



Linnéuniversitetet Kalmar
Växjö

School of Languages and Literature/English

Supervisor: Johan Höglund

Examiner: Anna Greek

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The Broken Dream
The Failure of the American Dream in *The Grapes of Wrath*
from a Caste and Class perspective

Therése Johansson

LINNEAUS UNIVERSITY
School of Language and Literature/English

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Author: Therése Johansson
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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to investigate the failure of the American Dream in the novel *The Grapes of Wrath* and the factors that affect it. Thus, the thesis of the paper is that it is the classes and castes of Californian that prevent the Joad family from fulfilling the American Dream.

The thesis will be discussed from four focal points of the American Dream: Freedom, Equality, Individualism and Family and Ideal Home. The novel takes place during the Great Depression, a time when many Americans were homeless and unemployed. An attempt will be made to define the American Dream and give a background to it. Furthermore, the binary pair of “self” and “other” will be used as an instrument of analysis.

Keywords: John Steinbeck, The American Dream, The Joad Family, Social classes, Freedom, Equality, Individualism, Family, Ideal Home.

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INTRODUCTION

Why don't you go to California? There's work there and it never gets cold. Why, you can reach out anywhere and pick an orange. Why, there's always some kind of crop to work in. Why don't you go there? (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 36)

One of the most well-known dreams regarding a new life and personal fulfillment is the American Dream. In the 1930's, the term "the American Dream" was coined, and thereby gave name to the wishes and expectations of the migrants to America, but also within America itself. The above quotation describes how the desire for a better life is illustrated among tenant workers in *The Grapes of Wrath*, where California is depicted as a utopia. It also makes the promise that everybody will have a job, and thus be able to realize their dreams. In this sense, California is associated with the dream of a better life, which can easily be broken.

During the Great Depression in the 1930's and the Dust Bowl Migration, which took place during the Depression, many people from Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas and New Mexico traveled westwards to California due to dust storms and bank foreclosures. They were looking for a better life than the one they had in their home states (Keith Windschuttle 24). During the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl Migration, when a lot of Americans were homeless since they had lost their money and their jobs when the stock market crashed in 1929, the American Dream must have been even more important for the American people, due to the hard times.

The Grapes of Wrath is by some critics regarded as John Steinbeck's masterpiece (Stein 202). Furthermore, Steinbeck himself claimed the book to be a "true American novel" (John Steinbeck, *Working Days* 29). The novel narrates the story of the Joad family and their

resettlement from Oklahoma to the Promised Land of California during the Dust Bowl Migration. There, the family realizes that the things they have imagined about California are not true. Consequently, they are forced to work for low wages and live in camps. They are also treated with no respect by the Californians.

The main aim of this paper is to investigate the failure of the American Dream and the underlying factors behind this in the novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. The thesis of the paper will thus be that it is the social classes and castes in California that prevent the Joads from fulfilling the American Dream. The social structures in the novel can be regarded as a form of caste system, where it is very difficult to advance further from your caste. Therefore, the terms “social structure”, “social classes”, “social hierarchy” and “castes” will be used in the analysis. Due to the social structures, a “self” and “other”-distinction is made between the Californians and the ‘Okies’. Okies’ was a nickname given to the people from the South Central States, i.e. Oklahoma and Texas, who immigrated to California during the Dust Bowl Migration (Stein vii). The distinction can thus be claimed to affect the Joads’ ability of reaching their dreams to a considerable degree and therefore contribute to break their American Dream.

The paper will focus on the following key elements of the American Dream:

- Equality
- Freedom
- Individualism
- Family and Ideal Home

Some aspects of the dream are not discussed in this paper, (i.e. wealth and everybody should have the right to education) since they are not appropriate for the aim and scarcely dealt with in the novel.

The method that is used for this paper is hermeneutics. Thomas M. Seebohm (2004) argues that hermeneutics is a method used for interpretation of different texts in order to gain an understanding of them (9-10). According to Seebohm, there are three steps of analysis when using the hermeneutic method:

1. The pre-given written text.
2. The interpretation or translation of the text.
3. The text of the interpreter as the result of his or her interpretation (12).

The hermeneutic method is a method that allows interpretations of literary texts from a subjective perspective. By using hermeneutics, the interpreter tries to understand the issue being dealt with “from the inside” (Seebohm 93-94). In this context, Seebohm argues that a crucial aspect of the understanding is imagination. Imagination is crucial for the interpretation, since the interpreter must be able to imagine how the characters in the text feel or what they desire (99). However, the problem by using the method is that there is no guarantee that the interpretation being made is correct (Seebohm 7). Nevertheless, hermeneutics is a method that is useful for pointing out qualities and interpretations of a text, which may differ from person to person. I have chosen this method, since it allows different interpretations and also allows the interpreter and other interpreters to constantly discover new layers in the text and thus make new interpretations.

The primary material used for this paper is *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) by John Steinbeck. The edition that will be referred to is the Penguin Modern Classics from 2000. To define the term “American Dream”, the books *The Epic of America* (1944) by James Truslow Adams and *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation* (2003) by Jim Cullen will be used. *The Epic of America* was first published in 1931, but the edition used for this paper was published in 1944. The text was also the first one to coin the term “American Dream”. Adams’ and Cullen’s texts are separated by about 70 years, and they also want to convey different aspects

of the matter. Adam's text is written from a more philosophical and a promotional perspective. In the text, he makes a claim for what the American people should strive for during the Great Depression. Moreover, Cullen gives a historical perspective of the dream and its origin and discusses it from different vantage points, e.g. freedom and home ownership, which Adams does not deal with. However, it is important to note that neither of the texts can be considered as research in that sense; but they are accounts for the dream.

