

# The Attainability of the American Dream in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath*

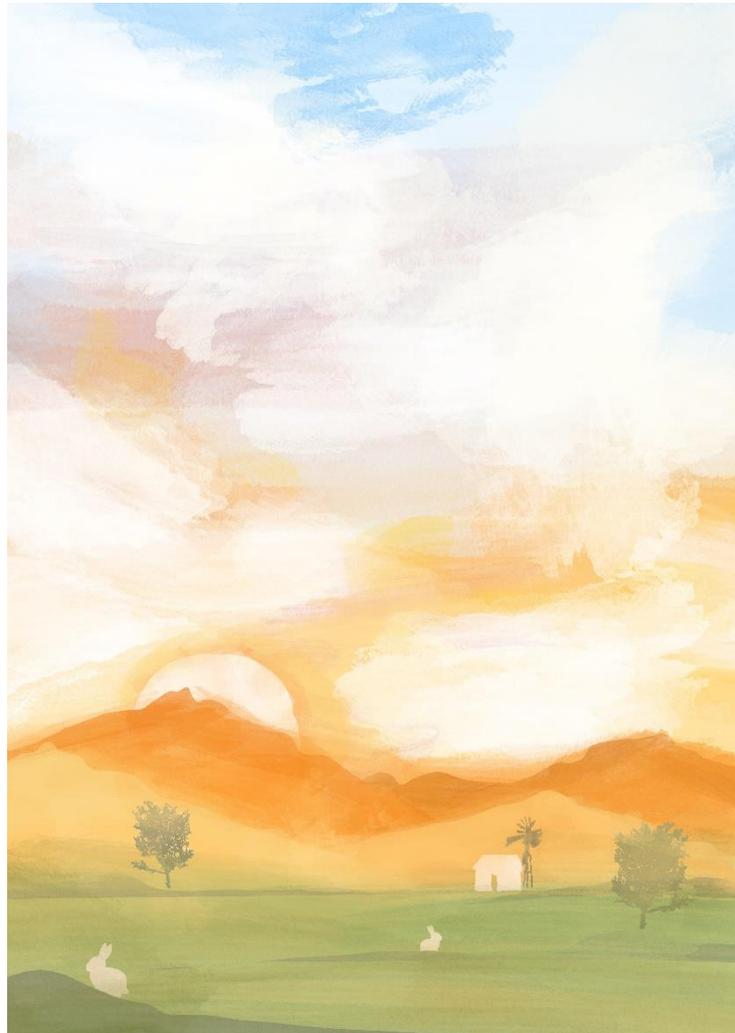


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5451 words (excl. quotations and works cited)

2 July 2021

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## Abstract

John Steinbeck's Great Depression novels *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) engage with the American Dream and the extent to which migrant farmers can attain it. Despite their engagement with this cornerstone of US society, literary critics tend to underestimate the present-day relevance of these works. This BA thesis performs a comparative close reading of the texts and argues that the American Dream is a myth: the characters of Lennie Small and Rose of Sharon Joad serve to underscore the fact that vulnerable people who depend on others are not granted a chance to pursue their Dream. Informed by Steinbeck's unpublished essay "Argument of Phalanx", this thesis also asserts interdependency and cooperation between migrant farmers could aid them in achieving the Dream and, by extension, transform the structure of US society.

## Introduction

When John Steinbeck published *In Dubious Battle* in 1936 – a novel written from the perspective of two labor organizers in California – his priority was not to denounce the oppression of farm workers. In a letter to his friend George Albee, the author states he was "not interested in ranting about justice and oppression (...) [he] wanted merely to be a recording consciousness, judging nothing, simply putting things down" (qtd. in Cohen 23-24). Steinbeck was more interested in studying organized workers' group behavior than he was in aligning himself with the Leftist agenda (17). The author's fascination with observing group behavior stems from his friendship with marine biologist Edward F. Ricketts, whom he met in 1930. From Ricketts, Steinbeck learned to see "human struggles in a broader biological context" (19) and felt prompted to create his own theory. Steinbeck worked on his essay "Argument of Phalanx" between 1934 and 1936 and handed it to his friend Richard Albee upon completion (Astro 63). Although the essay was never published for a wider audience – reasons as to why are not indicated anywhere – a physical photocopy is available through UC Berkeley's Bancroft Library in a collection entitled "John Steinbeck collection of letters and papers, 1935-1971". Sam McNeilly quotes directly from said photocopy in his 2020 article "Visions from the Tide Pool: John Steinbeck's Interdependent Migrant Community". However, Richard Astro's 1973 book *John Steinbeck and Edward F. Ricketts: The Shaping of a Novelist* quotes the original text more extensively than McNeilly, making it the most secure link to this primary source. It is for this reason this thesis is informed by Astro's discussion of the phalanx theory. The central idea of "Argument of Phalanx" – its name borrowed from a Roman battle strategy that had soldiers form a group and raise their shields on all sides to protect the flanks – draws on the notion that all superorganisms are made up of smaller components. As any other superorganism, the phalanx – or group-man – consists of multiple individuals. In this light, the phalanx forms a new organism with a will of its own (Astro 63),

