



Steinbeck's Female Characters: Environment, Confinement, and Agency

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Steinbeck's Female Characters: Environment, Confinement, and Agency

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A Thesis in the Field of English

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Abstract

Steinbeck's Female Characters: Environment, Confinement, and Agency proposes that the female characters in John Steinbeck's novels *The Grapes of Wrath* and *East of Eden*, and his short story "The Chrysanthemums" have been too easily dismissed. In all three works, female characters, who are often read as secondary characters, can be seen as strong women trying to break out against the social norms that force them into the background of Steinbeck's fiction. I have chosen these works in particular as they best display the power struggle between men and women.

This project investigates all three works in order to find scenes and dialogue that show the female characters Elisa Allen, Ma Joad, and Cathy Trask working toward a new way of living in a male-dominated society—and at times threatening or participating in violent behavior in order to be accepted and understood. I analyze how gender is portrayed throughout all three works and pay particular attention to the figure of Cathy Trask in *East of Eden*, who is treated harshly in scholarly criticism, but whom I argue shows Steinbeck at his most progressive in regards to female characters. These female characters in his texts are, in fact, complex figures who reflect the displacement and oppression Steinbeck is famous for writing about. I include key readings of criticism both on the works themselves and, to the extent to which it is helpful, readings on gender and literature. I use biographical material about John Steinbeck that reflect his awareness of gender roles.

The investigation concludes that Steinbeck felt sympathy for women and the societal roles they were forced to occupy. The characters of wife, mother, and prostitute are indicative of the lack of professional paths offered to women at the time. Steinbeck's depiction of women was not an expression of dislike for the gender, but rather, a means to show the restrictions society places on women because of their gender. This conclusion provides readers and critics with another lens through which we can view his female characters and his work as a whole.

Biographical Sketch

Nikki Garcia is an assistant editor at Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, where she works on everything from picture books to young adult novels, and is passionate about increasing diversity in children's books. Born and raised in New York City, Nikki graduated from St. John's University with a bachelor's in fine arts. She is the first in her family to earn a college degree.

Dedication

To Luisa, Angel, Katie, and Henry, with love

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Table of Contents

Dedication	vii
Acknowledgments	viii
I. Introduction and “The Chrysanthemums”	1
II. Ma Joad in <i>The Grapes of Wrath</i>	13
III. Cathy Trask in <i>East of Eden</i>	24
IV. Conclusion	35
V. Bibliography	42

Chapter I

Introduction and “The Chrysanthemums”

John Steinbeck is often seen as neglecting the experiences and voices of women. One of the scholars leading this charge is Mimi Gladstein, who opens her article “Masculine Sexuality and the Objectification of Women: Steinbeck’s Perspective” stating, “Any number of critics have noted this and drawn from this removal or lack of the feminine in his fictional world a variety of conclusions, not the least of which has been a continuing labeling of Steinbeck’s depiction of women as misogynistic” (109). In this article, Gladstein further supports these critics’ arguments by interpreting his female characters as objects rather than subjects. Gladstein argues that, “...in his recreation of this time and place, Steinbeck deliberately excised a significant portion of the real women who were part of the actual time and place he visits...” (112).

Critics often choose to focus on the male characters in Steinbeck’s novels: Tom Joad, Jim Casy, Samuel Hamilton, and Adam Trask. In comparison, the female characters in his work have been too easily dismissed. Steinbeck’s female characters—who are often read as secondary characters—can be seen as strong women. When looking through a different lens that views directly into his novels, short stories, plays, and novellas, one will find his female characters trying to break out against the social norms. Why are his female characters often placed in the background of his works? And how does this affect their relationship with their respective male counterparts in his fiction? I propose that the answers to these questions lie within the time that Steinbeck lived and the experiences he

had in his own life. His female characters are often wives and mothers because that was the life most women had at the time of his writing. He depicted the power struggle between husbands and wives in his fiction because it was also his experience in his own marriages. John Steinbeck is famous for writing about the displaced and overlooked people in society, and I propose that that includes women as well.

John H. Timmerman's 1995 introduction to *The Long Valley* argues that Steinbeck "told the stories that he wanted to, the stories that he had heard or lived, stories of genuinely human characters in all their raw need or desperate yearning. And he told them without concern for critical approval or censure" (viii). Human characters—not male or patriarchal characters—but human, which includes both men *and* women. These *human* characters have a raw need and desperate yearning to be heard, seen, and accepted despite their environment and circumstances.

But in the real world, which Steinbeck translates to his imagined world, people and his characters alike are faced with challenges when they try to break out against the parameters society has constructed for them. As Timmerman notes, "All too often...those dreams are shipwrecked upon some jagged rocks that society places in the way. Thereby also emerges Steinbeck's third major pattern: the isolated individual in conflict with some larger social structure" (xx). What happens when men's dreams are shipwrecked in Steinbeck's fiction? They have the freedom to dream new dreams and aim for those. For instance, when Tom Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath* is released on parole, he never expects his childhood home to be taken from the banks. And when he is forced to leave with his family, a slew of trouble forces him to rethink his life and his contributions in the world. Inspired by the preacher Casy's philosophy, Tom decides to embark on a revolution

against the police and landowners that are lying and mistreating “his people.” Tom’s new dream is to unite this community of displaced Okies and fight for their rights. The female characters in Steinbeck’s fiction, however, are not allowed to evolve their dreams into something new and attainable. They are put in a very specific societal box that men have built for them, and I believe in his fiction, Steinbeck was trying to say that this raw need to break out against society’s rules, to be seen and to be heard, extends to women too.

Timmerman insightfully notes that “Steinbeck’s social conscience emerges powerfully” in *The Grapes of Wrath*, *East of Eden*, and “The Chrysanthemums” (xxi). Steinbeck’s social conscience extends to women and the specific obstacles they faced. When Steinbeck’s female characters are faced with obstacles that get in the way of their ultimate desires, they respond in various ways. Ma Joad, in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), takes charge of her family, therefore raising herself above men by making final decisions regarding her family’s plans and welfare. *East of Eden’s* (1952) Cathy Trask lies, steals, cheats, and murders her way to a place of position and power. But the female character Elisa Allen, in “The Chrysanthemums” (1938), is perched precariously in the middle of these two character types.

“The Chrysanthemums” tells the story of Elisa Allen, who loves working in her garden outside her husband’s farm. She successfully produces beautiful and strong flowers, but longs to contribute more to her family and the world at large. Elisa takes care of her husband, but her responsibilities do not include childrearing, like Ma Joad’s. The stakes are not as high in her life as they are for the Joad family in *The Grapes of Wrath*. She also hasn’t been pushed to extremes yet, like Cathy Trask has. Elisa still entertains the idea of freedom, but hasn’t reached a place of no return when it comes to her sanity.

And she has not approached that moment where she is willing to do *anything* in order to break out of her garden-shaped prison.

In the opening scene of “The Chrysanthemums,” we meet Elisa Allen and learn about her environment and the role she occupies within it. It is a place where the “high grey-flannel fog of winter closed off the Salinas Valley from the sky and from all the rest of the world” (1). This environment is symbolic of Elisa’s own life as the wife of a ranch owner. Elisa’s place is inside the home and the only place she shines is in her flower garden. Just as the Salinas Valley is cut off from the rest of the world by the fog that has taken over, so too is Elisa cut off from opportunity. As the farmers and ranchers wait for the fog to pass and rain to come, Elisa is forced to remain inside her garden and wait for a transformation in her society’s ideals. As Steinbeck writes, “It was a time of quiet and of waiting” (1).

