.
 The heat goes out of it
 Like the living heat that leaves a corpse (148).*

In this passage, the organization is made up of four phrases for the tractor, eight for the horse, and four again for the tractor. The grammatical structure, meanings, simplicity of diction, balance, concrete details, summary sentences, and reiterations all resemble the crafting of the Bible. “Except for the terms of machinery, the passage might be one of the Psalms” (Davis, 89). The Biblical resonance which gives these passages power is used discreetly. It is never used on the trivial or the particular, which gives its recurrence a cumulative effect. These passages mark the little transitions that are taking place in society. In the passage cited above, the tractor represents the changing way of life for American farmers. The life is being taken out of the work, and with it, the compassion for fellow workers. For this reason, the few farmers who drive the tractors that bulldoze the houses of their neighbors are able to continue with the status quo. The tractor becomes another signifier of the privileged. Steinbeck carefully crafts the passages that mimic the Bible to draw attention to small changes that have large consequences for the Joad family and for the working classes.

Apart from the structural resemblances to the Bible, *The Grapes of Wrath* makes particular connections to the Song of Songs. As well as comparing Jim to the turtle dove, Rose of Sharon’s name comes from the same verse as the reference to the turtle. The Rose of Sharon is supposed to be the most perfect flower. Sharon is one of the largest plains in all of Palestine. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Rose of Sharon is migrating from the

Great Plains to the supposedly more fertile land in California. By connecting Oklahoma to Sharon, Steinbeck contrasts the arid dustbowl region with a region of wild fertility full of beautiful flowers. Despite the seeming fertility of California, Rose of Sharon wilts once she leaves her native land. The slow withering of Rose of Sharon shows how the lives of the migrant workers quickly declined. Rose of Sharon is the symbol of the perfect life the migrant workers are seeking. The loss of her child reveals that perfection is unattainable, yet her brave actions in the end, offering the milk from her breast to a starving stranger, suggests that she can still build some type of life out of her withered world.

The withering of the life of the Joad family is part of the cycle of the American society. In this cycle, “industrial farming is an assertion of individual corporate rights over those established by settled communities of the previous era. Like the Indians before them... the Joads are an expendable commodity” (Keough, 40). This view of the plight of the migrants as part of an inevitable process reveals that this disenfranchisement and displacement of entire communities is what America is founded on. The societal structure prepared to dispense with the Joads is part of the status quo. Despite the fact that changes are taking place in the lives of the migrant workers, the status quo remains the same. It is the same as when the frontier families moved westward, forcing the Native Americans out. It is the same as when the Americans gained California, forcing the Mexicans out. Now a new era is taking over the land and forcing the current tenants out. Unlike the previous cycles, this current trend is national. According to Lloyd Willis,

The cultural core that Steinbeck engages is consistently national in scope and understood as profoundly materialistic, consumptive, wasteful, and

antagonistic toward any form of individuality. Characters who exist outside of this core—visionary and prophetic characters like Tom Joad and Jim Casy—moreover, live precarious lives on a cultural border that is vigilantly patrolled and violently defended against subversives and radicals.

Classifying Jim and Tom as subversives and radicals demonstrates their place outside of the accepted social standards. Their individuality marks them as men who will be willing to fight for a place in society, even if they must create that place themselves. *The Grapes of Wrath* “attacks the cold logic of modernity by creating characters who refuse to accept the particular worldview promulgated by the forces of control and who instead seek to recuperate a sense of enchantment or spirituality in the midst of an ideological lockdown” (Spangler, 309). The characters in *The Grapes of Wrath* resist the cycle which makes their existence obsolete. The passionate resistance offered by Jim Casy in his efforts to organize a strike and in Tom Joad when he kills the man responsible for Jim’s death “laments the price of existence paid by the individual in modern America and gesture toward an antidote for the incivilities of civilization”(Spangler, 309). This antidote is one of reform. In order to cure society of the corruption it suffers, it must be restructured to make a new place for the individuals it has excluded.

Similarly, the antidote for the corruption seen in Hautman’s *Rash* is also reform. Within the labor camp, the prisoners are able to restructure society to make a place for themselves. The prisoners create hierarchies amongst themselves. The society they create is a subcategory within the society that has ostracized and disenfranchised the criminals. Unfortunately, this substitute does not satisfy Bo Marsten. He would rather fight to create an acceptable place within normal society, but when he attempts to stand

up for himself, he is met with violence. One such attempt is after Bo is told that he cannot ask questions and he decides to ask a question anyway. The response he receives is a blow to the stomach from the baton of one of the guards.

While both Steinbeck and Hautman attempt to advocate nonviolent responses for their characters, as seen in the nonviolent protests of Bo in *Rash* and Jim Casy's efforts to lead a strike in *The Grapes of Wrath*, the continued failure of their attempts and the violence they are met with from their oppressors makes the nonviolent route seem doomed. While neither of these authors condones violence, they both see it as the inevitable outcome of the lack of change. As Jim points out, "French Revolution-all them fellas that figured her out got their heads chopped off"(493). Both of these novels seem to be leading inevitably to revolution, yet the authors choose to end the stories of the Marstens and the Joads before that revolution takes place.