and is more powerful than the sum of its parts. In turn, according to Steinbeck, the strength of the phalanx enables its members to achieve more than they would be capable of on their own. In other words, the phalanx ensures a degree of individual empowerment: "Once a man has become a unit in a phalanx in motion, he is capable of prodigies of endurance of thought or of emotion such as would be unthinkable were he acting as individual man" (qtd. in Astro 65). Indeed, the notion that groups of people are able to achieve more by virtue of their cooperation was not a rare phenomenon in US society of the 1930s. This thesis explores two key novels by Steinbeck in light of this unpublished theory of the phalanx.

Whereas the 1920s had been an era of unprecedented wealth marked by a rapid increase of national income and an explosive growth of consumerism (Himmelberg 6), the Great Depression of the 1930s pushed the nation into a deep crisis. Numerous causes laid at its foundation, among them stock market speculation, excessive borrowing at high interest rates, and corrupt corporate and banking practices (Egolf 82). Dire consequences followed: by late 1931 a quarter of the total work force had become unemployed and many citizens had lost their homes and savings (Himmelberg 10). Particularly the agricultural sector suffered enormously: as a consequence of the economic crisis, farm prices dropped 55%, lowering incomes and consequently worsening farmers' debts. Foreclosures were a common-place phenomenon: an estimated one-third of all farmers lost their land (9). In addition, the Dust Bowl hit the Mid-West in 1930, marking the beginning of an extremely dry period that would last several years (8). This combination of an economic and natural disaster left hundred thousands of farmers from the Plains no other choice but to migrate westward in search of employment (10). Many of them landed in Steinbeck's home town: the Salinas Valley in California, the heart of agribusiness (Holmes 52). Here they would work hard to secure a better life for themselves, but often to no avail (Himmelberg 10).

Jackson Benson argues that Steinbeck's research for *In Dubious Battle* possibly made him sympathize with the plight of migrants farmers (Cohen 27), motivating the author to reinvestigate the topic with a new attitude. Two new books were the result: Steinbeck was finishing *Of Mice and Men* (1937) in August 1936 when he was asked by the *San Francisco News* to write a series of articles<sup>1</sup> on the ever-growing problem of migrant farmers in California (26). The author traveled to several migrant camps, living and eating with the migrants to understand the severity of their situation (29). The first-hand experience he gained in these camps also served as inspiration for *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). *Of Mice and Men* tells the story of George Milton and Lennie Small: itinerant ranch hands who dream of owning a house and a small patch of land together (*Mice* 16). *The Grapes of Wrath* follows the Joad family as they are forced to abandon their farm in Oklahoma and trek to California, where they hope to buy a "little white house[s] in among the orange trees" (*Grapes* 105). These works continue Steinbeck's fascination with the phalanx in that they show groups of people working together, improving the chance they have at attaining their dream, or more specifically, the American Dream. Significantly, that term was formally coined during the Great Depression by historian James Truslow Adams in his 1931 book *The Epic of America*:

The dream is a vision of a better, deeper, richer life for every individual, regardless of the position in society which he or she may occupy by the accident of birth. It has been a dream of a chance to rise in the economic scale, but quite as much, or more than that, of a chance to develop our capacities to the full, unhampered by unjust restrictions of caste or custom. With this has gone the hope of bettering the physical conditions of living, of lessening the toil and anxieties of daily life (qtd. in Samuel 13).

