

**THE SILENCED WOMEN OF JOHN STEINBECK'S
DUSTBOWL TRILOGY**

by

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Abstract

The primary aim of this project is to examine selected works by John Steinbeck, a significant American writer. Through a close contextual and textual analysis of Steinbeck's Dustbowl Trilogy, which consists of the novels *In Dubious Battle*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*, this project will interrogate Steinbeck's contribution to the silencing of women and their inferior placement in their society and determine the extent to which Steinbeck promotes patriarchal ideology through his literature. A close examination of the modernist era in which these novels were written will provide the method of interrogating Steinbeck's portrayal of women's situation during the Depression and determine whether it is a reflection of the reality of women's situation at that time given the political and environmental factors of the 1930s.

The theories of various feminist critics, including Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Gayle Rubin, Luce Irigaray, Sherry Ortner, and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar will be explored in order to elucidate the author's treatment of the female characters and determine the extent to which patriarchal ideology is embedded in his writing. A brief examination of some of his contemporaries, namely F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway, will reveal the general treatment of women in male authored modernist literature and determine the extent to which Steinbeck's female subjugation is representative.

Keywords: John Steinbeck patriarchal ideology literary silencing female subjugation feminist literary theory American literature Dustbowl Trilogy

Declaration:

I declare that this thesis is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in English at the University of Fort Hare. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at any other university.

Stella Burri

_____ day of _____, 2012.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to the loving memory of my grandmother, Alvild Hovden (1922-2012), who is a constant source of inspiration, and, with her tenacity and vigour, was never afraid to let her voice be heard.

Your own words are the bricks and mortar

of the dreams you want to realize.

Your words are the greatest power you have.

The words you choose and their use

establish the life you experience. (Sonia Croquette)

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Table of Contents:

Abstract	i
Declaration	ii
Dedication	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents	v
List of Illustrations	vii
Introduction	1
Chapter One – America at the Turn of the Century	15
1.1 John Steinbeck	15
1.2 Historical Context	27
1.3 The Modernist Era	30
1.3.1 Karl Marx (1818-1883)	31
1.3.2 Charles Darwin (1809-1882)	33
1.3.3 Sigmund Freud (1856-1939)	35
1.3.4 Albert Einstein (1879-1955)	37
1.4 The Emergence of a New Culture	39
1.5 The Situation of Women	43
1.6 The Depression Era	46

1.7 The Situation of Women	56
Chapter Two – Contemporary Feminist Literary Criticism	58
2.1 Theorists	58
2.1.1 Simone de Beauvoir 1908-1986	61
2.1.2 Judith Butler 1956 –	67
2.1.3 Gayle Rubin 1949 –	70
2.1.4 Luce Irigaray 1932 –	72
2.1.5 Hélène Cixous 1937 –	76
2.1.6 Sherry B. Ortner 1941 –	77
2.2 Feminism and Literature	81
2.2.1 Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar	82
Chapter Three – Steinbeck’s Silenced Women: An Analysis	88
3.1 <i>In Dubious Battle</i>	90
3.2 <i>Of Mice and Men</i>	102
3.3 <i>The Grapes of Wrath</i>	115
Conclusion	135
Works Cited	140
1. Primary Sources – Steinbeck’s Work	140

2. Secondary Sources 140

List of Illustrations: 148

1. "Dust storm, Colorado 1937" 148

2. "Aftermath" 148

3. "Dust storm approaching, Kansas 1937" 149

4. "Father and children seeking shelter" 149

5. "Migrant Mother" 150

6. "Family walking on the highway" 150

7. "Mother and child" 151

8. "Camping at the side of the road" 151

Introduction

Born in 1902, highly acclaimed modernist author, John Steinbeck, discovered his love for reading and his talent for writing in his early teenage years. His path to recognition and popularity was, however, long and difficult and it took several attempts and numerous disappointments before he achieved his first notable success with the novel *Tortilla Flat* in 1935. From that moment on, Steinbeck's reputation and acclaim grew steadily and reached unprecedented heights after the publication of novels such as *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, which are today considered classics of American modernist literature. Steinbeck had a strong connection to nature and the land; particularly close to his heart was the place where he grew up, Salinas, California, the area in which most of his novels are centralized. The environment and the forces of nature are central in many of his novels, as are issues of inheritance of property or generational power (Meltzer 67). Steinbeck did not concern himself with fancy writing or wit; his aim was to create realistic stories, told from a steadfast moral point of view, with well-developed characters to whom readers could relate (Meltzer 46). His careful attention to detail, from the physical description of the characters to the particular words and expressions used in the dialogues, was retrieved from constant observations he made during encounters with people from all walks of life, giving his writing a rigid authenticity. Similar to other authors of his time, Steinbeck's writing is strongly influenced by modernist thought and ideology.

Numerous interrelated events and ideologies worked together in shaping society of the early twentieth century. Rapid developments and advancements with technology, industry and science introduced new, revolutionary theories and concepts which had

an enormous impact on the collective consciousness of Western society. Ground-breaking concepts regarding the human psyche, the equality of the classes and the origin of the universe shook the foundations of Christian faith, which had previously been the anchor of Western culture. The traumatic cultural experience of crisis and loss is often reflected in the works of modernist authors, who engaged with, and responded to this experience by using several literary techniques, such as irony and symbolism, which are characteristic of modernist writing (9). In the aftermath of the war, a sense of existentialism took root in people, as they began questioning the meaning of their existence and the purpose of life. As a result, the 1920s saw a revolutionary change in Western culture. Technological advances, such as the invention of the gramophone, the radio and the cinema, created a new mass culture that provided an escape from the disenchantment and despair (Wilson 35). Music, dance and the emergence of the first Hollywood celebrities became the new focus for the younger generations. The erosion of traditional values, influenced by the Freudian theory on sexuality, became visible, as homosexuality, polygamous relationships and promiscuity became increasingly acceptable (Paddy 123). Gender and sexual emancipation strongly challenged the morality of gender roles assigned by religion and Victorian prohibitions, and gave rise to the concept of the New Woman, who, no longer confined to the domestic sphere, was able to enter the work force, as well as explore issues of sexuality on her own terms (Paddy 120).

The decade following the Roaring Twenties saw a major change in almost all aspects of American society. Gone were the affluent days of economic prosperity and superficial escapism; in their place came a decade long struggle against the worst economic and environmental crisis since the beginning of industrialization (Freidel 201). The collapse of the stock market in 1929 marked only the beginning of

a decade known as the Great Depression, the Dirty Thirties, or the Hungry Thirties (Craats 9). As a consequence of the economic collapse, the rate of unemployment spread rapidly across the country, reaching its peak at twenty-five per cent in 1932, plunging the majority of Americans into poverty in some cases causing entire families to be wiped out from malnutrition and starvation (Freidel 201). The rural farmers in the area of the South and Middle West, known as the Dust Bowl, suffered perhaps the most: farm income declined by more than sixty per cent, and a vast number of farmers lost their land through mortgage foreclosures and evictions (203). In addition, a large area of the country was struck by the worst drought in the history of the nation. Starting off in the Dust Bowl region, the drought, which lasted an entire decade, continued to spread, eventually agriculturally decimating over twenty-seven states and turning many areas of fertile farm land into deserts (203). Hundreds of thousands of families, particularly those living in the Dust Bowl states, left their homes and travelled great distances in search of work and potentially greener pastures, but the life that awaited them at their destination was often not any easier than the one they had left behind. Those who were fortunate enough to find employment were forced to work as agricultural migrants, travelling from one farm to the next performing hard labour at starvation wages (204).

Just as prosperity had shaped the culture of the 1920s, the economic deprivation gave rise to a new culture in the 1930s. This change is particularly visible when examining the situation and position of women in society; feminist movements came to an abrupt halt and due to the large scale of unemployment, women across the country were once again confined to the domestic sphere. Women were mostly neglected in the field of art and literature, as the focus of attention changed from hedonistic pleasures to socio-political issues, addressing the social injustices and

despair suffered by the masses (Freidel 227). As a result, the literature of the 1930s is permeated by a strong sense of patriarchal ideology, as male writers were generally disengaged from the notion of female subjectivity, and had a tendency to create stereotypical, and often even hostile, representations of women, such as possessive mother figures or treacherous *femme fatales* (Montefiore 84).

As John Steinbeck was one of the award winning writers of the 1930s, a close contextual and textual analysis of three of his novels, *In Dubious Battle*, *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, written during this era will be executed in this dissertation. Steinbeck's careful attention to detail and his obvious sympathy for the working class realistically portrays the struggle of millions of people who were affected by the political and environmental disasters of the 1930s. Although he displays a brilliant understanding of the plight of the working man, Steinbeck often fails to attend to the struggle of women.

Based on feminist literary theory, and infused with an understanding of the socio-political issues of that particular era, this dissertation will interrogate Steinbeck's contribution to the silencing and oppression of women, and examine the patriarchal ideology that permeates his writing.

The modernist ideology evident in Steinbeck's writing, in terms of a literary understanding, can be recognized as a direct consequence of the technological and societal advances of the modern age (Tew & Murray 13). The modernist era, characterized by the rapid growth in scientific and technological development, and the widespread rise of capitalism, created a culture that adapted and adhered to a new set of values and ideologies which significantly differed from the principles and beliefs of the past. The revolutionary concepts and theories by men such as Karl

Marx, Sigmund Freud, Charles Darwin, and Albert Einstein regarding class division and equality, the human psyche, and the origin of human life, radically challenged the foundations of Christianity, thus accelerating the emergence of a secularized culture. This loss of religious morality and spiritual values together with the catastrophic events of World War One resulted in a profound sense of mourning and loss that permeated the individual and collective consciousness of Western society (8-9).

The traumatic cultural experience of despair and faithlessness gave rise to existentialism, a philosophy concerned with the condition of human existence and the purpose of life. The sense of hopelessness and disillusionment, which is characteristic of existentialist ideology, is often reflected in the works of modernist authors, who responded to this experience by creating several literary techniques which have become characteristic to modernist writing such as parody and pastiche. Influenced by Freudian concepts of the human psyche, writers of this era began to experiment with the idea of unreliable narration and multiple points of view in order to portray more adequately the complexity of human psychology and the relativity of truth. In the attempt to provide a more adequate depiction of human thought processes and the way in which the world is perceived and experienced, a technique involving the use of suggestive and associational stream-of-consciousness sentences was created (Paddy 122). A fascination with the relativity of time, inspired by Albert Einstein's theories on the subject, resulted in bold explorations in narrative sequencing using flash-backs and interrelation of memory and the current moment, creating the impressions of time as a non-linear structure (125).

