John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*: Home-Seeking and the Ambiguity of the Ending

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I. Introduction

The first response to *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) was that this work was about class struggle and the attack on capitalism.[1] The editorial in Collier's charged it with being communist propaganda. The Associated Farmers of Kern County, California, denounced the book

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[1] In this sense when this work first appeared it was regarded as a sociological document. Thus, the reception was to mostly prove or disapprove the factual accuracies. For example, Professor O. B. Duncan, head of the Department of Sociology at A. and M. college said that ". . . all the available data prove beyond doubt that the general impression given by Steinbeck's book is substantially reliable." [Oklahoma City *Times*, February 5, 1940.] The title of the editorial which came from the same newspaper, May 4, 1939, was "Grapes of Wrath? Obscenity and Inaccuracy." For more details, see Shockley, 117-120.

as "obscene sensationalism" and "propaganda in its vilest form" (Shockley 117-119).

Since then, critics have mainly dealt with this book from the viewpoint of the political novel. As Peter Lisca pointed out, many critics emphasized the fact that the novel so "stirred the American public for a social cause as to have had measurable political impact" (48). Considering the novel's stunning commercial success, selling as many as 10,000 copies a week and 400,000 in total during the first year (Louis Owens 92), and judging from the intensity of both positive and negative reactions, it, as a political novel, must have succeeded in drawing the readers' attention to the problems of the decade of the Great Depression.

Certainly these criticisms have some validity in that the novel attacked monopoly capital and pitiless industrialism. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck represents monopoly capital and industrialism as a monster. The bank is exemplary. The large bank, which, with "the owner with fifty thousand acres," runs the Farmers' association, "the Shawnee lan' an' Cattle Company," is a monster because its destructive inhuman capital power enforces upon men the most miserable existences.[2] Industrialism is also a monster. Under industrialism, along with monopoly capital, "farmers cannot but be migrants"[3] expelled from their own homeland.[4]

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[2] As the homeless poor are hungry and miserable, so the rich are miserable because they are always fearful of being killed by the poor.

[3] John Steinbeck. *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976). 298-299. Unless noted otherwise, hereafter page numbers in parenthesis refer to this text.

[4] Behind the industrialization of farming there is a technology whose aim is an endless search for greater crops (445-446). The machine (tractor) pushes a simple agrarian folk out and "cannery make the little farmers lose their farms" (364).

Yet what is more important in the novel, intertwined with the political, seems to be Steinbeck's involvement with the theme of home-searching because, although all episodes in the novel are related to the political, Steinbeck continues to investigate why the people become migrants, how the migrants try to find their home, and how it is possible in reality.

II. Journey for Home and Sticking Together

For the Joads, home has especially significant meaning. It has not only the meaning of security but is also symbolically related with one's own identity. Their identities are rooted in home because it is the place where the birth, life, and death of generations have happened. This is symbolically embodied in Grampa's death after he leaves the land. Jim Casy says: "He died the minute you took 'im off the place" (187). As Muley Graves, who is described "like a damn of graveyard ghos" (65), points out, "[p]lace where folks live is them folks. They ain't whole, out lonely on the road in a piled-up car. They ain't alive no more" (67). Their home is the source of their existence because it has all the panorama of their family history:

> Grampa took up the land, and he had to kill the Indians and drive them away. And pa was born here, and he killed weeds and snakes. Then a bad year came and he had to borrow a little money. An'we was born here. There in the door—our children born here. (43)

Monopoly capital deprives them of their home. It means that they are deracinated from their home and have lost their identities. In some sense it is their destiny to try to find their home in California because regaining home can restore their identities. The critic Bernard Bowron claims that the Joads' going to California is in the literary tradition of "Wagons West" romance. Defining the turtle as "indestructible will for life," he says that the Joads and the turtle are "re-enacting the great American legend" (211). For the Joads who go to California, i.e. the West, to find their new home attempt to re-establish the old home, and in this respect, they look like modern pioneers.

Yet the Joads' searching for home is greatly different from the pioneers' going for a homestead in the American pioneer tradition. They do not go westward of their own will to find a new world. Rather they are driven by the tractor, the symbol of industrialism, and do not have any alternative except going to California. They do not advance westward with their fellows or friends filled with optimistic hope. They run away from the tractor and callous monopoly capital. The old, powerless, out-of-order jalopy replaces the canopy-covered new pioneer wagon. In this sense they are not pioneers but only modern nomads, who are expelled from their homeland and float in a Hudson, symbolizing the poor's defeat in monopoly capitalism. In a sense they are just homeless proletarian vagabonds.