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<sup>1</sup> Entitled *The Harvest Gypsies*, published daily between 5 and 12 October 1936 (Steinbeck and Wollenberg 5).

Adams proposes an idyllic definition of American life: work hard and you will prosper, regardless of your social station. Steinbeck problematizes this notion in *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath* by showing characters who live on the fringes of society, working tirelessly and depending on one another to achieve their Dream of land- and homeownership, but who eventually fail to secure this vision of a better, deeper, richer life. Especially the characters of Lennie Small and Rose of Sharon Joad are vital in addressing the mythical aspects of the American Dream.

While *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath* offer social critique on the treatment of farm workers in the 1930s, they continue to be relevant for American society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, Steinbeck critic Donald Noble observes a tendency in literary critics to label Steinbeck's popular works – including *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath* – as dated (4). This is not the case. To borrow Noble's apt counterstatement: "Are the problems of migrant workers solved? (...) Have banks and large corporations ceased to be impersonal or amoral?" (4).

Centralizing the plight of farm workers in the 1930s, *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath* show that the cornerstone of the American Dream – its claim that anyone regardless of their position in society has a chance to pursue their Dreams for the future – is a myth. By the end of both stories none of the characters have been able to secure their American Dream. However, not all is lost: both works plant a seed of hope by showing the potential of cooperation, of mutually beneficial interdependency. In other words, the power of the phalanx. This BA thesis argues that *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath* show that individuals from marginalized groups such as farm workers do not have a fair chance at attaining the American Dream, while simultaneously demonstrating the potential of the phalanx when faced with hardship. The chapters are structured as follows: chapter 1 performs

a comparative close reading of Lennie Small and Rose of Sharon Joad's role in demonstrating the powerlessness of marginalized, vulnerable individuals who dream a Dream. Chapter 2 engages with the notion of phalanx and shows, through comparative close reading, the potential of cooperation. Lastly, I conclude with a statement on the research project as a whole.

## Chapter 1. The American Myth

*Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath* are set in a tumultuous decade. Not only are the 1930s marked by mass migration from the Mid-West due to the economic crisis and the Dust Bowl, but this period also marked a shift from manual labor to mechanization. By 1938 five men could complete work that required 350 pairs of hands prior to automatization. Consequentially, itinerant farm workers were disappearing rapidly and migrant farmers' attempts at finding employment were often fruitless (Loftis 135). Both works engage with the consequences that come with this type of transition: faced with scarce employment opportunities, farm workers were at a great disadvantage. A lack of income affects the odds of survival, as well as the chance to pursue a better life. Lennie Small and Rose of Sharon Joad find themselves in this situation, and deal with additional challenges as well. Lennie's mental affliction leaves him dependent on his friend George Milton for directions, and Rose of Sharon, being a young pregnant woman, relies on her husband Connie for sustenance. Nevertheless, both of them dream of living a deeper, richer life and believe they can attain it. In this light, both works utilize them to point out a shortcoming of the American Dream, namely that those with special needs or any other form of dependency on others are not granted a chance at achieving the Dream.

Lennie and Rose of Sharon are both portrayed as dependent people, either through personality traits or rank in the family order. *Of Mice and Men's* opening pages reveal Lennie's childlike nature when he sits down by the water: "Lennie dabbled his big paw in the water and wiggled his fingers so the water arose in little splashes; rings widened across the pool to the other side and came back again. Lennie watched them go. "Look, George. Look what I done"" (5). The narrator likens Lennie's hand to a large animal's paw, which invokes connotations of strength and danger, portending the climactic event of the story, but more importantly, it reveals an innocent aspect of his personality – he makes the water splash and

