THE «GREAT MOTHER» IN «THE GRAPES OF WRATH»

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Malcolm Cowley regards The Grapes of Wrath as the only proletarian novel of the 1930’s to survive into the present era without losing its force. In these terms, the impact of the novel derives from the continuing relevance of Steinbeck’s theme to the growing economic and social unease in Western culture. This approach limits the novel’s importance to social commentary, however, and fails to deal with its emotional power, a force based upon Steinbeck’s activation of a powerful archetype. Steinbeck, in analyzing the problems of the 1930’s had, perhaps unconsciously, arrived at an alternative to the dominant structures of Western culture. This alternative surfaces among the people who are the first victims of the decline of the old order, the migrant families. The failure of Western civilization to provide the necessities for these dispossessed wanderers leads them to establish a more primitive social order; ultimately, the migrant families form matriarchal structures. Concurrent with the development of the matriarchy is the irruption of images, patterns, and attitudes associated with the most primitive forms of the matriarchal deities. Throughout the novel, archetypal manifestations of the feminine irrupt in the form of the «Great Mother.»

The powerful closing scene of the novel provides, in iconographic form, a vision of the Great Mother: «Rose of Sharon loosened one side of the blanket and bared her breast. ‘You got it,’ she said. She squirmed closer and pulled his head close. ‘There!’ Her hand moved gently in his hair. She looked up and across the barn, and her lips came together and smiled mysteriously.» ¹

¹ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath (New York Modern Library, 1939), p. 618-9. All further references to this text will be identified by page numbers in parentheses.
a powerful archetype. Sensing an archetypal pattern, critics have related Rose of Sharon to the Madonna, and her nurturing gesture has been seen as a manifestation of Christian love. One must keep in mind, however, that Rose of Sharon is not a mother suckling her child; her baby was born dead, «a blue shriveled little mummy» (603). At her breast is a stranger, a starving man, a fellow refugee from a rising flood that has already destroyed many homes and families. This gesture and this simile are archetypal, however, and the necessary culmination of Steinbeck’s novel, for it is in this affirmation of the nourishing power and endurance of the feminine that the Great Mother is evident.

It is necessary to define the limits of this archetype as Steinbeck has used it, for in her many facets, the Great Mother encompasses virtually everything. «Woman = body = vessel = world.» is the formula Erich Neumann\(^2\) has given to the all-enclosing quality of the archetype. In The Grapes of Wrath, the Great Mother appears in both her elementary and transformative characters. In the former, she appears as a primordial spirit behind the forces of nature, manifesting herself in earth and sky, crops and famine, rain and flood. In her elementary character she is also present in the home and in the cultural activities that grow out of the establishment of facilities for sleep, food preparation and so on. In her transformative character, the Great Mother is a force for change in the individual and society; this change may involve growth or destruction, rebirth or death, for both are within her domain. This last point must be emphasized for destruction is as much a part of the Great Mother as is creation; she who gives life can also bring death to the natural world or the individual. A primitive icon of the Great Mother, the nineteenth century Indian statue of Kali dancing on Shiva,\(^3\) indicates both aspects of her character. Kali holds a sword of destruction in her upraised hand, and holds out a bowl of nourishment in the other. This kind of ambivalence is present throughout Steinbeck’s novel and is profoundly expressed in the final scene when a man near death by starvation and flood, two disasters associated with primitive earth goddesses like the Great Mother, is given the nourishing breast, the most elementary symbol of her life-giving quality.

The ambivalence between creative and destructive qualities is experienced on its most basic level as an attribute of Mother Earth. In Steinbeck’s earlier novel, To A God Unknown (1933), the Indian, Juanito, passes on to the white homesteader a bit of inherited wisdom: «My mother said how the earth is our mother and how everything that lives has life from the mother and goes back into the mother.» It is apparent from the beginning of The Grapes of Wrath that man has lost contact with the living qualities of the earth. The corn grows, Mother Earth is still fertile, but the crops are covered with

\(^2\) It is necessary to establish my indebtedness to Erich Neumann’s thorough analysis of the archetypal feminine in The Great Mother (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1963).

