

Ma: An Epitome of the Mother Earth

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ABSTRACT

Woman, wife, mother, mothering and motherhood are synonymous; and sex-role stereotyping separates the social expectations of women from those of men. For women, the expressive traits (nurturing, obedience, affection, and sympathy) are hailed and rewarded as expected and normal behaviour; men are expected to be tenacious, aggressive, responsible and ambitious. Women who move outside of their designated boundaries in search of authority over their own lives are stigmatized as unfeminine, bad wives and mothers, and social deviants. Men, male vision, and the relationships of men to each other and to the rest of the world whereas women, without whom the men would have no world, have no independent identity of their own dominate the works of John Steinbeck. In this paper, the centrality of women in the works of Steinbeck specially to the action of *The Grapes of Wrath* has been traced.

1. Introduction

Woman, wife, mother, mothering and motherhood are synonymous; and sex-role stereotyping separates the social expectations of women from those of men. The success of such sex-role stereotyping depends on establishing socially acceptable clusters of behavioural attitudes that define male and female gender identities differently from the biological (sex-based) identities of women and men. To function properly, these behaviours require social placement on a hierarchical scale of strong versus weak, independent versus dependent, dominant versus submissive, in favour of men. Consequently, women are conditioned toward passivity while men are rewarded for more aggressive behaviour. For women, the expressive traits (nurturing, obedience, affection, and sympathy) are hailed and rewarded as expected and normal behaviour; men are expected to be tenacious, aggressive, responsible and ambitious. Women who move outside of their designated boundaries in search of authority over their own lives are stigmatized as unfeminine, bad wives and mothers, and social deviants. The most well-known positive image in the category of good woman is the Mother Earth, who, engaged in selfless mothering, dedicates her entire being to the welfare of others. Elizabeth Janeway, objecting to psychological impositions that render women subordinate to men, speaks out against social scientists like Eric Erickson and Freud who, in defence of the status quo, tried to explain how women ought to be, rather than how they are. She claims that the opinions on the biological aspects of women's inabilities to perform as well as men in some areas, and vice-versa, are not facts, but are, rather, social mythology based on practices and beliefs that shape social life according to a particular set of values; and there is no scientific basis for the male-constructed definition of women's nature. This social mythology of women's nature enables men to define the "natural" capabilities of women in ways that make women socially and economically dependent on men.

Men, male vision, and the relationships of men to each other and to the rest of the world whereas women, without whom the men would have no world, have no independent

identity of their own dominate the works of John Steinbeck. Women in Steinbeck's works seldom need seek the right to work outside of their homes, or to choose careers equal to those of men. They have no connections to the "gentle companions" female identity or to the ideology of femininity that became popular in the nineteenth century. Work as hard as that of farm men, or lower-class men struggling for survival outside of the agrarian economy, occupies a great deal of their time. In the words of one of Steinbeck's character, Tom Joad, "Women's always tar'd, ... that's just the way women is, 'cept at meetin' once an' again." They are always tired because they are always attending to the needs of everyone but themselves. Even domestic violence against these women is socially acceptable within the group. Only race privilege protects them from the barbarous abuse of others outside of their community that women of colour in similar situations experience. Yet, the most they can achieve and hold onto with social dignity is the supportive nurturing role of woman's place in a man's world.

The Grapes of Wrath

The centrality of women in the works of Steinbeck specially to the action of *The Grapes of Wrath*, is clear. *The Grapes of Wrath*, usually described as a novel of social protest and a strongly sustained social and political narrative, provides an accurate and faithful description of a critical period in American history. It recreates an aching detail of a decade of despair and suffering, of social instability and experimentation. It exposes the desperate conditions under which one group of American workers, the migratory farm families, was forced to live during the 1930's. These were the people who were uprooted and set adrift in the depths of the greatest economic depression the United States has known and had to abandon their homes and their livelihoods because tractors were rapidly industrializing the Southern cotton fields and because erosion and drought were creating the Dust Bowl in wide areas of New Mexico, Kansas, Texas, Colorado, and Oklahoma.