proudly wants to show George. This behavior is not uncommon in small children. Already the narrator is showing that Lennie is unlike other men traveling the highway looking for work; he requires extra support. When the two sit down, "Lennie, who had been watching, imitated George exactly. He pushed himself back, drew up his knees, embraced them, looked over to George to see whether he had it just right" (5). In his mimicry Lennie reveals he requires directions for basic actions; he depends on George to such a degree it renders him vulnerable in work- and living conditions that are already harsh. In terms of survival, Lennie needs George more than George needs Lennie. It is true that George gains companionship and love, even the fulfilment of caring for another person, as Brian Doyle Leahy suggests (84), but the fact that Lennie needs George for basic survival outweighs the companionship George derives from Lennie. Indeed, had George not given him the go-ahead to defend himself Lennie would have been mercilessly beaten up by Curley: "'Make 'um let me alone, George'" (*Mice* 63). Similarly, Rose of Sharon Joad relies on male family members to make decisions; the family hierarchy dictates she takes her position in the back row during family meetings. On the eve of their departure to California the Joad family gathers around: Grampa, Uncle John and Pa are the family elders and main decision-makers; they sit down in the center. Behind them stand the other men: Tom, Connie and Noah. Lastly, the women and children, who stand in the back (*Grapes* 116). Significantly, the women do not participate in the decision-making process, as becomes evident from Al's contribution to the meeting: "This was Al's first participation in the conference. Always he had stood behind with the women before" (117). The novel shows that young men, like Al, may earn the right to contribute once they reach adulthood, which means that Rose of Sharon – being a young, pregnant woman – depends on her male relatives to take decisions for her. Her lack of agency is in contradiction with a tenet of the American Dream, namely its claim that every individual should be able to pursue their ambitions regardless of social station. The character of Rose of Sharon thus shows this aspect

of the Dream is not the case for perhaps many women from farming communities, as she is not in a position to make her own decisions. In short, Lennie and Rose depend on other people to take their decisions for them, pointing out their vulnerability.

The characters' dependency on relatives or companions for direction and decision-making extends to their vision of the American Dream. George and Lennie dream of owning a "little house and a couple of acres an' a cow and some pigs" (*Mice* 16). A farm, a patch of land and animals to tend to: a simple but idyllic vision of the future, labeled by John Marsden as the quintessential American Dream. More specifically, Marsden suggests, it is a reaction to people's alienation from the production process. Those "couple of acres" would allow the duo to finally enjoy the fruits of their own labor and reap harvests they can call their own instead of working temporary jobs for corporate land owners (295). In other words, the two yearn for self-sufficiency; precisely that which Lennie is incapable of. He happily joins in during certain parts of George's monologue sketching the minutiae of their farm life, but when asked to tell it himself, he replies "'No, you. I forget some a' the things. Tell about how it's gonna be'" (*Mice* 16). It becomes evident to the reader that Lennie would indeed be unable to look after himself, that he would have little chance at success on his own because of his dependency on his friend. However, dependency is not bad in and of itself; George gains love and friendship, too. But the story makes it explicit that there is perhaps no place for Lennie in the American Dream if he cannot picture it himself. Lennie hints at this when he tells George he would live in a cave if that meant he would no longer be a nuisance (14). *The Grapes of Wrath* follows a similar path with Rose of Sharon in that she, too, has become enamored with the Dream someone else has painted for her and would depend on this person to attain it. She excitedly paraphrases Connie's words when she tells her mother about their future in California: "'Connie says I'm gonna have a *doctor* when the baby's born (...) we'll live in a town an' go to pitchers whenever, an' - well, I'm gonna have a 'lectric iron, an' the baby'll have

all new stuff" (*Grapes* 192). In Edward John Royston's words, Rose of Sharon wants to become a modern woman in a modern town as opposed to remaining a girl from the countryside (159). She aspires to have access to entertainment, consumer goods and healthcare: all symptoms of urban living which the American nation rushed towards during the 1920s. Importantly, rural communities often stayed behind in that regard: by 1930 around 40% of the population still lived in rural communities of fewer than 2500 inhabitants (Grant 256). Given the historical context, Rose of Sharon's dream seems impossible; it is too great a distance to climb on the social ladder. Royston suggests Rose of Sharon's naivety lies in her misjudgment of misleading magazine advertisements (154), but it is actually more rooted in her blind faith in Connie. He says this is the life they will lead once they reach California and – in her fascination with having access to all aspects of urban life – she has no reason to believe otherwise. Additionally, her naivety is revealed through her blind trust in Connie to provide this urban lifestyle by himself; she cannot contribute towards this goal the way her husband could. In her excitement she explains to Ma that "'*Connie* gonna get a job in a store or maybe a fact'ry. An' *he's* gonna study at home, maybe radio, so *he* can get to be an expert an' maybe later have *his* own store'" (*Grapes* 192, my emphasis). With the emphasis on Connie's actions, it is clear that Rose of Sharon would not be able to secure the life of a modern woman by herself. Ma Joad comes to realize this, too. For a moment she feared her daughter would leave the family in favor of an urban lifestyle, but with some relief "[She] suddenly seemed to know it was all a dream. She turned her head forward again and her body relaxed, but the little smile stayed around her eyes" (192). These works indicate – with Lennie and Rose of Sharon both dependent on their companions for basic sustenance as well as a chance to attain the American Dream – the slim chance they have to build their desired life on their own.