\(^3\) Ibid., Plates, p. 65.
dust. The land has been raped; growing the same crop year after year has sucked the life from the earth. The Joad family suffers because it has been guilty of this kind of neglect. «'Ever' year,' said Joad, 'Every year I can remember, we had a good crop comin' an' it never came. Grampa says she was good the first five plowin's, while the wild grass was still in her'» (37). The novel opens many years after the last of the wild grass; the land is not even owned by people anymore but by banks or corporations. The matriarchal consciousness has also been lost, for Neumann notes that it is dependent upon man's «participation mystique with his environment» (Great Mother, 293). The new relationship to the land is one of unemotional domination. «No man touched the seed, or lusted for the growth. Men ate what they had not raised, had no connection with the bread. The land bore under iron, and under iron, and under iron gradually died; for it was not loved or hated, it had no prayers or curses» (49). The new man is a «machine man» who sits on an iron seat on an iron horse. Efficiency has replaced wonder; contempt has replaced understanding. Steinbeck has embodied these concepts in a number of small details as well. Tom Joad, returning to his home, discovers that all the artifacts which symbolize a life close to the earth are askew. The well is dry; there are no weeds under its trough. The house is aslant, all of the windows are broken, and there is a hole where there once was a stove-pipe. The machine man's lunch is another detail of this kind. It is wrapped in waxed paper and all his food is processed: Spam, white bread, «a piece of pie branded like an engine part» (49). The result of this process of alienation from the land, the Great Mother, is separation and exile. The machine man «goes home, and his home is not the land» (158); the Joads have neither home nor land.

The women in the novel are divided between those who have no relationships to the earth, land, or the life force, and those who have at least a vestigial feminine consciousness, an awareness that becomes stronger in several characters as the novel progresses. The women of the former type are nameless. They have no individuality because they are defined by the objects with which they surround themselves: big cars, cosmetics, clothing and pot-bellied husbands. Their feminine attributes are disguised: breasts are confined, «stomachs and thighs straining against cases of rubber» (211). Women are also distinguished in terms of their relationship to time. The matriarchal consciousness is at work when a woman senses a relationship to the cycles of nature. People living close to the land, or primitive peoples, experience a sense of cyclic time in the seasons and recurrence of crops. Linear time, history, life seen in terms of progress from one point to another, are all modern, masculine concepts appended to the basically cyclic pattern of life on earth.4 Women, even in an industrial society, experience themselves, at least, in terms of biological cycles. These nameless women on the road, however, have accepted linear time and have lost the regenerative capacity that comes from an acceptance of oneself in terms of an

4. This discussion of linear and cyclical time is dependent upon the formulation of these concepts of Mircea Eliade in Cosmos and History (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1971).
eternally recurring pattern. Steinbeck is explicit about this; the eyes of these women are «sullen, disliking sun and wind, earth, resenting food and weariness, hating time that rarely makes them beautiful and always makes them old» (211).

Unlike the nameless ones, the Joad women have retained a closeness to their archetypal heritage. As a group the three are manifestations of the three ages of the Great Mother: hag, mother, and nubile daughter. The youngest girl, Ruthie, remains outside; she has not yet achieved her initiation into womanhood, so she merely watches and learns. Granma is shrill, ferocious, and assertive, true to her mythical forebears, Hecate, or Athene as Crone. It is reported that she once shot off one of Granpa’s buttocks, a symbolic castration, which would indicate at the very least a strong tendency toward matriarchal dominance. Her life-force is apparent; she outlasts her mate, and Ma humorously comments that grief was not one of her pre-dominant qualities as «she always ate a good meal at a funeral» (238). Granma is part of nature’s cyclic patterns. Before her death, her mind wanders and she becomes «like a little baby» (239). A sense of the recurrent patterns of which she is a part is suggested by the mysterious whisperings between dying granma and pregnant Rose of Sharon.