The Grapes of Wrath has an appeal which is timeless. It owed its inception to a specific crisis which no longer plagues the nation. But in the process of dramatizing that problem and suggesting ways in which it should be combated, John Steinbeck gave us a gripping novel with enduring characterization and a message which is timeless. The novel's main characters are the twelve members of the Joad family: Grampa, Granma, Pa, Ma, their children Tom, Noah, Al, Winfield, Ruthie, Rosasharon and her husband Connie, and Uncle John, joined by the ex-preacher Jim Casy. Dispossessed of their Oklahoma homestead by the banks having foreclosed the mortgage on their property, after the impoverished soil and dust storms made it impossible for them to support themselves, the group leaves for California, where they expect to find work as field hands. Ma Joad, Tom Joad, and Jim Casy- and in lesser ways the others as well – enact for us a story of the unending struggle of men of good will to make the promise of the land a living reality.

2. Ma: An Epitome of Mother Earth

Steinbeck's main character, Ma Joad is the strong woman of Proverbs. He described Ma as the Joad family "citadel, "the strong place that could not be taken". In his book, *Heroic Fiction: The Epic Tradition and American Novels of the Twentieth Century*, Leonard Lutwack, building on Steinbeck's description of Ma as "remote and faultless in judgment as a goddess; envisions Ma as the mother-goddess who inspires and protects her hero-son, much like the mother-goddesses of ancient myth. The first extended description of Ma begins in documentary detail and ends in allusions to matriarchal power. Ma is an ordinary tenant farmer's wife and a "goddess" waiting to assume her new role as the representative of a dispossessed people:

Ma was heavy, but not fat; thick with childbearing and work. She wore a loose Mother Hubbard of gray cloth in which there had once been coloured flowers, but the colour was washed out now, so that the small flowered pattern was only a little lighter gray than the background. The dress came down to her ankles, and her strong, broad, bare feet moved quickly and deftly over the floor. Her thin, steel-gray hair was gathered in a sparse wispy knot at the back of her head. Strong, freckled arms were bare to the elbow, and her hands were chubby and delicate, like those of a plump little girl. She looked out into the sunshine. Her full face was not soft; it was controlled, kindly. Her hazel eyes seemed to have experienced all possible tragedy and to have mounted pain and suffering like steps into a high calm and a superhuman understanding. She seemed to know, to accept, to welcome her position, the citadel of the family, the strong place that could not be taken.... And from her great and humble position in the family she had taken dignity and a clean calm beauty. From her position as healer, her hands had grown sure and cool and quiet; from her position as arbiter she had become as remote and faultless in judgment as a goddess. She seemed to know that 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. (99-100)

To Steinbeck, Ma's thickness, her "strong, broad, bare feet", her "thin, steel-gray hair", her "strong freckled arms" are not signs of femininity laid waste, but rather of "clean, calm beauty". All these adjectives suggest a hardy and rugged woman, one who knows that her imperturbability and sure-handedness are counted on by her family. Ma'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. The portrait of Ma suggests there may be an unheralded tradition of powerful women in early twentieth-century American literature who come forward in times of crisis and offer alternatives to the values of an individualistic and patriarchal society.

Critics of Steinbeck's women often note that the first time we come face to face with Ma Joad she is engaged in the most symbolic act of mothering- feeding her family. The second time we see her, she is washing clothes with her arms, up to her elbows, in soapsuds, and the third time, she is trying to dress the cantankerous grandfather who is by now incapable of caring for his own basic needs. Occurring in quick succession on a busy morning, these are the housewife's most important tasks: feeding the family, keeping them clean, and tending to the needs of those too young or too old to do so for themselves. In these earliest scenes with Ma, the family is making its final preparations for the journey to California, and women's work not only goes on almost uninterrupted, but increases in intensity. The family's dispossession deprives Pa Joad of his traditional agrarian labour, but Ma's work continues, and she remains strong. The tools of her husband's labour- wagons, plows, horses etc. are sold before the journey, but Ma's kettles and pans are taken along and become, with the truck, the focus of family life. When the Joads make camp the first night, Ma immediately issues an order to find firewood. Because leaving has not diminished her work, her authority is intact.

