

GENDER RELATIONS IN STEINBECK'S  
*THE GRAPES OF WRATH*

Daise Lílian Fonseca DIAS<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** The objective of this paper is to analyze gender relations in mutation in Steinbeck's masterpiece *The grapes of wrath* from a feminist perspective. A detailed analysis will be made of the way the author portrays women and gives decisive roles to them, while the figure of the male provider collapses in a chaotic universe of economic depression - breaking the apparent misogynist pattern he followed in his early fiction.

**KEY-WORDS:** women, *The grapes of wrath*, Steinbeck, feminist criticism.

Feminist literary criticism is a branch of interdisciplinary inquiry that studies gender as an important category of analysis. There are two premises about gender: the first one is that the inequality of the sexes is a cultural construct and not a biological imposition; the second is related to man's power that has dominated knowledge and imposed his beliefs as universal, shaping methods and paradigms of human relationships.

The feminist point of view really enriches this analysis because feminist criticism has two important concerns, one is to revise concepts thought as universal, and the other is to restore a female perspective more deeply. Feminist criticism has shown that traditional criticism reinforces images of women and behavior and encourages them to accept subordination by praising women for virtues like humility, passivity and subordination. It is through feminist criticism that women confront patriarchal values and unveil the prejudices against them expressed in male texts.

Among topics to be discussed in this analysis, especial attention will be given to the domestic theme as well as the experiences that Steinbeck's women characters had during their exodus from Oklahoma during *The Dust Bowl* to California's promised land. Most of the experiences female characters had took place on the road, and they appear to reinforce the contrast between the private and the public, especially because the characters are portrayed in historical context – the great economic depression of the 1930s, –which changed the role of the male in the American society, as well as the female role, since American women were required to join the work force in order to improve the family's income.

In the U. S., the late thirties had an atmosphere of woman's independence in some professional aspects. The great depression years radicalized and awakened many women, who became feared and active once they were not the passive “angels in the

---

<sup>1</sup> (DL/CFP/UFCG)

house” anymore. American women were leaving the private sphere and taking risks in the public place, performing activities considered exclusively for men, like helping with the family’s income.

This research takes place almost more than fifty years after the first publication of *The Grapes of Wrath* and at the beginning of a new century and a new millennium when the feminist criticism is still in a process of academic consolidation and is still questioning women’s conditions and place in many societies worldwide.

Unfortunately, life and the images of women have not change that much for a large number of women around the globe since the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath*. While in some parts of the globe women have conquered intellectual space and gained respect, in others, they are still facing the same problems Steinbeck’s women characters faced in the early twentieth century.

This analysis will start by focusing its initial discussion on Ma Joad - the leading female character - who deconstructs the female and male roles according to the power of conviction. She uses the power of the word, of language and discourse that is supposed to belong to men. In the beginning of the narrative, Ma Joad is not allowed to expose her thoughts freely, she has to wait to be allowed to talk, but that old behavior starts to change, even because she is the kind of woman who always had her own independent mind, although she is under a patriarchal system and has to accommodate to it.

The first time Ma Joad is introduced to the reader, she is described as “ ... heavy, but not fat; thick, with child-bearing and work” (*GW*, 1967:99). Her image is really strong. In her appearance there are universal symbols of womanhood, femininity, and mothering. Her appearance is shaped by ‘child-bearing and work,’ her dress is a ‘Mother Hubbard’ with ‘flowers,’ which are signs of her condition as a mother and a common woman; the colors are almost gone, like her asleep wilderness, as her husband will say.

The attention the narrator devotes to Ma Joad’s description is paramount if compared to the other characters; he tells the reader about her feet, hair, arms, hands, face and eyes. It is worth quoting the description at length about her position and influence over the family, for she seemed:

to know, to accept, to welcome her position, the citadel of the family, the strong place that could not be taken. And since old Tom and the children could not know hurt or fear unless she acknowledged hurt and fear, she had practice denying them in herself. And since then, a joyful thing happened, they looked to see whether joy was on her, it was her habit to build up laughter out of inadequate materials. But better than joy was calm. Imperturbability could be depended upon. 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 remote and faultless in judgment as a goddess (*GW*, 1967: 100).

Since the beginning of Ma’s characterization, the reader become acquainted with her strong personality, and her discrete position of leadership. Her place is important, for she is The Mother, but she is humble enough to bow to the hierarchy of the family. Ma has an archetypal role, because her description stresses her superhuman qualities, which distances her from the ordinary mortals of the family, and because of that she becomes an ideal.