Lennie and Rose of Sharon reveal and underscore a significant flaw in the American Dream, and by extension also in the structure of American society: those in need of special care are treated as disposable or they end up with the complete opposite of what they set out to achieve. Anne Loftis' interpretation of the social dynamic between itinerant farmers in *Of Mice and Men* describes "a society intolerant of weakness or difference" (137). Candy's old dog is an example of this sentiment. In pain and no longer able to herd sheep, Carlson treats him as a nuisance. Seeing no reason to keep Candy's trusty old friend alive, he remarks: "He's all stiff with rheumatism. He ain't no good to you, Candy. An' he ain't no good to himself. Why'n't you shoot him, Candy?" (*Mice* 45). Although Carlson acknowledges the animal's suffering, his focus remains on the dog's usefulness to Candy: he has rheumatism and is therefore no longer useful to Candy, besides the fact the animal "ain't no good to himself" either. In Carlson's eyes the dog is disposable, ignoring Candy's attempts to prevent the execution of his canine companion:

"Candy said hopefully, "You ain't got no gun."

"The hell I ain't. Got a Luger. It won't hurt him none at all" (48)

The narrative draws a parallel between the dog and Lennie as they essentially share the same fate. George speaks of Lennie in the same vein Candy proudly recalls his dog's sheep-herding days: in response to Slim praising Lennie's strength, "George spoke proudly. "Jus' tell Lennie what to do an' he'll do it if it take no figuring. He can't think of nothing to do himself but he sure can take orders"" (40). Indeed, Lennie's muscle would make him invaluable in the industrial system, but since he has no control over his strength he also forms a threat to the very system that values it. In other words, Lennie exists outside the system because he lacks self-control (Marsden 296). George comes to realize this too after he learned of Curley's wife's death. In a final act of love, George does what Candy regrets he did not do: "I ought to of shot that dog myself, George. I shouldn't have ought to of let no stranger shoot my dog""

(*Mice* 61). In the end, Lennie is denied the right to live and pursue better days. In a similar vein, Rose of Sharon's dream is shattered when Connie abandons her. After Connie tells her he regrets going to California, and in her eyes has ruined their future plans, "[She] rolled on her back and stared at the top of the tent. And then she put her thumb in her mouth for a gag and she cried silently" (*Grapes* 296). She feels defeated because her plans to live an urban life vanish without Connie, and she continues to feel his absence for the remainder of the novel. In an angry retort to Tom, she asks: "What chance I got to have a nice baby? Connie's gone, an' I ain't getting' good food (...) What chance that baby got to get bore right?" (464-65). And indeed her baby did not get bore right. The child was a stillborn, and came into the world during a heavy storm in a stationary car. Rose of Sharon's pregnancy ended entirely opposite to the way she envisioned it to be.

Through the characters of Lennie and Rose of Sharon, *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath* point out that vulnerable individuals are sidelined by the American Dream. In theory, as Adams suggests, any individual should be able to pursue their ambitions and dreams freely regardless of social station. In their tragic inability to attain their Dream, Lennie and Rose of Sharon reveal the American Dream – a cornerstone of American society – to be a myth.

## Chapter 2. Potential of the Phalanx

Both *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath* utilize the phalanx theory to show that migrant farmers have power by cooperating – as opposed to individual efforts – and are potentially capable of achieving their version of the American Dream by virtue of their cooperation. *The Grapes of Wrath* extends this notion by showing that unionized migrant farmers can stand up to the very system that oppresses them.