Ma is the strong, determined wife and mother who controls the family and holds it together as long as humanly possible. As long as the family or some part of the family is together, Ma will see to it that they survive. She understands the individual needs of each member of the family. She has a clear sense of priorities. She makes Pa buy milk for Winfield, though the rest of the family must eat mush for dinner. It is Ma who decides they will leave the camp they are in, sneaking Tom out between the mattresses. After she delivers the speech about the family "crackin' up," she is shown acting decisively to assure both Tom's safety and to protect, as best she can, the health of the other members of the family. The novel presents Ma moving "majestically" through the camp, down the stream, and up an embankment to deliver Tom some food and tell him he must go. This Ma is anything but resigned and passive. She tells Tom to come close, so she can feel his face to know how his scars are healing. She tells him, "I wanna touch ya again, Tom. I wanta remember, even if it's on'y my fingers that remember. You got to go away, Tom." She then gives him some money that she

has been "squirrelin" away. When he demurs, her response is a good illustration of how effectively Ma can manipulate people. She tells Tom that he has no right to cause her pain. Tom knows he is beaten and tells her, "You ain'tplayin' fair" (570).

Steinbeck's Ma is not a soother; she prods, cajoles, pricks, and angers her family into action. She knows that if Pa is ever defeated completely, the family will collapse. So, at times, she goads Pa into near frenzy, knowing that his anger will make him stronger by strengthening his resolve. To Pa Joad, life on the road seems meaningless. Route 66 is a trial by contempt, brutality and inhumanity. Stretching to an unknown destination from an irretrievable starting point, the road confronts Pa with an image of time slipping by without the reassuring cyclical pattern of farm life to give him a sense of progress or permanence. Without a farm of his own, Pa feels that "life's over an' done", but Ma contradicts him:

"No, it ain't," Ma smiled. "It ain't, Pa. An' that's one more thing a woman knows. I noticed that. Man, he lives in jerks- baby born an' a man dies, an' that's a jerk-get 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. Woman looks at it like that. We ain'tgonna die out. People is goin' on." (577)

By the time she offers her husband this reassurance late in the novel, she has extended her belief in the importance of collective strength from the family to the migrants as a people: "Use' to be the fambly was fust. It ain't so now. It's anybody". (606) Another extension of Ma's mothering precipitates her into a new and unaccustomed position of power within the family when she insists that Casy, with no family of his own, but who wishes to travel with them, be taken along. This is her first opportunity to assert herself outside of her housewife's role, to claim leadership in important decision making, whereas previously only the men officiated. Casy travels with the Joads only because Ma overrides the objections of her husband, whose concerns for their space needs, and the small amount of money and little food they have, lead him to think it unwise to take an extra person, especially an outsider to the family, on the trip. Questioned on the matter, Ma replies:

It ain't kin we? It's will we? ... As far as 'kin', we can't do nothin', not go to California or nothin'; but as far as 'will,' why, we'll do what we will. (139)

When the conversation ends, Casy has been accepted and she has gained new authority. She accepts this unpretentiously and with an absence of arrogance that will accompany her actions each time she finds it necessary to assert her will in the weeks and months ahead. And always, she asserts herself only for the good of the family. Two incidents that illustrate the group's understanding and acceptance of her wisdom and good judgment are especially noteworthy in this context. One occurs when the car breaks down during the journey and she refuses to agree to split up the family in order to hasten the arrival of some of its members. In California. When her husband insists that

separating is their better alternative, she openly defies him and, armed with a jack handle, challenges him to "whup" her first to gain her obedience to his will (230). The second incident takes place in California, when, after weeks of the groups' unsuccessful search for work and a decent place to settle down, she chides the men for capitulating to despair. "You ain't got the right to get discouraged," she tells them, "this here fambly'sgoin' under. Youjus' ain't got the right" (479).