That Ma Joad has a strong importance in the family is stated early in the novel, in the first description. Her position is that of a healer and an arbiter, a citadel and a goddess. She is aware of her power over the family, however, her sense of tradition and respect

for hierarchy prevents her overt expression of it except when it is necessary. GLADSTEIN (1986:79), says that "...her characterization, both narrative and dramatic, is multidimensional. Her character rises from the pages of the book as much more than Mother Earth or serene and aloof goddess," for Ma Joad is simple and complex, a leader and a follower, a woman whose ignorance does not interfere with her wisdom.

Ma Joad's behavior might seem contradictory, because she is humble and follow the patriarchal hierarchy, but at the same time her discourse and attitude is of revolt. She indeed, does not break with the idea of tradition and hierarchy, because these elements keep the value of the patriarchal society that put up the value of the family. And also because the patriarchal tradition puts the mother in a pedestal, making the mother an element of union in the family.

In Steinbeck's work the role of the mother and wife is often synonymous with housewife, and of mother. Ma Joad's qualities are supposed to belong to an ideal wife: she is pure, pious, submissive and domestic, four cardinal virtues of women's behavior. Although Steinbeck does not view the domestic role as degrading, but as a particular function, and most of his women characters seem to find fulfillment as housewives. Ma Joad represents the ideal universal mother, because she nurtures not only her children, but those who are in need.

In the beginning of the narrative she is entrapped in the domestic sphere, involved with household chores taking care of everybody. GLADSTEIN (1986:78) says that "...she functions as a nurturing mother to all. The fact that she is known only as "Ma" and is not given a first name reinforces her maternal image." The first time she appears in the narrative is when she is preparing food for the family, which is a traditional image of the mother's duty. She takes stoically her daily activities of cooking, cleaning, washing things that are going to be unclean very soon. She devotes no time for herself, because her duties of mother and wife are stronger than her inner desires as a woman, if she has any, for the narrator does not mention any.

In the beginning of the story, Ma Joad is living accommodation in action, for she obeys the patriarchal rules, although her discourse is always strong and decisive. Her first words reflect her hospitality. Without knowing who 'the coupla fellas' were – for her son young Tom Joad was back from prison, together with the ex-preacher Casy – she is ready to share the little food that was left, and asks them to come inside her house. The Joads have just lost their homes, and piece of land, but she is responsible for a sense of community that will reflect upon their behavior towards people.

The Joad family is complete with Tom's arrival, but they have to decide if there is room enough in their truck for Casy, who first talks to young Tom and Ma about going with them to California:

Ma looked to Tom to speak, because he was a man, but Tom did not speak. She let him have the chance that was his right, and then she said, 'Why, we'd be proud to have you. 'Course I can't say right now; Pa says all men'll talk tonight ...I guess maybe we better not say till all the men come. (GW, 1967: 127)

Ma Joad first respects the hierarchy and then speaks, and this is a sign of what would happen to the family through their exodus to California, for men's inability to act in that new decisive situation of dispossession, will make a woman the leader of the family.

When the men gather together to decide about taking Casy to California with them, Pa, without turning his head – for the women were out of the men's circle, which reveals the lack of understanding by men of the importance of the female's opinion – he

asked “Kin we, Ma?” (GW, 1967:139), referring to the inclusion of Casy in the family truck, to what she answered pondering:

Ma cleared her throat. “It ain’t kin we? It’s will we?” She said firmly. “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. An’ as far as ‘will’-it’s a long time our folks been here and east before an’ I never heerd tell of no Joads or no Hazletts, neither, ever refusin’ food an’ shelter or a lift on the road to anybody that asked. They’s been mean Joads, but never that mean’ (...) Her tone had made him ashamed. (GW, 1967:139).

Ma Joad’s words above reflect that in the plot, free will has a major role, and later, the Joads will make several free choices in order to assure the survival of the group. She is the one who made the group decide to take the ex-preacher with the family to California, and her attitude was based on a sense of sharing and community.

Not noticing, old Tom Joad consulted his wife, and gave her the opportunity to speak, and to decide which represents an evolution in his behavior. However, he did not expect the powerful tone of her opinion. Her words quoted above shook her husband and the rest of the family because of its assertiveness.

For the first time in the narrative, the men of the family seem to perceive Ma Joad’s importance, especially after her powerful words, because “...they waited for her to come back across the darkening yard, for Ma was powerful in the group” (GW, 1967, p. 140). Gender relations are deconstructed throughout the narrative process, for example, the former powerful male leader (Pa) becomes submissive to the will of a woman (Ma Joad) who takes the control of the family, and Casy does ‘female activities.’ Another important sign of this process is when Ma Joad leaves the meeting about the final decisions in relation to the family’s moving to California and the men wait for her return, which is the first sign of respect for her. This is a symbol that there is going to be a great change of roles, and a recognition of her value.