The first thing we learn about Elisa is her age: “She was thirty-five” (1). The text makes clear that Elisa is not a young woman learning the ways of the world for the first time. She has lived long enough to know how her environment works and her place inside it. She also doesn’t have any children, and at her age, this would be looked upon negatively, since one of her womanly duties is to provide her husband with sons to inherit the ranch. The way she cares for her chrysanthemums suggests that they are her surrogate children. In this scene, we see the meticulous movements she practices to protect her chrysanthemums: “She spread the leaves and looked down among the close-growing stems. No aphids were there, no sowbugs, or snails or cutworms. Her terrier fingers destroyed such pests before they could get started” (2). She plants, nurtures, and more

importantly, she protects the flowers until they are fully grown. When they have reached their full potential, she stands back and looks upon them with pride, adoration, and love.

Elisa's physical appearance allows us to learn quite a lot about her character: "Her face was lean and strong and her eyes were as clear as water" (1). This description suggests that Elisa has lost her baby-faced youth and innocence, and what is left is the face of someone who is resilient and clear-minded when she needs to be. In the next line, we learn that Elisa's "figure looked blocked and heavy in her gardening costume, a man's black hat pulled low down over her eyes...." Elisa clearly does not care about her appearance when she's in her element. Her masculine clothes leave much to the imagination and do little to accentuate any womanly curves. For her, gardening is serious, and her appearance plays no part in it. However, we also learn that Elisa "wore heavy leather gloves to protect her hands while she worked" (2). A woman's hands are often seen as a sign of social status. Paradoxically, Elisa's use of gardening gloves is an indicator of her femininity and her social standing. She is not forced to work in the fields. Her husband, Henry, evidently provides a decent living that allows Elisa time in her garden.

Unlike Henry, we see Elisa kept at a literal distance from business matters that could potentially concern her future: "Elisa Allen, working in her flower garden, looked down across the yard and saw Henry, her husband, talking to two men in business suits" (1) by the tractor shed. Steinbeck makes a point to the reader that Henry is speaking to two men in "business suits," so therefore this must be an important meeting. The text reminds us that "Elisa watched them for a moment and then went back to her work," and often "looked down toward the men by the tractor shed now and then" (2). Elisa is kept

within the confined space of her garden, but can see the possibility of a different life in the distance. Henry has the power to negotiate deals with important white collar men, while she is forced to watch from the sidelines, always aware but never able to participate.

When Elisa is complimented on the one thing society has allowed her to have—her garden—she often responds with a kind of defiance that is evident not only in her dialogue, but also in her body language. When her husband says, “You’ve got a strong new crop coming” (2), she “straightened her back....In her tone and on her face there was a little smugness.” Elisa is aware of her talents, and at a time in history when women were given little recognition for hard work, she plans on soaking up every minute of it. When Henry mentions that he wishes she would work some of her magic on their orchard, we can see by Elisa’s reaction that she knows he is teasing, and she expresses hurt over not being taken seriously: “Her eyes sharpened. ‘Maybe I could do it, too. I’ve a gift with things, all right’” (2-3). Elisa’s defensiveness indicates that she wants to be seen as a contributing member of society.

In “Out of the Fence and into the Ring: Steinbeck’s Engagement with Public Issues in ‘The Chrysanthemums,’” Terrell Tebbetts argues that “John Steinbeck’s ‘The Chrysanthemums’ examines the plight of women in a society that limits them to confined domestic spaces designed to protect them and their work” (55). He also further suggests that Elisa’s work in her garden is the equivalent of “confined, aesthetic work similar to musicianship and painting middle class women pursued for generations in bourgeois society...” (56). “The Chrysanthemums” depicts a strong woman with creativity and talent being emotionally cut down and put back in her place.

Tebbetts also notes, “Elisa Allen lives in a confined world set apart not only for women but also for artists” (56). Not only does Elisa represent all women, she represents artists, who feel that they are either unheard or unappreciated within the larger community. Elisa creates “art” for enjoyment, believing that there isn’t a place for her creations within the community and the larger public sphere. Like a lot of artists, it’s believed that until your art is recognized by the masses, it holds no real value, and therefore it is only for your personal enjoyment.

One moment that illustrates this dynamic occurs in her interaction with the man who accidentally comes upon the Allen home. After Henry leaves to tend to the steers, Elisa returns to work in her garden when a wagon pulls up next to the farm. The man inside the wagon travels from Seattle to San Diego mending pots, pans, scissors, etc. for payment. He claims to have lost his way off the general road, but takes this as an opportunity to generate some new business from Elisa. Elisa has asked the man if he sleeps and lives in his wagon, and his reply is yes (9). In this scene, Elisa and the man continue to go back and forth conveying desires, boldness, and rejection. Elisa’s emotions come in waves, often repeating themselves as they continue to awkwardly converse about intimate topics unfitting for strangers that just met. First, Elisa conveys a hope or dream to live as this man does: “I wish women could do such things.” The man quickly rejects this idea. “It ain’t the right kind of life for a woman,” he claims. Elisa’s natural reaction is hostility as she questions his authority on the subject: “Her upper lid raised a little, showing her teeth. ‘How do you know?’” The man quickly confesses, “Of course I don’t know.” The power struggle between the man and Elisa may sound polite, but the tension is palpable as she bares her teeth, ready to fight. Elisa ropes him in by

voicing her wish for a life where she can pick up and leave, then immediately challenges him when he agrees with her that this is not the right kind of life for a woman. It's a kind of dance between the two characters as they sway back and forth between both sides of the argument. One wants to break out of her fenced-in garden, and the other wants to keep her firmly in place.

Later in the scene we see this dance again. Elisa shows her aggression and hopes when she challenges him in his field of work: "You might be surprised to have a rival some time....I could show you what a woman might do" (9). Once again the man rejects her ideas: "It would be a lonely life...a scary life" (9). At this point, the man gives up and decides to leave, no longer wanting to dance. Perhaps he doesn't like his status as a man being challenged. Also, the salesman may, on some level, long for the safety and comfort of Elisa's life. Her husband's livelihood allows Elisa the ability to "play" in her garden, instead of searching for real, paid work on the road. The salesman's lack of empathy disables him from entertaining the idea that she feels as trapped as he does. His views are myopic and are similar to the perception one society has of all women.

Toward the end of the story, we see Elisa change in appearance from our first introduction. In this scene, she is preparing for a night out with her husband and takes great measure to remove the "masculine" clothing she wears when in her garden: "She put on her newest underclothing and her nicest stockings and the dress which was the symbol of her prettiness. She worked carefully on her hair, penciled her eyebrows and rouged her lips" (10). Steinbeck suggests that Elisa understands that within her garden she can be her true self, but when leaving the safety of her confined space she must put on a mask for the public. From her dress to the rouging of her lips, this mask she is forced

to wear showcases her femininity and leaves her talent and rebelliousness back home. It is interesting to note that just before Elisa's husband sees her all dressed up, "she stiffened and her face grew tight" (11). Her reaction suggests that she feels like an imposter. This image doesn't convey her true self, and she feels caught in a lie. But her husband doesn't seem or want to notice. Instead he tells her that she looks nice, and although he has given her a compliment, Elisa still wants to know what he means by "nice." Henry explains by saying, "I mean you look different, strong, and happy" (11). Naturally, Elisa holds on to the one word that matters to her, and that is "strong." Elisa wants Henry to recognize her emotional strength, but he focuses on the physical, similar to sizing up the strength of a prize horse. Her response is to affirm that she is indeed strong and "...never knew before how strong" (11).

