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God and Man

Democritus, also known as the Laughing Philosopher, once said, “Happiness resides not in possessions, and not in gold, happiness dwells in the soul” (“Democritus Quotes At Brainyquote.Com”). As a part of human nature, individuals are constantly looking for the source of happiness. Some look for happiness in others, some look for it in material goods, sometimes it is sought after in oneself. Others look for happiness in dreams, religious pursuits, and the divine. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, by John Steinbeck, the Joads- a family who has been affected by the Dust Bowl- are forced to migrate west. Along their journey they are constantly looking for ways to find happiness, whether it be through a son’s return, daughter’s pregnancy, or hope of a promised land. Unfortunately, every time the Joads put their faith in something, the outcome never is what they desire because it is based off of the powers of human nature. Their son is unable to save them, their daughter’s baby is a stillbirth, and the Promised Land is instead an overcrowded wasteland. Their happiness is constantly being placed in utilitarian forms of thought, in which the greater amount of good for the greater amount of people is what brings happiness. As described by Louis Owens, “*The Grapes of Wrath* is the story of a people growing through ignorance and failure and isolation toward a commitment to something much larger than the isolated self” (). In short, the novel exposes how happiness is created through leaving oneself behind and turning towards the betterment of society as a whole. Similarly to Steinbeck, Samuel Johnson explores the follies of human nature in “The Vanity of Human Wishes.” Johnson

explores how pride, stubbornness, and worldly pursuits harm the progression of individuals because it is only through divine help that the vanities can be put aside and real happiness can begin. The *Norton Anthology of English Literature*'s introduction to Samuel Johnson's "The Vanity of Human Wishes" describes the following concept, "In a world of blindness and illusion, human beings must struggle to find a point of view that will not deceive them, and a happiness that can last" (). Although *The Grapes of Wrath* is perceived as a novel of triumph of the oppressed and a call for socialism, in actuality the novel exposes the vanities of human nature as described in "The Vanity of Human Wishes" and calls for a return to God for the betterment of society.

At the beginning of the novel, Tom Joad has just been released from prison and is heading back to his family's farm. It has been three years since he has been home and the effects of the Dust Bowl have yet to make an imprint on his life. As he is walking, Tom passes near a diner and sees a semi which has a "No Riders" sticker on it. Instead of continuing on, Tom waits for the driver to come out to ask him for a ride. When Tom is convincing the driver to let him have a ride he says, "But sometimes a guy'll be a good guy even if some rich bastard makes him carry a sticker" (). Tom does a couple of things here. First, Tom appeals to the driver's ethics of wanting to be and being a good guy. Second, he appeals to the fact that someone else is making the driver carry that sticker and that if it were really up to the driver, he would give Tom a ride. Ultimately, the driver allows Tom to ride in the semi for a bit until he gets to the fork in the road where the men will need to go their separate ways. And this sort of behavior is common from the Joad family throughout the novel. Constantly, they let their stubbornness take over their reason. This can be seen most blatantly when throughout their journey, Pa Joad is constantly being told that California is not the Promised Land, but rather a waste land that would only bring

unhappiness. Yet, the Joads travel all the way and throughout California even after hearing the warnings and seeing personally of the hardships that accompany the land. Similarly, Tom wanted a ride and so even if it went against reason and put the driver's job at stake, he still made the effort to see if somehow the results would be in his favor. The results were in fact were what Tom wanted, but only for a short amount of time. Once the driver and Tom split, the sadness that accompanied the Dust Bowl enters Tom's life and it was time for reality to set in. The actions of the Joads, as well as many Okies, as described above are perfectly summarized in "The Vanity of Human Wishes" which states, "How rarely Reason guides the stubborn choice,/ Rules the bold hand, or prompts the supplicant voice;/ How nations sink, by darling schemes oppressed,/ When Vengeance listens to the fool's request" (). In this quote, Johnson is determining the correlation between stubbornness and reason and ultimately comes to the decision that individuals cannot have reason when they are engaged in stubbornness. And when engaged in stubbornness, nothing is what it seems and everything only falls apart as it does for the Joads and Tom. They were bold and stubborn, pushing limits and trying to be successful themselves, but it was all in vain. They did not heed the warnings nor let the reason of those who knew what was going on guide them, rather they put their trust in themselves and were led to a hell on earth. Most critics would say that the stubbornness of the Joads exhibits the triumphs of the oppressed man and shows that their ability to rise from their hardships is what supports the argument that Steinbeck writes and is even calling for a socialist society. In the San Francisco Chronicle, in accordance to many critics, Joseph Jackson remarked, "Steinbeck's sensitiveness was ripe to react to the tragedy of the little man and his unquenchable courage in the face of calamity" (). Rather, though, the stubbornness of the Joads shows that when individuals place their trust in themselves, without heeding the words of God and others who know best, they will ultimately fail no matter how