Before leaving to California, while everyone is getting ready for the journey, Ma Joad stops inside of the half-empty house – they had sold most of the things – and opens a stationery box. Inside it, there are “...letters, clippings, photographs, a pair of earrings, a little gold ring, and a watch chain braided of hair and tipped with gold swivels” (GW, 1967:148). Ma examines carefully those objects, they are everything left of her entire life. This is one of the few moments she devotes to herself. There is no reference to her inner emotions while looking at those objects, because the narrator works like a camera, just showing, instead of entering people’s mind and telling their feelings.

According to FRENCH’s (1994:79). understanding of Ma Joad’s attitude before leaving her house to California, the act of looking and touching those important objects is “pathetic,” however, he does not take into consideration that she was an old woman, and he does not consider the importance of this moment. He says that Ma “...burns a few pathetic souvenirs of the past matter-of-fatly” Indeed this is a profound and meaningful moment, for her, who used to live with stability, in her own house and was forced by economic conditions to lose and to leave everything behind to start a new life. Those souvenirs held the story of her life, and are symbols of her femininity and memories, her only treasure, therefore they are not pathetic. Ma Joad’s act of burning some of those objects, represents a loss of identity, a sense of fragmentation of her memories as a woman and a mother, and also loses the death of part of her past, and a new beginning.

On their way to California, the Joads meet the Wilsons, and Granmpa dies in the Wilsons’s tent, who share the little there was left and friendship with the Joads. Both families identify with the idea of going together to California. Their working together in

times of need illustrates the strong sense of hospitality and sharing among these simple country people.

An important change takes place in the Wilson/Joad gathering, it is the fact that Rose helps Ma Joad and learns from her, since Rose is never interested in helping her mother with the household chores. This attitude might seem irrelevant, however, Rose's new attitude shows the change that is happening in her in her process of maturity; she is shown peeling potatoes, cooking, and comforting Granma after Grandpa's burial. Rose starts to act as an adult, and for a moment she is not self-centered. She seems to start learning the importance of the work of each member for the good of the group.

The two families decide to travel together to California, but Mrs. Wilson gets sick, and their car is broken. Due to this, Tom suggests that he and Casy would stay and fix the car, while the rest of the family would keep moving. Ma Joad gets desperate, for she does not want the family to fall apart. She stepped in front of her husband and says that she is not going, "Pa was amazed at the revolt" (*GW*, 1967:228). Ma's attitude changes the focus of the male interest and decision, because at least in that moment, she is in the center of people's attention deciding, and expressing her mind without her husband's permission.

Ma Joad gets a jack handle and threatens old Tom Joad, however, he insists on their going; his sentence is a summary of patriarchal beliefs: "I tell you, you got to go. We made up our mind" (*GW*, 1967:230). In old Tom Joad's opinion, his wife should obey him anyway, she is not supposed to decide alone what is good or not either for herself or for her family. He treats her like a father towards one of his kids. However, Ma Joad surprises him and the other people saying:

On'y way you gonna get me to go is whup me...An' I'll shame you, Pa. I won't take no whuppin', cryin' an' a-beggin'...An' if you get me, I swear to God I'll wait till you got your back turned, or you're settin' down, an' I'll knock your belly-up with a bucket..." (*GW*;:230)

This is a moment of epiphany to Ma Joad and to her family. Because it is the first time she perceives that the most important thing she has – her family – is about to be broken. But the thing that shocked her family is that she rebels against the father, the embodiment of the patriarchal family, and in front of everybody. She does not understand the dimension of her attitude. It is also the first time she fights for her own opinion, showing that despite being a woman, she has a mind of her own as the text shows:

Pa looked helplessly about the group... "Come on," said Ma. "You made up your mind"... "So goddamn sassy," Pa murmured. "And she ain't young neither." The whole group watched her revolt. They watched Pa, waiting for him to break into fury...And Pa's anger did not rise...They es of the whole family shifted back to Ma. She was the power. She had taken control (*GW*, 1967:230-31).

This scene represents a moment of awakening for her family as well, because they realized that Ma Joad becomes the leader of the family: "All right," said Ma. "We'll go along. We'll stop first place they's water an' shade..." (*GW*, 1967:231). Indeed, everything she wants is to keep the family together, she wants to protect it from falling apart. Her attitude with the jack handle echoes Granma's when she shoots Granmpa. And because of Ma Joad's will to protect the family, she fights with the guards when they reach California, in order to prevent them from seeing Granma's corpse - the Joads could be arrested for driving with a corpse in the car - and avoids her family from being

blamed also for hiding a fugitive man, her son Tom, who could not leave Oklahoma, their home State, which is destroyed by drought and misery.