Jackson J. Benson's biography, *John Steinbeck, Writer* (1990) discusses "The Chrysanthemums," and one major theme of the story, "...that of the difficulty of the woman in finding a creative, significant role in a male-dominated society...[and]...the basic understandings held by a society of a woman's presumed limitations..." (276). Steinbeck was not only aware of the limitations placed on women in general, but also on his very intelligent first wife, Carol. As Benson suggests, "They are both strong, large-boned, and competent; both wear masculine clothes....But it is in Elisa's emotions and in her situation that her resemblance to Carol is most telling and revealing" (275-276). It is believed that "the story indicates very strongly that Steinbeck was aware of and sympathetic to his wife's frustrations. She was, after all, a very intelligent, capable, creative person, happiest when she was able to make use of her talents and initiative

beyond the role of part-time secretary or clerk, which she was usually forced to take” (276).

It’s not until a little later in the story that Elisa’s strength is tested. Elisa and Henry are driving down the road in her husband’s car when she sees an object up ahead, and in that moment “she knew” (Steinbeck, “The Chrysanthemums” 12). Trying her best not to look at her precious chrysanthemums thrown at the edge of the road by the salesman, she wonders why he couldn’t have take better care to hide his rejection of her work—her art. As they pass the caravan, she doesn’t say a word to her husband. She may do this in order to conceal the hurt she feels over this rejection of her artistry, but soon lets go of that feeling the moment they’ve moved beyond the caravan.

Once the feeling of rejection has passed, Elisa moves on to anger, an understandable emotion to have when she brings up the boxing fights. She asks her husband questions about the nature of the fights and if women also attend. Henry replies:

“Oh, sure, some. What’s the matter, Elisa? Do you want to go? I don’t think you’ll like it, but I’ll take you if you really want to go.”
She relaxed limply in the seat. “Oh, no. No. I don’t want to go. I’m sure I don’t.” (13)

The subject of the fights, and whether or not they are appropriate for women, masks the topic Elisa really wants to discuss. On the surface, the story implies that Elisa is trying to determine if it is suitable for women to attend boxing matches, but I believe these fights, in her mind, represent a woman’s fight against her environment. And when Henry asks Elisa if she really wants to attend a fight, she says no. But what is she really saying no to? I suggest that she’s saying no to her own personal fight against those who hold her firmly in place. In the end, Elisa feels too defeated to fight back. She’ll just take the night out as solace for a hard day, then return to her garden where she feels safe and

secure, as only a patriarchal society would want her to believe. It's in the admittance of defeat that Elisa lets go of her aggression, her anger, and instead "[cries] weakly—like an old woman" (13).

Why has Steinbeck chosen to write about an unrecognized artist alone with her art? Perhaps he felt this way about his own art and writing. Steinbeck's choice to have a woman represent the artist reveals that he felt a certain affinity with women. Why would this apparent misogynist choose a woman to represent him? It is because he knows that women and artists alike are fighting a struggle to be deemed worthy. As Tebbetts argues, "Women and artists, on the other hand, are supposedly too tender and weak to engage in such battles, and thus need the protection confinement affords them. Women 'need' the quiet domestic sphere. Artists in the genteel tradition 'need' a purely aesthetic realm, creating pleasant images and pleasant stories for pleasant people leading pleasant lives" (59).

Benson suggests that Steinbeck was aware of how much easier he had it as a man, and his sympathy resembles that of Henry's character in the story. Like Henry, Steinbeck knows that he has married an amazing woman, but his love, recognition, and respect does little to comfort Carol: "...the misguided sympathy and kindness offered by the husband...is so terribly defeating and—what is the feminine equivalent of 'emasculating'?" (276). It couldn't be easy for Carol or Steinbeck to navigate these choppy waters in their marriage. It is possible that Carol was angry about the hand she had been dealt as a woman, and I imagine it was difficult for Steinbeck to feel the need to apologize for winning the gender lottery. All in all, "Steinbeck was not an unloving or

unkind husband,” but sometimes “love and kindness can be, even inadvertently, subjugating...” (276).

It was apparent much later, after their divorce, that Steinbeck was far more dependent on Carol than she was on him: All who knew him felt strongly that he “was the kind of man who needed to be married—to a strong woman—in order to survive emotionally” (413). Much like his childhood surrounded by women, Steinbeck felt the need to recreate this sense of security with those he chose to marry. He may have not had the right answers for Carol, or the desire to make a public stand against gender inequality, but at least he was aware of the injustice, when so many men at the time felt content with the status quo.

Chapter II

Ma Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath*

The Grapes of Wrath tells the story of the Joad family and their migration from Oklahoma to California. After the bank repossessed their home and land, they are forced to leave in search of a new home and jobs. In the opening of novel, Steinbeck describes the environment and events occurring in Oklahoma during the Great Depression. The dust-filled air has taken over and ruined the crops. Families at one point or another in the past have taken a loan from the bank and now, with times especially difficult, cannot pay the mortgage on their land. Things have gone from bad to worse, and now the banks are coming to collect, and collect they do. Not only does Steinbeck set up this bleak and harsh setting for the reader, he also manages to set the tone about the nature of relationships between men and women at this difficult time:

Men stood by their fences and looked at the ruined corn, drying fast now, only a little green showing through the film of dust. The men were silent and they did not move often. And the women came out of the houses to stand beside their men—to feel whether this time the men would break. The women studied the men's faces secretly, for the corn could go, as long as something else remained. (3)

The men are not worried if the women will break. At this specific time in history, the men know that they are expected to care and provide for the family. Not only do the men know this, but the women are aware that this is how the world works as well. That is why they are standing by their men, and keeping a close eye, to see if all is lost:

After a while the faces of the watching men lost their bemused perplexity and became hard and angry and resistant. Then the women knew that they were safe and that there was no break. Then they asked, What'll we do?

And the men replied, I don't know. But it was all right. The women knew it was all right, and the watching children knew it was all right. Women and children knew deep in themselves that no misfortune was too great to bear if the men were whole. (3-4)

As long as the men were “angry and resistant,” then the women knew that all hope wasn't lost. Again, it's important to notice that Steinbeck does not show the men's concern for the emotional state of the women. The men do not express worry regarding whether the women will manage to get through this difficult time. Is the lack of concern simply because the men just do not care? That is a possibility, and most likely the case. It is also possible that Steinbeck recognized the strength women often exude in difficult times. Perhaps the men and/or Steinbeck knew, deep down, that the women will persevere. But unlike the men, the women and/or Steinbeck could not be so sure. If Steinbeck adhered to the conventional way of thinking, then readers would have experienced a very different scene.

Later on, the landowners visit the families to deliver the news that they must leave the land: “The women and the children watched their men talking to the owner men. They were silent” (31). As we saw in “The Chrysanthemums,” Steinbeck often shows women watching from the outside as their men make decisions that will ultimately affect their lives. The women are silent and unable to contribute their thoughts and experiences to this dilemma. Steinbeck makes sure to connect and compare the women with the children. Like the children, the women must remain silent, unseen, and dependent on the actions and decisions of the men: “In the doorways of the sun-beaten tenant houses, women sighed and then shifted feet so that one that had been down was now on top, and the toes working” (32). The women “sighed” and “shifted feet,” signifying a feeling of

restlessness. The women show a desire to participate rather than be spectators. They want to discuss, collaborate, and make decisions together with the men. Steinbeck implies this feeling as he places women physically and emotionally at a distance, glancing at their fates from afar.