But these situations in which Ma's voice carries, also illustrate the tensions between men and women, in sex-gender role systems, when women move into space traditionally designated to them. Each time Ma asserts her leadership she meets with Pa's resentment, for, regardless of her motives, he perceives that she usurps his authority. In the first instance, when Casy is accepted into the group, "Pa turned his back, and his spirit was raw from the whipping" her ascendancy represented to him (140). She, mindful of her role, leaves the family council and goes back to the house, to women's place, and women's work. But nothing takes place in her absence, the family waits for her return before continuing with their plans, "for she was powerful in the group" (140). During the rip (when Ma challenges Pa to "whup" her her). After several suspenseful minutes, as the rest of the group watch his hands, the fists never form, and, in an effort to salvage his hurt pride, he can only say: "one person with their mind made up can shove a lot of folks aroun'!" (230). But again, she is the victor and the "eyes of the whole family shifted back to Ma. She was the power. She had taken control" (231). Finally, in California, when Ma has her way once more in spite of Pa's opposition, and the family will move from a well-kept camp that had been a temporary respite from the traumas of the journey and their stay in Hooverville, but that placed them in an area in which they could find no work,

Pa sniffed. "Seems like times is changed," she 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 tick." (481)

But he makes no attempt to beat her as her response is immediate and challenging. She tells him that when he returns to fulfilling his responsibilities as head of the household, then he can use his stick. Men have the "right" to beat their women only when they (the men) are adequately performing their masculine roles. However, since he is not, she defies him with the information that she has a stick all laid out too. This is the second scene in the novel where Ma challenges Pa to some kind of physical combat and he backs away.

"You get your stick Pa," she said. "Times when they's food an' a place to set, then may be 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-mouse aroun'. But youjus' get you a stick now an' you ain'tlickin' no woman; you're a fightin', 'cause I got a stick all laid out too." (481)

In each of the instances mentioned here, once the decision is made and Ma's wise decision carries, she returns to women's place and/or displays stereotypical women's emotions. After her first confrontation with Pa over Casy, she hastens to tend the pot of "boiling side-meat and beet greens" to feed her family. Following the second, after she has challenged Pa to a fight and wins, she looks at the bar of iron and her hand trembles as she drops it on the ground. Finally, when she roses the family from despair, she immediately resumes washing the breakfast dishes, "plunging" her hands into the bucket of water. And, to emphasize her selflessness, as her angry husband leaves the scene, she registers pride in her achievement, but not for herself. "He's all right," she notes to Tom. "He ain't beat. He's like as not to take a smack at me."

Steinbeck suggests that Ma's experience as a woman has made her see the individual as part of a larger whole. Ma's matriarchal understanding of unity opens her to the possibility of a new frontier myth founded on the westward migration as a process which brings a dispossessed people together:

In the evening a strange thing happened: the twenty families become one family, the children were the children of all. The loss of home become one loss, and the golden time in the West was one dream. And it might be that a sick child threw despair into the hearts of twenty families, of a hundred people; that a birth there in a tent kept a hundred people quiet and awestruck through the night and filled a hundred people with the birth-joy in the morning. (264)

He presents Ma's growing power as a source of communal strength sheltering human dignity from the antisocial effects of individualism. Her heroic maternal qualities reflect the strength and character of those migrant wives who not only survived but nourished their children and husbands as well. For one thing, not only among the Joads, the main characters in the novel, but in all the families in crisis, the children look to the women for answers to their immediate survival: "What are we going to do, Ma? Where are we going to go?" (47) the anonymous children ask. In male-dominated sex-gender systems, children depend on their mothers for parenting, and their stability rests mainly on the consistency and reliability with which women meet their needs. Steinbeck assures us that the family can survive by returning to an earlier stage of collective, nonauthoritarian security while the larger society moves towards a socialistic economy. As he sees it, in times of grave familial or community need, a strong, wise woman like Ma Joad has the opportunity (or perhaps the duty) to assert herself and still maintain her role as selfless nurturer of the group. In this respect, she is leader and follower, wise and ignorant, and simple and complex, simultaneously. In short, she is the woman for all seasons, the nonintrusive, indestructible "citadel" on whom everyone else can depend.