In *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (1998), Richard H. Pells gives an overview of how different authors handled the depression. One of the authors being dealt with is John Steinbeck alongside *The Grapes of Wrath* in relation to the Depression. *Redesigning the American Dream: Gender, Housing and Family Life* (2002) by Dolores Hayden provides an overview of the rise of the American ideal home in relation to the family. In addition, Mark Poster's *Critical Theory of the Family* (1988) is used for a definition of the ideal family. William Lloyd Warner's *American Life: Dream and Reality* (1962) discusses social classes and castes. Furthermore, the book also discusses the theory and background of individualism. Ania Loomba's *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (2005) discusses stereotypes in order to create a dichotomy between "self" and "other" in a postcolonial context. However, the concept has been applied to my analysis of *The Grapes of Wrath*, where the Californians mostly define themselves as "self" and the 'Okies' as the "other". This distinction is also made from the 'Okies' perspective, where they represent the "self" and the Californians the "other".

Walter J. Stein's *California and the Dust Bowl Migration* (1973) is mostly used to explain prejudices against the 'Okies'. Furthermore, to gain an insight into the Depression as well as the American Dream during this period, Charles R. Hearn's *The American Dream in the Great Depression* (1977) is used. In *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941* (2009), Robert S.

McElvaine discusses American values and culture during the Great Depression years as well as individualism. Maxine Greene's article *On the American Dream: Equality, Ambiguity, and the Persistence of Rage* (1983) provides another definition of equality. James L. Nolan JR discusses different aspects of freedom in his article *The Supreme Court and the Story of American Freedom* (1996). The third volume of Esmond Wright's work regarding the history of the United States, *A History of the United States of America: The American Dream: From Reconstruction to Reagan* (1996), is also used for the discussion concerning freedom.

John Steinbeck himself produced quite a lot of material concerning *The Grapes of Wrath*. *The Harvest Gypsies* includes articles that Steinbeck wrote while living with the "Okies" in California. One article is of specific interest for this paper, since it portrays the way the "Okies" actually lived (in tents and government camps) and how they worked in order to maintain equality and dignity among themselves. The version used for this paper was published in *The Grapes of Wrath and Other Writings* (1989).

The Grapes of Wrath deals with a lot of people, but the main characters are the Joad family. The core of the family consists of Ma and Pa Joad and their six children: Noah, Tom, Rose of Sharon, Al, Ruthie and Winfield. Most of the children are adults or adolescents, but Ruthie and Winfield are about ten years old. Other members of the family are Grampa and Granma Joad as well as Uncle John. Rose of Sharon's husband Connie and the priest Casy are also with the family on the journey. Moreover, during the journey Rose of Sharon is pregnant with her and Connie's baby.

The paper consists of three major chapters, of which two contain subchapters. The background chapter is divided into two minor chapters. The first one will make an attempt to define the American Dream, while the second one deals with the binary pair of "self" and "other". The analysis chapter is divided into four subchapters. The "Equality"-chapter focuses on

the lack of equality between the 'Okies' and the Californians. This chapter will also deal with the 'Okies' government camps, which were constituted in California during this period. The "Freedom"-chapter will concern first and foremost personal freedom and civic liberty, since religious freedom is scarcely problematized in the novel and is not appropriate for the aim or the thesis. The "Individualism"-chapter will focus on the right to make your own choices only thinking of yourself and how this fails for the family and the other 'Okies'. The chapter will also deal with communalism in relation to individualism. "Family and Ideal Home" will discuss why the Joads cannot get a proper home, and why the family transforms from a patriarchal to a matriarchal family structure. Finally, the conclusion chapter will sum up the paper and give a brief overview of what has been dealt with.

2

BACKGROUND

2.1 The American Dream

The origin of the term “American Dream” derives from the second sentence of the American Declaration of Independence, which states that “all men are created equal”. The declaration also mentions “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” as crucial rights of the American people (Cullen 38). According to Cullen, the American Dream for the “Founding Fathers”¹ was freedom (41). Their definition of freedom was made in relation to slavery, which was considered to be the opposite. It should be noted, however, that when speaking of slavery, the “Founding Fathers” did not refer to the African slaves in the south of the United States, but to what “Great Britain was doing to their lives and livelihoods” (Cullen 47).

In 1931, James Truslow Adams coined the notion “American Dream” in *The Epic of America*. The book was written during the Great Depression and Adams tries to make a definition of what the American people should strive for:

But there has been also the American Dream, that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement. ... It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. (415)

¹ The “Founding Fathers” were the men who framed the American Declaration of Independence (Cullen 40).

Adams argues that the American dream is not built upon monetary prosperity. Instead, one of the fundamental parts is equality between people, regardless of social class. Adams also points out the importance of getting rid of old social classes and structures. He argues that by keeping the structures, it is impossible for every woman and man to grow to the fullest development (416).

In contrast to Adams, Cullen claims about 70 year later that there can be more than one American Dream (7). He states that it is difficult to define the dream, and that the definitions have changed over time (7). Furthermore, Cullen, as well as Adams, tries to describe where the notion of the “American Dream” comes from and discusses, as stated above, the Declaration of Independence. Cullen also argues that the power of the different aspects of the American Dream lies in a sense of collective ownership; that “anyone can get ahead” (60).