Steinbeck's physical description of Ma Joad displays her remarkable strength within the family: "Ma was heavy, but not fat; thick with childbearing and work....Her full face was not soft; it was controlled, kindly" (74). Steinbeck highlights the fact that Ma is hardworking and steady. She is heavy from contributing to society in the only way she is allowed—through childbearing. Her heaviness comes from pregnancy, childbirth, and the rearing of her children—not from laziness: "She seemed to know, to accept, to welcome her position, the citadel of the family, the strong place that could not be taken" (74). A citadel is a "fortress" and "defending body," and within the text, this definition pertains to her role within the family. The reader might expect the word "citadel" to be applied to one of the male figures, but Steinbeck uses it to describe Ma Joad. Steinbeck also expresses to the reader that this position "could not be taken" from her by *anyone*.

From the beginning, Ma Joad always carried the answer in her mind, heart, and soul about how best to handle this continuous wave of misfortune that has befallen her family. Whether it was uniting to fight against the banks or the landowners in California, Ma knows that the victims need to come together in order to make a difference. We see this in her plea to Tom to not go after the men that have taken their home:

"Tommy, don't you go fighten' 'em alone. They'll hunt you down like a coyote. Tommy, I got to thinkin' and dreamin' an' wonderin'. They say there's a hun'erd thousand of us shoved out. If we was all mad the same way, Tommy—they wouldn't hunt nobody down—" (77)

It is Ma who comes up with the brilliant idea of banding together, an idea that can be put into action throughout their journey. According to Ma, the community could have united if they didn't "walk aroun' like they was half asleep" (77). In California, the migrant workers need to unionize, and Ma Joad always knew that was the answer. Steinbeck does not entrust any other character in the novel to have *the answer* about the best course of action for their family and the migrant workers.

Only Ma Joad has the intuition not to trust the handbills distributed out to farmers losing their livelihood. When she is packing up their belongings, she tells Tommy that she hopes "things is all right in California" (90). Tommy questions her worry and fear. Ma's reply makes it clear to the reader that she has nagging worry about their upcoming trip west:

"Seems too nice, kinda. I seen the han'bills fellas pass out, an' how much work they is, an' high wages an' all; an' I seen in the paper how they want folks to come an' pick grapes an' oranges an' peaches. That'd be nice work, Tom, pickin' peaches....I'm scared of stuff so nice. I ain't got faith. I'm scared somepin ain't so nice about it." (90-91)

The Joad men blindly believed in this new and profitable adventure, but Ma Joad knows better.

A telling look at the family and how they physically hold themselves can be found in chapter 10. In this scene, the Joad family is trying to decide the next steps in their plan. Pa, Uncle John, Grampa, Tom, Connie, and Noah decide to squat down to the ground next to the truck:

Pa walked around the truck, looking at it, and then squatted down....Uncle John moved toward him and squatted down beside him. Grampa came out of the house and saw the two squatting together, and he jerked over and sat on the running board of the truck, facing them. That was the nucleus. Tom and Connie and Noah strolled in and squatted... (100)

The Joad men choose to be physically close to the ground because caring for the land is all they know. Their knowledge and confidence is based solely on the land they have spent generations learning how to cultivate. They also choose to hold their discussion near the truck, which has now taken the place of home, whether they like to admit it or not. So the men perch themselves near “land” and “home:” their two main responsibilities and desires at this very moment in the text.

Ma, Granma, and Rose of Sharon physically place themselves behind the men, but they are standing: “They took their places behind the squatting men; they stood up and put their hands on their hips” (100). In a standing position, this places them physically higher than the men and also gives them a bit of literal distance from the problem—the land. The men are too close to the issue and cannot see clearly, whereas the women have enough distance to effectively solve the problem. We see this later in the novel when Ma continues to challenge Pa and questions his ability to provide a viable solution to fix their problems while still keeping the family unit together.

The following scene in chapter 10 shows the beginning of a gender shift between the male and female characters. The turning point occurs between Ma Joad and the preacher Casy. Ma Joad is salting meat to preserve for future meals, and the preacher offers to relieve her and salt the meat himself:

“Leave me salt down this meat,” he said. “I can do it. There’s other stuff for you to do.”

She stopped her work then and inspected him oddly, as though he suggested a curious thing. And her hands were encrusted with salt, pink with fluid from the fresh pork. “It’s women’s work,” she said finally. “It’s all work,” the preacher replied. “They’s too much of it to split it up to men’s or women’s work. You got stuff to do. Leave me salt the meat.” (107)

Ma Joad does not give up her “women’s work” easily. She has been conditioned to believe that one of her contributions to the family is to make sure food is prepared, and she does not take this responsibility lightly. But after some hesitation, Ma knows that the preacher has a point. Now is not the time to worry about formalities. It is time for everyone, men and women, to pitch in and be helpful.

After this encounter between Ma and Casy, we see through Steinbeck’s text the true thoughts of the Joad men in regards to the women. An especially revealing moment transpires between Tom and the preacher. The preacher makes a comment about Ma and her physical and mental state. “The preacher said, ‘She looks tar’d.’ ‘Women’s always tar’d,’ said Tom. ‘That’s just the way women is....’” (108). It’s one of the most revealing occasions in the novel where the male characters acknowledge all the work and effort women put into their families. Tom’s acknowledgment that women are always tired is to make a point that their work never ends.

Emotion from the men is not something we see often during the novel. One instance where a sense of defeat is publicly displayed is when Grampa cries in front of his entire family:

Without warning Grampa began to cry. His chin wavered and his old lips tightened over his mouth and he sobbed hoarsely. Ma rushed over to him and put her arms around him. She lifted him to his feet, her broad back straining, and she half lifted, half helped him into the tent. Uncle John said, “He must be good an’ sick. He ain’t never done that before. Never seen him blubberin’ in my life.” (136)

Uncle John states that he has never seen his father cry before, and it baffles him. Even today and especially during this time, men are taught not to cry, especially not in front of their families. Ma is the only one who goes to him, literally lifts him up on her own, and

takes him into the tent and away from alarmed eyes. This is a disturbing display of emotion for the family to see, and the men are too shocked to provide comfort to their defeated father.

One of Ma Joad's few moments of defying her husband occurs almost halfway through the novel. Pa Joad has just decided that they are going to get back on the road, and Ma chooses not to go:

Ma stepped in front of him. "I ain't a-gonna go."

"What you mean, you ain't gonna go? You got to go. You got to look after the family." Pa was amazed by the revolt. (168)

Ma's defiance is unheard of in her family, which is evident by Pa's shocked response. He recovers by reminding her of her female duties. But Ma can sense a shift. Not only has their physical environment changed, but also the nature of their relationship.

In "'His Home Is Not the Land': Caretaking, Domesticity, and Gender in *The Grapes of Wrath*," Jenn Williamson suggests that "...by transforming Ma Joad's position within the family hierarchy, Steinbeck places more value on domestic work, the domestic space in which the work occurs, and the women who engage in that work" (41). The roles have reversed, and Ma's contributions are what will keep the family together. But Pa wants to keep their former relationship firmly in place, so it is Ma who will literally have to fight to maintain this new dynamic: "Ma stepped to the touring car and reached in on the floor of the back seat. She brought out a jack handle and balanced it in her hand easily. "'I ain't a-gonna go,' she said" (Steinbeck, *The Grapes if Wrath* 168). She knows that the only way to maintain her ground is if she's willing to be violent. She makes it clear that the only way she will go is if he "whups her," but also tells him that she will not take it lying down:

She moved the jack handle gently again. “An’ I’ll shame you, Pa. I won’t take no whuppin’, cryin’ an’ a-beggin’. I’ll light into you. An’ you ain’t so sure you can whup me anyways. An’ if ya do get me, I swear to God I’ll wait till you got your back turned, or your settin’ down, an I’ll knock you belly up with a bucket. I swear to Holy Jesus’ sake I will” (169).