Ma, we are told almost immediately, is the «citadel of the family, the strong place that could not be taken» (100). Woman as an encompassing shelter is one of the primordial manifestations of the Great Mother. Moreover, she is the source of the family and its emotions; her position is «great and humble.» Her beauty has arisen out of her services within the family: «From her position as healer, her hands had grown sure and cool and quiet; from her position as arbiter she had become as remote and faultless in judgement as a goddess.» The first time Ma appears she is cooking pork, food from an animal that is associated with her throughout the novel. Neumann notes that «the pig is a symbol of the archetypal feminine and occurs everywhere as the sacrificial beast of the Earth Goddess» (139). It is the pork that Ma has salted and prepared that keeps the family alive on the road. Ma’s relationship to life indicates an awareness of cyclicality. On the road, the men are concerned with maps, miles, and time: «from Sallisaw to Gore is twenty-one miles and the Hudson was doing thirty-five miles an hour. From Gore to Warner thirteen miles; Warner to Checotah fourteen miles; Checotah a long jump to Henrietta—thirty-four miles, but a real town at the end of it» (167). To Ma, however, «it’s jus’ the road goin’ by for me. An’ it’s jus’ how soon they gonna wanta eat some more pork bones» (168-169). Before the journey, Ma was just one voice among many in making group decisions. As the novel progresses, she becomes more dominant. She decides when they will stop or go on. Pa threatens to re-establish patriarchal dominance with the side of a shovel to her head, but acquiesces to her rule every time.

Off the land, and not yet a part of the industrial society, the Joads are forced into primitive, matriarchal cultural patterns. Preparing food and making shelter are the primary social needs, and Ma is the prime mover in creating this primitive kind of civilization. A simple conversation between Ma and Pa establishes this clearly.
... ‘Funny! Woman takin’ over the fambly. Woman sayin’ we’ll do this here, an’ we’ll go there. An’ I don’ even care.’

‘Woman can change better’n a man,’ Ma said soothingly. ‘Woman got all her life in her arms. Man got it all in his head. Don’ you mind. Maybe – well, maybe nex’ year we can get a place.’

‘We got nothin’, now,’ Pa said ... ‘Seems our life is over and done!’

‘No it ain’t,’ Ma smiled. ‘It ain’t, Pa. An that’s one more thing a woman knows. I noticed that. Man, he lives in jerks–baby born, an’ a man dies, an’ that’s a jerk. Woman, it’s all one flow, like a stream, little eddies, little waterfalls, but the river, it goes right on. Woman looks at it like that. We ain’t gonna die out. People is goin’ on–changin’ a little, maybe, but goin’ right on! (577)

Ma has achieved a position of dominance in her society because she is a carrier of inherited matriarchal folk-wisdom. She knows about burial rites, for example; Grampa is sewed neatly into his shroud, coins placed on his eyes to pay his way across the Styx. Ma also presides at births. She initiates Rose of Sharon into womanhood before she gives birth by piercing her ears. «Does it mean sompin?» Rose of Sharon asked. «Why, ‘course it does, ... ‘course it does» Ma replied (485). Everything Ma does is in accord with her function as an archetypal mother. She experiences herself as a provider of nourishment; others experience her as a source of strength. Her character has a positive effect on those around her for it is firmly rooted in the generating spirit of the Great Mother.

Rose of Sharon is primarily a representation of the fecundity of the Great Mother. At the beginning of the novel, she experiences herself and the world in terms of her condition: «the world was pregnant to her; she thought only in terms of reproduction and motherhood» (130). Her relationship with her mate, Connie, has a significance that Neumann attributes to the Great Mother, «Fecundation,» he notes, «makes the woman into a numinous being for herself and for the male» (270). To Connie, it seems as if «the world had drawn close around them and they were in the center of it, or rather Rose of Sharon was in the center of it with Connie making a small orbit about her. Everything they said was a kind of secret» (176). Once they are off the land, however, Rose of Sharon succumbs to the pressures of the patriarchal society. Connie’s dreams focus upon a new life in the machine age; he wants to work in a store, a factory, or learn a technical trade. Rose of Sharon dreams of having her baby with a doctor and in a hospital, acquiescing entirely to male usurpation of feminine functions. After Connie’s desertion, Ma re-orients Rose of Sharon to the old patterns, directing and encouraging her. The price of Rose of Sharon’s alienation from her matriarchal roots is the death of her baby. While she is recovering, Ma imparts women’s secrets to her: «Ma lay close to Rose of Sharon. Sometimes Ma whispered to her and sometimes sat up quietly, her face brooding» (612). It is at Ma’s direction that she nourishes the starving man. Her enigmatic smile while suckling a stranger is
at least partially inspired by Rose of Sharon’s new experience of herself. The production of milk is an ancient transformation mystery; it involves the movement from nubility to motherhood focusing a woman’s awareness of herself as a nurturing force. Rose of Sharon’s relationship to the world has changed from an inner-directed self-sufficient one to a loving and protective view. Joy and heightened awareness of oneself are the rewards of recognizing an archetypal expression; Rose of Sharon’s generosity and joy are based on her recognition of the Great Mother within.