Steinbeck continues to show in the work that the Joads' journey to California is distant from the great American legend. Steinbeck, conscious that they are just modern migrants exiled by monopolistic capital, delineates the scene of migration as follows:

> The moving, questing people were migrants now. Those families which had lived on a little piece of land, who had lived and died on forty acres, had eaten or starved on the produce of forty acres, had now the whole West to rove in. And they scampered about, looking for work; and the highways were streams of people, and the ditch banks were lines of people. The great highways streamed with moving people. ... the machines pushed them out and they swarmed on the highways. They were migrants. (362)

In this sense, the turtle, "hit by a truck" (921), represents the Joads, who go southwestward but continue to be knocked down by monopoly capital and industrialism.[5]

Considering this, the Joads' searching for a home in the California is foredoomed from the start because their journey to the west is an escape to another industrialized monopoly capitalist society. The land where they try to build home is all in the powerful hand of the monopoly capital. The Bank of the West owns everything in California: "They ain't nothin' left" (265). In this situation there is no possibility that the dispossessed Joads can have their own home on the land. The home they try to regain in California can be possible only as an illusion, never in reality.

This world where horrible monopoly capital rules appears as jail to everyone including the Joads. When Tom is released from jail what he first finds is that the outside world is jail itself. Monopoly capital and

[5] However we cannot simply identify the turtle with the Joads because the turtle stands for individualism, while the Joads stick together with others.

its agents are other jail guards. There is no boundary between in the jail and outside the jail. In a sense the jail of the monopolistic capitalist society is more terrible than the actual jail. “It's pretty nice some ways” because “[y]ou eat regular, an' get clean clothes, and there's places to take a bath” (33-34).

The image of jail follows all through the Joads' journey. They try to find their home in this jail. This image of jail is remarkably exemplified in the description of the Hoover Ranch where the Joads are incarcerated. In this ranch the Joads are just “birds in a attic ... bust[ing] their wings on a dusty winda tryin'ta get out” (321). The jail of monopoly capital imprisons everyone, and its agents, “guards with guns, control them” (487-488). It, furthermore, undermines the Joads' home-seeking, and disintegrates all members into dwarfed and atomized individuals.

In this sense the role of Ma is important in the Joads' home-seeking. Her continuous slogan, “all we got in the world is the fambly” (219) binds the family members together all through the hardship in jail. Ma is the spiritual core of home as “the citadel of the family” (95). “If she swayed the family shook, and if she ever really deeply wavered or despaired the family would fall, the family will to function would be gone” (96). She is the existence who tried to foil the power of “jail” by communal value. Thus Ma binds the members of the family in opposition to the destructive monopolistic capitalism. In some sense Ma represents some quality that can resist the monopolistic capitalism, industrialization and ownership linked with individualism.

Nonetheless she cannot be a productive force against the monopolistic capitalism because the traditional notion of family does not work in this monopoly capitalist society. Her communality cannot but be restricted to her biological family. It doest not have enough power to lead the Joads' home-seeking, resisting the jail of monopolistic capitalism. Ma says:

> They was the time when we was on the lan'....we was the fambly—kinda whole and clear. An' now we ain't clear no more. I can't get straight. They ain't nothin' keeps us clear.... We're crackin' up, Tom. There ain't no fambly now. (503)

Thus, their home-seeking is possible only when they overcome the jail of monopoly capitalism. That is to say, in order to have a home as a place, the Joads must break the obstacles constrained by monopoly capital. It is in this context that Steinbeck's philosophy of sticking together, one of the controversial points of this work, appears as a solution. Since the sticking together is so strong and powerful that, in order to overcome it, they have to stick together with others. Their home can be found only when they take an action with the mass by transcending the traditional notion of family or growing the communal notion of family. “Our folks” (536) at the latter part of the work become the whole class of the dispossessed working class, not only the family members.