An insightful moment in the novel is when Pa Joad comments on Ma’s youth:

“Ma’s almost like she was when she was a girl. She was a wild one then. She wasn’ scairt of nothin” (226). Now that Ma has risen up in the ranks of the family, to a more important status than even Pa, she has gained back some of the vitality of her youth. Naturally, caring for her family isn’t any less important, but she has life or death problems in front of her, and that has caused her youthful fearlessness to return. Pa goes on to confess to Tom, “I thought havin’ all the kids an’ workin’ took it out of her, but I guess it ain’t” (226). It is hard to tell if Pa is disappointed or perplexed, but it’s another rare moment among the men when they realize that raising children is exhausting and sometimes character-changing work.

It is in these moments that the Joad family becomes increasingly fearful of Ma and her resilience when placed between a rock and a hard place. Pa has begun to fear Ma and her violent threats: “When she got that jack handle back there, I tell you I wouldn’ wanna be the fella took it away from her” (226). The gender roles are reversing, and it is now Pa who displays a similar fear that Ma expressed at the beginning of the novel.

It is not until the next morning that the family develops a collective fear of Ma, once they realize that she spent the night next to their dead Granma in the back of the truck. Ma knew the family needed to pass inspection at the border in order to cross over to California: “The family looked at Ma with a little terror at her strength” (228). Ma knew that she had to deprioritize her own comfort and focus on what was important—the

welfare of the family. All Ma could say in response to their exclamations of surprise and disbelief is “the fambly hadda get acrost” (229). Although Ma says it miserably, you can imagine her saying it over and over in her mind like a mantra helping her forward. Her strength evokes anger within the men: “John, there’s a woman so great with love—she scares me. Makes me afraid an’ mean” (229). The men cannot seem to comprehend how Ma finds strength within her love. When people do not understand something, they usually respond with anger out of ignorance. Casy cannot understand what motivates Ma Joad.

We really see the anger about the changing times and the effect it has on gender roles in chapter 26. Once again, Ma and Pa are at a standoff about who gets to decide when it is time to leave camp:

Pa sniffled. “Seems like times is changed,” he said sarcastically. “Time was when a man said what we’d do. Seems like women is tellin’ now. Seems like it’s purty near time to get out a stick.” (352)

We’ve seen Ma and Pa battle earlier in the novel, and this is Pa’s last attempt at trying to restore order and balance within his family. But Ma makes a point about his inability to care for his family anymore. When a man can put a roof over his family’s head and food in their stomachs, then he reserves the right to make decisions:

“Times when they’s food an’ a place to set, then maybe you can use your stick an’ keep your skin whole. But you ain’t a-doin’ your job, either a-thinkin’ or a-workin’. If you was, why, you could use your stick, an’ women folks’d sniffle their nose an’ creep-mousin around’. But you jus’ get you a stick now an’ you ain’t lickin’ no woman; you’re a-fightin’, ’cause I got a stick all laid out too.” (352)

Ma’s speech certainly riles up Pa—possibly her intention all along. To Ma, a man who worries constantly is useless, but a man who is mad has something to prove.

Ma Joad manages to keep her family together for the most part, with her keen understanding of men and the motivation they need to survive. As Williamson further explains, “For Steinbeck, when masculinity falters, femininity remains steady, necessary for everyone’s survival” (43-44). Toward the end of the novel, Ma proclaims, “Woman can change better’n a man... Woman got all her life in her arms. Man got it all in his head” (423). For Ma, women hold their reasons for changing in their arms and close to her heart. She implies that men don’t have the same adoration for and closeness to the family that a mother has. Her children are her reason for surviving. A woman views life as a constantly flowing and moving entity: “Man, he lives in jerks—baby born an’ a man dies, an that’s a jerk—gets a farm an’ loses his farm, an’ that’s a jerk. Woman, it’s all one flow, like a stream, little eddies, little waterfalls, but the river, it goes right on” (423). It is Ma’s understanding of the difference between men and women that makes her so successful at this difficult time in their lives.

In “From Patriarchy to Matriarchy: Ma Joad’s Role in *The Grapes of Wrath*,” Warren Motley states “Ma Joad’s work packing away the slaughtered pigs, organizing camp, buying food and cooking it over a succession of improvised stoves represents not submission but the steady shedding of her husband’s control” (406). She has taken control of the family despite the “debilitating effects of depression suffered by her husband and brother-in-law” (407). This is an accurate depiction of Ma Joad. She is not a weak or colorless mother standing behind the men in her family and going along with everything they decide. Instead she has kept the daily activities going despite the fact that she has less help than before. Motley compares Ma Joad to the frontier women depicted

in early twentieth-century American literature, who had to show strength in their back and grit in their bones to survive in that kind of environment.

John Steinbeck depicted one of the strongest, most maternal, and most progressive female characters of the time. In the novel, Ma Joad is the character that holds all the answers within her—not just for her family but for the country. A constant beacon of light, and the first person to sacrifice herself in a situation, Steinbeck identifies her love and generosity as the source of her power. And for all the male characters placed at the forefront of the novel, it's really Ma Joad who steals the show.

Chapter III

Cathy Trask in *East of Eden*

Literary criticism often paints John Steinbeck in a negative light when it comes to his female characters, especially in his novel *East of Eden*. Critics tend to view the majority of his female characters in extremes. They are either stunted or evil, and very few are seen as complex figures. Mimi Gladstein, for instance, views the women in *East of Eden* as either weak or evil or beyond repair. In “The Strong Female Principle of Good—or Evil: The Women of *East of Eden*,” Gladstein states, “When the mothers are there, they tend to be colorless, weak characters who fade into the background” (31). I would argue that this view just skims the surface when analyzing the female characters in *East of Eden*, and does not take into consideration their surroundings and the men they share this space with.

East of Eden tells the story of two families, the Trasks and the Hamiltons, who eventually migrate to California. Ultimately these two families meet and their lives intersect. Adam Trask’s stepmother, Alice, was taken as a wife at a young age. Her main responsibilities were to care for her husband, Cyrus, and his two sons, Adam and Charles; to cook; and to be a warm body to visit at night: “Alice never complained, quarreled, laughed, or cried. Her mouth was trained to a line that concealed nothing and offered nothing too” (Steinbeck, *East of Eden* 21). Alice’s acceptance of her place within her environment made her the perfect wife in Cyrus’s eyes. Cyrus was a hard man who

conjured up a fake military career and ran his home like a military base. Cyrus had little grip on his own reality, and as a result, was entirely blind to Alice's needs.

Alice Trask is not a warm and caring mother, but she has inner strength, which helped her endure this brutal atmosphere. Gladstein suggests that feminine characters like Alice may have settled into the life she was dealt, but what Gladstein fails to consider is that perhaps just surviving was an accomplishment. This is in contrast to the first Mrs. Trask, a "pale, inside-herself woman," who committed suicide after receiving a venereal disease from Cyrus's philandering (15). Mrs. Trask was so naïve from her confinement that she believed she was being punished for her "nocturnal philandering" while he was away. Ultimately, Mrs. Trask gave up, but Alice managed to keep going until she fell sick and passed.