Another literary technique favoured by modernist writers is symbolism. Symbolism involves expressing ideas and emotions without describing or defining them directly, but by recreating them in the mind of the reader through the use of unexplained symbols (Chadwick 2-3). This technique allowed language and literature to become more than just a reflection of the external world but an imaginative representation of revelatory abstract concepts (Paddy 122).

As a modernist author, John Steinbeck's writing is permeated by modernist ideology. Having seen and experienced the suffering of millions of Americans during the Depression, Steinbeck's *Dustbowl Trilogy* is marked by the existentialist sense of hopelessness and despair. The literary techniques utilized by the author, particularly the extensive use of symbolism, characterize Steinbeck as a modernist writer.

In terms of the emancipation of women and the changing of gender roles, which too, were areas of great development in the 1920s, a strong sense of patriarchal ideology permeates Steinbeck's writing, as most, if not all, of his female characters are oppressed and subjugated, not only by the male characters in the novels, but also by the author himself, who chooses to confine the women to the stereotypical roles of either angel or monster. The examination of other male modernist writers, however, illustrates that Steinbeck's patriarchal concept of femininity is not unique. Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald and William Faulkner, to mention only a few, were among the most prominent authors of the modernist era, and have become subject to strong feminist criticism over the years.

When examining the lives of Steinbeck and his contemporaries, Fitzgerald, Faulkner and Hemingway, a number of commonalities, besides their misogyny, can be found, most notably their volatile relationships with women, their infidelities, and their

abusive relationship to alcohol. Their misogynistic attitudes become evident in their writing, such as Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.

Like Steinbeck, Hemingway restricts feminine subjectivity, as his binary portrayal of female characters confines them to either the role of the pure and selfless angel or that of the fiendish monster. In the case of *A Farewell to Arms*, this binary is particularly visible for the nurse represents the angel and the prostitute embodies the monster. Critic Jamie Barlowe-Kayes, however, offers, what Traber refers to as a "brutal summary of the varied ways Hemingway trivializes his female characters" (28):

Women are inspirations, muses, sexual temptations and release from sexual tension; they serve as nurturers, solvers of domestic problems, and creators of conditions which allow men to go on accomplishing – and making decisions. Even Hemingway's ways of holding women in esteem marginalizes them – kept them as objects, playthings, nurturers, allotting them the no-power of domestic power. (Barlowe-Kayes 175)

Indeed, Catherine, besides representing male sexual fantasy, is often seen as "merely a distraction or impediment to a quest by a male hero for transcendence (Hatten 76). She is also portrayed as exceptionally needy, and emotionally disturbed, even to the point where she tries to turn Frederic, the protagonist, into her dead fiancé (Nolan 108). Furthermore, by engaging in premarital sex, and becoming pregnant out of wedlock, Catherine embodies the bad woman, the opposite of Gilbert and Gubar's notion of the pure and virginal angel (20). In regards to Catherine's death, Traber says that it should not be interpreted "as Hemingway killing off a

female hindrance to his male protagonist's freedom; rather, Catherine dies in the ultimate performance of "what women do." What is 'natural' to the female sex ultimately kills her" (36). From a feminist point of view, however, Catherine's death can be seen as a figurative and literal silencing of the female voice, and Hemingway's refusal to grant her the experience of motherhood.

Hemingway's misogynistic tendencies are evident in his own treatment of women, such as when he satirized Gertrude Stein in *Death in the Afternoon*, and defamed his wife in *Green Hills of Africa*, where he refers to her as P.O.M (Poor Old Mama), a choice of words which was widely criticized, even by fellow misogynist Fitzgerald (Wagner-Martin 110).

In addition to being a masterful example in literary structure and technique, *The Great Gatsby* also offers an excellent illustration of patriarchal ideology and female subjugation. Set in the Roaring Twenties, the novel contains numerous depictions of the New Woman and her modern and uninhibited ways. It can be argued that the three main female characters, Daisy Buchanan, Jordan Baker, and Myrtle Wilson are all versions of the New Woman, despite their apparent differences (Tyson 122).

Although all of them seemingly enjoy the independence and freedom that the era has granted them, their characterization by the author and the reaction of the male characters in the novel reveals the deep-seated discomfort, and even hatred, toward the New Woman. Daisy and Myrtle, for instance, are both open about their marital unhappiness, "although secrecy about such matters is one of the cardinal rules of patriarchal marriage", and all three women disregard patriarchal sexual taboos, as Daisy and Myrtle are involved in extramarital affairs, and Jordan engages in premarital sex (Tyson 124). They also refuse the traditional role of motherhood, as

Daisy is the only one who has a child, but seems devoid of any maternal love toward

her daughter. That Fitzgerald's patriarchal notions reject this kind of 'unfeminine' behaviour is evident in his treatment of these characters. Daisy is portrayed as a dishonest and pretentious attention-seeker and remorseless killer, while Jordan is depicted as a liar and a cheat. Like Daisy, she is irresponsible and concerned only with herself. Tyson argues that her physical appearance is typical of a woman who has invaded the male world. "She was a slender, small-breasted girl" who looked "like a young cadet" (*The Great Gatsby* 16). Evidently, a woman like Jordan, who has dared to enter the masculine world by playing professional golf, does not deserve to be fully feminine, and thus by extension, attractive, in appearance. The same holds true for Myrtle, who is characterized as loud, obnoxious and overtly sexual. Not only does she bully and humiliate her devoted husband, she also cheats on him with a married man, whom she is merely using for the purpose of upward social mobility. Unlike Daisy and Jordan, she is neither young nor attractive, but "in the middle thirties, and faintly stout... Her face... contained no facet or gleam of beauty" (*The Great Gatsby* 28).

Tyson argues that these three "transgressive women are punished by the progression of narrative events. That Daisy gets stuck with Tom in a loveless marriage seems ... only right and proper: she doesn't deserve any better..." (Tyson 126). Jordan is punished through the author's characterization of her as a cheat, and by implying that she used manipulation and coercion in order to get away with it, Fitzgerald has yet another opportunity to illustrate the deviousness of women. Myrtle, Tyson says, is the character who threatens patriarchy the most and thus receives the most severe punishment: death. That the manner of her death involves sexual mutilation is significant, says Tyson, because "it underscores the notion that Myrtle's sexual vitality, that is, her aggressiveness, was her real crime" (127).

When analyzing Faulkner's treatment of women, it is important to take into consideration the culture in which he grew up. In the Southern United States, Kelly Cannon explains, there exists a particular kind of culture regarding the paradigms of masculinity and femininity. Masculinity in the South, while traditionally associated with social class and race, is also inseparable from gentility (291). As a result, Southern male-authored literature very often relegates women and people of colour to the role of the Other, while the white male remains the One (Carville 215).

Caroline Carvill argues that the South's view on women, which permeates Faulkner's writing, involves seeing them as simultaneously central and marginal, powerful and ineffectual. In other words, while Faulkner puts his female characters on a pedestal, he also subjugates them (215).

His subjugation of women is particularly evident when examining the female characters in *The Sound and the Fury*, a novel which consists of four parts, each section being narrated from the point of view of a different character. Feminist critics have reacted to the fact that Caddy is not one of the narrators although she is one of the central characters and acts as a focal point for the other characters' narratives.

Faulkner said that the reason for this was "because Caddy was still to me too beautiful and too moving to reduce her to telling what was going on, that it would be more passionate to see her through somebody else's eyes, I thought" (qtd in Weinstein 84). With this treatment of his central female character, Faulkner ensures that she is denied a voice and is wholly presented from a male perspective. She is unable to voice her own story, and has to rely on the men around her to speak on her behalf. Her position as the only sister among the three brothers is also significant, Weinstein says, as this indicates the female as being essentially alone, whereas "the male is granted the privilege of same-sex company" (84). Indeed, the

men in the novel seem to share a common language and engage in common activities, while the women are isolated and alone. Once again, Cixous' notion of the lone female surrounded by men, existing in a male world comes to mind (Tong 224). Although Caddy is central to the development of the novel, "this is a context that stifles (rather than enables) the female at the center. Deprived of female correspondents, these figures are defined by, and at the mercy of, the brothers, fathers, uncles and lovers who surround them" (Weinstein 84).

It is also important to note that it is Caddy who is held responsible for her brother Jason's financial destitution and the death of her brother Quentin, who commits suicide because of her disastrous marriage. Her daughter, Quentin, is also portrayed as untrustworthy, and as repeating "her mother's dishonor and flight" (Minter 385).

Mrs. Compson, the cold, self-involved mother, is also denied access to the exclusive world of the males. Her words, Weinstein says, may be accepted or met with resistance, but rarely do they result in dialogue. She is on display, "dramatized not through any bond with others, but through her impact on them" (85). Only Dilsey, the black housekeeper, proves to be an exception in Faulkner's representation of women. Weinstein says that "blackness is not only problematic in *The Sound and the Fury*, it permits narrative escape from white problems of sexuality and gender both" (85). Dilsey, however, is still wholly confined to her role as a servant to the Compson family, and due to her race and her gender, the "three white brothers, and their white author see her in only a loving (and immovable) domesticity. Free of Nancy's aggressive sexuality, [Dilsey] fulfills a white fantasy of a black woman essentially at ease and functioning within a patriarchal world", particularly in the subjugated role of the servant (85).

As the modernist era is characterized by the liberation of women and the weakening of traditional gender roles, Tyson argues that the negative characterization of women in patriarchal literature stems from the male authors' discomfort with the modern woman and the threat she poses to the patriarchal hegemony in society (122). South African writer and feminist, Laretta Ngcobo argues that "all these crimes against women stem from one fundamental principle – the social and sexual subordination of women; there is an age-old fear that the independence of the female spirit will destroy the pillars of our society", which suggests that this patriarchal fear is not specific to the modernist era, but rather a deep-seated emotion within patriarchal ideology in general (Ngcobo 540).