The dream about economic fulfillment might be the most well-recognized dream (Cullen 8). On the other hand, Adams claims that the American Dream is not about material success, but rather about personal fulfillment (416). The goal of this aspect of the dream has always been to “end up with more than you started with” (Cullen 159).

Equality might be regarded as the most unsuccessful part of the dream (Cullen 8). Cullen states that one of the reasons for this is the American Civil Rights Movement and its struggle for equality (8). Nevertheless, most Americans believe that equality must play a role in everyday life; simply because the American Dream relies upon it (Cullen 108). Furthermore, Cullen argues that it is possible to accept all inequalities (i.e. that people are treated differently, sometimes in a poorer way due to their social belongings) as far as a different outcome is possible (108).

Another important aspect of the dream is home ownership. This might be the part of the dream that is most often realized (Cullen 9). It is worth noting that the most eager group of the American population to own their own homes consists of immigrants (Cullen 148). In some sense, the Joads can be regarded as immigrants and in some not, since they are Americans and

move within their country. Moreover, they can also be considered as migrant workers, since they move in order to work. Pells states that the Joads are migrants to California, but they are not like “‘shif’less’ bums, searching for work and offended by affronts to their dignity” (216). Almost of the same importance as owning a house is to have a car. The car might serve as a complement to the home ownership and is therefore celebrated as a sign of democracy (Cullen 149-150).

2.2 Self and Other

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the Joads are met with suspicion and prejudice when they arrive in California. Stein discusses the issue and claims that “[w]here large groups of strangers enter a community, residents strive to discover characteristics common to the intruders in order to relate to them more easily” (60). The Californians have created a “self” (Californians) and an “other” (‘Okies’) in order to protect their own social structures and to maintain their power. The division of people into different social groups can be considered as a form of “stereotyping” and a categorization of people. Stereotyping is in Loomba’s book described as: “...a reduction of images and ideas to a simple and manageable form; rather than simple ignorance or lack of ‘real’ knowledge, it is a method of processing information” (Gilman qtd. in Loomba, 55). However, it is worth noting that the groups being discussed in Loomba’s book are Europeans and people living in the territories that the Europeans colonized. Nevertheless, the concept and its uses are the same regardless of what groups that are being dealt with.

However, while the different groups in Loomba’s book often differ in skin color, it is important to note that both the Californians and the ‘Okies’ are white. Stein describes different characteristics like settlements on ditch banks and speaking with a slightly nasal drawl that were considered as “touchstones for a stereotype of the Okie as a naturally slovenly, degraded,

primitive subspecies of white American” (Stein 60). According to Loomba, characteristics that might be ascribed to the “other” are often negative such as laziness, violence, greed, primitivism and irrationality (93). Moreover, it is important to note that the different roles that the “other” can be assigned depends on the surrounding circumstances (Loomba 85). Thus, the division between “self” and “other” justifies the prejudices and suspicion the Joads are met with in California.

3 ANALYSIS

3.1 Equality

Equality can be considered as the aspect that made people move to America from the very beginning (Adams 416). According to Adams, people should not be judged from the social orders or classes they belong to, but from their own ability (416). Furthermore, Warner argues that “[t]he principle of equality is necessary to provide all men with a sense of self-respect...” (128). Greene makes another statement regarding equality:

The very idea, however, that people were entitled to equality was a dramatic break with tradition in a world where most people were frozen in place by class differences, poverty, confining traditions, resignation. It was apprehended many times as a kind of description of the way human beings were in relation to one another. (180)

When the Joads arrive in California in the middle of the novel, they realize that there are different classes of people: the Californians and the “Okies”. Their first experience of this is when they encounter a local policeman. The incident takes place almost immediately on their arrival and Ma and Rose of Sharon are resting in a tent. A policeman appears and tells them that they cannot stay where they are. He ends the visit by stating: “[w]ell, you ain’t in your country now. You’re in California an’ we don’t want you goddamn Okies settlin’ down” (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 223). In order to handle Ma and Rose of Sharon, the policeman ascribes them the characteristics he thinks are synonymous with all immigrants and makes a distinction of ‘self’

(Californians) and ‘other’ (‘Okies’), i.e. stereotyping and categorizing. He does not seem to care about that Ma and Rose of Sharon may well differ from the “typical” picture of an ‘Okie’. The policeman is also very exact in pointing out that he belongs to a higher social class than them, since he is a Californian and they are ‘Okies’.

The Joads are met with suspicion and prejudice throughout the novel by the Californians. This is obvious especially at the second workplace the family works at. Tom encounters two guards and asks them whether it is possible to get hold of hot water and one of them replies: “[s]ay, who in hell you think you are, J.P. Morgan?”² (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 395). Thus, the guards ascribe to Tom and the rest of the ‘Okies’ the characteristic of greed and force them to remain dirty, which can be used to describe the “other” (Loomba 93). After Tom has left the guards, they continue their conversation regarding the ‘Okies’. One of the guards argues that “These goddamn Okies! You got to watch ‘em all the time!” (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 395). By saying this, the guard reveals that he does not trust the ‘Okies’.