But it is Cathy Trask who is the most extreme of Steinbeck's female characters. When Cathy Trask is first introduced, we learn that she is missing something seemingly inherent to women. The narrator states, "It is my belief that Cathy Ames was born with the tendencies, or lack of them, which drove and forced her all of her life. Some balance wheel was misweighted, some gear out of ratio. She was not like other people, never was from birth" (72). The narrator seems to be alluding to Cathy's refusal of domesticity. She lacks the tendency to be maternal, nurturing, and loving, therefore leaving a "shell" of a woman with her own desire for self-preservation and, the power of "using her difference, make a painful and bewildering stir in her world" (72). No one can understand her motivations, because they appear different from other women—to be a wife and mother. But what Cathy really wants is the life reserved for men. In *Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters* (1969), Steinbeck explains to his editor, Pascal Covici, that her actions

take on a notion of revenge: “[Cathy’s] life is one of revenge on other people because of a vague feeling of her own lack” (124). Cathy punishes others for implying that she should feel wrong or dirty for living the life of a whore and, eventually, a madam.

Even in her physical description, she possesses male qualities: “Her breasts never developed very much. Before her puberty the nipples turned inward....Her body was a boy’s body, narrow-hipped, straight-legged...” (72). Cathy views sex as a weapon or tool to get what she wants: “Cathy learned when she was very young that sexuality with all its attendant yearnings and pains, jealousies and taboos, is the most disturbing impulse humans have” (74). Cathy’s wields its power with vigor like any man, allowing herself the freedom to have sex outside of wedlock. Steinbeck puts a literal mark on Cathy’s forehead that acts as a marker for the rest of the world to recognize. In *Journal of a Novel*, Steinbeck further explains, “[The scarred forehead] is going to be a recurring symbol in various forms. And what does it mean? Oh I could tell you, the maimed, the marked, the guilty—all such things, the imperfect” (35). Cathy’s scarred forehead marks her as guilty for not adhering to the parameters that society has lain out, as well as highlights her imperfection as a woman with masculine tendencies.

In Cathy’s adolescent years, she decides to no longer follow her parents’ rules, and instead chooses to work as a prostitute. Cathy understands that sex equals power, and her knack for manipulation, especially with men, offers her a wealth of opportunity. Steinbeck may also be making a statement about the limitations women have for viable careers. Cathy has some other choices, but they are considered feminine and domestic, such as becoming a schoolteacher. Her direct refusal of “feminine” careers doesn’t offer many other options, and she sees her sexuality as a way out of a domestic life. When

Cathy's father drags her back toward a domestic life, she decides it is time for extreme measures. Cathy murders her family to free herself, a perfectly extreme and Cathy-like thing to do: "Cathy wanted money, and she set about getting it as quickly and as easily as she could" (93).

Despite how smart and cunning she is, Cathy Trask is still capable of making mistakes, and she makes a rather large one with Mr. Edwards. Up until her attack by Mr. Edwards, Cathy believes she can manipulate anyone. All people are fools in her eyes. But it is her inability to see that Mr. Edwards is capable of being just as ruthless that leads her into the arms of Adam Trask, a man in desperate need for feminine warmth and love. In order to preserve her safety while she heals from Mr. Edward's attack, Cathy marries Adam, but makes it explicitly clear that she has no intention of being a "proper" wife. Adam wants to travel to California and get away from his brother's disapproval of their union, but Cathy expresses her desire to stay in the North: "She said she did not want to go to California and he did not listen, because *his* Cathy took his arm and started first" (132). The apple does not fall far from the tree. Like father, like son: Adam has inherited Cyrus's incapability to see things as they truly are.

Gladstein interprets Steinbeck's biography as revealing a loathing toward women. She cites Steinbeck's own divorce as playing a key role in his creation of Cathy Trask: "Much of Cathy's character certainly suggests a venting of his animosity toward neurotic, dominating, manipulative conscienceless women, terms that are indicative of much of his post-divorce attitude" (32). Indeed, Steinbeck was hurt after his divorce from his second wife, Gwyn. She had admitted to being unfaithful. However, there is no biographical evidence to claim that he was not a supportive husband or that he did not want his ex-

wives to be happy. In *John Steinbeck, Writer: A Biography*, Jackson J. Benson notes “[His third wife,] Elaine went into production, getting a good job that first winter with the Theatre Guild. She eventually worked her way into becoming a full-fledged stage manager, a job which up to that time had been seldom performed on Broadway by a woman” (632). Elaine’s successful career proves that Steinbeck did not succeed as an obstacle, as Gladstein would like us to believe.

In “‘No Sanctuary’: Reconsidering the Evil of Cathy Ames Trask,” Sarah Appleton Aguiar argues that “Cathy Ames Trask remains one of the most irredeemable and inhumane characters in American literature” (145). Aguiar then suggests that although critics see her as a monster, if we look at Cathy’s core, we can see someone who is more concerned with self-preservation than actually committing evil for the sake of committing evil. Aguiar states, “...although Cathy’s actions appear to have the hallmarks of free will and choice, she is behaving instinctually rather than logically or morally; that is, her deeds are dictated by survival and not by higher faculties that measure actions by freely considered values.” (149) In Cathy’s mind, and in her reality, she believes she has no choice. But in the end, she makes a choice anyway—a choice to be different from all the rest.

Aguiar’s interpretation allows us to explore how Steinbeck examines his main characters—especially female characters—by stressing their limitations, perceived or otherwise, forced on them by their environments. He investigates the choices that characters make or do not make when they feel as trapped as a cornered animal. Naturally, Cathy appears to have a choice; it is true that she does, but what other critics fail to see is that Cathy doesn’t *think* she has a choice. Aguiar is correct that Cathy’s

actions are instinctual, but I think we can take her argument one step further. Cathy's instinct motivates her to be her own boss, despite the fact that it is an unsuitable career choice for a "lady." Her instincts also tell her to cut all ties to family. She views this environment around her, and through her eyes, all she can see is men making her decisions: her father dragging her back home to finish her training as a teacher; Adam deciding that they should head out west; and a male doctor deciding what is best for her body, therefore refusing to help her abort her twins. Cathy's actions are extreme, but in her mind she is cornered. She will lie, cheat, or kill to get out from under the male thumb.

I have encountered scholarship that tries to understand the nature of Cathy's cruelty, and critics often attribute her character to being monster-like, depraved, or inhuman. I have found little scholarship that takes Cathy's environment into consideration and that perhaps her cruelty is the product of living and trying to succeed in a man's world. So why have so many critics ignored Cathy's wants and desires? One answer is that they don't see her as a normal human being. They see her as a monster, and naturally a monster wants to be destructive. There is validity in this interpretation. What Cathy wants clearly doesn't fit into societal ideals. Even her brothel, a perfectly necessary establishment in a community, according to Steinbeck, is considered depraved.

However, where I think many critics fail is in their inability to see Cathy as a person responding to limitations in her surroundings. Her responses to this environment may not be what we consider rational, but we need to focus instead on a larger system that Steinbeck is examining—a system that explores female roles and responses within a world defined by patriarchy. If you force any group of people, women included, into a box, one day they will fight, scream, and claw their way out. Stephen K. George states in

“The Emotional Content of Cruelty”: “At the heart of this cruelty, this desire to denigrate a man’s sexuality and destroy the male ego, seems to be a virulent form of gender hatred” (139). Cathy displays envy for the freedom of men. In her mind, it would be a glorious day when she could choose her own path.