From that moment on, the Joads somehow change from a strong patriarchal structure based on the attachment to the land to a powerful female orientation based on the maintenance of the family, for it is from the land that men get strength, while Ma Joad takes it from the union of the family.

Ma Joad changes from passivity to an active behavior, and this process reflects BEAUVOIR's (1980) argument that nobody is born a woman, but becomes one. As long as Ma Joad is conscious of the family unit, and that her family is going to fall apart, she perceives that it should be her role to agglutinate the group. It is this belief that makes her stronger, and courageous enough to break her role of passivity to action.

Ma Joad is an example of BEAUVOIR's (1980) belief that destiny: biological, psychic, or economic define the way a female behaves in society. It is civilization that shapes this intermediate product between male and the castrated being that is called "female." Thus, women's passivity is a trace she develops inside her since infancy. So, it is a mistake to believe that women's passivity is a biological process, indeed it is a cultural one.

In *The Grapes of Wrath* gender relations are very tense. There is a relation between the geographic moving and the psychological one, which brings a conception of the gender relations in mutation, for women get stronger while moving, but men start a process of weakness. Both men and women throughout the geographic move, experience things that make their psychological aspect come to the understanding of women's importance and power.

When the Joads finally reach California, they face the corruption of their dream. They do not find equal rights; people live in shanty camps, begging for miserable wages. The situation is contradictory, for there is plenty of food in the fields, but they are not allowed to have any, and most of the workers are either starving to death or working for a pittance. However, the Joads, especially Ma Joad, does not give up the dream of getting a house and better conditions of living, for her optimism is a powerful weapon against weakness.

Sometimes Ma Joad fights with a desire to cry, but she is the provider of courage, of dignity, of the idea of home. She transforms every tent into a home, into a nest for her family; and instead of falling apart she encourages the family to keep on going. BEAUVOIR (1980) says that woman has a deep need of being optimistic, and Ma Joad's incredible strength enables her to undergo pain and hardship without flinching, while at the same time provides her family with renewed strength.

After a period of humiliation along the journey, when the Joads reach the government camp in California, they feel like human beings again, because they are treated with some dignity in one of the camps. The Joads do not stay only in the organized camp, Wedpatch, but they move from camp to camp in order to find work, and the situation gets worse day by day; there is only starvation and slave work. The family gets together in order to evaluate the situation and Tom shows his discouragement, but before the inability of men to guide the family becomes superior to Ma Joad's strength, she decides:

we're a-goin' to Marysville. I don't care what the pay is...Pa sniffed. "Seems like times is changed," he said sarcastically. "Time was when a man said what we'd do. Seems like women is tellin' now. Seems like it's purty near time to get out a stick...Ma put the clean dripping tin dish out on a box. She smiled down at her work. "You get your stick, Pa," she said." Times when they's food an' a place to set, then maybe you can use your stick an'

keep your skin whole. But you ain't a-doin' your job, either a-thinkin' or a-workin'. If you was, why, could use your stick, an' women folks'd sniffle their nose an' creep-mouse aroun'. But you jus' get you a stick now an' you ain't lickin' no woman, you're a-fightin', 'cause I got a stick all laid out too." (GW, 1967:480-81)

Ma Joad's words express that when the male is the provider and protector, he has endless power, but whenever he identifies with the perspective of weakness, and does not show his characteristics of male, which are strength, and decisive word for example, he acquires characteristics of femininity. So when Ma Joad defies her husband, she says that both are on the same level, they belong to the losers class. Through her comment, Ma Joad reproduces the patriarchal system, where the female are inferior to male. She deconstructs the capitalist idea of patriarchy that to be a male, every man should be a winner, and succeed over the female. Ma Joad does not speak for herself but for all women, she says that women will be submissive whenever men are providing, but in hard times there is equity, and in that moment a different female attitude was required.