The male characters in the novel experience the transforming power of the feminine as well. Neumann notes that: «the male experiences this aspect of the feminine directly and indirectly as provocative, as a force that sets him in motion and impels him toward change» (32). Each of the men in the novel undergoes a transformation, for some it is a creative alteration, for others it is destructive. It is quite plain that the male characters are transformed by the Great Mother, by their relationship to the feminine principle, rather than by Christian or social principles. Steinbeck has created strong male characters in several of his novels, most notably in To A God Unknown and East of Eden, but one looks in vain for strong patriarchal attributes in either Pa or Grampa. Grampa, for example, was a force to be reckoned with until he left the land; it took only a few days of separation from his vital relationship to the earth for him to die. Pa, too, once off the land, becomes more and more an auxiliary of Ma’s, indicating a consistent dependence on the feminine whether manifested in land or woman. Pa’s relationship to feminine principles is, however, one of fear or misunderstanding, a fault for which he pays. He does not know how to insure the fertility of his land; the constant raising of one crop interfered with the basic needs of the earth. As a result, he is driven from his land. Noah, his first son, has been sacrificed to his fear of the fundamental transformation mystery of birth. «For on the night when Noah was born, Pa, frightened at the spreading thighs, alone in the house, and horrified at the screaming wretch his wife had become went mad with apprehension. Using his hands, his strong fingers for forceps, he had pulled and twisted the baby. The mid-wife, arriving late, had found the baby’s head pulled out of shape, its neck stretched, its body warped; and she had pushed the head back and molded the body with her hands. But Pa always remembered and was ashamed» (106). As a result, Noah is strange, aloof, and alienated from the rest of the family. Halfway to California, however, Noah undergoes a symbolic rebirth, a baptism which brings him back into connection with the Great Mother. The rite of passage takes place in a river where the men have come to wash and cool themselves. The river is shallow; sitting, their bodies are covered but «their heads stuck out of the water» (277) suggesting that the power of the archetypal feminine is not an intellectual power but a physical or spiritual one. Noah, whose intelligence was already in question, is the first to respond to the call of the Great Mother. «I was in that there water. An’ I ain’t a-gonna leave her. I’m a gonna go now, ... down the river. I’ll catch fish an’ stuff, but I can’t leave her. I can’t» (284). Noah’s use of the feminine pronoun is significant here. When told that Noah is gone, Pa still
does not understand, and this failure places him in the position of a child in the family, subservient to Ma, who seems to understand everything.

The case for the matriarchal resurgence in the novel is challenged by the conventional interpretations of the function of Jim Casy. He has been seen by many critics as a Christ figure. It is obvious that Casy shares not only Christ's initials, but a basic message of love and a willingness to sacrifice himself for his fellow man. His relationships with women, however, separate him firmly from Christ. Casy is no longer a preacher because love of God and religious ecstasy led him to express that love physically. «Tell you what,» he said, «I used ta get the people jumpin' and talkin' in tongues, an' glory-shoutin' till they just fell down and passed out ... An' then --you know what I'd do? I'd take one of them girls out in the grass, an' I'd lay with her. Done it ever' time» (29). Casy found that the women to whom he preached also equated religious ecstasy with sexuality, which led him to question how this so-called working of the devil could be present when a woman felt full of the divine spirit. Neumann's answer is that sexuality is a manifestation of a divine principle more ancient than those in which Casy had lived and preached. Casy tries to articulate this divine principle and ends up with a kind of oversoul theory: «maybe it’s all men an’ all women that we love; maybe that’s the Holy Spirit – the human spirit – the whole shebang. Maybe all men got one big soul ever’ body’s a part of» (32-33). He explicitly denies the relationship of this principle to God or Jesus. This oversoul is a pagan one, like Whitman's, in which sexuality is an expression of divinity. Steinbeck's own comments on the soul are useful here. It is reported that upon visiting a church, he could not refrain from responding to the minister's comments on the necessity of nourishing the soul: «a lot of crap,» he remarked, rather loudly, «if the soul is immortal, why worry about it –it’s the body that--» Casy expresses guilt at having betrayed his Christian principles, but his experience of woman as a «holy vessel» leads him to take her to the grass time and again. It is the body that is important to Casy as well.