Unless she admitted hurt or fear or joy, the family did not know those emotions; and better than joy they loved her calm. They could depend on her "imperturbability". When Tom, Jr., returns from prison to find no homestead, the house pushed off its foundations, fences gone, and other signs of living vanished, his first thought is "They're gone- or Ma's dead" (56). He knows that under no circumstances would she permit the place to fall into such ruin if she were there. His is not a casual observation, but a statement fraught with anxiety. As Nancy Chodorow points out, in the sex-gender system, the absent mother is always the source of discomfiture for her children. Tom closely associates the physical deterioration of his home with a missing mother, a signal for him of the catastrophe of which he is yet unaware.

In many ways, Ma embodies the philosophy of Jim Casy. She treats all creatures with the respect due to them and, while always putting the needs of her own first family, she willingly helps other people when she can. She comforts the Wilsons, shares food with the starving Hooverville children, and finds work for the Wainwrights. She feels instinctively that they are the people, that they are the ones who will endure and populate the world. Though she speaks rarely, Ma expresses one of the most comprehensive morals of the novel: "If you are in trouble or hurt the need- go to poor people. They are the only ones that'll help- the only ones." Ma's conversations with Sairy Wilson give her the opportunity to articulate her family pride in "holdin' in". Ma quotes her father's dictum that anybody can break down, but it takes a man not to. It is significant that the "men" who do not break down are women: Sairy, Granma and Ma.

Ma emerges as a central, cohesive force. She suffers greatly when she sees Grampa die, then Noah leave, then Granma die, and then Tom forced to hide and finally go away. But she hides her grief, knowing full well that Pa and the children could know hurt and fear only if she acknowledged hurt and fear. Her control and kindness are mirrored in her face, and her eyes have that serene look of one who has somehow passed beyond suffering and pain. Nothing disturbs Ma, at least outwardly, because she knows that the whole family looks to her for guidance and stability. There are many occasions in the novel where Steinbeck shows us Ma's assertive strength and sagacity. The aggressive nature of Ma's strength even becomes for jokes. Tom teases Al that he better have the truck ready or "I'll turn Ma on ya" (481).

The long trek from Oklahoma to California provides many instances that demonstrates Ma's selfless nurturing, her wisdom, her leadership abilities, and, above all, her centredness in the family. At times she assumes mythic proportions, but her portraiture is also realistic and she acts with wisdom. Impressionistically, she is firmly planted in the earth, but she is more dependable than the land, which could not withstand the buffeting of nature or the persistent demands of small farmers or the evil encroachment of technology and corporate power. Her position is established at the beginning of the novel. An important illustration of this occurs at the time of the death of the grandmother on the long night in which the family makes an incredibly precarious desert crossing into California. Lying with the dead old woman

all night to conceal this partially unforeseen mishap from the rest of the group, Ma's only thought during the ordeal is: "The fambyhadda get acrost" (312). Alone with her secret of the true state of the old woman's conditions, her considerations for the other members of the family, in this case particularly for the future of the younger children and for her daughter's unborn child, take precedence over the tremendous emotional cost to herself. Her determination to protect the family is almost ferocious, as she stands up to the officials at the agricultural inspection station on the California border to prevent them from discovering the dead woman by making a thorough check of the contents of the truck.

Ma climbed heavily down from the truck. Her face was swollen and her eyes were hard. "Look, minster. We got a sick ol' lady. We got to get her to a doctor. We can't wait." She seemed to fight with hysteria. "You can't make us wait." (308)

Her apparent distress over the welfare of the old woman's health is convincing. She is intent on keeping the death a secret from the rest of the group as long as their overall situation remains threatening. She absorbs the trauma of the death in herself, and only after they arrived safely on the other side of the desert does she give the information to the others. Even then she refuses the human touch that would unleash her own emotional vulnerability. The revelation of this act to protect the family is one of the most powerful scenes in the novel. The members of the family, already almost fully dependent on her emotional stamina, look at her "with a little terror at her strength" (312). Son Tom moves toward her in speechless admiration and attempts to put his hand on her shoulder to comfort her. "Don' touch me,' she said. I'll hol' up if you don' touch me. That'd get me" (312). And Casy, the newest member of the family, can only say: "there's a woman so great with love- she scares me" (313).