Through tough attitudes, Ma Joad acquires respect and admiration from her family; she influences action, and her opinions are accepted by the group. The great depression was shaking up the role of the people, where the rules they knew did not fit anymore, since there was no place for hierarchy, because men and women were on the same level. Old Tom Joad complains, but makes his choice to follow Ma Joad for the good of the group:

Pa grimped with embarassement. "Now it ain't good to have the little Fellas hear you talking like that," he said..."You get some bacon Inside the little fellas 'fore you come tellin' what else is good for 'em', said Ma. (GW, 1967:481)

The father figure loses its power to the family in the moment old Tom Joad succumbs to the female power. There is no source of strength anymore for him: his former piece of land is gone, what is left of his family lives under tents in dirty migrant camps, and there is not either enough food nor job for them, besides, he has lost his position of leader and master. However, for the good of the group, he falls into obscurity and leaves the official control of the family to his wife. He abdicates his position of master and protector for the good of the group.

The source of woman's power is her desire to keep the family united and together; Ma Joad's power is not because of her accomplishments. She does not conquer the position of leader, however little by little, she occupies the empty place of the leader. Her new active behavior is shown as good for the family, for she is the one who shares the responsibility of keeping the family together with young Tom Joad, who is her beloved son, and with whom she has the closest relationship. Both mother and son are confident of one another as is shown in the passage below:

Tom sighed, "I'm gettin' tired Ma. How 'bout makin' me mad?" "You got more sense, Tom..I got to lean on you. Them others-they're kinda strangers, all but you. You won't give up, Tom." The job fell on him. "I don't like it," he said. "I wanta go out like Al. An' I wanta get mad like Pa, an' I wanta get drunk like Uncle John..." "You can't, Tom. They's some folks that's just theirself an' nothin' more...Ever'thing you do is more'n you"... "Now, Ma-cut it out. It ain't true. It's a ll in your head" (GW, 1967:482).

Ma Joad is the mother-goddess who inspires and protects her hero-son. She perceives that Tom has a mission before he does, which is to help people, but her son feels like giving it up. His words reflect the emotional state of the men of his family: Al, the youngest son, wants to leave the family, his father is mad, his uncle drinks. These men are challenged by the economic chaos, and submit to it – except Uncle Tom who is marked by his wife’s death. The male characters become powerless, and then, the family is their only shelter.

Because of Tom murdered two people – the first one in Oklahoma acting in self defense, and the second one in reaction to his friend Casy’s death – Tom is forced to leave his family, since his stay would charge his family for hiding a fugitive. Ma Joad is forced to dismiss him, since both realize that the family could not keep hiding himself forever. He leaves because he wants to protect his own family, and his final words to his mother represent Steinbeck’s message in the novel:

... I’ll be aroun’ in the dark. I’ll be ever’whe-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. If Casy knowed, why, I’ll be in the way guys yell when they’re mad an’- I’ll be in the way kids laugh when they’re hungry an’ they know supper’s ready. An’ when our folks eat the stuff they raise an’ live in the houses they build-why, I’ll be there. (GW, 1967:572)

Tom’s words reveal a message against buccaneering capitalism that imposes suffering against his people. His message is also a sign of the importance that free will has for those who really decide to act, either for their own benefit or for the good of the group. Tom leaves in order to escape from prison, however, the true prison in the novel is the world outside the prison walls, where he could not get neither a decent job, nor good life condition for his family. This is the most difficult loss for Ma Joad. First she loses Tom for some years when he goes to jail, but after she loses him forever, because fate condemns both to live apart from each other, once Tom seems to be predestined to belong to the world.

Both mother and son learned that the community is more important than the self, even if their true desire is to go along together. REUTER (1996) referring to romance and society, states that little by little the possibility of social mobility is built, because the characters search for changing their condition, by making money or just transforming the world. In the case of Tom, he assumes his mission which is to help everyone.

Tom had been an active voice in his family, and a leader; his position was even more important than his father’s, who in one of the family gatherings complains about the new situation where a woman is the leader of the family. Because it is hard for a man to lose his position of leader to his wife. Generally in male fiction, the effects of female dominance are disastrous, but Steinbeck provides a heroine, Ma Joad, who has the capacity of leading the family in an age where the prejudice against women was stronger than today. Her wisdom reflects the change not only in herself, but in the whole society that was in a process of recognizing women’s capacity to replace men in several aspects.

Ma Joad is a powerful woman, she sees two deaths in a short period – Grandpa and Granma; her son Noah abandons the family; young Tom Joad runs away because of his murders; her husband is a limited man who is destroyed when the social situation places upon him responsibilities that he is unable to carry out; her son, Al, wants to leave the family and live on his life; and Connie abandons Ma Joad’s pregnant daughter, Rose of

Sharon, who ends up losing her baby. But Ma Joad continues and survives all these changes, and becomes the central force of the family.

Steinbeck's characterization of Ma Joad is a complete and positive characterization of a woman. She embodies the myth of the pioneer woman, and she is a symbol for positive motherhood. She is strong, but is never allowed to pursue what might seem to be the implications of a female character: fragility. She becomes a leader, but does not transcend what Steinbeck wanted to praise: her role of mother and wife.