Casy also felt alienated by the seriousness of Christianity. He enjoys laughing at the hackneyed joke about the bull and the heifer. Unlike the Father whom Jesus worshipped, Casy's god is a god unknown. Moreover, it is a divine principle that expresses itself through a feeling of oneness with the natural world. «Sometime I’d pray like I always done. On’y I coun’ figure what I was prayin’ to or for. There was the hills, an’ there was me, an’ we wasn’t separate no more. We was one thing. An’ that one thing was holy» (110).


6. Robert Bennett, The Wrath of John Steinbeck or St. John Goes to Church (Los Angeles, Albertson Press, 1939). This pamphlet has no pagination, the quotation appears on the third last page.
On joining the Joad family, the first thing Casy does is help to slaughter a pig. The importance of the pig as a sacrificial beast of the Great Mother has already been mentioned. This slaughter was, for the most part, just men’s work on the farm; Casy, however, goes beyond the actions of the other men. He apprentices himself to Ma and helps her salt down the meat, thereby becoming an initiate into one of the fundamental mysteries of the Great Mother, that of food transformation. Ma is dubious at first, «It’s a woman’s work» she protests. «It’s all work, ‘’ (146). In order to see Casy as a Christ-figure too much of his character has to be left out. If he is seen as the unconscious prophet of a primitive earth goddess, both his sexuality and his feeling that «all that lives is holy» (196) and «what people does is right» (289) can be taken into account. Nor do Casy’s sacrifices of himself take him beyond the realm of the Great Mother, for she has always demanded sacrifices in her honor. Pain and deprivation are associated with her most primitive rituals. Casy’s first sacrifice was for the Joad family, the second for the family of man. Casy’s last words are reminiscent of Christ’s as he tells the men who are attacking him: «You don’t know what you’re a-doin.» But his rationale for this remark was not that they did not know they were killing a son of god but that they did not know that they were «starvin’ kids,» (527) a basic concern of the Great Mother.

Tom is more nearly a Christ figure than Casy, but he is profoundly the son of his mother. Before he goes off into the world, he undergoes a symbolic re-entry into the womb. While he is hiding in a cave, his mother brings him nourishment in the darkness, and he discusses with her his plans to aid the other migrants by organizing them. He visions an apotheosis for himself, one in which he is absorbed into a maternal darkness, maintaining a transcendent presence at food rituals. «I’ll be all aroun’ in the dark. I’ll be ever’ where – wherever you look. Whenever they’s a fight so hungry people can eat, I’ll be there...» (572). His transformation is the result of his recognition of the needs of a developing matriarchal consciousness in which the needs of the family, the earth, and those who live close to it, are primary.

The transformation in Uncle John has taken place before the novel opens. He is punishing himself with drink and celibacy for contributing to the death of his wife. He remains in the background of the novel for the most part, a kind of living reminder of the failure of patriarchal values. Ma gives him a bit of appropriate and useful advice when she warns him not to burden others with his crimes against life. «Don’ tell’em,» she warns, «go down the river an’ stick your head under an’ whisper ‘em in the stream» (365). John does not take her advice at this point, but, at the end of the novel, he performs a ritualistic sacrifice in the river to make reparation to the Great Mother for all of their sins. He takes Rose of Sharon’s dead baby and casts it on the stream as a warning to others. «Go down an’ tell ‘em. Go down in the street an’ rot an’ tell ‘em that way. That’s the way you can talk... Maybe they’ll know then.» (609)

Al Joad, with his mechanical skills is, at the beginning of the novel, a man of the new age. His abilities to keep the car running involve several small miracles.
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last scene, however, he has been absorbed by matriarchal principles and matrilocal necessities. He leaves his own family for the family of his wife, a custom demanded by the matriarchal rules of migrant living.