many times they get up. It was not courage as perceived by Jackson, but rather stubbornness. As stated in Pressman's analysis, "From Emerson he found that, 'here is no socialism imposed from above; here is a natural grouping of simple separate people'" (). It is not a call for socialism that Steinbeck writes, but rather he exposes the vanity that humans naturally experience, in which they rely on themselves instead of placing faith in the divine. In accordance with Johnson's argument, Steinbeck exposes the weakness of the individual's stubbornness and the dreary path that it leads down to create a call for society to return to God and become better.

Before the Joads leave for California, they are making preparations for the trip. In addition to family members, the old preacher- Jim Casy- accompanies the Joads to help with preparations and make the journey. As they are finishing up the last of their preparations Casy decides to take over the meat salting to allow the women to finish up other preparations. When Ma Joad sees what Casy is doing she tells him that it is women's work and that the girls will take care of it. Casy in turn replies with, "'It's all work,' the preacher replied, 'They's too much of it to split up to men's or women's work. You got stuff to do. Leave me to salt the meat'" (). Casy is trying to say that it is completely ridiculous to split up the man and women's work because it is all just work and needs to get done regardless of who performs the task. It does not matter by who, as long as it is efficient. Ultimately Casy remarks on the vanity of gender distinctions and the responsibilities that are split up by it, that are completely unreasonable especially in pressing times. In a study on gender distinctions it states, "Gender roles are a primary determinant of behavior only when they are salient in the situation or other roles are ambiguous" (Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin). In other terms, society creates gender divisions and roles. These divisions determine behavior when someone tells an individual that the distinctions are important. Without these division the conflict concerning who could and should do different roles would disappear.

Casy points out how silly individuals are to uphold certain cultural practices even when they are unreasonable and only make life harder. Casy is similar to Democritus, the laughing philosopher, as described by Johnson, "Once more, Democritus, arise on earth,/ With cheerful wisdom and instructive mirth." Democritus and Casy are juxtaposition of each other because they both are preaching the same things and looking at human nature from a different point of view, but they each go about it differently. While Casy takes the vanities and follies of human nature seriously by contemplating the meaning of life, breaking social norms, and even eventually leading a rebellion among the migrant workers, Democritus takes a different approach. While he does share wisdom, Democritus laughs at the faults of society and uses jokes as a means to elicit thoughts about the follies of human nature and even elicit some change because of the realization of the ridiculousness of the practices that we engage in to be socially acceptable. Although Casy and Democritus go about teaching and observing the vanities and faults of human nature in different ways- Casy taking on a more serious note, while Democritus sees things from a more comical level- they both were able to elicit change because of their ability to see past the culturally accepted. Using Casy, in regards to Democritus' philosophy, Steinbeck is able to expose the fault of gender difference and show that individuals place limits on each other and their own society. It is because of human nature and what society believes to be acceptable that causes the fall of society. Through Casy, as Johnson does with Democritus, Steinbeck tells "a story of the awakening of man's consciousness that coincides with the awakening of his [Steinbeck's] conscience" (). As Steinbeck realizes the faults of humanity, he writes of the characters in his novel coming to the same conclusion. He uses this to argue that the people are bringing down their own society and that it is not through humans and their nature that society is better but rather through a God, or Supreme Being that is able to see the faults and correct them

in society. That society will ultimately be cured of its follies in the Joads lives- as Steinbeck sees in his own life- through the divine.