The exploration of the oppression of the female characters in selected John Steinbeck novels will be conducted based on feminist literary theory. A thorough exploration of feminist theorists, including Simone de Beauvoir, Gayle Rubin, Luce Irigaray, Judith Butler, Helene Cixous, Sherry Ortner and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar will provide a deeper understanding of the subjugation of women, both in society and in literature. Beauvoir's theory of women's oppression will shed light on biology as a critical factor contributing to the emergence of male dominated societies, while the theories of Rubin and Irigaray will highlight the social and cultural roots of patriarchy. Butler's concept of gender performativity provides a deeper insight into the issues of gender roles and will be particularly helpful in the examination of the female characters and their marginalized status in society. The theories of Gilbert and Gubar explore the existence of patriarchal ideology in literature, and will be used to advance the understanding of gender roles and the oppression of women.

Under particular investigation in this project is the oppression of women and the silencing of their voices, both by the male characters in the novels and by the author himself. When looking at the selection of novels by John Steinbeck interrogated in this project, it is clear that a feminist reading of these works is necessary. Gilbert and Gubar's notion of the 'angel / monster' image of females that often exists within patriarchal literature will be especially helpful in analysing the female characters in Steinbeck's novels. As with many other male writers, it is evident that Steinbeck often falls into the trap of creating female characters who adhere to the roles of either angel or monster, while his male characters are typically more rounded and less confined to stereotypical roles. Furthermore, Steinbeck's female characters are often forced into rigid positions, such as the role of the mother, the daughter, the wife, and the temptress. The significance of these roles and the consequences they bear for these women will be investigated by using Butler's concept of gender roles.

This thesis will contain three chapters. Chapter One will give a brief biographical background on Steinbeck, as well as discuss the historical context of the Depression era and the modernist era. Chapter Two will interrogate various feminist theories, which will be used in the examination of Steinbeck's selected novels. Chapter Three will give a close examination of the Dustbowl Trilogy novels, *In Dubious Battle*, *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath*. Finally, a number of photographs will illustrate the devastation and suffering during the environmental and economic crises of the 1930s.

This study will shed new light upon the oppression and silencing of women in male modernist literature and will significantly contribute to a greater understanding of Steinbeck and offer an interrogation of his promotion of patriarchal ideology and the

subjugation of women through his literature. A thorough feminist analysis will be used in this study in order to highlight how the application of feminist literary theory can illuminate the understanding of women's oppression. A comprehensive interrogation of Steinbeck, coupled with an analysis of the modernist era, with particular focus on the Depression era, will elucidate the correlation between the socio-political and environmental factors of the 1930s and women's oppression and inferior placement in society.

1. America at the turn of the Century

1.1 John Steinbeck

Born on February 27, 1902, in the small town of Salinas, California, John Steinbeck enjoyed a happy and reasonably stable childhood. John Ernst Steinbeck and his wife Olive were determined to give their children a sense of responsibility from an early age and John, as well as his sisters, was actively involved in domestic chores and taking care of the animals on their farm (Meltzer 19). Mrs Steinbeck, a former teacher and an active community leader, introduced her son to the world of literature and poetry, and inspired his love for reading and writing. Although very few parents in the early 1900s saw the need for their children to attend high school, let alone college, Mrs Steinbeck insisted that her children excel at school and pursue an academic career (23). Steinbeck's talent for writing was discovered soon after entering high school and it was here that he was introduced to great writers, such as George Eliot, Thomas Hardy and Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Later Steinbeck commented: "I remember them not at all as books but as things that happened to me" (qtd in Meltzer 25). Perhaps it was this combination of reading and writing that awakened a talent that would later mark Steinbeck as one of the greats of literary history.

Despite his love for literature and his strong desire to write, Steinbeck was not eager to begin his college career. At his mother's insistence, however, Steinbeck eventually enrolled at the Stanford University campus in nearby Palo Alto (29-30). In a similar fashion to other writers, however, such as William Faulkner and F. Scott Fitzgerald, Steinbeck's academic career was marked by an erratic path of failure and lack of attendance at lectures. The six years Steinbeck spent at Stanford, without

ever receiving a degree, did not go to waste, however, as many strong friendships were formed and valuable connections were made (30-31).

Whereas Mrs Steinbeck was insisting on the value of education, Mr Steinbeck placed great value on manual labour and a man's ability to work for himself. As a result, Steinbeck was encouraged to work during his summer vacations and his first proper work experience involved roaming California as a "migratory ranch hand" looking for work (31). It was during this brief period that Steinbeck learnt some of the things that later would become the focus of his bestselling novels and short-stories: how hard life was for the migrant workers, how they were oppressed and abused, and how the country's capitalistic values enriched a few while plunging the working class into poverty. Many of the people Steinbeck met during this time, the way they spoke, and the issues that concerned them, provided inspiration for characters in his writing (32). Throughout his years at Stanford, Steinbeck alternated between academic life and the tough life of a manual labourer, and later combined the two worlds in his writing.

In 1925, at the age of 23, Steinbeck finally left Stanford, and decided to venture to New York in search of work (41). Within a week he was employed by a construction company; however, the long 15-hour work day and the heavy manual labour left Steinbeck exhausted and unable to conjure up the energy to write. Through his uncle, an advertising executive in Chicago, Steinbeck was able to find employment as a reporter for the New York *American*. His career with the newspaper, however, did not last as Steinbeck was fired for his inability to utilize the writing style the editors required (44). Without money, and reluctant to return to manual labour, Steinbeck left New York and returned to his parents in Salinas.

Steinbeck continued to work on his writing, alternating between the novel *Cup of Gold* and several short-stories, one of which was published in a small magazine in 1927 (48). Steinbeck was becoming increasingly insecure regarding his own writing, never believing that it was actually good enough to be published (50). This insecurity, combined with his disappointments in employment and personal relationships, plunged Steinbeck into a depression which was further fuelled by his excessive drinking (51).

Recognizing his despair, Mr Steinbeck offered his son a stipend of twenty-five dollars a month and accommodation at the family cottage at Pacific Grove, so Steinbeck could pursue his writing in quiet surroundings (53). During his stay at the cottage, he was frequently visited by Carol Henning, a woman Steinbeck had fallen madly in love with the first time they met. Their relationship flourished, although Steinbeck continually rejected Carol's wish to get married; in his mind, he was not yet ready for that kind of responsibility (53-54).

After many disappointments in writing, things were finally starting to look brighter for Steinbeck, as his first novel *Cup of Gold* was published in 1929. The \$250 he received as an advance was the first real money he had earned from his writing. Although the novel did not receive much praise, nor did it sell many copies, the fact that it was published in the first place was enough to pull Steinbeck out of his depression (55).

A few months before Steinbeck and Carol married, the United States experienced a great economic catastrophe, which caused the collapse of its entire economic structure and plunged the country into a crisis that would last for more than a decade (57). The unemployment scale reached massive proportions and hunger and poverty

became the norm for millions of people across the country, particularly the farmers. The Steinbeck's were affected by the crisis too, but instead of describing the time as one of misery and deprivation, Steinbeck later said: "I remember it as a warm and friendly time. Only illness frightened us. ... Given the sea and the gardens, we did pretty well with a minimum of theft. We didn't have to steal much" (qtd in Meltzer 58-59).

In 1930 Steinbeck met a man who would influence his life in many ways: Edward Ricketts, a marine biologist from Chicago, became Steinbeck's closest friend and served as an inspiration for many characters in several novels (62). The two men shared many interests and it was through Ricketts that Steinbeck was introduced to the fishermen and winos who would later feature in novels such as *Tortilla Flat*, *Cannery Row* and *Sweet Thursday* (63). Ricketts also made Steinbeck aware of the interrelatedness between humans and nature, a theme that dominated many of the author's later novels.

While the economic crisis forced Carol to search for employment, Steinbeck spent his mornings at Pacific Grove, working steadily on his writing. In the late afternoons, the doors would be open for visitors and friends who came by to share bottles of wine and dance to the recordings of various jazz artists (64).

Between 1932 and 1934, Steinbeck worked on a series of short stories and short novels, including *Pastures of Heaven*, *To a God Unknown*, *Red Pony*, *The Long Valley*, and *Tortilla Flat*. Up until then, Steinbeck had not concerned himself with writing about the struggle and suffering the Great Depression had wrecked the working class, instead, he had been writing apolitical stories that were meant to entertain, avoiding the crisis around him. However, after being introduced to the

ideologies of the Agricultural Workers Union, which had been formed as a result of numerous strikes throughout California, Steinbeck gradually began writing stories that portrayed the struggle of the workers (78).

In 1933, a major cotton strike in the San Joaquin Valley, provided Steinbeck with material for *In Dubious Battle*, the novel which would eventually become the first part of the *Dustbowl Trilogy* (81). A young "Okie", Cicil McKiddy, whom Steinbeck had befriended was part of the striking workers and later provided the author with details about the event. Although the novel was based on actual events, Steinbeck decided to fictionalize the people and the places where the story takes place, in order to avoid hurting "anyone's feelings" (81). In a letter to his agent, Steinbeck explains why he decided to manipulate reality, saying:

I have used a small strike in an orchard valley as the symbol of man's eternal warfare with himself. I'm not interested in strike as means of raising men's wages, and I'm not interested in ranting on about justice and oppression, mere outcroppings which indicate the condition. But man hates something in himself. He has been able to defeat every natural obstacle but himself he cannot win over unless he kills every individual. And this self-hate which goes so closely in hand with self-love is what I wrote about (qtd in Steinbeck & Wallsten 98).

These nihilistic sentiments are clearly visible in most of Steinbeck's work and seem to be a reflection of the emotional battles, alternating between self-love and self-hate, which he struggled with throughout his life.

In 1935, after Steinbeck had received much praise for the recently published novels *Tortilla Flats* and *In Dubious Battle* he began working on a new story which would eventually become his most popular short novel and the second novel in the Dustbowl Trilogy, *Of Mice and Men* (Meltzer 86). Initially intended to be a children's book, Steinbeck decided on the title after coming across a poem by Robert Burns, "To a Mouse" written in 1785. Although Steinbeck did not expect his latest novel to sell very well, *Of Mice and Men* became immensely popular and Steinbeck's reputation as a serious writer was finally established (88).