All characters gradually realize this truth. Ma's changed notion of the “family” is shown in her conversation with Mrs. Wainwright to whom she is grateful for helping during Rose of Sharon's labor:

> The stout woman smiled. “No need to thank. Ever'body's in the same wagon. S'pose we was down. You'd a give us a han'.”
> “Yes,” Ma said, “we would.”
> “Or anybody.”
> “Or anybody. Use' ta be the fambly was first, It ain't so no more. It's anybody. ...” (568-569)

Tom, Ma's chosen son, also realizes that “now a fella ain't no good alone” (535), and that “a fella ain't got a soul of his own, but on'y a piece of a big one” (537). He leaves his family to lead a strike, the representative political action of sticking together. His following statement is the climax of this realization:

> I'll be ever'where—where you look. Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever they's a cop beatin'g up a guy, I'll be there. If Casy knowed, why, I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad an'—I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry an' they know supper's ready. An' when our folks eat the stuff they raise an' live in the houses they build—why, I'll be there. (537)

In this sense it seems that Steinbeck emphasizes men's sticking together for struggle or socialist organization for class emancipation. Pointing this out, Chametzky says that Tom Joad “fits nicely into the pattern” of the “proletarian” novel, and regards Tom's realization as his conversion to communism (41-42). Yet, it is not so. Tom's realization comes as the only alternative value when Ma's

communality between family members fails as the embankment against the monopoly capital while they search for home. This sticking together is not for labor against capital. It is not the solidarity of the whole dispossessed working class against the monopoly capitalists and their allies, the institutions of the state. It appears only as the alternative value for the Joads' home-seeking. This is why Steinbeck does not elaborate on Tom's and, further, the strike leader's political activity. In this sense Steinbeck's solution to the political and economic problems is fundamentally an inward and mystical one.[6]

III. The Undermining of Communality and the Ambiguity of the Ending

The ending part confirms this ambiguous attitude of Steinbeck's more clearly. Rather their sticking together gradually dissolves in the ending. Furthermore the bank, the representation of their last sticking together is carried away be the flood. What is the meaning of all of these? As Chametzky points out, if Steinbeck stresses the sticking together among human beings, the bank, the symbol of sticking together would not be broken up because it is the result of the boxcar camp workers' cooperation, i.e., sticking together (42). They made it for the birth of a new baby, i.e., the hope of new life. But it breaks up. It is helpless before the flood. It indicates that Steinbeck even doubts the principle of sticking together itself. Although he emphasizes

[6] Stephen Railton says about this point that it is an "essentially religious" solution, and John Ditsky has the similar opinion. For more detail, see Railton, 42, and Ditsky, 122.

sticking together among human beings in order to overcome their wretched circumstances, on the other hand, he implies to us the futility of sticking together or organization.

Actually he continues to present to us the danger of organization. For example, he assails monopolistic capitalist companies and banks because of their violent striving for only profits. As far as their profits are concerned, they commit an enormous crime:

> There is a crime here that goes beyond denunciation. There is a sorrow here that weeping cannot symbolize. There is a failure here that topples all our success. The fertile earth, the straight tree rows, the sturdy trunks, and the ripe fruit. And children dying of pellagra must die because a profit cannot be taken from an orange. And coroners must fill in the certificates—died of malnutrition—because the food must rot, must be forced to rot. (449)

The crime of powerful monopoly capital is so enormous that the individual's crime or sin, rather, seems to be petty. Compared with this grand crime, uncle John's continuous reminding of his sin that he disregarded his wife's wish to call a doctor and this caused her death seems to be very ironical. No one can condemn stealing in this situation. Pa's stealing of potatoes looks natural rather than criminal.[7] Yet, what is more interesting is that he criticizes capitalistic companies and banks not just because they pursue only their profit

[7] In this society the irony of law is that men go to jail for the small stealing of a bottle of milk and never go to jail for the large stealing of ranch (304).

motives but because they are organizations themselves. He attacks any kind of organization. The following conversation between a tenant farmer and an owner shows Steinbeck's suspicion of organization:

> We are sorry. It's not us. It's the monster. The bank isn't like a man.
> Yes, but the bank is only made of men.
> No, you're wrong there—quite wrong there. The bank is something else than men. It happens that every man in a bank hates what the bank does, and yet the bank does it. The bank is something more than men, I tell you. It's the monster. Men made it, but they can't control it. (43)

He even doubts the Weedpatch government camp. This camp seemingly looks like an ideal society. As Ditsky says, this camp seems to represent the ideal place as the "experimental unit of agrarian democracy, the land-based model community" (123).[8] On the other hand, however, Steinbeck sometimes implies that this organization, like the capitalistic organizations which ignore individuals' happiness and vitality, could produce "the horrors" of an "unnatural" way of life that the program of the camp might suggest.[9] The Joads' leaving camp indicates this apprehension of Steinbeck's.[10] The superficial reason of