Stein discusses the contact between the Californians and the ‘Okies’. He claims that the contact between the two groups was limited to employee/employer and vendor/customer (59). Moreover, officer/victim can be added to this list from *The Grapes of Wrath*, since they are dealt with as well. Otherwise, the ‘Okies’ were separated from the rest of the community (Stein 59). This can be considered as a way to exclude the ‘Okies’ from society and maintain the social structures of “self” and “other”. Consequently, the only contact that the Joads and other ‘Okies’ have with Californians in the novel is during the above mentioned circumstances.

However, the attitude among the Californians who encounter the ‘Okies’ differ. While the already discussed policeman seems quite harsh and hostile toward the ‘Okies’, the first employer Tom encounters seems more positive. The first impression he gives is quite harsh, but after a

² J.P. Morgan was a very rich financier in the late 19th century (Cullen 70).

while he explains to Tom why he cannot give him and the other workers more than twenty-five cent per hour (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 307-310). He also shows concern regarding their family situations: “I don’t know how you men can feed a family on what you get now” (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 309). Even though the employer after all seems to be quite well disposed towards the job applicants, he explicitly points out that he stands above them and belongs to another social class. His social class is considered to be “higher” than the ‘Okies’, and therefore he is in charge of their wages and can do whatever he likes with them (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 307-310). Warner claims that social class is visible in the ways people meet each other and the social attitudes: “Social class refers to levels which are recognizable in the general behavior and social attitudes of the people of the whole community where the levels exist.” (72). Moreover, Tom and the other ‘Okies’ are judged according to their social class and not their ability. To be judged from your ability is, according to Adams, crucial to the American Dream (416).

It can also be argued that the social hierarchy in *The Grapes of Wrath* shares characteristics with castes. While you are free to move between social classes and aim for a higher status, this is not the case with castes, where upward social mobility is prohibited (Warner 71). However, it is important to note that social classes place humans in higher and lower orders as well, though the positions are not fixed like the castes (Warner 73). Furthermore, fixed statuses produce ways of acting and attitudes that discourage social change (Warner 141). Even though the Joads are not born into a caste, they have no possibility to get out of their “caste” in California. An example from the novel that illustrates that the ‘Okies’ are prevented from advance in society is from the government camp. One night when a dance is planned in the camp, Tom learns that the police will try to start a fight in the camp. The purpose for doing this is to have an excuse to dissolve the camp, according to orders from the Farmer’s Association (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 309-

310). The unstated reason for this is, thus, to prevent the workers from organizing themselves and thus becoming able to challenge the Californian social structures. One of the workers that Tom encounters in the camp has an opinion regarding this issue: “They’re scairt we’ll organize, I guess. An’ maybe they’re right. ... Figger maybe if we can gove’n ourselves, maybe we’ll do other things” (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 311). As already stated, social class divides people in distinct levels, which is the case with the castes as well (Warner 72).

The Joad family and the ‘Okies’ have no possibility to move between social groups, due to the caste-like system in California. In addition, as long as the social structures remain, there is no possibility for the Joads to become equal to the Californians. As Greene states, social classes may sometimes be fixed as well due to poverty, and therefore considered as the way people should behave toward each other (180). This might be the case in California, where the ‘Okies’ are fixed in a social class since they cannot get work because of it.

Moreover, the ‘Okies’ consider themselves to be a separate social group from the Californians, which is confirmed by the attitudes towards a woman in the government camp: “She got no right to be stiff-necked. She got no right, not with our own people” (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 330). Since this definition of different classes is made by the ‘Okies’ as well, they help out to maintain the division of ‘self’ and ‘other’. It can also be supposed that the division into different classes and castes serves a function and a purpose in society. The social hierarchy demands that someone has to be at the bottom of society, and in this case it is the ‘Okies’. Warner states that these kinds of hierarchies are the ones that segment society (69). Furthermore, he provides examples that the American upper class does not let children from the slums advance in society (105). This is what happens in *The Grapes of Wrath*, where the Californians serve as an upper class while the Joads and the ‘Okies’ represent the slum and therefore are prohibited to advance further.

Nevertheless, the ‘Okies’ do their best to maintain equality among themselves. After staying at the Hooverville³ outside Bakersfield, California, the family arrives in a government camp, which is governed and maintained by the ‘Okies’. Furthermore, the camp’s administration consists of one camp manager (who is elected by the committees) and four committees with different appointments (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath and Other Writings* 1006-1007). Steinbeck especially notes one thing regarding the camps and equality:

The sullen and frightened expression that is the rule among the migrants has disappeared from the faces of the Federal camps inhabitants. Instead there is a steadiness of gaze and a self-confidence that can only come from restored dignity. (*The Grapes of Wrath and Other Writings* 1007)

Steinbeck also states that “[t]he difference seems to lie in the new position of the migrant in the community. Before he came to the camp he had been policed, hated and moved about. It had been made clear that he was not wanted” (*The Grapes of Wrath and Other Writings* 1007). This is also confirmed in the novel by an employer: “Those folks in the camp are getting used to be treated like humans” (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 310). Ma experiences this as well when the family has arrived to the camp and the camp manager visits to welcome them. Afterwards, when she tells Rose of Sharon of the manager’s visit and compares it to their earlier encounter with the policeman, Ma states that “...I feel like people again” (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 322). The government camps can be considered as a quite equal place for the ‘Okies’ and thus provide them with self-respect, for which equality is crucial (Warner 128). Hence, it is important for the inhabitants of the camp to protect it, in order to maintain their equality and challenge the

³ Hoovervilles were rural and suburban slums all over the United States where homeless people settled during the Depression (Stein 52-53).

social structures of California. However, the government camps can also be considered as a way to maintain social differences and castes. Since the camps do not mix people from different social classes with each other, they help to maintain the sense of “self” and “other” between the Californians and the ‘Okies’, and therefore prevents social mobility.