Cathy felt suffocated in her marriage to Adam. He did not see her, truly, deep inside. I believe that Cathy didn’t want to hurt Adam when she pointed her gun at him, she just wanted to be released from this life of domesticity. “Her marriage to Adam had been the same. She was trapped and she took the best possible way out. She had not wanted to go to California either, but other plans were denied her for the time being” (157). The domestic situation Steinbeck created for Cathy was probably relatable to many female readers of his time—a resignation to the hand that one was dealt.

For a man who chose to paint women in a negative light, according to Gladstein, he had an interesting way of showing the depth and emotions of losing your free will:

Her self was an island. It is probable that she did not even look at Adam’s new land or building house, or turn his towering plans to reality in her mind, because she did not intend to live here after her sickness was over, after her trap opened. But to his questions she gave proper answers; to do otherwise would be a wasted motion, and dissipated energy, and foreign to a good cat. (157)

Cathy never for one second entertained the idea of a happy life with Adam. From the beginning, she knew this wasn’t the right kind of life for her. And so she waited until her pregnancy was over to leave this life of domesticity behind. But we should also consider that Cathy tried to tell Adam that she did not want this life. “Adam, I didn’t want to come here. I am not going to stay here. As soon as I can I will go away” (173). It’s unfortunate that Adam does not take her statement seriously. It would have saved him physical and

emotional pain. His response is selfish as he calls her a child and her confession “nonsense” and asks her not to say “silly things” (173). Cathy tries once more by saying, “It’s not a silly thing,” but eventually gives up because she knows he has not heard a thing she has said.

It is not until chapter 17 that we see the narrator perceptively question Cathy’s image as a monster, and the arguments made are sound: “When I said Cathy was a monster it seemed to me that it was so. Now I have bent close with a glass over the small print of her and reread the footnotes, and I wonder if it is true” (182). If the narrator can question Cathy’s motivations, then so can critics. The narrator further explains, “The trouble is that since we cannot know what she wanted, we will never know whether or not she got it” (182). But I argue that we do know what she wanted: to be free to live the life she chooses. Money equals freedom, and what other ways could she acquire it without marriage? This line is especially revealing: “Who knows but she tried to tell someone or everyone what she was like and could not, for lack of a common language” (182). Everyone around her is speaking an entirely different language, a language that involves words like marriage, children, and home, but Cathy only speaks in terms of money, power, and freedom. Any man who tried listening surely would not understand. Even at the birth of her two sons, Cathy plainly states, “I don’t want them” (192). Samuel Hamilton, one of the wisest characters in the novel, cannot fathom the reality of a woman who denies her children and instead blames her disregard for them on “weariness” (192).

And when it is time for Cathy to leave, she further proves that Adam failed to hear her. When Cathy states she’s going away, she says “I told you before” (199). Adam is shocked and helplessly states that she didn’t, but Cathy knows better: “You didn’t

listen. It doesn't matter" (199). Cathy shows more of her lack of maternal instincts when she says to "throw [the children] in one of your wells" (199). Adam at this point cannot fathom what is happening and believes she is sick. In his mind, that is the only reason for her doing this to him. But callously, Cathy states "I can do anything to you. Any woman can do anything to you. You're a fool" (199). And Cathy is right; Adam is a blind fool.

Later in the novel, Cathy, now known as Kate, is reunited with Adam in the brothel. The passage of time has made Kate more sensitive and paranoid. She feels the need to justify her life's decisions in order to prove her success. Kate makes a revealing comment to Adam in the brothel: "I remember how they talked. 'Isn't she a pretty little thing, so sweet, so dainty?' and no one knew me. I made them jump through hoops, and they never knew it" (319). Kate wants to be seen as a powerful woman. She does not want to be known as just another pretty face. But Kate takes it one step further by stating: "That's what I hate, the liars, and they're all liars" (320). But whom is she referring to? Is it women for refusing to take what they want? Or is it men who pretend to take pride in virtue and purity, even though they frequent her brothel in search of something more decadent?

As the novel progresses, this need to prove everyone wrong becomes more important to Kate. When she encounters her son Cal for the first time, who must look a lot like his biological father, Charles, Kate states:

"...They looked at me and thought they knew about me. And I fooled them. I fooled every one of them. And when they thought they could tell me what to do—oh! that's when I fooled them best. Charles, I really fooled them then." (460-461)

Throughout the novel, it appears that Kate feels she has something to prove. And in the end, she “fools” them all by living her life on her own terms.

Ultimately, Kate fails to realize that there is one person who sees her true identity. Kate’s right-hand man, Joe, first looked upon her with nothing but stereotypical notions: “When he first got the job with Kate, Joe looked for the weaknesses on which he lived—vanity, voluptuousness, anxiety or conscience, greed, hysteria. He knew they were there because she was a woman” (499). Joe expects Kate to be weak, stupid, and easy to manipulate: “It was a matter of considerable shock to him to learn that, if they were there, he couldn’t find them. This dame thought and acted like a man—only tougher, quicker, and more clever...He developed an admiration for her based on fear” (499). Joe sees Kate for who she really is: a woman with all the qualities of a man. Joe knew from the beginning and without question, “It was Kate’s business and she was smart” (499).

But where Kate lacked in femininity and domesticity, Lee, the Chinese male servant, made up for it in spades. He raised, fed, and clothed the boys in her absence. And he took care of Adam. Lee is the twin boys’ mother figure. Lee’s maternal instincts are on display in Chapter 51, when Sheriff Quinn visits: “[The sheriff] looked at the room—flowered chintz, lace curtains, white drawn-work table cover, cushions on the couch covered with a bright and impudent print. It was a feminine room in a house where only men lived” (560). Lee manages to create a “feminine” home for Adam and the boys. Steinbeck suggests a clear switch of gender roles—Kate’s masculine career and Lee’s domestic responsibilities—where they are both successful in a life that society feels is not meant for them.

Goldstein argues that "...although [Cathy's] characterization is certainly meant to symbolize certain negative traits in women, it is also meant to represent the monster in men" (34). From what I've gathered in my close reading and in other sources, Steinbeck was not one to highlight "negative" traits in women, but I agree that Cathy does represent the monster in men. These men decided, long before she was born, what her life will entail. If Cathy is a monster, then we must also punish the monster that created her: society and the men that govern it.

Chapter IV

Conclusion

Steinbeck has been criticized for depicting his feminine characters as either weak or morally bankrupt, but I can't imagine a more undeserving claim. It is true that Steinbeck showed women in three distinct roles—the wife, the mother, and the prostitute—but I think this is indicative of his environment. In his biography *John Steinbeck, Writer*, Jackson J. Benson suggests that Steinbeck's childhood surrounded by women may have shaped his views. "Even as a child there was a good deal of perversity in John. In a society in which masculinity was defined as independence, he felt he was surrounded by female authority. When his mother was off doing something cultural, as she often was, there was at least one older sister around that had to be reckoned with" (19). In Steinbeck's home, there wasn't a division of work designated to just the men or women: "[Steinbeck] recalled later in life that his mother was 'loving and firm with her family, three girls and me, trained us in housework, dish washing, clothes washing and manners'" (19).