The changing role of women in *The Grapes of Wrath* is also reinforced by Ma Joad's older daughter, Rose of Sharon. This woman is introduced to the reader with the same care her mother is. Her descriptions and attitudes build up the aura of superiority that involves her, and this idea is also stated by the way her hair and head are described: "Her hair, braided around her head, made an ash-blond crown" (GW, 1967:129). Her pregnancy functions as an excuse for not being helpful, since she does not show any kind of commitment or affection to her baby, one possibility is that she might represent nature itself, that is, she is a living being that just reproduces; she does not have neither emotional affection nor any kind of commitment to her baby. She somehow anticipates the current modern condition of children who are most of the time born without affection.

The words used to describe Rose of Sharon denote the difference from the woman before and after pregnancy. Before pregnancy she seems to have more sexual appeal to her husband. The narrator stresses a change in their relationship by saying that "Her round soft face which had been voluptuous and inviting a few months ago, had already put on barriers of pregnancy..." (GW, 1967:129). Her husband, Connie, misses the way their sexual life was before the pregnancy, he becomes aware that life would never be the same for them anymore. For her husband, she loses the sexual appeal and acquires the image of the Madonna.

Rose of Sharon, has a childlike behavior, and through the description of the changes that pregnancy brought her, the implicit message is that woman as a mother would be an idol on a pedestal. She suddenly transcends the world of human beings, to reach a higher degree as a mother. As a woman she was provocative, however, as a mother she is not seen only as a woman anymore, but as another category of human beings that must be respected and protected. Instead of being touched and looked at; she acquires features of a symbol, especially for her husband.

The relationship between Rose of Sharon and Ma Joad is that of a mother who teaches, and a daughter who learns, for Ma Joad's function in the novel is also to teach her daughter how to be a mother, and to perpetuate the species, but while Ma Joad is centered on the family, Rose of Sharon is self-centered. Although Ma Joad is a symbol of the male and female break of the roles, she is also a reproducer of the current social system that puts the female in the position of passivity and the male in action.

Rose of Sharon faces many problems in the exodus to California, especially losses, and almost everything seems to affect her only because of the baby. She complains about the hard things she faces all the time. However, her great preoccupation about the baby is indeed about herself, and her narcissism appears to be a process of alienation, and a necessity of attention, for the baby takes her sexual regular desire and the beauty of her body. On the other hand, she takes the best of it, that is, a lot of attention from the community.

Rose of Sharon becomes the queen of the family; everybody wants to protect her. Her attitude towards "the baby," provokes a shift in men's attitude towards women in *The Grapes of Wrath*, for in the beginning of the narrative, women were considered inferior, however respected as mothers. When the Joad family decided to go to California,

“...Uncle John have preferred not to sit in the honor place beside the driver. He would have liked Rose to sit there. This was impossible, because she was young and a woman” (GW, 1967:130). This attitude represents the hierarchy that the group follows, however, throughout the narrative, Steinbeck seems to make his characters understand that there is no place for prejudice towards women, since both male and female were stuck in the same world and faced the same misfortunes. Finally, Ma Joad and Rose of Sharon get a place beside the driver, breaking the patriarchal ritual that imposes selfish rules against women.

Rose of Sharon is a naive girl, almost a child who needs to be protected. She has no hopes of doing anything in California, but she dreams through her husband's dreams, as she says in the passage that follows:

Connie gonna get a job in a store or maybe a fact'ry. An' he's gonna study at home, maybe radio, so he can git to be a expert an' maybe later have his own store. An' we'll got to pitchers whenever. An' Connie says I'm gonna have a doctor when the baby's born; an' he says we'll see how times is, an' maybe I'll go to a hospiddle...I'm gonna have a 'lectric iron, an' the baby'll have all new stuff (GW, 1967:224).

Rose of Sharon does not think about herself acting, her dreams are passive, she sees herself always receiving from her husband. Connie just describes his plans for a new better lifestyle that would affect her, but he never consults her about what she expects from the future world, probably because he believes that he could read her off like a page of a child's story-book. But due to gender relation in this environment, it is much more probable that being woman and a wife, her opinion is unimportant.