3.2 Freedom

Freedom is perhaps one of the most crucial aspects of the American Dream and, as already argued, for the “Founding Fathers” the dream simply meant freedom from slavery (Cullen 41). Even today, the American Dream is closely bound up with freedom (Cullen 9-10). Pells argues that depending on who is in charge, freedom can be considered to be relative and restricted by many aspects depending on who has the power and how it is used (113). Freedom can also be assumed to exist in several versions. For example, Cullen states that there can be religious freedom (57). Moreover, Nolan makes a difference between individual freedom and civic liberty. He suggests that individual freedom is when a person is “free” to do what he likes, regardless of what others say. Regarding civic liberty, the human being is responsible towards society and is part of something larger than her- or himself, despite her/his right to do as she/he pleases (Nolan). In addition, Wright argues that “men should not exercise power over one another; therefore power should be as limited and as diffused as possible” (35). It can also be supposed that “[f]reedom is the right to question and change the established way of doing things” (Reagan qtd. in Wright 493).

Al is a person who experiences restrictions to his personal freedom, both from his family and society. On several occasions, he clearly states his wish to leave the family and work in a garage (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 383). However, he is forbidden to do this by first and foremost

Ma and to some extent Tom and Pa (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 409, 411). Pa prevents Al from leaving, since he has realized that the family has to stay together (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 388). Moreover, Al's freedom can also be considered as relative and restricted by others than his family. Since he is an 'Okie', his personal choices and consequently his personal freedom are limited within the Californian society. The distinction into different social castes prohibits Al's movements between the different social layers in society, since a caste structure does not allow social mobility (Warner 71). It is consequently in the interest of the Californians that 'Okies' like Al stay where they are so the social structures can be maintained and thus the power of the Californians is unchallenged. Therefore, their personal freedom should be restricted and thus not allow them to advance socially.

Nolan clearly states that "[c]oncerning "civic liberty, individuals were free to govern themselves, to establish "politic constitutions" among themselves. Implicit in this aspect of freedom was the idea of responsibility to the common good". What common good is may differ between the social groups in California. For the 'Okies', the government camps serve a good purpose, since they are able to maintain some freedom, despite their social status. On the contrary, the Californians feel that the camps threaten their power and control over the 'Okies'. Thus, they want to dissolve them. One example of this is the already discussed sequence when the 'Okies' plan to have a dance at the camp and the police try to start a fight in order to have a reason to dissolve it (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 309-310). Thus, it can therefore be argued that it is the social structures and attitudes in California that restrict the "civic liberty" of the 'Okies'. Furthermore, Nolan holds that the idea of civic liberty "[s]anctioned both individual choices and liberties, and the idea of responsibility to a community". Hence, it can be considered that the Joads and the 'Okies' still feel responsible towards the government camp and their caste. This can be regarded as a way of maintaining the caste system of California from the 'Okies'

point of view. However, that they feel responsibility towards their social group might be a reason for them to not challenge the social structures. It can hence be argued that the 'Okies' have no choice, since the Californian society does not allow social mobility.

Furthermore, the freedom aspect is also crucial regarding the labor unions in the novel. According to Nolan, civic liberty and the idea of a common good underlie the ability to establish political institutions. This, however, does not apply to the 'Okies' and their organization in labor unions in California. While the unions are useful and good for the 'Okies', they threaten the Californians and their power as well as the social structures. When on a walk, Tom encounters Casy, who left the family when they arrived in California, outside one of the working places the family stays at. Casy tells him that he is now engaged in a labor union and that they are performing a strike in order to improve the working conditions for the workers. However, the strike is dissolved by policemen (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 399-403).

Freedom should be concerned with the questioning and challenging of the established ways of doing and thinking (Wright 493). This is what happens when the labor unions question the Californians' way of treating the 'Okies' as well as the social structures, which can be considered as established. Furthermore, it is a challenge to the caste system in California, since the unions aim to establish a more equal society, starting to improve the working conditions. Moreover, the dissolution of the strike is a way for the Californians to prevent the 'Okies' from advancing socially as well as maintaining the caste system and demonstrating their power. However, Wright states that men should not exercise power over one another (35), which is what happens here. Thus, the Californians have the power to restrict the 'Okies' freedom.

3.3 Individualism

Individualism is one of the strongest components of the American Dream as well as American life. Warner makes the following comment on the individualistic ideal:

Americans – devout advocates of individualism – believe that individualism means that each man has within himself the right to make his own choices and to make or break his life-career on the basis of his own judgment. ... Whenever the American system of equal opportunity and individualism operates successfully and a man can make his choices and be rewarded when he does well, then Americans believe the system is fair, and their way of life is understandable to all because they can live and act as individuals and be rewarded accordingly. (138-139)

Furthermore, Warner argues that an open class system is crucial for maintaining egalitarian principles of a society, where families can rise and fall according to social rules. When this operates successfully, it supports the maintenance of the belief in the free individual (138). Therefore, an open class system allowing mobility is crucial for the individualistic aspect of the American Dream. In addition, McElvaine argues that there are two kinds of individualism in America; competitive and cooperative (201). In America, workers have tended to adopt the cooperative approach, while businessmen have yielded toward the competitive one (Pells 201).