Although Steinbeck has been known to have strong political views and a sense of justice, he was not known to publicly voice his opinions about women, the roles they play in our society, or feminism in general. Publicly, it appears he focused his attention on other political matters. Perhaps this is why critics have not explored his female characters or the role that gender struggles play in his work. But Steinbeck does appear to have a soft spot for "outsiders," and I believe it is because he felt like one himself, as an artist

and a writer. Benson reveals, "...he too, saw himself as the lonely idealist, a man cast out from and opposed by the respectable majority—a man ahead of his time, radical in his adherence to principle and in his vision" (70). Steinbeck was ahead of his time in many ways, but especially in his feelings toward the female plight. There is no evidence to prove that Steinbeck didn't believe a woman could have a career.

In his youth, Steinbeck had feelings for a young woman named Margaret Gemmell. Often, he spent time telling her how pretty she was, but usually he would offer advice:

Then he would lecture her on what she should do: you have a great advantage, he'd tell her; no one would suspect that you are so intellectual, and you can get away with so much. But I'm afraid, he would say, if you're not careful, you'll wind up like every other pretty girl—caught up in marriage and children, thwarted and unfulfilled. You have to have a career. (84)

These conversations he had with Margaret provide insight into Steinbeck's views of women. First, he implies that no one would suspect that she's intellectual, and I think that is because she is a woman. But he views this as an advantage, and a way to manipulate others to satisfy her needs. She can get away with "so much" because society expects so little from her, much like Cathy Trask. He also speaks against marriage and children. To him, if she succumbs to what society wants, then she will never have the opportunity to be more than a wife and mother—a life he sees as "unfulfilling." But it's his last declaration about the necessity of her having a career that is the most progressive.

It was always clear to Steinbeck's friends, and to himself too, that he could never be happy with just anyone as a wife. Benson argues "No one could visualize him married to the stereotype of the 'pretty young thing,' empty-headed and passive" (161). But

Steinbeck's choice in women came at a price, and with his first two wives, it was the feeling of competition that would inevitably destroy the marriage. Carol had "given her life to him and to his work," and when the marriage ended "she had neither" (478). Gwyn, his second wife, felt her creativity was stifled by his success: "...she became the leading character of a supporting cast, and she hated it. She wanted to star in her own play" (621). His marriages could have turned out differently if society would have been more progressive toward women. But although Steinbeck was disappointed regarding the ends of his marriages, he was self-aware enough to know that it is "the ways of his time" that impacted his marriage in a negative way.

Steinbeck created female characters disappointed with their situations like Elisa Allen, challenging their husbands like Ma Joad, or manipulating others to get their way like Cathy Trask. Like the real women in his personal life, they are trying to break out of society's confining walls. Across these three written works, the physical environment surrounding these three characters range from a small size to a rather large one. Aside from the literal environment in which they live, there is also a broader concept of space. Space can be described as the distance from other people or things, and it is this separation that can determine one's comfort. Steinbeck's works certainly suggest that Elisa, Ma, and Cathy maintain a certain distance from the problems put before them, and also from their husbands. Another way of describing space is as an area that is either taken or available for a specific use. Steinbeck's female characters are often seen making the best of the physical space given, but a desire to expand is always lingering within them.

What rules and conventions are allowed inside the female space? In these three works, Steinbeck suggests that this space includes marriage, children, domestic work within the home, and the caretaking of not only the children but of the husband as well. In contrast, the male space involves farming the land, raising animals, providing the finances to care for the wife and children, and making decisions that involve the welfare of the family. In *The Grapes of Wrath* and *East of Eden*, we see the line between male and female spaces begin to blur, and I believe Steinbeck was suggesting that regardless of the physical size or space of their confinement, his female characters' struggle to be taken seriously is a universal theme within each story.

In "The Chrysanthemums," Henry and Elisa's distance within their marriage is displayed within the text. They never speak about what is really bothering them, but instead choose to use other subjects as a way of masking what they are trying to say, for example, when Elisa mentions the boxing matches as a way to express her feelings. Henry also provides Elisa with a small parcel of land with a fence surrounding it. This small space is given to exercise her creativity. Her land is static, confined, and permanent. Her space also doesn't include Henry, and he's aware of it as "...he leaned over the wire fence that protected her flower garden from cattle and dogs and chickens" to speak with her (2). Henry chooses not to disturb her domestic space, but instead to observe from the outside. Steinbeck's use of land in his novels suggests that he felt its ownership was vital to one's success. Land is important to the Allens, and although Elisa's husband will not provide her access to their entire ranch, he gives her a piece of it. Her ability to extend the beauty that she cultivates will never grow past the fence.

At first glance, Ma Joad's environment in *The Grapes of Wrath* may seem smaller than Elisa's garden. After all, Ma's space is confined to a truck—a vehicle that is holding her entire family inside. And although the truck symbolizes her home, it also has the ability to move. In contrast to Elisa's garden, Ma's confined space is mobile, therefore allowing her to move from state to state. The scenery is always changing, and with each new environment comes a slew of new obstacles to face. As Ma's literal view of her environment changes, so does her role as a caregiver. During Ma's change from a domestic role to a leadership role, the distance between her and her husband grows further apart. In the beginning of the novel, Ma and Pa rarely argue. They are firmly situated in their respective spaces, which close any "distance" between them. But as the roles change throughout the novel, the distance grows, which causes more arguments and threats of violence between this husband and wife.

What sets Ma apart from the other two character types is her ability to occupy the "male" space successfully. In "'His Home Is Not the Land': Caretaking, Domesticity, and Gender in *The Grapes of Wrath*," Jenn Williamson argues: "Steinbeck draws Ma Joad as a domestic authority who moves beyond material caretaking to occupy males spaces and take on masculine authority" (52). As her authority grows, the Joad men's space shrinks to the point where, little by little, their domestic rule is diminishing, which no longer gives them the room to make decisions.

Ultimately it is Cathy's environment that is the largest and most liberating of the three characters. As an independent-minded person since her youth, Cathy chooses to never be rooted in one place. Unless under extreme circumstances, like her pregnancy, she travels whenever she likes and moves about town on her own. Always a self-imposed

loner, Cathy does not let others weigh her down with their needs or demands. She does not have a lover, friends, or family to inhabit her space and confine her to one place. Her “distance” from others is vast, since within her space there is only room for one. It is not until she decides to widen her space to fit her son Aron that she experiences rejection for the first time, an emotion that most certainly brings about her death. Because of Cathy’s limited view of the life she has created for herself, real or imagined, she will never know that she possesses the most freedom, especially among her fellow female characters Elisa and Ma Joad.

Steinbeck could also sympathize with and relate to women’s frustrations on an artistic level, which is suggested in his work. As an artist, he was often sized up, criticized, and judged. Often given the reputation of being sensitive and unable to make “real” daily contributions, he had to combat those who disregarded his decisions. Even his mother was against the idea of him being a writer, and it was his father, oddly enough, who convinced her to leave him to his craft.

Steinbeck was known for writing novels that went against what the public expected. In *Journal of a Novel*, Steinbeck wrote: “You know as well as I do that this book is going to catch the same kind of hell that all the others did and for the same reasons. It will not be what anyone expects and the expectators will not like it. And until it gets to people who don’t expect anything and are willing to go along with the story, no one is likely to like this book” (26).

A lack of understanding and acceptance is what Steinbeck believes he has the most in common with women, and it is with full intention that he chooses Elisa Allen in “The Chrysanthemums” to not only represent the “confined” woman but also the

“suppressed” artist trying to make a mark on the world. As Benson proposes, “while [Steinbeck’s] writing is seldom autobiographical, it is often very personal” (53). And as an artist, he brings everything that is personal for him in the world onto the written page.

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