One of Ma Joad's task is to teach her daughter, and one of the lessons is that there are things in life that must be performed without anybody's help, like the ritual and even rite of passage that is pregnancy:

When you're young, Rosasharn, ever'thing that happens is a thing all by itself. It's a lonely thing. I know, I 'member, Rosasharn.” Her mouth loved the name of her daughter. ‘You're gonna have a baby, Rosasharn, and that's somepin to you lonely and away. That's gonna hurt you, an' the hurt'll be lonely hurt, an' this here tent is alone in the worl', Rosasharn...They's time of change, an' when that comes, dyin' is a piece of all dyin', and bearin' is a piece of all bearin'...(GW, 1967:285-86).

Ma Joad also teaches her daughter about the course of life, warning the girl about terror, joy and loneliness, even pain, which is part of the continuity of life. Her role is to prepare Rose of Sharon to be a grown-up woman like herself, a generous mother, who cares not only for those with whom she has a blood link.

Rose of Sharon is somehow the embodiment of the idea of femininity: she is powerless, passive, and docile, even her name of a flower represents her fragility. Rose's senses of accomplishment is linked to the image of her husband, who becomes her only source of strength. It is through him that she hopes to overcome her limitations. She puts in Connie's hands her happiness and fulfillment. BEAUVOIR (1980) says that man is a kind of link between the woman and the universe, and as a matter of fact, Connie is this link to Rose, he is the one who is supposed to work, provide, fight, act, and give her a deep sense of existence.

Rose of Sharon's efforts to motivate her husband to go on fails and Connie leaves her. He fails in building up Rose's idealized world for them, because in the industrialized world, there is no place for such a childish wife, who does not have anything to offer her husband, not even economic help, like Ma Joad who also started to

work in order to help. After his departure, Rose of Sharon "...got up and went into the tent. She lay down on the mattress and rolled over on her stomach and buried her head in her crossed arms" (*GW*, 1967:372). Ma Joad is there to comfort her daughter; both women are losers of men who abandoned them. Rose of Sharon refuses to believe that Connie went away, she wants to believe that his absence is due to his desire to buy some books about radio, however, as time goes by, and he does not come back home, she starts to be in a growing, but temporary, process of depression.

Rose of Sharon complains about her need of milk, about being alone, and her mother uses a strategy to comfort her daughter, she gives her earrings to Rose of Sharon, although her daughter is not pierced. Rose of Sharon's childish behavior seems to change after being cut, as in a rite of passage the earrings are a symbol of Ma Joad's role that someday will be performed by her daughter. GLADSTEIN (1986:82) analysis of the fact of Rose of Sharon being cut to wear the earrings, says that "...Rose of Sharon must bear the pain of having her ears pierced. Symbolically, she must suffer to prove herself ready to assume Ma's responsibilities and position." And this is what happens.

Rose of Sharon gradually changes after that rite; she decides to work in the field with the rest of the family, however she was so weak that fainted. Day by day she becomes more sensitive and worried about having a baby in that miserable condition. She is about to lose her baby, even though she still wants to go to the field and pick cotton, because she realizes that she must help the family, once her brother Al wants to leave it, and the family will lose more people to help. Nature seems to be solemn to Rose: the rain falls, and the men decide to make a ditch in order to protect her, Ma Joad and Al's girlfriend's mother from drowning.

All these events take place at night, which will be the most terrible in Rose of Sharon's life, but after all the suffering, her baby is born dead, and Uncle John is the one who buries it, in fact he puts the baby inside of a box and sets it in a stream, in a symbolic act of revolt against their helpless position in the world:

Go down an' tell 'em. Go down in the street an' rot an' tell 'em that way.  
That's the way you can talk. Don't even know if you was a boy or a girl.  
Ain't gonna find out. Go on down now, an' lay in the street. Maybe they'll  
know then" (*GW*, 1967:608)

Uncle John's words reflect that it was a social sin that killed Rose of Sharon's baby, not a theological one; he suggests that the dead body of the baby will tell people the nature of its death and what really caused it. Rose of Sharon, as the mother, will tell the same message when she feeds the man in the last scene of the novel, for she embraces not the child that society denied her, but she embraces her species, as a sign of awakening of the nature of her own self and role of mother.

Old Tom Joad carries Rose of Sharon in his arms, Uncle John carries Ma Joad's younger daughter Ruthie, and she carries her younger son Winfield. Al decides to stay with his girlfriend, but the rest of the family leaves and finds a barn where there is a starving fifty-year old man with his son. The boy is desperate because his father is starving to death, but shares a blanket with Rose of Sharon who has just lost her son. It is a world of losses that is portrayed in this scene, however, the importance of the universal family is stressed, since sharing is the most important of all actions. After seeing the desperate situation of both father and son, Ma Joad and Rose of Sharon look at one another, and the girl realizes the necessity of those people; then she performs one of the most controversial scenes in literature, which is the final scene of the novel:

Then slowly she lay beside him. He shook his head slowly from side to side. Rose of Sharon loosened one side of the blanket and Bared her breast. "You got to," she said. She squirmed closer and Pulled his head close. "There!" she said. "There." Her hand moved behind his head and supported it. Her fingers moved gently in his hair. She looked up and across the barn, and her lips came together and smiled mysteriously (GW, 1967: 619).