Shortly after the publication of *In Dubious Battle*, Steinbeck was asked to write a series of articles on California's migrant workers for the *San Francisco News*. Although Steinbeck was already familiar with this topic, he wanted to gain an even deeper insight into the conditions of the migrant workers, and established valuable connections with the Resettlement Administration (RA) in San Francisco (89). This enabled him to visit the migrant workers' camps and experience the suffering of hundreds of families and children. As was characteristic of the writer, Steinbeck completely immersed himself in his task, and decided to live in one of the camps for a period of time. Always listening and asking questions, making notes and taking photographs, recording the gossip and the folklore, Steinbeck gathered valuable information that not only helped in his assigned task, but later also provided him with material for writing *The Grapes of Wrath* (94). As a result of the articles published in the *San Francisco News*, Steinbeck garnered the wrath of the corporate farmers. His photograph was being spread throughout the state and Steinbeck was on numerous occasions threatened (95). The experience of seeing entire families on the brink of starvation deeply affected Steinbeck, and in an attempt to raise money for migrant

relief, Steinbeck decided to lend his name to the “John Steinbeck Committee to Aid Agricultural Organization” (108).

After a trip to Europe and prolonged stay in New York, the Steinbeck’s decided to drive back to California via Route 66, an experience which permanently etched itself in the writer’s consciousness (101). Witnessing the hundreds of families who travelled along this highway in search of greener pastures, and desperate to escape the suffering of the Dustbowl States, impacted on Steinbeck deeply. His wife later said that Steinbeck did not take any notes during this trip; nonetheless, his excellent memory enabled him to recollect a migrant family’s journey on Route 66 in remarkable detail and realistic fashion as is illustrated in *The Grapes of Wrath* (102).

Steinbeck began working on *The Grapes of Wrath* in early 1938. Having written mostly short stories and short novels, Steinbeck was determined to write an epic, and his aim was to create a legendary migrant family that would be alive to every reader (109-110). In October 1938, having spent only forty-three working days over a five-month period, the novel, consisting of over 260,000 words was completed (114)., Steinbeck did not expect the novel to do well, but, as was the case with many of his previous publications, *The Grapes of Wrath* became hugely successful and earned the author high acclaim. Although the novel would become Steinbeck’s most famous work, the praise it received was countered with angry denunciation (118). Not only was the novel’s final chapter subjected to great controversy, Steinbeck was also accused of exaggerating the suffering of the migrants to such an extent that Congressman Lyle Boren of Oklahoma announced that the novel was “a lie, a black, infernal creation of a twisted, distorted mind” (qtd in Meltzer 118). The novel was criticized as being filthy, outrageous and untruthful, and the press claimed that “the

migrants themselves hated [Steinbeck] for lying about them” (125). Subsequently, the novel was banned as subversive in many states. For every hateful critic, however, there was an equally outspoken supporter, perhaps the most important voice being that of Eleanor Roosevelt, the president’s wife, who visited the migrant camps and told the press that nothing in *The Grapes of Wrath* was exaggerated (125). The following year, *The Grapes of Wrath* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize and the movie rights were secured for an astonishing \$75,000. The movie was produced the same year, starring film icon Henry Fonda as the main character Tom Joad, and quickly gained widespread popularity across the nation (121).

After the attack on Pearl Harbour during World War II in 1941, Steinbeck’s next novel *The Moon Is Down* became hugely successful, and the American public responded enthusiastically to the novel’s themes of democracy, solidarity and freedom (135). Two years later, Steinbeck was approached by the American Air Force and was asked to write a book describing how bomber crews were chosen and trained. The assignment required Steinbeck to live the life of an air cadet, visiting various air bases around the country, as well as flying many kinds of aircrafts. The task took its toll on Steinbeck, and he worried that the finished product would lack the quality of his previous works, but to his surprise, *Bombs Away: The Story of a Bomber Team*, was heralded as a “fine example of the best journalism” and was hugely popular with the public (137).

While Steinbeck’s professional career was at an all-time high, his private life was in ruins and the couple divorced in early 1943. Shortly after, Steinbeck married jazz singer Gwyndolyn Conger, with whom he had started an emotional affair two years earlier (136). The newlywed couple was, however, soon to be separated, as

Steinbeck was dissatisfied with watching the war unfold from a distance and was eager to report from the centre of the action. His wish was granted when the *New York Herald Tribune* decided to send Steinbeck on an assignment to Europe in June 1943 (138).

Steinbeck left with the American forces, moving from England to North Africa and then to Italy, reporting on the war to several newspapers both in the United States and in Europe (139). The experience of being in the middle of a war zone had a lasting effect on him: impeding his memory and damaging his hearing. Back in New York, Steinbeck suffered from depression once again, and his friends and family agreed that he had come back a changed man: “The spirit of fun, the playfulness, had been knocked out of him” (Meltzer 142).

For the next few years, Steinbeck was busy with the film production of the adaptation of his novel *The Pearl* and the writing of the novel *The Wayward Bus*. While he enjoyed a hugely successful public life, Steinbeck’s private life was an entirely different matter, and, unable to work out their differences, the couple divorced in 1948.

In May of the same year, Steinbeck received the devastating news that his dearest friend, Ed Ricketts, had died from injuries sustained after being involved in a motor vehicle accident. Utterly stunned and shattered at losing his best friend, Steinbeck once again became submerged in deep depression, but the prospect of spending the forthcoming summer with his boys from his first marriage, Thom and John, seemed to be able to lift Steinbeck’s spirits. However, in the spring of 1949, during a meeting that would become a turning point in his life, Steinbeck met the woman who was to become his third wife: Elaine Anderson Scott (163).

Inspired by new-found love and the two-month visit from his sons, Steinbeck felt the creative energy returning once again and threw himself eagerly into writing the novel which would become the immensely successful epic *East of Eden*. Steinbeck incorporated many factual accounts of his own maternal family in the novel which was built on the mythic pattern of the Old Testament narrative in Genesis – the Cain and Abel story (167). After publication, the novel quickly became a best-seller and, soon the movie adaptation appeared on the silver screen, starring the legendary actor James Dean in his first major screen role. In order to escape the media attention in the United States, Steinbeck and Elaine planned a long vacation in Europe, travelling through Spain, France and Scandinavia. The trip, however, did not go exactly as planned, as Steinbeck suffered a stroke whilst travelling through France (179).

After returning to the United States at Christmas 1954, Steinbeck started writing editorial pieces for the *Sunday Review*. This kind of work was exactly what he had longed to do ever since he had begun his journalistic career twenty years earlier (179). Steinbeck spent the next two years writing short pieces for various newspapers across the country, but found the need to write fiction had once again returned. His new project, he decided, would be to translate Sir Thomas Malroy's story of King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table from medieval into modern English. The project kept him busy for several years and was interrupted in 1960 in order to make time for the novel *The Winter of Our Discontent*, which became another best-seller after its publication in 1961 (187).

Steinbeck had now reached the age of fifty-eight and his health was beginning to fail. His strokes, albeit small, persisted and his doctor warned him of his rapidly

deteriorating heart condition. Determined not to be regarded as a cripple, Steinbeck decided to travel across the United States while writing about his experiences.

Travels with Charley in Search of America, was the title of this book, which offers a penetrating insight into American life during a time of political upheaval and racial segregation. On his return, Steinbeck decided that he and his family, including his two sons, deserved a long vacation which would be spent traveling through Europe (193). For his sixtieth birthday, Steinbeck and his family rented a villa on an island in the Mediterranean. Steinbeck was no longer the man he used to be as his health deteriorated with an alarming rate and his deeply lined face and the dark circles under his eyes gave him the appearance of an old man. It appears that Steinbeck himself knew that he had finally reached a stage in his life where he needed to slow down. Despite the successful reviews and high acclaim that Steinbeck received for *Travels with Charley*, he was not content, although his fragile health told him he would never write another book (194).

In October 1962, as the world was intently focused on the Cuban missile crisis, Steinbeck learned that he had been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature for “his realistic and imaginative writings, combining as they do sympathetic humour and keen social perception” (Meltzer 195). Before him, only five other Americans had received this prestigious award, Sinclair Lewis (1930), Eugene O’Neill (1936), Pearl S. Buck (1938), William Faulkner (1949) and Ernest Hemingway (1954). At the ceremony in Stockholm in December that same year, Steinbeck was praised for the many novels he had written, which had been translated into more than thirty languages. (198).

In early 1963, President Kennedy asked Steinbeck to travel to the Soviet Union as part of a cultural exchange program, meant to ease the tensions between the two powers. During his stay in Russia, Steinbeck collapsed from exhaustion and was taken to hospital. Refusing to listen to the doctor's orders, Steinbeck continued his mission, meeting with writers, journalists and professors from all over the Soviet Union. While visiting Poland, the world received the devastating news that President Kennedy had been assassinated. Steinbeck was shattered, and the United States State Department ordered him to return home. Upon arriving in the United States, Steinbeck and Elaine were taken to Washington where they had dinner at the White House with the new president, Lyndon B. Johnson. As Mrs Johnson and Elaine were old acquaintances, the Steinbecks were invited to stay at the White House every time they visited Washington (202).

In 1964, John Steinbeck junior turned eighteen years old and was drafted by the military. After the basic training was completed, he asked his father to use his influence with the president to have him sent to Vietnam immediately. After a few years of ignoring his ill health, Steinbeck decided that he needed to join his son, and went to Vietnam to serve as a journalist for the Long Island newspaper *Newsday* (208). Risking his life wherever he went, Steinbeck flew in helicopters on assault missions and joined in ground attacks. Although the pieces he sent to *Newsday* were initially in support of the war effort, he eventually changed his mind by the time he returned to the United States.

A spine fracture contracted whilst on the Asian continent continued to give him problems, to a point where he needed back surgery and a long hospital stay. The spinal surgery was successful, albeit difficult, and Steinbeck never fully recovered.

The mild strokes began to recur again, and he was confined to the city, to be near a hospital in case the worst happened. In autumn 1968, despite all the medical care he was given, Steinbeck felt life slipping away. On December 20, at the age of sixty-six, at home in their apartment, he fell into a coma and died of heart failure leaving behind a literary legacy that would carry his name for many years to come (212).

1.2 Historical Context

The socio-political landscape of United States experienced cataclysmic changes in the first decades of the twentieth century, which dramatically altered the collective ideology and consciousness of a nation. The prosperity and affluence of the Roaring Twenties came to an abrupt halt with the onset of the economic depression in 1929. In order to understand the gravity of the change in consciousness and behaviour that occurred as a direct result of the onset of the Great Depression, it is paramount to examine the decades that preceded this era, and how several historical events helped influence this change in consciousness.