In his research into group behavior, Steinbeck was interested in whether humans could retain their individuality when they are part of a group (Astro 63). In his 1955 piece entitled "Some Thoughts on Juvenile Delinquency" the author returned to the subject of group behavior and concluded that man cannot successfully be an individual until he fulfills a role in a group (65). This means that group participation – or a phalanx – can fill its individual members with a sense of purpose and direction otherwise unobtainable for them. In this light, individual components of a phalanx strengthen the group and vice versa; it is a mutually beneficial relationship. William James Connor concurs in his reading of Steinbeck's phalanx that "Such interdependence increases people's own abilities and utility while at the same time enabling them to be of assistance to the larger community" (223). *Of Mice and Men* exemplifies such a relationship with Candy, the old, physically disabled swamper who becomes engrossed by the farm George describes to Lennie. He is empowered on an individual level because he joins the two protagonists in their endeavors. When he offers to join them and use the \$350 he has saved up: "They looked at one another, amazed. This thing they had never really believed in was coming true" (60). With Candy's contributions, George and Lennie would finally be able to pursue their Dream instead of treating it as their escapist fantasy. In other words, Candy's participation has strengthened the entire phalanx, taking them all one step closer to their desired farm. And as the phalanx theory dictates, Candy is empowered in return. He explains that he will be fired as soon as the boss considers him no

longer useful to the ranch, but joining George and Lennie re-ignites the possibility for him to live with purpose and dignity: "Maybe if I give you guys my money, you'll let me hoe the garden even after I ain't no good at it (...) I'll be on our own place, an' I'll be let to work on our own place" (60). The security of the phalanx would enable Candy to continue to fulfill his tasks even after old age and a physical disability prevent him from carrying them out efficiently. Moreover, he would go to work knowing he is cultivating and contributing to his own patch of land, meaning he has achieved his American Dream of a better, richer life without suffering from daily anxieties. But most importantly, Lennie benefits from the phalanx on a personal level, too. Chapter 1 of this thesis delved into Lennie's vulnerability in a hostile society; he relies on George for directions, and without his friend he would be unable to imagine the American Dream of owning and working his own farm, let alone achieve it. For a brief moment, the odds are shifted in his favor as the trio realizes they will be able to purchase the farm together. As George imagines the possibilities that lie ahead, Lennie excitedly reminds him of his greatest desire: "'An' put some grass to the rabbits," Lennie broke in. "I wouldn't never forget to feed them"' (61). With the farm now having become a tangible reality, Lennie vows never to forget to tend the rabbits. Considering his history of having an impaired short-term memory, dedicating himself to a task he loves would improve his overall functioning. As with Candy, the farm provides a safe environment where he can live with purpose and dignity and carry out his tasks his own way.

Similar to George, Lennie and Candy, the Joad family forms a phalanx that enables them to travel cross-country to California in the hopes of securing a home and employment among the orchards. Ma Joad paints a rosy picture of what she hopes to find in the golden state: "But I like to think how nice it's gonna be, maybe, in California. Never cold. An' fruit ever' place, an' people just bein' in the nicest places, little white houses in amongst the orange trees" (*Grapes* 105). An admirable dream all members of the family are committed to now

that they have lost their home and livelihood. All they have left to brave this storm with is each other. The family holds a meeting on the eve of their departure to discuss their strategy during which "They seemed to be part of an organization of the unconscious. They obeyed impulses which registered only faintly in their thinking minds" (115). This shows they are all part of a larger being, a notion proposed by Steinbeck himself in his theory of phalanx: once a man has become part of a moving phalanx, his desires and habits change. The phalanx essentially controls its members' desires (Astro 65). That is not to say everything goes well solely because they are traveling together; it is the strength of the family that enables them to face any hardship they meet. The Wilsons' car is damaged and in need of repairs before it can continue its journey. Tom proposes they split up: he and Casy stay behind to handle the repairs while the others continue the journey to California and try to find work (*Grapes* 195). All are in agreement, except for Ma who refuses to break up the group (196-97). Cyrus Zirakzadeh situates Ma's revolt within the larger context of social interdependence vis-à-vis individual money-making. Ma finds the latter destructive of the family's collective identity, a logical sentiment given the fact the family has always been interdependent for their sustenance (613-14). Thus Ma is the first to acknowledge that cooperation and interdependence are the key to their survival: "All we got is the family unbroke. Like a bunch of cows, when the lobos are ranging, stick all together" (*Grapes* 198). The herd survives, whereas the lone cow does not.