In both of these novels, the solution to the problems the working classes are facing is unity. As Jim Casy witnessed during his time in prison, when the people banded together and worked as one unit they got results. However, if the solution is so simple why don't the working classes simply band together to end their suffering? In *Rash*, Bo also questions why this was the case saying, "all we had in common was that we were all male, all teenagers, and all guilty of crimes against society...you would think that since we were all in the same rotten situation, we'd try to get along, but instead we exchanged tough-guy stares" (88). Tom Joad answers both Jim Casey's plea and the question posed by Bo Marsten when he explains that the family has to take care of themselves. He says, "we was outta food. Tonight we had meat. Not much, but we had it. Think pa's gonna give up his meat on account a other fellas? An' Rosasharn oughta get milk. Think Ma's gonna wanta starve that baby jus' 'cause a bunch a fellas is yellin'

outside a gate” (493)? The families will do anything to get what they need. In the prison, the men had nothing to lose by banding together and it was the best way to get what they needed. In this instance, however, the people can get what they need on their own and will actually lose what they have in the short term if they band together. Jim accepts Tom’s explanation but justifies the suffering of men now for the good that will come later by saying “ever’ time they’s a little step fo’ward, she may slip back a little, but she never slips clear back...an’ that makes the whole thing right. An’ that means they wasn’t no waste even if it seemed like they was” (493). Even though Jim makes this argument, he knows that Tom cannot heed it, just as many of the workers in the camp cannot heed it. They must tend to their own survival because that is their nature. The same can be said of the working classes in *Rash*. Individually, the prisoners can gain more by looking out for themselves in the short term, therefore they have no motivation to work together.

The inability of the characters to work together to enact reform creates ambiguous endings in both of these novels. The ending of *The Grapes of Wrath* comes full circle to the beginning with the flood opposing the severe drought the characters faced in Oklahoma. The extreme lack of water in the beginning of the novel provides an interesting juxtaposition to the flooding which climaxes the novel. “Disenfranchised and dehumanized, the Joads can only curse the rising floodwaters even as they once prayed for such a deluge to feed their parched crops” (Cassuto 70). The culmination of the novel is to turn the natural order upside down. A family whose well-being was once integrally tied to the land and the weather now care nothing for the health of that land or for the growing season. This family left their home in search of water and is facing the same threat of destruction now that they have found the water. The return to the desperate

condition represented by the opposite extreme of the same situation reveals that the journey to California has not brought the Joad family closer to the American dream. The status quo has not changed and the working classes are still left to suffer under the elements.

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the reader does not learn the fate of the Joad family. Apart from the family members who have died along the way, there is no indication of what lies ahead for the Joads who are still alive. Louis Owens explains that the reason the ending is ambiguous is because Steinbeck is “describing a situation that just is. Now, something like the paradox of reformer naturalism comes into play there, because he describes the situation that “just is” in which people are, basically, destroyed by a system in order to change the system” (Dunaway,19) . In this situation, Steinbeck cannot express what the ending will be because it is still unfolding. Initially, one of Steinbeck’s editors felt that the ending was unsatisfactory. Upon being requested to alter his the ending by incorporating the stranger Rose of Sharon feeds from her breast into the story and making her act one of more meaning, symbolism and love, Steinbeck responded, “I am sorry but I cannot change that ending...If there is a symbol, it is a survival symbol not a love symbol, it must be an accident, it must be a stranger, and it must be quick” (*A Life in Letters*, 178). Steinbeck goes on to explain that changing the ending of the novel would alter the meaning of the entire work. By the last action of the novel being a symbol of survival, Steinbeck concludes the Joad family will do whatever is necessary to survive. If reform is necessary, it will happen. Interestingly, the ending of this novel is calm compared to the violent and tumultuous actions that have taken place. This dramatic shift is yet another aspect *The Grapes of Wrath* shares with *Rash*.

The ending of *Rash* is also ambivalent. Once Bo is out of prison he continues to

resist the status quo. He feels that society is unjust and he desires to see it change. However, instead of determining to stay and fight for reform, Bo considers the possibilities of either accepting the status quo or fleeing to a place where the current state of things is different. He describes himself as “sixteen years old and already a violent half-educated, unhappy ex-con...a menace, afraid to go out into the world because of what I might inflict upon my fellow citizens” (225-226). Bo does not feel like he can change who he is, and he recognizes that he cannot change the status quo in America on his own. Therefore, he is considering moving to Argentina as his best option because it is not illegal to lose your temper there. It is not illegal to run without padding, or to play football, or to call someone names and even to get into a fight. For either choice, Bo has the support of his grandfather, who remembers a time when America was different. Gramps says “If I was fifty years younger, I’d go myself. In Argentina you can even order a beer in a restaurant” (249). According to Bo Grandfather, the problems of the current American society could only be solved by returning to the way it was in a previous time. This back step is unlikely, which leaves the reader feeling that reform is equally unlikely.