The onset of World War One in 1914 marks a turning point in world history, as it “resulted in unprecedented psychological and cultural effects” (Roberts 244). The war, which, up until that point, was the bloodiest and most costly war fought in modern history, claimed the lives of millions of people, most of whom were young men in their early stages of adulthood. It is estimated that during the four years of war, an average of five thousand men died every day, resulting in Europe alone losing one quarter of its population (247-248). Although the United States did not join

the war until 1917, the consequences of being part of this massacre resulted in the devastation of spiritual and moral ideals and the loss of confidence and goodwill (266).

While the majority of European economies were shattered after the war, the United States prospered like never before, and so the decade of the 1920s became an era of unprecedented prosperity and affluence. This economic growth and the new-found purchasing power of ordinary citizens gave rise to a new consumer culture, where material goods were purchased not only out of need, but more so, out of the simple pleasure of buying (Freidel & Brinkley 172).

By the early 1920s, the United States had firmly established its reputation as the greatest industrial power in the world and the technologically most innovative (Brogan 129). Revolutionary inventions, such as the electric refrigerator, the vacuum cleaner, and, perhaps most importantly, the modern automobile, marked the beginning of a new era of technological and scientific advancement and greatly contributed to the emergence of a mass culture of consumerism (Freidel & Brinkley 171). Along with the concept of a consumerist culture, came the emergence of a mass culture, initially fronted by the distribution of cheap newspapers and the invention of the radio (Roberts 319). The radio, invented in the early 1920s, was perhaps the most important vehicle of communication, as it allowed for instant access to broadcasting news and in that way gave people a sense of unity across the nation (Freidel & Brinkley 174).

The invention of the cinema also greatly influenced and shaped the popular culture of the 1920s and gave rise to the first 'celebrities' such as Greta Garbo, Charlie Chaplin and Rudolph Valentino, while the gramophone enabled people to bring

popular music into their own homes (173-174). Although the radio is said to have been 'king' in the homes of people during this period, the success of the film culture is not to be discarded. In the pre-war period, the United Kingdom had already over four thousand film theatres, and approximately seven to eight million people visited the cinema each week (Wilson 37). By 1920, this number had risen to over twenty million, clearly demonstrating people's need for entertainment and escapism. In the United States, figures were similar, and soon Hollywood emerged as the film capital of the world, producing many 'stars' who were to become very rich and influential and dearly loved by people all over the world (37).

The rising motor vehicle industry, fronted by General Motors and Henry Ford's Model T, demanded the expansion of roads and bridges and the building of highways across the country, which gave Americans a sense of connectedness, as suddenly the world became much smaller and more easily accessed (Brogan 134). The aeroplane, initially restricted to military use, now became commercially available as a mode of transportation (129).

Many of the cultural and institutional changes that characterized the United States during the 1920s emerged as a result of the rapid increase in literacy levels, which was achieved through compulsory education at a primary level (Roberts 319). As a result, reading material, in the form of newspapers and books were more readily available than ever before (Wilson 35). As literacy levels were on the increase, even among the working class, the publishing industry flourished. Cheap books and a large readership demanding literature with a certain entertainment value, established, for the first time, the possibility of reading as a leisure activity, and soon

the market was flooded with cheap popular fiction that frequently made in onto the 'bestseller' lists (36).

1.3 The Modernist Era

Modernism can be defined as a cultural and aesthetic revolution which emerged as a consequence of several historical events and the rise of new ideologies and concepts (Smart 9). Initially, the term 'modernism' was used to define a particular style of art and architecture and only in the 1950s did it become a term referring to an artistic movement and a particular period in history (9). New revolutionary theories and a radical shift in seeing and interpreting the world, coupled with the rapid advances in technology and science and the historical events of the time, created the emergence of a new culture, a new era in human history, which unavoidably shaped the literature of the time.

Several theorists and thinkers in various fields fundamentally changed society's interpretations and perceptions of the world. Among the most prominent and influential were Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, Sigmund Freud and Albert Einstein, who all contributed to the dramatic breaks with previous thoughts and beliefs regarding politics and history, religion and evolution, psychology, philosophy and science. Although being of different generations, the lives of these men overlapped for a brief period of time around 1880, "at the threshold of the artistic revolutions" that would be known as Modernism (Childs 37).

1.3.1 Karl Marx (1818-1883)

Karl Marx, a social, political and economic theorist was deeply concerned with the consequences of capitalism on society and argued in favour of a proletarian revolution in order to effect social change (Childs 38). In his most prominent works, *The Communist Manifesto* and *Das Kapital*, he explains his theory of surplus value, inherent class conflict, the inevitable historical evolution of capitalism to socialism and the weakening of the state with the successful rise of a classless society achieved by communism (38).

According to Marshall Berman, in the first part of the manifesto,

Marx lays out the polarities that will shape and animate the culture of Modernism in the century to come: in the theme of insatiable desires and drives, permanent revolution, infinite development, perpetual creation and renewal in every sphere of life; and its radical antithesis, the theme of nihilism, insatiable destruction, the shattering and swallowing up of life, the heart of darkness, the horror. (qtd in Childs 39)

As a result of Marx's theories on social stratification, society, particularly the lower classes, became increasingly aware of the inequalities that existed and injustices they suffered through the hands of capitalism. The growing urban proletariat resulted in the development of collective organizations, such as unions and political parties, which were necessary to struggle against exploitation (Bilton *et al.* 55).

Marx's thoughts on capitalism as an alienating force in society had a strong influence on modernist literature, where the shift from "country to city, land to factory, individual to mass production is clearly visible (Childs 39). Furthermore, Marxism and

modernism have many components in common, and it is not surprising that modernist writers were heavily influenced by Marxist thoughts and theories. Just like Marxism, which puts crisis at the centre of capitalist development, so has modernism been characterized as a literature of crisis, which is visible in many modernist works, such as D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and W.B. Yates' *The Second Coming*, where the fear of crisis and the longing for rejuvenation is a central issue (39).

Marxism views modernist art as emerging out of a "loss of communal identity, out of alienating capitalism and constant industrial acceleration" (40). The modernist period did, in fact, grow out of, and was shaped by, social and economic upheavals, technological innovations and the development of a mass commodity culture (40). Marx argued that "capitalism thrives on disturbance, uncertainty and the process that is needed to stave off stasis, and so describes the symptoms from which the modernist writers would consider themselves to suffer" (qtd in Childs 41). According to critical theorist Fredric Jameson, the "formal experiments of modernist writers appear as textual attempts to resolve the problems of contemporary society" and modernist techniques, such as strategies of relativity and stream-of-consciousness narratives are merely "compensations for the dynamics of late capitalism" (qtd in Childs 45). Thus the portrayal of the alienated urban living and the sense of difficulty and defamiliarisation that permeates modernist writing, is one of the clearest displays of the consequences of modernism.

1.3.2 Charles Darwin (1809-1882)

Born in England, Charles Darwin is perhaps the most controversial naturalist and zoologist of the modern era. Having closely examined nature and its inhabitants in many parts of the world, Darwin formulated his principle of evolution by natural selection, which later became the cornerstone of his theory and the most controversial notion of his beliefs (Childs 46). His ground breaking works *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* and *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* explain Darwin's perception of evolution and humankind's descent from apes.

In terms of Marxism, Darwin's thoughts on natural selection and the emphasis on the propagation and survival of the fittest can be viewed as "one of the main underpinnings of a capitalist morality legitimized by selfish genes, the struggle for self-preservation and promotion" (46). Thus Marxism represents a similar evolutionary paradigm as "societies mutate and develop from feudal to capitalist to communist systems" (46).

Darwin's theory had far-reaching and devastating effects on the modernist society. His argument that human development was rooted in sex and natural selection stood in stark contrast to the previous beliefs that humanity was not only unchanging, but also modelled on God's image (46-47). The notion that humans were closer to animals than to God and that nature was not static but constantly evolving, suggested "different narratives of human history, not one of a single progression towards a final judgment day; but a cyclical movement within nature, in which reproduction and survival of the fittest increasingly became recognized as the forces behind human endeavour, not a rational thought or spiritual belief" (47).

The validity of faith and religion had been under attack during most of the nineteenth century's rationalism of science and philosophy, but it is Darwin's theory that has been associated with the final overthrow of the so-called old order. As a result, many people regard Darwinism as the embodiment of the "assault on traditional beliefs concerning God, the universe and humanity's position in relation to each other" (47).

At the turn of the century, Western society's belief in a purposeful universe was dwindling and there was a collective sense that God, if not dead, was absent from the lives of humans. Consequently, people suddenly found themselves in a world which seemed "hostile towards its species and a universe which, because, rather than in spite of, the advances of science was steadily decreasing in its comprehensibility" (Childs 56). Humanity had lost its primary purpose for living and was suddenly reduced to godless primates, who were closer to savage animals than a supreme God. This resulted in an enormous loss of faith and spiritual confidence which became one of the foremost characteristics of the modernist movement (56).

Like the Marxist critique of capitalism, the impact of Darwinism is profoundly visible in modernist society. In T.S. Eliot's poetry, such as the highly praised poem *The Waste Land*, the influence of Darwinism in the erosion of religious faith is strikingly evident, and the haunting images of disorientation and incomprehensibility mirror the atmosphere of the modernist society (Baxter 68). The various fantasy genres, for instance, produced in the 1880s and 1890s, strongly reflect Darwinist issues of human development, degeneration and depravity. Classics of modernist fiction, such as Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* explore the degeneration of humanity into monstrous selves and others and have been read "partly as caution against a rise in

fin-de-siècle, promiscuity and its concomitant evils of prostitution, syphilis and adultery” (Childs 48). Peter Childs argues, “neither was explicitly discussed: both evolution and capitalism were great levellers, supposedly liberating individuals from archaic rule by the clergy and the aristocracy but dividing humanity between the strong and the weak, either physically or financially” (46).