Ma's mantra does not solely concern the Joad family, but all migrating farmer families seeking better days in California. These families hail from all corners of the Mid-West but they are united in their status as migrant farmers. Together, they form one family – a phalanx – capable of self-government and trekking across the country via Highway 66. Rick Marshall suggests the highway's function in *The Grapes of Wrath* is twofold: it is a product of industrial capitalism – the very system migrant farmers are trying to escape – as well as a

symbol of freedom: a means to escape and seek out better days (74). The highway thus provides freedom, but it also forces assimilation: the road strips families of their individuality and reduces them to migrants. By the time they arrive in California, they all have the same experiences behind them and desires ahead of them (63-64). Yet in the face of losing their individuality the migrants continue to persevere and make assimilation their strength. The narrator observes – from a distance yet compassionately – the interaction between different migrant families as they stop for the night: "In the evening a strange thing happened: the twenty families became one family, the children were the children of all. The loss of home became one loss, and the golden time in the West was one dream" (*Grapes* 228). This shows their union, their collective past experiences and future dreams; they find solace and comfort in each other's company after their harrowing experiences. They are rebuilding a strong community that will enable them to overcome past sorrows and future hurdles. At night they form little worlds, bubbles of safety that restore the order and security they have lost at the hands of industrial capitalism: "The families moved westward, and the technique of building worlds improved so that the people could be safe in their worlds; and the form was so fixed that a family acting in the rules knew it was safe in the rules" (229). In this new found order they find themselves settling into routines without giving it second thought:

And as the cars moved westward, each member of the family grew into his proper place, grew into his duties (...) each member had his duty and went to it without instruction: children to gather wood, to carry water; men to pitch the tents and bring down the tents; women to cook the supper and to watch while the family fed (229-30).

The new phalanx has provided them with structure and security. The families know they will be safe another night surrounded by a warm community. Naturally there are also families who do not partake in world-building along the Highway. Some families are anxious to get to California they "drove night and day (...) flying from the road, flying from movement (...)

forcing the clashing engines over the roads" (*Grapes* 230-31). Their fates remain a mystery, but Rick Marshall offers insight into what could happen to those who break free from the assimilated majority: a jackrabbit jumping along the road, occasionally trying to jump off the road but is eventually run over by a car. There will be dangerous consequences for those who do not assimilate, so Marshall argues (74). Lennie can be counted among those who do not assimilate: as previously suggested by Marsden, Lennie's strength cannot be controlled, rendering him a threat to the industrial system. As someone with special needs, he stands out and is not granted a place in society. Then it is only in the migrant families' collective benefit that they "scuttled like bugs to the westward" (*Grapes* 227), slowly and steadily as one organism trekking down the asphalt artery towards the green heart of California.

Both works thus engage with the theory of phalanx to show there is more beyond the individual: groups ensure individuals a degree of safety, and the competencies of every individual member combined could potentially make the American Dream a reality. Nevertheless, the works differ fundamentally in tone with regard to their endings: *Of Mice and Men* ends on a hopeless note, whereas *The Grapes of Wrath's* final chapters remain hopeful. The phalanx established by George, Lennie and Candy collapses when George and Candy discover the body of Curley's wife. Fearing for the future, Candy asks George whether the two of them can still purchase the farm, but:

Before George answered, Candy dropped his head and looked down at the hay. He knew. George said softly, "- I think I knowed from the very first. I think I knowed we'd never do her. He usta like to hear about it so much I got to thinking maybe we would" (93).

Knowing Lennie will be incarcerated, or worse, lynched, George realizes their plans have come to an end. The Dream of a couple of acres was one he shared with Lennie, without him,