Throughout the novel, Steinbeck switches from talking about the migration in general to applying it specifically to the Joad family. Towards the beginning of the novel, Steinbeck explains that the overall cause of the Okie migration during the Dust Bowl was not necessarily because of the land drying up but rather the response to the land drying up and why the response was necessary. He writes, “The bank- the monster has to have profits all the time. It can’t wait. It’ll die. No taxes go on. When the monster stops growing it dies” (). The people are removed from their lands and forced to migrate because of the bank, a symbol of capitalistic society. As remarked by H. Kelly Crockett in regards to the bank and power organizations that Steinbeck was paralleling in the novel, “... [The] Bank of the West- [is like] all groups who place their possessions above human welfare” (Crockett). In other words the bank runs everything, which puts aside humanity and its welfare. As stated by Steinbeck later on in the chapter, “Men made it, but they can’t control it” (). Men created a society run by a never ending monster that must constantly be fed. The monster is the bank and it feeds off of the people’s incomes and gain. Nothing can happen, nothing can be given, and nothing can be received without the bank’s interference, without it taking something. And this is how men designed the bank to be. As described by Johnson, “Claim leads to claim and power advances power” (). Men desire power, but do not understand that with power comes the great responsibility. Power is a never-ending cycle in which it must constantly be growing or it diminishes and so in regards to the bank there comes a point where it becomes too much. Louis Owens wrote, “*The Grapes of Wrath* demonstrates how labor organizations, or unions, grow from the desperation of the workers, how capitalism, in its inherent quest for the profit that keeps the machinery going, will oppress and

even destroy the laborer” (). Power is something that men alone cannot control, it instead controls men- even to the point of destruction. The only way to defeat this is by taking the away the power from banks as well as humans. Only a deity can defeat the monster, because both are something that humans can neither explain nor control. And once the monster is eradicated and man’s lust for the monster’s power is gone through divine means, only then can society improve.

Towards the end of the novel, Rose of Sharon- a member of the Joad family who has been pregnant throughout the migration, finally gives birth but the child is stillborn. By this time, the Joads have been through it all- family members have died and left, California is not what it was made out to be, the weather has taken a turn for the worse and finally their last glimmer of hope, the baby, is gone. Heartbroken, the Joads leave it up to Uncle John to bury the baby. In the middle of the storm, Uncle John puts the baby in a make-shift box and sent it down the river, telling it to tell the people of the migrant’s struggles so that the people might have a small glimpse into the hardships that they, the migrants, had to go through. He says to the baby, “Go down an’ tell ‘em. That’s the way you can talk... Maybe they’ll know then” (448). This story is similar to the story of Moses, who was sent down a stream as a baby and eventually proclaimed truths to his people. Throughout the novel, the baby is a symbol of hope for the Joad family. When it was delivered as a still-born, the Joads sense of hope was lost. But it is not the Joads loss of hope that makes the baby so important but rather what the baby will do- even though it is dead- that makes it so vital to Steinbeck’s story. The baby is a symbol of future generations and instead of burying it- which would bury the hope and the message of Uncle John- the baby is let go, free to tell its story- the Joads’ story- to any and everyone that it comes in contact with. As stated in “The Vanity of Human Wishes” about the relationships between generations it says, “from age to age in everlasting debt” (). Each generation must pay the debt of the generation