Although the endings of these two novels are ambivalent, their affect on readers is clear. After reading *Rash*, the reader is left with mixed feelings of powerlessness, bitter acceptance, and determined resistance. The fact remains that this is a futuristic society that does not exist, yet. While many aspects of the novel seem to sprout from popular trends of the day, there still time for the reader to affect whether the fears projected in this novel are pure fiction or a hint of prophecy. The reader comes away from the novel feeling warned, watching out for signs that the United Safer States of America may be forming right now. As well as the concerns for future societies, this

novel forces the reader to reflect on the current society. By comparing American society today with the society Bo Marsten lives in, the reader can see the benefits and the shortcomings of their own society in light of the reforms Hautman is advocating. In comparing the current society, it is easy to see that reforms are still needed to provide opportunities for the working classes to attain the American dream.

Reform may still be called for by Hautman, but the status quo has shifted in America since the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Steinbeck's novel had a strong impact on its reader through the honest portrayal of the characters. The reader could relate to the characters and understand where the motivations and actions of the characters were coming from. Simon and Deverell explore the affect of Tom Joad on the reader. They argue that "Tom Joad scared people because Steinbeck wanted him to" (182). The various interpretations of Tom Joad encompass a larger representation in the novel. Tom is the embodiment of the message Steinbeck has infused throughout the novel. He speaks to strong, young men willing to work, but cast down by society. He turns to violence for survival and simultaneously serves as a warning of what other young men are capable of in desperate times. Tom is frightening because the alternative to a reform of the system Steinbeck is writing about is frightening. According to Morris Dickstein, "the plight and migration of the Joads...became a metaphor for the Great Depression" (112). Dickstein goes on to argue that the portrayal of the Joads aroused in Americans sympathy and indignation. For the first time, many Americans were able to understand what the working classes in America were going through. Lincoln Gibbs credits Steinbeck with bettering democracy and giving American citizens an understanding of our fellow man. He says, "Thanks to him we sense the wrongs, the virtues, and the potential strength of thousands of our fellow citizens whom we had not

known. His writings make for democracy” (184). In a sense, the reform the novel is building towards is something that Steinbeck hopes will happen outside of the novel.

John Steinbeck had particular goals in mind when he set out to write about the migrant workers from the dustbowl. After *The Grapes of Wrath* was published, Steinbeck said, “[The migrants] are getting some relief, now, but there must be more” (*Conversations with John Steinbeck*, 17). The sympathy and indignation aroused in Americans prompted efforts to help the working classes. Steinbeck told his editors, “I am not writing a satisfactory story. I’ve done my damndest to rip a reader’s nerves to rags, I don’t want him satisfied” (*A Life in Letters*, 178). He did not want reader’s satisfied with the status quo. He wanted the reader to carry out some of the reforms that Tom Joad and Jim Casy failed to carry out. Looking back over the past 70 years, there has clearly been progress towards creating a society in which the American dream is accessible to all American citizens. However, novels such as *Rash* remind us that there is still work to be done.

The importance of comparing these two novels lies in the possibilities that emerge through studying them together. These works complement each other very well in an educational setting, such as a high school classroom. By reading these works students will understand themes central to American Literature. Through the study of *The Grapes of Wrath* high school students will be able to see part of the history of the American dream. They will understand what the American Dream meant and will be able to question its existence in the 1930’s for the working classes. By supplementing *The Grapes of Wrath* with *Rash*, high school students will be able to see how the American Dream functions in relation to themselves. The material in *Rash* is something adolescents can relate to more easily than they can relate to the material in *The grapes*

of Wrath. *Rash* is not as heavy and depressing, yet it conveys many of the same important themes as Steinbeck's work. It is critical when teaching adolescents to find a means of making the material matter to them. Young adult literature does that. It is written specifically for the adolescent audience and uses contemporary setting and conflict to engage the reader. In the 1939, Steinbeck engaged readers across the country because *The Grapes of Wrath* dealt with what was happening at the time. Today, Hautman is able to engage his readers in the same way. The readers can relate to the struggle of the Marsten family in a way that some readers will never be able to relate to the Joads. The contemporary setting of *Rash* is merely an update to the ongoing American struggle enshrined in the sort of myths both books dismantle. Contemporary adolescent literature is just as vital in the classroom as classical literature because it proves that literature speaks today, and in doing so it becomes not a fixed thing, an object, but something that adapts and changes as we as a society change and as readers become more aware. Using both in the modern classroom enhances student awareness of the past and of the present. These works of literature can inspire students to learn more and to express themselves. Students can create and exercise agency through literacy. Only by exercising this agency can students become the individuals who will challenge the status quo in America. It is necessary to teach these two novels to show students that the conflict in *The Grapes of Wrath* is not confined to the past. John Steinbeck wanted his reader to take action. By utilizing Pete Hautman's cautionary tale of what America will be if no one challenges the corrupt systems now in power students will understand that action still needs to be taken. The reform both of these novels calls for is the end to oppression, the end to poverty versus privilege, and the beginning of the realization that the American Dream is meant for all. The message given to the reader

when these novels are studied together is one of hope and change. An America where all individuals can enjoy the American dream does not exist for the characters in the fiction of these authors, but through the actions the reader chooses to take it can exist in today's America.

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