1.3.3 Sigmund Freud (1856-1939)

Freud, born to Jewish parents in Austria, started out his career as a neurologist at the general hospital in Vienna in 1882. After producing his first significant work in collaboration with Joseph Breuer regarding the treatment of hysteria by means of hypnosis, Freud gradually shifted his field of interest to psychopathology. The concept of ‘free association’ as an alternative to hypnosis for recovering repressed memories, along with his emphasis on infantile sexuality, became one the cornerstones of his theory on psychoanalysis (Childs 56).

Between 1900 and 1905 Freud published three of his most controversial works, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, where he argued that dreams were the product of repressed desires, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, and *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, which both dealt with aspects of sexuality (56). After a brief collaboration with Carl Gustav Jung, who became the first president of Freud’s International Psychoanalytical Association, Freud went on to work alone, developing his theories of the divided mind in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Ego and Id*, which were published shortly after World War One (57). In his later works, Freud expounded the idea that the human mind consists of three parts, the id, representing

the primitive side of humans, which is governed by the moral and socialized superego, which also helps to keep the embattled ego in balance (52). According to Freud, a well-balanced ego is the essence to a healthy mental life, while a dominance of the ego by the id leads to psychosis, and a dominance of the ego by the superego results in neurosis (57). These revolutionary theories and concepts had an enormous impact on the modernist society, where people already lived in a world of bewilderment and incomprehensibility.

Uncertainty and a sense of crisis had already taken root in the early twentieth century society. Marxist and Darwinist thought had eradicated the beliefs and certainties of the previous ages, and people had a strong need to analyse and understand the world in which they were living. In that aspect, Freud's theories could not have come at a more appropriate time, as people were desperate to find new ways to interpret and decode society and the universe (57).

In effect, Freud had redefined what it meant to be human, introducing new concepts such as narcissism, the uncanny, the death drive, the Oedipal and Electra Complexes, the pleasure principle and repetition compulsion, which could be used to explain and define the human condition (Paddy 130). Freud's claim that sexual desires and drives were the basic motivations for human action further emphasized the Darwinist notion that humans were more closely related to animals than to a divine creation (Stinson 48). Consequently, the spiritual and religious search for God was now replaced by the psychoanalytic quest for self-knowledge and enlightenment was no longer found in Christianity, but "in the self, in individual subjective consciousness" (Childs 62).

Freud had a fundamental impact on modernist fiction and its interpretation. Suddenly, writers were concerned with character development, exploring the internal development of personality, revealing hidden drives and desires, creating what would become one of the distinct characteristics of modernist literature (Childs 60). Freud's concept of 'free association' was translated into the technique of stream-of-consciousness, where the writer would allow the character to reflect and reminisce on past events. This technique became immensely popular among modernist writers, and is observable in novels such as Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* (61). The literary use of symbols and metaphors also became extremely popular as a result of Freud's influence, suggesting that life is full of hidden meanings. As a result, W.B. Yates developed a range of mythopoeic symbols, which were worked into a system described in *A Vision* (61). Freudian dream analysis also inspired writers to give the reader the role of the interpreter in order to discover and decode the underlying meanings which were hidden beneath the superficial content of the text (61).

1.3.4 Albert Einstein (1879-1955)

Theoretical physicist, Albert Einstein, born in Bavaria to Jewish parents and possessing German, Swiss and American citizenship by the time of his death, is one of the most influential physicists of the modern era (Childs 72). His *Special* and *General Theories of Relativity* uprooted the foundations of classical Newtonian physics and indirectly created new ways of viewing and interpreting time and space (Paddy 128). His theories of relativity challenged the notion of an absolute frame of reference as they encompassed the concept of simultaneity, 'which demonstrated

that two events, apparently simultaneous to one observer, will not necessarily be so for another in a different place (due to time differentials and other variable)” (128).

Einstein’s theory radically challenged the previous beliefs regarding physics and the universe, and consequently effected an “irreversible paradigm shift in understandings of the physical universe” (Childs 73). Whereas the laws of physics according to Newton were static and unchangeable, Einstein’s belief asserted that no physical law is entirely reliable, but that everything depends on the position of the observer in time and space. This notion greatly added to the general sense of uncertainty and bewilderment in the modernist society (73). Furthermore, Einstein’s theory on the origin of the universe and his ability to explain every occurrence in nature by the means of physics, further diminished people’s belief in the existence of a supreme God who had created the earth and its inhabitants for a specific spiritual purpose.

Einstein’s profound impact on society is clearly observed in the literature of the time, with writers adapting the revolutionary concepts of time and space in a textual context in order to create literary techniques which have become characteristic of modernist literature. Concepts such as unreliability, anti-absolutism, instability, individuality and subjective perceptions are distinct modernist techniques directly shaped and inspired by Einstein’s theory (74). Childs argues that the shift from a Newtonian perspective to an Einsteinian view is at its most visible when comparing modernist to realist fiction (74). Realist fiction, Childs says, encompassing a Newtonian universe, makes use of “reliable, objective narrators [who] encompassed the single perspective of a world governed by consistent, dependable scientific laws. Time was linear, and narrative moved along chronological lines” (74). Modernist

fiction, on the other hand, expressed time moving in arcs, flashbacks, jumps and repetitions. The flexibility and ambiguity of Einstein's physical universe inspired writers to free their characters of social conventions and "challenge the propriety, homogeneity and absolutism of the social and aesthetic guidelines laid down for them by a previous generation" (74-75).

The concept of narrative relativity became hugely popular after the publication of Einstein's theories, and has become one of the most striking aspects to modernist fiction by literary greats such as Joseph Conrad, Virginia Woolf, Henry James and Marcel Proust (74). Einstein's claim that a frame of reference was needed to underwrite observations of position and velocity, was adopted by modernist writers who employed unreliable, introspective, fallible, subjective and even neurotic or insane narrators in their stories, "which had to be taken as seen through the frame of reference of a Marlow (Conrad), ... Septimus Smith (Woolf) or Maisie (Joyce)" (Childs 75).

1.4 The Emergence of a New Culture

The culture of the modernist era emerged as a consequence of the complex amalgamation of several historical events, most notably, World War One, and the technological and scientific advances as the radical break with previous traditions and beliefs, instigated by famous theorists. Although these great thinkers have generally been blamed for undermining the foundations of Christianity and disillusioning people in their faith and spirituality, it was, in fact, the Great War, which first stripped society of its hope and sense of purpose (Tew & Murray 7). The

catastrophic destruction and the unprecedented loss of life which followed in the wake of the war, as well as the utilization of a new, aggressive technological warfare, left people in a state of utter shock and despair. As one British economist commented: "Never in the lifetime of men now living has the universal element in the soul of man burnt so dimly" (Roberts 267). The devastation of horrific, newly invented weapons used during the war, such as mustard and chlorine gas, which ensured a slow and agonizing death, and murderous machine guns and hand-grenades, shocked and traumatized combatants and civilians alike to such an extent that people suddenly lost their faith in everything the new century stood for: progress, science, technology and civilization (Wilson 28). Thus, the post-war era was characterized by an overwhelming sense of loss and hopelessness that permeated the individual, as well as the collective consciousness of the West (Tew & Murray 8). This sentiment, coupled with the controversial notions regarding humanity and its place in the universe brought forth by influential theorists and the weakening of Christianity and religious values, resulted in a society depleted of its sense of confidence and in its place, emerged a growing sense of existentialism. Existentialism, as a philosophical and artistic movement, is fundamentally pessimistic and even nihilistic to a certain extent. The world is viewed as an empty and meaningless place that is devoid of any spiritual or divine influence (Cooper Web). Jean-Paul Sartre, one of the foremost philosophers of existentialism denied the nihilistic nature of existentialism, saying that "Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself" (Sartre 30). Thus, Sartre argues, existentialism is a doctrine that renders human life possible, as it "confronts man with a possibility of choice" (30). This principle of "self-fashioning" means that "man is responsible for what he is. Thus, the first effect of existentialism is that it puts every man in the possession of

himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his shoulders” (30). Although the lack of religious faith is one of the fundamental principles of existentialism, Sartre claims that “existentialism is not atheist in the sense that it would exhaust itself in demonstrations of the non-existence of God, It declares, rather, that even if God existed that would make no difference from its point of view” (42). The existentialist sentiment of hopelessness and despair was readily adopted by the post-war society, as people could identify with the lack of faith and the apocalyptic world view that was presented by the followers of existentialist thought.

The modernist era was characterized by a sense of control and dominance of technology over nature, of which the Eiffel Tower in Paris can be seen to be the perfect symbol (Childs 76). Completed in 1889, the Eiffel Tower, as a symbol of modernity, represents the modernist society’s vertical expansion, the growing colonisation of the sky, and symbolizes humanity’s dominance of both the city and the machine (76). This growing dominance of the sky, was, of course, emphasized through the invention of the aeroplane, instigated by the first successful flight of the Wright brothers in 1903. Similarly, the rapid expansion of the railway system, both in Europe and in the United States, represented the horizontal conquest of the land, as did the exploration of several previously unknown territories, such as Robert Peary’s exploration to the North Pole in 1909, and Roald Amundsen’s successful expedition to the South Pole in 1911 (76). As a result of these conquests of the earth and the sky, the world and the universe were no longer vast expanses representing the mysterious and the unknown, but could be explored and explained through the means of technology and the laws of physics. The existence of an omnipotent deity

seemed increasingly unlikely, and people experienced a growing emptiness where previously God had resided.

In order to forget the horrors of the war and to fill the massive void that had been created through the loss of spirituality and religion, the modernist society searched elsewhere for fulfilment and satisfaction, namely, by the means of alcohol consumption and frivolous behaviour that became the hallmarks of the 1920s Jazz Age (Smart 32). It was in parties, dancing, drugs, sex and fun that the young men and women of that time found their escape from the existentialist atmosphere that permeated the consciousness of the modernist society. The Jitterbug, the Black Bottom and the Charleston set in motion a dance craze that rapidly spread throughout Europe and the United States. These 'Bright Young People' or 'Bright Young Things' which this generation of largely upper-class revellers quickly became known as, embodied the modernist sentiments which are reflected in playwright Noel Coward's world-weary voice:

Youth is fleeting – to the rhythm
In your mind
Time and tide and trouble
Never, never wait
Let the cauldron bubble-
Justify your fate.
Dance, dance, dance little lady
Leave tomorrow behind. (Coward 33)

These lines summed up the “post-war ragtime world, the jazz world of 1920, restless, aimless, hectic, fearful, futile, neurotic” (Smart 33). Despite the seemingly carefree

and liberating atmosphere that characterized this decade, pessimism and predictions of the decline of the West were found in the writings of many intellectuals, most notably, Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, which was widely read (33). Although not many believed his words of warning at that time, his prophecies were soon fulfilled when the economic collapse in 1929 put an end to an era of luxury and excess.