Beyond the references to the Great Mother in his characters, Steinbeck’s descriptions of the migrant camps also indicate a strong matriarchal principle at work. “In the evening, a strange thing happened: the twenty families became one family, the children were the children of all” (264). The highlights of life in these camps, culminating in the Weedpatch camp, are the rituals that formed around the basic functional spheres of the feminine. Birth and death are the basis of community celebrations: “And it might be that a sick child threw despair into the hearts of twenty families, of a hundred people; that a birth there in a tent kept a hundred people quiet and awe-struck through the night and filled a hundred people with the birth-joy in the morning” (264). Food preparation and laundry are social events on a smaller scale. Ma, for example, found herself feeding twenty or more waifs in one campground. She is also told about the archetypal laundry rituals: “You wait till the women get to washing... know what they did yesterday, Mrs. Joad? They had a chorus. Singing a hymn tune and rubbing the clothes all in time. That was something to hear, I tell you” (415).

The principles on which families are established are based on the needs of women and children. The legal aspects of marriage, invented so that men can pass on their names and property, are no longer useful. The rules are simple: “a man might have a willing girl if he stayed with her, if he fathered her children and protected them. But a man might not have one girl one night and another the next, for this would endanger the worlds” (266). It is this last social custom, a matrilocal principle, that was responsible for Al leaving the Joads. It was not a desertion of the family, but a re-establishment of the basic principles from which the family developed. Steinbeck makes it clear that the life in camp is not a fundamentalist Christian communism. Rose of Sharon is frightened by a dour Christian woman who warns her against the sinful dances and wicked plays that are held in the camp, insisting that: “they ain’t but a few deep down Jesus-lovers left” (422). During the dancing, the “Jesus-lovers” remain aloof and keep their children under close scrutiny, safely protected from these pagan celebrations. Ma, however, urges Rose of Sharon to attend the festivities, telling her that she will be especially welcome because “it makes folks happy to see a girl in a fambly way” (460).

Readers and critics of this novel who fail to see the developing matriarchal consciousness are forced to view Steinbeck’s final message in naturalistic terms, seeing humans helpless and at the mercy of the elements in the last scene when the diminished family—Ma, Pa, Rose of Sharon, Ruthie and Winfield—are driven from their boxcar home by the rising river. Other critics, unwilling to accept the implications of the ending for their theories about the Christian or communistic patterns, have tended to concur instead that “the ending is intentionally inconclusive.”

intention is useful here, for in a series of articles that he wrote for the *San Francisco News* on the migrant situation, Steinbeck indicated that he saw only despair and starvation for the workers as long as California maintained its stupidity in regard to the handling of the land and its owners. «Next year,» he wrote, «the hunger will come again, and the year after that, and so on, until we come out of this coma and realize that our agriculture for all its great produce is a failure.» He offered no alternatives, merely asked whether «the hunger must become anger and the anger fury before anything will be done.»

Leslie Fiedler has indicated that one of the values for the archetypal critic of a writer’s emphasis on realism or naturalism is that this creates «a kind of blessed stupidity in regard to what he is really doing, so that the archetypal material can well up into his work uninhibited by his intent.» Steinbeck certainly intended to take the predominant social attitudes to task, and whether he articulated it intellectually or not, the archetypal alternative to Western patriarchal consciousness comes to the surface of this novel. One alternative is provided at the beginning of the book. Like Muley, one can refuse to accept the new social patterns. He will not leave the land that has been «soaked by the blood of his father,» or the grass on which he first «laid with a girl» (69). So he remains, living in caves and eating wild rabbits, haunting the machine men who ride unfeelingly over the living earth, aligning himself with the vestigial remains of the Great Mother in nature. The other alternative is to discover the Great Mother within; if one is a woman this involves aligning oneself with the nurturing aspect of the archetype, if a man, experiencing the transformative power of the feminine. In a brief scene toward the end of book, Ruthie gives Winfield a stern lesson about the gifts of the Great Mother. Winfield, «grabbed at the flower in her hand and missed it, and Ruthie banged him in the face with her open hand» (615). Winfield is learning early that the gifts of the Great Mother cannot be taken by force, but must be earned by recognizing, first of all, that pain and deprivation are as much a part of her manifestation as is nourishment. Rose of Sharon and the starving man at her breast understand her powers completely. Sword in one hand, bowl in the other, Kali, too, wears a smile.