Steinbeck suggests that the "pain and suffering" of childbirth and the woman's role as attendant of the sick and dying leave her with an essentially tragic view of life that, in turn, generates a sustaining stoicism. Ma's "high calm" and superhuman understanding" not only endow her with the mental fortitude to be a "healer", "arbiter", and "citadel", but also spare her the kind of physically debilitating effects of depression suffered by her husband and brother-in-law. Steinbeck's view is thus quite literal. Ma possesses the psychological qualities to govern her family community because she has actually given birth to it and nurtured it.

She knows how Rose of Sharon is troubled by her pregnancy, and she threatens to slap her at times when she begins to feel sorry for herself, but she is always ready to comfort the poor girl when the need arises. When Rose of Sharon grows frightened at her grandmother's illness, Ma soothes her explaining that "dyin' is a piece of all dyin', and bearin' is a piece of all bearin'". (286) In order to coax her out of her depression, Ma gives her the earrings and entices her to go to the dance. But before Rose of Sharon can wear the earrings, she must have her ears pierced. Symbolically, Rose must learn to bear pain in order to inherit Ma's role. Ma comments to Rose of Sharon that she "very near let you have

a baby without your ears pierced" (484). The statement suggests that having the ears pierced is an initiation rite, indicating readiness to assume the womanly role. Now that she will be a mother also, Rose of Sharon must not only learn to behave like Ma, but she also is ready to wear Ma's jewellery. Rose asks Ma, "Does it mean sompin'?" And Ma responds, "Why, 'course it does. 'Course it does." Ma knows that she can rely on Tom, but not on Al who lacks Tom's sense of responsibility. She understands Uncle John's need to overindulge now and then and does not criticise him for it.

In the novel Ma's encouragement is not buttressed by subsequent scenes. The engagement between Al and Aggie Wainwright means that Al will be lost to the family group. Rose of Sharon's baby is born dead. And to cap off their troubles, the family is flooded out of their boxcar home. Steinbeck's closing scene is only faintly reassuring. That reassurance is embodied in the behaviour of mother and daughter, particularly in Rose of Sharon's nurturing gesture. Though she is weak, wet, and undernourished, Rose of Sharon inherits her mother's mantle and acts as an agent for the preservation of life. If at one level, the Joads represent the human family, then Ma and Rose of Sharon embody the role of women in that context. They are Mother and Daughter, Demeter and Persephone, the eternal feminine that duplicates itself and thus provides continuity and promise for the future.

The conclusion of the novel revises the boundaries of that family. When Rose of Sharon offers her breast to a starving man, her smile announces her initiation into a matriarchal mystery: the capacity to nurture life. The scene confirms Ma's belief that family unity can be extended to the wider community, and its shock, springing from the denial of sexuality in the meeting of man and woman. Rose of Sharon's offering is "a survival symbol": as a woman, she represents not the alleviation of oppression but the ability to endure it. On our typical understanding of that word, Ma may not be happy in her role, but "her face ...{is} controlled and kindly" and she fully accepts her place. Having "experienced all possible tragedy and ... mounted pain and suffering like steps into a high calm," she fulfils her highest calling in the realm of wife and motherhood.

3. Conclusion

At the end, it can be concluded that Steinbeck preserves some hope, however, by insisting the Ma's legacy passes on to Rose of Sharon, to Tom, and by extension, to a future generation of Americans that might incorporate her values into democratic society. The significance of Ma's bequest differs according to the sex of the two children; traditional male and female roles persist in Steinbeck's working out of matriarchal values. Rose of Sharon insists her mother's sense of community through her womb; Tom through his mind. Unable to physically supply milk from her own breasts to save the old man's life, Ma initiates her daughter into the sisterhood of "mothering the world," of perpetuating what Nancy Chodowow calls "The Reproduction of Mothering." Ma Joad is the epitome of the Earth Mother. Critics not that Steinbeck need give her no first name, for she is the paradigmatic mother, and this is the single interest of her life.

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