[8] About the Weedpatch government camp critics' interpretations are diverse. For example Chametzky says that the Weedpatch government camp represents New Deal political reforms. See Chametzky, 37, Warren Motley says that the government camp at Weedpatch is "an image of a society founded on the communal spirit of the matriarchy." See Motley, 409.
[9] Chametzky also points this out. See Chametzky, 40.
[10] According to Warren Motley, the Joads return to the roads because "Steinbeck doubts his America will adopt Ma Joad's matriarchal sense of community as a governing principle." See Motley, 410.

the Joads' leaving is the lack of job. But when we consider, on the one hand, the fact that they cannot find the job outside because of the season, and on the other, the description of the Weedpatch government camp that is blocked with a high wire fence with a watchman (366-67), it seems that it exhibits Steinbeck's misgivings of any kind of organization.

In this sense it can be said that Steinbeck undermines sticking together itself, i.e., his own solution for the achievement of Joads' home-searching. Yet, what is more important is that his doubt or undermining is not confined to sticking together or organization. It seems that in the ending Steinbeck undermines many precious values or themes which he developed or tried to present to readers in the previous parts.

Above all, home-searching, the main theme of this book is also undermined in the ending. All through this work the Joads endeavor to search for home, even though their home is always an ideal or illusion. Home-searching is very significant to them because it leads many characters', say, Tom's, Casy's, and Ma's, realization that sticking together is the only alternative way to finding home in reality. The home they find in the ending is, however, just a ruined barn which could be washed away anytime by flood:

> They came panting up to the rain-soaked barn and staggered into the open end. There was no door in this end. A few rusty farm tools lay about, a disk plow and a broken cultivator, and iron wheel. The rain hammered on the roof and curtained the entrance. (578)

Though it gives the Joads temporary shelter it does not function as their home. How large the gap between Tom's final vision of the house and a ruined barn is! How contrasting the home they try to find, i.e., "Ma's little white house" (118), and the obscured wretched barn!

In some sense, as Bernard Bowron implies, the last scene could be Steinbeck's intentional conclusion to emphasize his attack on monopoly capitalism and industrialism because it demonstrates the difficulty of the poor's home-searching in the monopolistic capitalistic society. The readers could get more wrathful when they see the Joads' last frustration at barn. Yet the open-endedness of the last scene does indicate more than this. In the end, it is uncertain whether the Joads and the stranger will survive or not. The Joads, who have searched for their home in their long journey, are scattered and left in the appallingly wretched barn, the ironical counterpart of Ma's white house. If they live through the flood, their journey for home-seeking would continue, which as Steinbeck's open-endedness implies will ultimately fail.

Another undermining of Steinbeck's happens in the communality, the core value of family and sticking together. Ma's emphasis on communality, keeps the family together in spite of all hardships before the ending. But where is this communality in the ending? All family members just try to survive and Ma says that she leaves the boxcar for a dry place with a part of the family members whether other family members are left behind or not:

> "We're a-gettin' outa here," she said savagely,

> "gettin' to higher groun'. An' you're comin' or you ain't comin', but I'm takin' Rosasharn an' the little fellas outa here." (575)

She betrays her previous emphasis on communality. It really contrasts with Ma's statement when she revolts with a jack handle against Pa's decision that everybody except Tom and the preacher goes ahead to California:

> "All we got is the family unbroke. Like a bunch a cows, when the lobos are ranging, stick all together. I ain't scared while we're all here, all that's alive, but I ain't gonna see us bust up." (219)

Certainly there is the famous scene of communality; Rose of Sharon's breastfeeding of a famished stranger. Although there are many controversies about this scene, many critics who defend the scene say that it indicates Steinbeck's appeal to humanity. Ditsky stresses that, though Rose of Sharon's action is fundamentally indicative of Steinbeck's conservatism, it is the common man's inevitable "commonsense answer to the enormity of the Depression and the absurdities of the system that allowed it to happen at all, and then permitted it to go on" (122). Warren French, pointing out this scene, says that the novel's ending is the perfect demonstration of communal value and, therefore, the completion of "the education of the heart" (107). Aside from the question if the re-birth of society can be achieved by the spiritual change of individual's consciousness, or by reader's conversion,[11] the scene seems to be too ambiguous for us

[11] As Stephen Railton points out, Steinbeck is conservative in politics in that any

to accept French's evaluation that this scene represents the climax of communality. Although Rose of Sharon's breastfeeding extends the stranger's survival a little longer, this communality is just a temporary one. Rose of Sharon's "mysterious smile" (581) coming from her satisfaction of fulfilling motherhood (symbol of communal spirit) will discontinue soon if the rest of the family who went to the tool shed do not bring her food. Rose of Sharon's action seems to stop at a gesture in the tableau of hopeless situation.