As discussed above, Al states on several occasions that he wants to leave the family and work in a garage (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* i.e. 334, 383). Furthermore, he states that “[f]ella can make his way lot easier if he ain’t got no fambly.” (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 378). This is the strongest individualistic statement in the novel, and Al is also one of the

strongest individualists. He is also prevented from leaving the family by first and foremost Ma (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 411). However, later on in the novel Al seems to have realized the importance of a family and that he cannot handle the situation he is in by himself. At the last place where the Joads stay in the novel, Al meets a girl and decides to get married (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 443). Moreover, he has realized that as an 'Okie', he would not have any chance to make his own way. This can be considered as a statement of the cooperative individualism. Al still has the opportunity to make his own choices, even though he remains loyal to his family in order to survive and therefore stays with them. As stated, the social classes presuppose that the individual is free to move between the classes and aim for a higher one than the original one. The caste system, like the one that is administered in California, prohibits such mobility (Warner 71). Therefore, it is not possible for Al to advance to a "higher" social class, and he has to abandon his individualistic project.

Nevertheless, the individualistic aspect of the novel yields to a more communalistic point of view in order to challenge the social structures and meet the negative attitudes towards the 'Okies'. Hearn claims that the only way for the Joads to realize their dreams is through communal unity and class solidarity (88). Furthermore, he states that "the poor must turn to poor people, and not to 'haves', if they are to find compassion, warmth and assistance" (Hearn 132).

After the family arrives in California, Tom realizes that it is impossible for a single 'Okie' to make his way in the Californian community by himself. The coincidence that makes him realize this is the already discussed encounter with a labor union. After the encounter, Tom appreciates that the 'Okies' must organize themselves as a group to have a chance to make any changes in their favor. Casy, who is engaged in the union, reveals to Tom that because of the strike taking place outside the workplace, the workers are quite well-paid (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 399-403). Afterwards, when Tom hides outside the workplace, suspected of having killed a

policeman, he seems to have changed his mind regarding individualism versus communalism (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 435-439). When he takes leave of Ma in order to work for a labor union, he makes the following statement:

I'll be ever'where – wherever you look. Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever they's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there. [...]... I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad an' – I'll be in the ways kids laugh when they're hungry and they know supper's ready. An' when our folks eat the stuff they raise an' live in the house they build – why, I'll be there. (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 439)

In this quotation, Tom clearly shows evidence of the cooperative individualism. He does as he wants, but still works in a cooperative spirit for the rest of the 'Okies'. Even Adams points out that the communal spirit is important for the realization of the American Dream (422). In the government camp, it is widely realized that the 'Okies' have to work together in a communal spirit to maintain their relative freedom. This is stated by a camp inhabitant named Willie: "It's cause we're all working together. Depity can't pick on one fella in this camp. He's pickin' on the whole darn camp. An' he don't dare" (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 374). However, the communal spirit can also be considered to both enhance and challenge the castes in California. It helps to establish more distinct groups and the 'Okies' feel responsibility towards their caste. They therefore feel loyal towards the caste and the individual aspect of the American Dream becomes less important. The 'Okies' also become less interested in improving their social status. However, the family and the 'Okies' have to stay together in order to survive and challenge the social structures and therefore they have to enhance the communal spirit and the sense of

fellowship. This can be considered as a way for them to challenge the castes. Consequently, the communal spirit might both enhance and challenge the castes in California.

Moreover, McElvaine makes an interesting statement, that “[o]ne can be an individual without being an individualist” (199). A passage in the novel illustrates this very clearly. The family has realized that they cannot find work in the area where they are located, and therefore discusses whether they should stay at the government camp or if they should leave. During the subsequent discussion Ma, who is the only person of this opinion, clearly states that she thinks that the family should move on (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 366-368). Ma’s arguments for leaving are that the family has not eaten properly for weeks and no one in the family has a job (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 366-367). She therefore shows that it is possible to be an individual without being individualistic, since she puts the family first and still remains an individual with her own thoughts and opinions. It is thus possible to still have one’s own opinions and choices, despite the structures and attitudes that try to oppress the ‘Okies’. Ma yields to a more cooperative individualistic point of view, as well as the other ‘Okies’. The reason for this is to still have a chance to challenge the social structure and the situation they are in does not allow them to compete with each other. Consequently, Ma does not act selfish. Selfishness might, according to Adams, destroy the American Dream (422).

3.4 Family and Ideal Home

Home ownership is a clearly stated aspect of the American Dream and also considered to be the most realized one (Cullen 9). This is also linked to the concept of the family as an important aspect of American life, since: “[t]o study the history of the American family is to conduct a rescue mission into the dreamland of our national self-concept. No subject is more closely bound

up with our sense of a difficult present – and our nostalgia for a happier past” (Demos qtd. in Hayden 17).

For Ma and Rose of Sharon, a proper home is one of the most crucial points when they talk about their upcoming life in California. Rose of Sharon dreams that she and Connie should settle down in a little white house and that Connie will study in the evenings in order to become qualified for a well-paid job. Furthermore, she describes all the electric equipment she will have in the house and that they will live in a town and not in the countryside. Another important aspect of their dream of their life in California is that they will be able to have their own car (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 171-172). After Connie realizes that their dream will not come true, he leaves the family without saying goodbye. (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 285). When he leaves them, the family is located in a Hooverville outside Bakersfield. Thus, Connie experiences how the ‘Okies’ live and to some extent how they are treated by the Californians (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 263-264). Thus, it can be argued that he has realized that the social structures in California will not allow him to advance in society the way he wants.