before them. What people do now will affect the future and so individuals rarely ever see the consequences of their own actions, rather they are shown and live the consequences of the actions of those that came before themselves. As best explained in economic terms, “Since the sacrifice of a generation can exist only through the sacrifice of one or more of the individuals who comprise it, we must conclude that bond financing postpones the sacrifice to a future generation” (Shoup). While this article is describing bonds and financial debt, the principle is still the same. No generation wants to pay themselves and so they place the burden on their posterity to avoid the consequences. As with Moses, who paid the debt of both the Egyptians- who enslaved- and Israelites- who were enslaved- by freeing the Israelites, the baby is a symbol of the future paying for the past- freeing the people from situations similar to those experienced by the migrants. Not only was Rose of Sharon paying for the debt of those who created the bank, but the baby also had a debt to pay. That debt being a loss of hope and using that to somehow elicit change. Like the baby, future generations are constantly learning from the past and creating changes for a better future- a future where one day children will not need to pay the debt of their ancestors. This is only possible though, through something greater. As with the monster, humans are caught in this cycle of forcing their posterity to suffer for their mistakes, it is only through God that the cycle breaks. God allows for prosperity and happiness without paying for someone else, because of the Atonement of Christ which in Matthew 26:28 in the New Testament states, “For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins” (). Christ paid for the past and present, so the future will not have to.

At the end of the novel, the Joad family finds a man and his son in a barn and the man is dying from starvation. To the shock of many readers, as depicted by Mrs. W.H. Matlack who said that the book “is vile all the way through” () the final scene is of Rose of Sharon nursing the

old man to health with her breast milk. Through this scene Steinbeck shows two different reactions to the sick man. The first is from the men, “She looked at Pa and Uncle John standing helplessly at the sick man” (). And the second from the women, “And the two women looked deep into each other... She said, ‘Yes’” (). The men, the ones who the women have been relying on the entire novel, are the ones in this last moment who have no idea what to do. Throughout the story, it is the men who worked the fields, the men who lead their families while migrating, it is the men who were always strong and had a plan even during the times of great adversity. But at the end Steinbeck makes the switch of the gender roles, that the men no longer know what to do, almost as if they have used all of their resources and all that is left is failure. It is the women who instead rise up and take on the burden that the men no longer can carry. It is the women who have stayed under the shadow of men that finally at the end have a plan and show that there is some hope left. Rose of Sharon is saying yes to more than just sharing her breast milk with the dying man. As critic Peter Lisca remarks, “As Rose of Sharon offers her breast to the old man (this is my body and my blood), the novel’s two counter themes are brought together in a symbolic paradox. Out of her own need she gives life; out of the profoundest depth of despair come the greatest assertion of faith” (). In contrast to Matlack’s statement, Lisca was able to see more than a woman offering her body to an older man, instead the true symbolism of Christ’s sacrifice is made apparent and celebrated in his analysis of this final scene. And although the novel does not ever tell the reader whether or not the man survives or what happens in the end, the rise of the women- their ability to carry that final burden in the end- solidifies Steinbeck’s argument. Johnson describes this relationship best by stating, “In life’s last scene what prodigies surprise,/ Fears of the brave and follies of the wise!” (). In simpler terms, Johnson is saying that in the end it is not the brave and the wise that rise, if anything they are the ones least prepared.

Rather in the end it is the person that is not expected, the one that has been there the entire time waiting for the moment when they are needed the most. The men represent humankind, the follies that encompass each one of us and the brave faces that in the end only show cowardice. In contrast, the women represent God and Christ, who are there during the good and the bad and in the end when the strength of man fails, picks up the ruins and gives hope for the future. Eleanor Roosevelt describes this ending best by saying, “Even from life’s sorrows some good must come. What could be a better illustration than the closing chapter of this book?” (). In agreement with Eleanor’s statement, this final scene is call for a return to God and Christ because it is only through them that human weaknesses can be overcome and that when all things which are humanly possible fail, there is still hope. This being hope for the future, hope for humanity, and hope for a better world.

The Grapes of Wrath shows the struggles that are a part of the nature of humanity and the vices that are described in *The Vanity of Human Wishes*. Although some critics such as _____ would say, “_____” (), others believe that Steinbeck wrote the novel with a religious agenda. As stated by Peter Lisca in regards to the Christian aspects- specifically biblical allusions although it is applicable to all religious themes- of the novel, “the novel imbues its social message with a religious fervor and sanction” (). The novel exposes the follies of individuals placing their faith in humanity and hoping for things that no human could possibly fulfill. Through exposing human vices such as stubbornness, pride, and wishful thinking, as well as using Christ figures and historical evidence, Steinbeck and Johnson call for a return to God and separating from the unreliable- that being human nature.

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