Steinbeck also undermines his characters in the ending. As for the characters' initiation in the novel, some critics point out the lack of character development. Thomas Evans says that all characters are portrayed as archetypes and the haves aim to promote sentimentality in order to achieve a wider range of response (77). Even though their initiations are accidental and contingent, characters have their consciousness raised through their experiences. Tom and Ma realize the importance of the value of sticking together, and other characters know the value of communality. Pa makes a dam with other workers. Uncle John, setting the apple box for the dead baby in the stream, says in anger that comes from his developed consciousness:

> "Go down an' tell 'em. Go down in the street an' rot an' tell 'em that way. That's the way you can talk. Don't even know if you was a boy or a girl. Ain't gonna find out. Go on down now, an' lay in the street. Maybe they'll know then." (527)

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change in American society will have to happen first in individual's consciousness including the readers. See Railton, 41-46.

In addition to this, characters keep their dignity as human beings before the ending.

IV. Conclusion

In the ending there remains only the effort for survival. In some sense people's survival can be seen as respect for life and a celebration of a will to survive. However, where is the dignity that makes people distinctive in the universe? Where is man's unique quality of, in Steinbeck's terms, “dying for a concept” (193)? Ma just tries to live the day in the end (542). The consciousness which everyone seemed to raise becomes obscured at the ending. The image of the ant is revived, and characters are portrayed as “ants searching for food” (365).[12] He undermines characters' dignity and initiations completely at the ending. It seems to me that Steinbeck doubts men's spiritual change and perceives the difficulty of maintaining spiritual awakening in reality.

Certainly, intertwined with the political, *The Grapes of Wrath*, as a main theme, presents to us the story of how early twentieth century

[12] In some sense, it seems that this derives from his being influenced by Naturalism. The critic like Edmund Wilson notes Steinbeck's preoccupation with animal images and discusses his view of man as “biological.” See Wilson, 231. However the critic like Frederick Bracher regards this kind of viewpoint the misconception of Steinbeck's biologism, saying, “Steinbeck looks at man, both individually and in groups, as only one more manifestation of the life which teems throughout earth and sea. Other naturalistic writers, to be sure, have tried to regard man with the coldly objective eye of the scientist and to show his kinship with the so-called lower forms of life. What distinguishes Steinbeck is the specifically biological flavor of his naturalism. It shows itself in incidental coloring,. . . but mainly in the warmth of Steinbeck's enthusiasm for life in all its forms.” See Bracher, 185.

dispossessed nomads get exiled and fail to find their home in the West. Yet what is more important is that Steinbeck, getting closer to the ending, undermines this theme of home-searching itself. In this work at first all seems to be clear in meaning, as many critics point out, but the closer we reach the ending, the more ambiguous things or themes become.[13] The work rejects any one fixed interpretation, and opens the possibility of many interpretations.

[13] In this sense Evans is right in his final evaluation that the violation of expectation is central to the novel's aesthetic purpose. See Evans, 75.

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Abstract

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Since John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) was published, critics have mainly dealt with this book from the viewpoint of political novel. Certainly these criticisms have some validity in that the novel attacked monopoly capital and pitiless industrialism. Yet what is more important in the novel, intertwined with the political, seems to be Steinbeck's involvement with the theme of home-searching because, although all episodes in the novel are related to the political, Steinbeck continues to investigate why the people become migrants, how the migrants try to find their home, and how it is possible in reality.

For the Joads, home has especially significant meaning. It has not only the meaning of security but is also symbolically related with one's own identity. In order to have a home as a place, the Joads must break the obstacles constrained by monopoly capital. It is in this context that Steinbeck's philosophy of sticking together, one of the controversial points of this work, appears as a solution. Their home can be found only when they take an action with the mass by transcending the traditional notion of family or growing the communal notion of family. However, although Steinbeck emphasizes sticking together among human beings in order to overcome their wretched

circumstances, on the other hand, he implies to us the futility of sticking together or organization. The Joads' leaving the Weedpatch government camp indicates this apprehension of Steinbeck's. Thus, Steinbeck, getting closer to the ending, undermines the theme of home-searching itself.

Key Words: political novel, home-searching, sticking together, the Weedpatch government camp, undermine