1.5 The Situation of Women

An increased level of awareness regarding gender issues, particularly the situation of women, had taken root in the mid-1800s, with women in Europe and the United States campaigning for women's rights and liberation. The first wave of the Women's Movement in the United States began with the first Women's Convention in 1848 spearheaded by Elizabeth Cady Stanton (Johnson Web). The Women's Movement concentrated on ratifying the bill called the Married Woman's Property Act, which was passed in 1848, giving women full control over their own real estate. The law, however, gave no protection to working women, and husbands were still in control over whatever money their working wives earned. At the Women's Rights Convention in New York that year, Stanton stated in her speech that:

men have compelled [a woman] to submit to laws she had no voice in making, made her, if married, civilly dead in the eyes of the law, taken from her all rights in property, even to the wages she earns. He has compelled her to promise obedience to her husband, who then becomes, to all intents and purposes her master, with legal power to deprive her of her liberty and to administer chastisement; and has framed divorce and separation laws entirely to the advantage of men. (Johnson Web)

The resolution was eventually signed by a hundred men and women, and this event marked the first victory in a long and tedious battle for the equality of women. Over the decades the campaign for gender equality intensified, but it was not until 1910 that the plight of women started to gain serious consideration in the world of politics. In her essay *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown*, Virginia Woolf famously proclaimed that:

in or about December 1910 human nature changed. All human relations have shifted – those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics and literature (105-106).

Indeed, the dawn of a new century saw an enormous change take place within Western society, particularly in relation to gender issues and the situation of women. Whereas the previous ages had confined women to the shallow symbolic roles of either housewife and mother or prostitute and social outcast, the turn of the century saw the emergence of a new kind of woman who refused to be subdued by the restrictions of tradition and patriarchy.

The Victorian view of the 'angel in the house' was no longer a desired status for the twentieth century woman (Smart 12). Instead, the 'new woman' was striving for independence and freedom and a sense of fulfilment outside the confines of the household and the domestic sphere. Due to the technological advances of that era, women were released from some of the burdens of housework and were no longer required to spend endless hours on housekeeping, thus seeking new activities to fill the void (Freidel & Brinkley 177). The change in women's fashion was perhaps the most visual sign of an impending revolution, as women across Europe and the United States put aside the restrictive corsets and Edwardian clothing in favour of

calf-length skirts, which soon reached knee-length during the post war period. By the early 1920s a generation of 'flappers' had emerged, shocking the older generations with their "short skirted abandon" (Smart 13).

During the years of the Great War, several women's campaigns fighting for the political freedom of women had to be put on hold. It was during this time, however, that the very concept of what constitutes 'women's work' was changed and redefined, as women were forced to leave behind their traditional duties in the home and fill the void left by the men who had joined the war (Smart 26). For the first time in history, women dominated the workplace in all spheres, driving ambulances at the Front, working in overalls in munitions factories and on the land, and took over from men as clerks and bank workers (26). As the war came to an end in 1918, many women retained their position and effectively paved the way for a more gender equal workforce.

This fundamental change in the roles of women naturally altered perceptions about the relationship between men and women and issues surrounding sex and sexuality, in particular, were openly discussed and debated (Smart 26). Various contraception methods also became readily available which gave women a new freedom in a time where childbirth was highly dangerous (26). With the restrictions of the previous ages lifted, the modernist society began to freely explore and express sexual desires, which led to the general acceptance of homosexuality and bisexuality. This is clearly evident in many of the literary works of that time, with Marguerite Radclyffe Hall exploring lesbianism in her novels, Virginia Woolf discussing androgyny and trans-genderism in *Orlando*, and E.M. Forster, with *Maurice*, writing a novel of homosexual love (Smart 27).

The Roaring Twenties saw a massive change in the way women were regarded in society, not only in terms of the political freedom gained through endless campaigning and fighting by the suffragettes, but more importantly, women's unprecedented sense of confidence and autonomy that came as part of the new era enabled them to remove the restrictive chains of traditional patriarchy and explore, as well as express their new-found freedom and liberation which has become a characteristic of the modernist era. These feminist advances, however, were all but lost with the cataclysmic crash of 1929 which led to the economic avalanche burying America in the Great Depression.

1.6 The Depression Era

The decade following the Roaring Twenties saw a major change in almost all aspects of American society. Gone were the affluent days of economic prosperity and superficial escapism; in its place came a decade long struggle against the worst economic and environmental crisis since the beginning of industrialization, which gave the era the name the Great Depression, the Dirty Thirties, or the Hungry Thirties (Freidel & Brinkley 201; Craats 9).

The continuous growth of the American economy since the end of World War One catapulted the nation to an unprecedented level of enormous prosperity during the 1920s, and there seemed no end to America's good fortune. In August 1928, President Herbert Hoover stated that "We in America today are nearer to the final triumph over poverty than ever before in the history of any land. The poorhouse is vanishing from among us" (Freidel & Brinkley 197). No one, at that point, would have

predicted that only fifteen months later, this statement would be nothing but a hollow memory, as the United States plunged “into the severest and most prolonged economic depression in its history” that would last a full decade before war, once again, restored prosperity (197).

To name the collapse of the stock market on October 29, 1929, also known as Black Tuesday, as the beginning, and even the cause, of the Great Depression, is misleading and incorrect. Contrary to popular belief, many factors were responsible for the contribution to the economic recession, and worked together to cause a collapse, of which Black Tuesday was merely a consequence (200). In hindsight it is clear that the American economy of the 1920s, prosperous as it might have been, severely lacked any diversification, as it relied almost solely on a few basic industries: construction and automobiles. When these industries declined, “the other sectors of the economy were not large enough or productive enough to take up the slack” (200).

A fundamental maldistribution of purchasing power also existed during this decade, where more goods were produced than the consumers could possibly purchase. Had they been able to afford it, the American public certainly would have kept up its massive consumption of goods and products; however, wages and salaries were low and people relied on loans from the banks to maintain their newly discovered lifestyles of luxury (201). Government enforced policies further contributed to the dismal economic situation, as taxation fell disproportionately on the lower classes and largely spared the rich, thereby increasing the inequality of incomes.

Additionally, strict policies and high tariffs regarding foreign export further inhibited

the expansion of the economy beyond America borders, limiting foreign trade and export (201).

British economist, John Maynard Keynes, was once asked “whether he was aware of any historical era comparable to the Great Depression. ‘Yes’, Keynes replied. ‘It was called the Dark Ages and it lasted 400 years’” (qtd in Freidel & Brinkley 201).

Although the Depression lasted only a decade, the economic collapse had far reaching and devastating consequences never before experienced in the industrial era. After Black Tuesday in October 1929, the rate of unemployment spread rapidly across the nation, reaching its peak at twenty-five per cent in 1932. Throughout the country, cities were crumbling under the strain of unemployment, with some towns nearly collapsing at an unemployment rate of up to eighty per cent (201).

Reality had changed dramatically for most Americans, as their sense of pride and affluence was replaced by shame and humility as they struggled to survive. Workers, unable to find jobs that did not exist, were often forced to hide their shame in their own homes and an increasing number of people had to experience the humiliation of begging for food or turning to local public relief systems in order to survive (202).

Due to the prosperity of the previous decade, however, these relief systems were severely underequipped to handle the sudden overwhelming demand, and the government itself was increasingly unable to help the public as tax revenues were declining rapidly and economic resources were scarce (203). As a result, the streets and cities that only a year before had bustled with the excitement of affluence and prosperity were now crowded with thousands of people begging and sifting through garbage cans for meagre scraps of food. Entire families were wiped out as a result of

malnutrition and starvation and millions of young men were forced to leave their families in search for work elsewhere (203).

While the economic depression had left the cities and towns in a harrowing state of poverty and despair, the people living in the rural areas of the country faced a second, equally catastrophic environmental disaster: the worst drought in the history of the nation (Freidel & Brinkley 203). The drought, originating in what became known as the Dust Bowl region, located on the southern plains in the mid-western United States, lasted an entire decade and eventually agriculturally decimated over twenty-seven states, an area covering around a hundred million acres of land (Freidel & Brinkley 203).

In some areas the soil became so dry it was devoid of moisture up to almost a meter below the surface. The enormous amounts of dry topsoil coupled with fierce winds created great dust storms which swept across the land, often blotting out the sun and suffocating livestock as well as anyone unable to barricade themselves indoors (Freidel & Brinkley 203). Adding to the agricultural devastation, large swarms of grasshoppers moved from region to region, devouring whatever meagre crops still managed to survive and damaging property in the process (203).

The rural farmers were already suffering due to the economic recession as farm income in the early 1930s declined by more than sixty per cent, and a vast number of farmers lost their land through mortgage foreclosures and evictions. With the drought now turning many areas of fertile farm land into deserts, hundreds of thousands of families fled their homes and travelled great distances in search of work and potentially greener pastures (203-204).

As the years of hardship continued, the causes of the environmental disaster were interrogated. Many people believed it to be a divine punishment of sorts, and before long, the nation's headlines and radio talk shows were filled with religious discourse, fuelling the belief that the people were being punished for their ungodly ways (Lookingbill 46). The biblical story of Moses in Egypt became a popular metaphor to portray the situation, with many ministers as well as government officials stating that much could be learnt from the Egyptians who in a season of plenty stored their surplus produce in order to survive the seven years of famine and pestilence (47). Naturally, this religious discourse led to an increase in religious fanaticism and the statement made by an editor of a Kansas newspaper expressed the common sentiment among a large group of Americans:

Man seems to have made a terrible failure, and sin and riotous spending, and living in pleasure, and forgetting God, has brought on God's judgements on our nation, by great areas of drought, and withholding rain, to add to the miseries of a great nation, full of pride, sin, adultery, and forgetting God (Lookingbill 25-26).