Already before the family sets out on the journey, Ma has her vision of a home clear: “I wonder – that is, if we all get jobs an’ all work – maybe we can get one of them little white houses” (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 95). This picture follows Ma during the whole journey and she keeps referring to it throughout the novel (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* i.e. 155). The dream is never realized, and the closest the family comes to a real house is when they live in a boxcar at the last workplace. However, the boxcar cannot be considered as a proper home in that sense. The Joads’ dream of their own house has its base in the belief that they would be able to get well-paid jobs in California. Since they do not find work because they are ‘Okies’, the family has to live in tents and boxcars and it is thus not possible for them to realize their dream of a

house. Hence, it is the caste system that makes the aspect regarding home ownership of the American Dream impossible for the family, since they are not allowed to advance socially.

Cullen states that it is of major importance to have your own car (149-150). He also provides examples of Americans who would rather go without both food and clothes than without a car (150). Therefore, it is interesting to notice that the Joads actually have their own car, even though they are without a home and are 'Okies'. In the government camp, Tom encounters a family named Wallace. After some conversation, they reveal to Tom that they had had to sell their car in order to have money to purchase food. Tom's spontaneous reaction is "Ain't you got no car?" (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 306). Thus, the Wallace family seems ashamed of this and would not let Tom drive them to their workplace in the Joads' car (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 306). The car might be regarded as a kind of substitute for not owning a house. Since neither the Joads nor the Wallace family own a house, it is even more important to them to have a car. The Joads are considered to belong to a social group at the bottom of society and therefore they should not be able to possess such a valuable piece of property. Hence, the Joads are very apprehensive about their car and hesitate to abandon it. In the end of the novel when the boxcar the family lives in is threatened by a flood, one of Al's major concerns is about the car. He tries to persuade the rest of the family that they cannot leave the boxcar since their own car is there and they have to look after it (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 467).

Pells emphasizes that the family is important in the novel as well as in the American Dream. He claims that the basic issue for the Joads is to keep the family together (217). It is also argued that Ma Joad is the one who works most eagerly to keep the family intact (Pells 217). One example is when Tom is wounded after he has beaten up and probably killed a policeman. To avoid putting the family at risk, he wants to leave them. Ma tries to persuade him to stay by pointing out the current state of the family, which is very unstable. She argues that Tom has to

stay in order to stabilize the family and keep it together (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 411). Another reason for keeping the family together might be to be able to affect their situation in California. Since the Joads are fixed in the 'Okie'-caste, it is even more important for them to stay together in order to have a chance to challenge the social structures together. Therefore, it is interesting to note that Ma later on sends Tom away. However, both Ma and Tom claim that the decision is for Tom's and the family's security and best interest (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 436-437).

Poster argues that the ideal family is the bourgeois model which was created in the 18th century. According to this model, the woman was supposed to be concerned with home and children, while the man was an autonomous being and a free citizen, on whom the woman should depend (Poster 169). This is also supported by Hayden, who claims that families of tradition are "male-headed" (85). This is the situation of the Joad family in the beginning of the novel (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 101). When the family holds a council regarding their move to California, the men of the family sit in a ring while the women keep themselves in the background. The head of the meeting is Pa. During the meeting, the women of the family stay back and do not really participate in the discussion (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 104-105). Furthermore, they do not reveal their opinion until they are asked for it (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 107). Along the way to California, Ma wants to stop for the night since Granma is sick, while the rest of the family wants to move on. Thus, Ma refuses to move on and forces Pa to do as she wants (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 176-177). Pa is perplexed by Ma's demands, since she challenges the old structure with the man as the head of the family.

When the Joads arrives in California, it is more obvious that Ma is the most dominant person and head of the family instead of Pa. When the family discusses whether they should stay in the government camp or not, it is Ma who takes command. Since Pa, Tom, Al and Uncle John have

been unable to find work since they are 'Okies', the family does not have enough money to get on at the government camp. The men seem quite depressed and paralyzed because of this and therefore Ma takes the lead. (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 366). Thus, the social structures of California force the family to transform from a patriarchal structure to a matriarchal one. The result of this is that Pa states that "[t]ime was when a man said what we'd do. Seems like women is tellin' now" (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 368), which reveals that he is aware of the fact that he has lost his place as the head of the family. Pa does not know how he should react towards the new social system, since he and the other men in the family do not get work due to their social belonging. Furthermore, they are not met with respect, since they are 'Okies'. This is something that he is not used to from Oklahoma. Thus, the social structures of California have changed the structures within the Joad family, since Pa no longer is the head of the family. (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 368, 411). Warner argues that the position within a family determines how a family member should act in different family situations (63). Hence, the above described actions by Ma should not be suitable for a woman during "normal" circumstances.

Hayden claims that women's work has for a long time been nurturing men and children (82). The nursing and nurturing person in the Joad family is Ma. One example of this is when she nurses Winfield when he is sick due to that he has eaten too many peaches (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 415-417). However, in the final scene of the novel it turns out that Rose of Sharon is also a nursing and nurturing person. After she lost the baby she was expecting, the family leaves the boxcar they are staying in, since it is threatened by a flood. The family seeks shelter in a barn, where they find another family. The man in the family is starving, and Rose of Sharon breastfeeds him in order to save his life (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 474-476). Furthermore, McElvaine claims that the traditional role of the mother is less dependent than the father's role on the family's status in society (181). Hence, it does not depend on the caste system that Ma and

Rose of Sharon are the nurturing persons⁴. As stated, Pa's new role can be considered to be an effect of the caste system. In order to have a proper chance to support them, he must be able to advance socially. This can also be considered as a reduction of the family's status in California, since Pa no longer is the one in charge.