it is shattered for the whole group. Contrary to *Of Mice and Men's* ending, *The Grapes of Wrath* maintains a hopeful note, showing groups continuing to stay together when faced with hardship. Commissioned by the *San Francisco News* to investigate the migrant problem, Steinbeck was also tasked to report what Roosevelt's Resettlement Administration (RA) was doing to relieve sanitation issues in migrant camps. Arriving at one such government camp, Weedpatch, Steinbeck was impressed with the degree of self-governance the migrants were allowed (Cohen 28). The Joad family arrives at an identically named camp where they have access to sanitation, a chance to partake in a committee and even entertainment in the form of dance parties. Not to mention that police are not allowed to enter without a warrant (*Grapes* 338). The real and fictional camp Weedpatch demonstrate the potential efficacy of interdependent relationships in attaining the American Dream, underscoring that individualism should not be the standard mode of living. The camp's facilities even leave a great impression on Rose of Sharon, who cannot contain her excitement: "the words bubble[d] out" (361) as she tells Ma about the nurse who tends to the pregnant women on her weekly visits to Weedpatch. Here her excitement mirrors her optimistic attitude at the beginning of the family's journey, when she was enthralled by the idea of having access to the sort of maternal healthcare the nurse at Weedpatch provides. What the camp thus demonstrates is that cooperation between migrants benefits the whole group; together they govern the camp in such a way that allows all members to survive and thrive, even the most vulnerable among them such as pregnant young women. Preacher-turned-unionizer Jim Casy is the first character to realize cooperation holds even greater potential: not only does it ensure survival, it can also be a means to bring about systematic change. Casy tells Tom Joad how he arrived at this revelation in prison:

One fella started yellin', an' nothin' happened. He yelled his head off. Trusty come along an' looked in an' went on. Then another fella yelled. Well, sir, then we all got

yellin'. And we all got on the same tone, an' I tell ya, it jus' seemed like that tank bulged an' give and swelled up. By God! Then somepin happened! They come a-runnin', and they give us some other stuff to eat (451).

By yelling for the guards as a group, the prisoners managed to be given better food to eat, hence improving their living conditions by cooperating. Sam McNeilly reads Casy as a Christ-like figure preaching the teachings of Cooperative Ecology, an extension of the phalanx theory that includes cooperation between human beings and their natural environment (33). In McNeilly's words, Tom becomes Casy's first disciple (38) after his violent confrontation with the police, now convinced that "A fella ain't got a soul of his own, on'y a piece of a big one" (*Grapes* 495). And with all these souls united in the face of hardship and injustice, much can be improved and a fair chance at living the American Dream may be within reach.

To conclude, the phalanx plays an essential role in both works. It demonstrates that interdependency between people can strengthen the group as a whole, but also its individual members, allowing them to live with dignity and the potential to live the American Dream they desire. While *Of Mice and Men* ends on a pessimistic note, *The Grapes of Wrath* implies interdependency between migrant farmers could initiate a change in the fabric of American society, one more oriented towards solidarity.

## Conclusion

Any accusations of sentimentality and outdatedness directed at *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath* overlook the present-day relevance these works still hold. This BA thesis investigated the attainability of the American Dream as portrayed in these books, and determined it is more akin to a myth: Lennie and Rose of Sharon are in no position to achieve the Dream they desire, showing that the concept of the American Dream – on which US society is built – is fundamentally flawed. The notion of the American Dream forms a stark contrast with the Great Depression that ravaged the nation to such an extent that hundreds of thousands of farmers lost their livelihoods, leaving them no other option than to seek better days elsewhere. Both *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath* engage with the potential of social interdependency by means of the theory of phalanx, showing that US society can turn away from its focus on individualism and work towards a society that favors cooperation and solidarity. As this thesis is structured around the phalanx in relation to human beings, it left little room to discuss Steinbeck's theory on an even larger scale. Therefore ecological readings such as presented by McNeilly in 2020 seem deserving of more exploration, particularly in light of global climate change. Despite this limitation, this BA thesis has shown that Steinbeck's phalanx theory and critique of the treatment of migrant farmers are still relevant. Earlier this year President Biden announced a \$1.9 trillion plan to battle the COVID-19 pandemic which includes a \$1400 stimulus check for most Americans and an extension of unemployment benefits (Stein). Biden's administration also aims to carry out a \$2 trillion jobs and infrastructure plan, or the Build Back Better plan, funded by taxes on large corporations and wealthy citizens. It aims to create millions of jobs in order to facilitate the country's shift to a sustainable economy (Gambino). Faiz Shakir, Bernie Sanders' campaign manager, considers Biden's plans an "investment in working people on a scale we have not seen since FDR" (qtd. in Gambino). As millions of Americans struggle with unemployment due to the

pandemic, an administration that favors community over the individual and supports its citizens in their basic needs would go a long way toward giving everyone a fair chance to live the American Dream, regardless of social station.

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