Rose of Sharon's attitude somehow suggested by Ma Joad is not only a pattern of continuity in terms of the relationship between mother and daughter, but it especially represents the endless renewal of the female principle of nurturing and taking care. For Rose of Sharon seems to have learned her mother's lessons that aimed to prepare her to become able to give continuity to the mother's role. This scene concludes the Joads lesson throughout their journey, for they learn how to live in brotherhood and sharing the little that was left.

Some critics, like LEVANT, complains about Rose of Sharon's process of transformation for the holy role of mother, even Steinbeck's editor Pascal Covici tried to make the author rethink the scene. However, Steinbeck wanted the scene to be a symbol of survival, and of the maternal love that is given to all people. The scene is an indicator that Rose of Sharon finally is ready to succeed her mother as a matriarch. Another point that reinforces her change comes from the treatment in relation to her, for throughout the narrative she is referred to as a "girl," while in this last scene the narrator emphasizes the equal status of Rose of Sharon and Ma Joad "...and the two women looked deep into each other" (GW, 1967: 618). Rose of Sharon's process of maturity developed at a slow pace, but she finally becomes a woman, and a mother, ready to feed her universal children, for she learns the lesson her mother so well teaches her. She becomes then ready to reproduce and to assume her function within the universal family, which is that of a mother.

Throughout the narrative Ma Jaod is the nourisher, but in the last scene she becomes the instigator, since she influences Rose of Sharon's decision. In "... giving her breast to the old man, Rose of Sharon takes her place with Ma as earth goddess. Her youth and fertility combine with her selfless act to signify continuity and hope" (GLADSTEIN, 1986:84). Steinbeck's symbols of hope are two women, who take care and bear up, when men are defeated by the economic chaos.

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck establishes a break in the pattern of naturalistic writers who tend to be pessimistic, because they generally can not "...believe that things can work out well if the characters cannot discipline themselves and exercise some control over the world around them" (FRENCH, 1987:72). Some critics state that *The Grapes of Wrath* is a pessimistic novel, indeed it is from the economic point of view, but concerning people's improvement as human beings, it is doubtless, an optimistic novel, for while men's essential quest is for economic recovery, they acquire what French called 'the education of the heart' and a profound sense of community and brotherhood. Steinbeck's point of view was quite modern, for he chooses two illiterate women as symbols of renewal and strength.

In his masterpiece, Steinbeck also analyzes the conflicts, the needs and the fear of poor illiterate white women, who are marked by the most dreadful loss that a woman can suffer: the loss of their children and husband. Steinbeck states that women can change better than men, so they are always ready to face the hazards of life. Through this attitude the writer breaks the previous shadow of misogyny that surrounded him in his early fiction.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

BANTA, Martha. **Imaging American women**: idea and ideals in cultural history. New York: Columbia University Press, 1987.

BEAUVOIR, Simone de. **O segundo sexo**: a experiência vivida. Vol. 1. 9ª impressão. Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira: 1980.

CORNILLON, Susan Loppelman. (ed). **Images of women in fiction**: feminist perspectives. Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1972.

FERGUSON, Mary Anne. **Images of women in literature**. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1986.

FRENCH, Warren. **John Steinbeck's fiction revisited**. Twayne's United States Authors Series. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994.

\_\_\_\_\_. John Steinbeck: A usable concept of Naturalism. In: BLOOM, Harold (ed). **John Steinbeck**: modern critical views. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987, p. 63-78.

GLADSTEIN, Mimi Reisel. **The indestructible woman in Faulkner, Hemingway, and Steinbeck**. Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1986.

\_\_\_\_\_. From Lady Brett to Ma Joad: a singular scarcity. In: YANO, Shigeharu (et al). **John Steinbeck**: from Salinas to the world. Tokyo: Gaku Shobo Press, 1986, p. 24-33.

LEVANT, Howard. The fully matured art: "The grapes of wrath." In: BLOOM, Harold (ed). **John Steinbeck**: modern critical views. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987, p. 35-62.

REUTER, Yves. **Introdução à análise do romance**: leitura e crítica. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 1996.

STEINBECK, John. **The grapes of wrath**. New York: The Viking Press, 1967.