⁴ However, it can be argued that gender-based castes are stronger than socio-economic status and therefore more difficult to change. Therefore, it would be harder to change the structures in the Joad family than the social ones in California.

4

CONCLUSION

The concept of the American Dream cannot easily be defined as one single and definite dream. Through time, the dream has meant different things to different people and it still does so today. Examples of the American Dream might be having your own house, have the freedom to do whatever you like or be equal to your fellow man.

The distinction of “self” and “other” helps to distinguish people from one another. Thus, it helps to maintain the difference between social groups and affects the way they treat each other, which is the case in California between the Californians and the ‘Okies’. Moreover, it is the “other”-group that is ascribed the negative characteristics by the “self”-group.

Regarding equality, the Californian attitude towards the ‘Okies’ is mainly negative. For example, Tom is accused of greed by a workplace guard and Ma and Rose of Sharon are treated without respect by a policeman. However, there are Californians that are friendlier towards the ‘Okies’, such as an employer that Tom encounters. Furthermore, it is this distinction into different classes that forces the ‘Okies’ to organize themselves and maintain their government camps in order to challenge this structure. The camps can also be considered to enhance the social structures. The ‘Okies’ also look upon themselves as a social class different from the Californians. The social system of California can also be regarded as a kind of caste system, since the Joads have no opportunity to get out of their social class since they are ‘Okies’. Thus, social mobility is prohibited. This affects the way they are treated by the Californians and their ability to get work and thus participate in the social mobility that is promised by the American Dream.

Freedom should be regarded as one of the most crucial aspect of the American Dream, but nonetheless it fails for the Joads. Since the social structures in California force the family to stay together in order to have a chance to survive, Al is not allowed to leave the family and work in a

garage. Al's personal freedom is hence restricted, both by his family and the social structures of California. Furthermore, the Joads' civic liberty is violated through the Californians' attempt to dissolve the government camps, which could also enable challenging the social structures and therefore allows the 'Okies' to advance in society. The labor unions also work for better conditions for the 'Okies'. This is also the reason why the established labor unions among the 'Okies' are dissolved by the Californians. Thus, the Californians try to restrict the civic liberty of the 'Okies'. Both the government camp and the labor unions can be considered to be for the common good of the 'Okies', but not for the Californians, since they threaten the social structures.

The social hierarchies force the Joad family to abandon their individualistic instincts. Al, who wants to leave the family and make his way on his own, realizes that he has to stay with the travel companion. Tom appreciates that the 'Okies' have to work together as a unit and he takes leave of the family in order to join a labor union. Due to the caste system, he abandons his individualistic instinct in favor of a communal one. It can also be argued that the communal spirit serves to enhance the caste system in a negative way, since it makes people feel more loyal to their social belongings. On the contrary, the communal spirit can also serve as a tool to challenge the caste systems. However, Ma shows that it is still possible to be an individual without being individualistic when she argues that the family should leave the government camp, since they cannot find work. All of Ma, Al and Tom yield towards the cooperative aspect of individualism, since all of them remain individuals even though they stay loyal to the family and the 'Okies'.

Since the Joads are unable to get well-paid jobs because they are 'Okies', they cannot afford to buy a house. Nevertheless, both Ma and Rose of Sharon share the wish for a little white house. However, the car becomes important for the family, since even though they are 'Okies', they still have a car. In some ways, the car becomes a substitute for a home. As a result, the family is

unwilling to get rid of it. Furthermore, the social structures and attitudes in California do not agree with the ones that the family is used to from Oklahoma. Since the men of the family are unable to get work because they are 'Okies', Pa is paralyzed and Ma therefore takes the lead. Before the family left Oklahoma, Pa was the head of the family. Consequently, the social hierarchies force the Joad family to transform into a matriarchal structure. Although Ma becomes the head of the family, she still remains the family's nursing and caring person. In the final scene of the novel, Rose of Sharon proves that she is nursing and caring as well, when she breastfeeds the starving man.

The American Dream might be a broken dream for more people than the Joads. In California, no one of the 'Okies' are allowed to fulfill the American Dream. Hence, the dream cannot be considered as a viable concept. In this case, the American Dream is an empty promise for this specific group, which forces them to the limit in order to realize it. Since the American Dream consists of several aspects, some of them might have been more realized than others. However, no one of them is realized in *The Grapes of Wrath* by the Joad family. For instance, Al cannot go his own way, the 'Okies' are prevented from organizing labor unions and Ma and Rose of Sharon's dream regarding a house never comes true. All the dreams that they had before they left Oklahoma failed, due to the caste system.

The American Dream is considered to be viable for all people of America, regardless of who you are and where you come from. Obviously, this is not the case. It seems like different social groups are built into the dream, and thus hard to overcome. Thus, for some people the concept might be viable, but for others, it is just an empty promise that is impossible to achieve. Since the great dream of equal opportunity does not succeed in being equal in its approach, the American Dream must be considered as a dream reserved for some people, but a dream that for most of them is a utopia.

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