While religious leaders across the nation encouraged people to examine themselves and their lifestyles and to recognize and acknowledge how their sins have contributed to the demise of the country, the government, under the leadership of Franklin D. Roosevelt, who was elected president in 1932, implemented numerous policies and acts, known as the New Deal, that would serve to relieve the economic depression (42). The Agricultural Adjustment Administration was established in order to alleviate the farm crisis by attempting to balance production with consumption (42). The administration realised that economically, the problem resided in the

overproduction of farm produce and the low prices which were a direct consequence of surplus production (Marrin 97). The only solution seemed to involve the lowering of production which then would raise farm income. Thus, the government paid farmers to cultivate less land and destroy existing crops and penalties were imposed for overproduction. This idea of “planned scarcity” resulted in millions of acres of land laying bare, and six million baby pigs and two hundred thousand sows being slaughtered in 1933 alone (98). Although the farmers benefited from rising prices, the plan was widely criticized by protesters who argued that it was senseless that consumers, particularly the jobless should have to pay more for food. Several wealthy farmers even increased their production, in protest, and were thus able to lower their prices for the needy (98).

While the government attempted to deal with the crisis, and religious leaders continued to preach their prophecies of doom and destruction, an increasing number of scientists began to argue that the drought and dust storms were not a punishment sent by God, but entirely man-made and the result of reckless farming, human ignorance and greed (98). Hugh Hammond Bennett, a high official in the Department of Agriculture and an expert in soil science, had for years warned about the dangers of industrial farming and destroying native grasses (Lookingbill 57). As a result of over farming, overgrazing, misplaced ploughing and improper irrigation, the natural landscape of the Great Plains had been destroyed, leaving large amounts of dry top soil behind that eventually would breed enormous dust storms (57).

The Great Plains, an area stretching north-south across North America, covering approximately ten states, had not always been a place of dust and desolation. On the contrary, the region was once teeming with wildlife and native grasses mainly

inhabited by nomadic Indians and large herds of buffalo (Marrin 20). After the Civil War came to an end, the settlers decided to expand their territory into the plains, and in the process, remove both the Indian and the buffalo. While the animals were slaughtered by the millions, force and starvation was used to drive the Indian tribes off the land and onto reservations, leaving the Plains free for the expansion of European settlers.

By the late 1800s ranching flourished across the area, to the detriment of the environment. Despite the large numbers of buffalo that previously inhabited the Plains, the animals did not damage the grasslands. The manure fertilized the soil, the buffalo's sharp hooves loosened the soil allowing for air and moisture to penetrate, and the shape of the jaw allowed it to bite the grass only to a few inches above the ground, so the grass always recovered quickly (Marrin 25). The introduction of cattle, however, marked only the beginning of the slow, but steady destruction of the area. Unlike the buffalo, the cattle were confined to smaller areas at the time, which resulted in their hooves compressing the soil, thereby reducing its ability to absorb and hold water causing gradual soil erosion. In addition, the cattle ruined the natural flora of the region, as their jaws are designed to bite grasses down to the roots, never allowing the plants to recover (26-27).

The ranchers further interrupted the natural circle of life by killing off animals that were considered pests, such as grizzlies, wolves, coyotes and eagles. With these predators gone, smaller herbivores multiplied at an alarming rate. Prairie dogs, for instance, devoured enormous amounts of grass, thus the ranchers poisoned almost the entire prairie dog population, thereby reducing the soil's fertility, since prairie dogs helped to keep the sod healthy. As a result, large areas of fertile land dried up, unable to support anything but weeds (27).

This early destruction of the Great Plains marks the beginning of a process which eventually ended in disaster in the 1930s. As the dust storms worsened and millions of people became 'dust bowl refugees', scientists tried to convince the public that ignorance and industrialism were to blame for the current conditions. Industrial farming and capitalism led to the overworking of the soil and the disregard for the natural cycles of the earth. In 1932, Roger C. Smith, professor of entomology at Kansas State Agricultural College argued that the increase in farming "upset the age-old balance of nature" and that a "population out of sync with the cycles ... faced "rainfall and drought," "plenty and famine," and "abundance and want"" (qtd in Lookingbill 62). Smith depicted the environment as "a complicated and delicate machine in which a slight misadjustment of a part affects all the others" (qtd in Lookingbill 62).

As the American government gradually realized that the current ecological crisis was, in fact, man-made, and that the damage could be controlled, serious efforts were made in an attempt to rectify the situation. Farmers and ranchers were encouraged to take part in the "Trees for the Prairies" campaign, which emphasized the importance of reforestation in preventing the dust storms from forming (63).

While the government, with the help of scientists, attempted to alleviate the crisis that the drought brought upon the nation, life for people living in the Dust Bowl became increasingly unbearable. The sweltering heat claimed countless lives and the unrelenting winds produced dust storms of such magnitude, the era became known as the "Dirty Thirties" (Marrin 61). Although dust storms on the Great Plains were not considered unusual, the nation had never before witnessed storms on that scale. In 1934 the largest dust storm to date was recorded, carrying away an

estimated 350 million tons of top soil. The following year, however, another, even larger storm swept over the country, enveloping cities and obscuring the sun, leaving behind destruction and darkness. Although the Great Plains never again experienced a storm rivalling the Black Sunday blizzard, which this storm in 1935 later became known as, numerous dust storms continued to devastate the region for the next four years (63). *See illustrations pg. 149.*

The dust storms were notorious for their sudden and unexpected appearance, often not giving people a chance to seek shelter. If caught outdoors during a sand storm the suffering was excruciating and sometimes resulted in death. Inside the houses, people sealed their windows and doors with felt strips and rags, in an attempt to keep the sand out. The dust, however, fine as powder, managed to penetrate the smallest openings and cracks and would settle on every available surface inside the houses (66). In some towns, the Red Cross handed out gas masks, used during the Great War, in order to prevent people from suffocating in their sleep, while in other places people were advised to sleep with damp rags covering their faces and to lie as still as possible, as to not stir the dust covering the beds and blankets. The involuntary inhalation of dust particles had serious effects, and many people fell ill with the lung disease silicosis, known as “dust pneumonia” or “black lung” among the locals. The victims of dust pneumonia suffered immensely and generally died in pain and gasping for breath, similar to poison-gas victims (73).

Livestock and wild animals alike, suffered greatly during dust storms. Dust, blowing into the eyes of cattle, and mixing with tears, turned to mud, which cemented their eyelids shut; the sand in their feed scraped their teeth away, and unable to chew, many starved to death (73). One day, Caroline Henderson, writer for the *Atlantic*

Monthly magazine, found an injured jackrabbit, trembling with fear outside the kitchen door of her Oklahoma farm house. After feeding the emaciated animal, Henderson, clearly affected by this experience, wrote in one of her articles: "When these wild creatures, ordinarily so well able to take care of themselves, come seeking protection, their necessity indicates a cruel crisis for man and beast" (qtd in Marrin 73-74).

Although the dust storms caused enormous physical damage, the psychological effects were not to be dismissed. The unpredictability of the storms caused people to live in a constant state of anxiety, which manifested itself in an increase in short-temperedness and aggression, and many people were committed to insane asylums as the stress became too much for their minds to bear. Some people committed suicide, sometimes after shooting their families, seeing death as the only way to escape the suffering (74).

Despite the suffering and despair, however, the people of the Great Plains tried to keep their spirits up and preserve their sanity through the use of humour. Many jokes and anecdotes emerged during this era depicting the absurdities and suffering of that time. American folksinger, Woody Guthrie, wrote numerous "Dust Bowl Ballads", in which he portrays the sorrow and despair of the people, letting them know that they are not alone and forgotten (74).

Crippled by the environmental devastation and unable to continue living in the Dust Bowl, an estimated three hundred thousand people left their homes on the Great Plains and headed towards California, the land of opportunity.

1.7 The Situation of Women

The desperation following the economic and ecological depression in the United States reawakened in society some of the patriarchal sentiments that had been repressed during the period after the Great War. “Men should behave like men, and women like women”, was the phrase designed to subdue the relatively newly gained freedom and independence of women, who were now, once again, confined to the domestic sphere (Rowbotham 203).

A poll conducted in 1936, showed that eighty-two per cent of the population felt that wives should not work if their husbands were employed, and the majority were in favour of legal restrictions being imposed on working women (201). Informal discrimination resulted in women struggling to find employment, particularly in the fields of social work, teaching, and book keeping, and many women were forced to perform menial work for meagre wages. Consequently, by the end of the decade, over two million women found themselves unemployed and unable to support themselves or their families (204).

The New Deal policies focused predominantly on the unemployed males and their dependent families, and largely failed to address the plight of single mothers and unmarried women. Subsequently, Eleanor Roosevelt made it one of her primary missions to lobby for special provision for these unemployed, often homeless young women, who roamed the streets struggling to find the means to survive (209).

Despite all efforts, however, the provisions for women were always less than for men, but, nonetheless, women continually appealed to Eleanor Roosevelt’s goodwill in hopes of receiving some kind of aid. In her despair, a hopelessly poor woman sent the president’s wife a letter containing two gold rings, one her own, the other that of

her mother, and a desperate plea for baby clothes and diapers (209). The desperate situation faced by many women across the nation led to the emergence of a new-found sense of social activism, as many people, women in particular, set up shelters and collected food for the poor (201).

Whereas the marriage rates in the 1920s had seen a considerable surge, the young people living through the economic depression and ecological disaster became wary of marriage as they feared having to bear children they could not afford to feed. Additionally, the demand for knowledge on birth control was rapidly spreading and numerous birth control clinics were established across the nation (216-217).

Indeed, the events of the early twentieth century had an immense effect on the situation of women. Although the momentum of the women's movement was temporarily disrupted during the depression, the foundations of modern feminist theory had been laid, and thus the decades following World War Two saw the rise of numerous feminist critics, who, with their ground-breaking theories, ensured the continuation of feminist oriented debates in society.

2. Contemporary feminist literary criticism

2.1 Theorists

Although modern feminist criticism emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, certain principles of feminist thought were conceptualized as early as the seventeenth century, when “libertarian opposition to the oligarchic state provided a few women with a platform – albeit an extremely narrow one – from which to raise their own demands as rational members of the *polis*” (Taylor 204). For instance, natural rights theorist, Samuel van Pufendorf, argued in 1673 that

although, as a general thing, the male surpasses the female in strength of body and mind, yet that superiority is of itself far from being capable of giving the former authority over the latter. Therefore, whatever right a man has over a woman, inasmuch as she is his equal, will have to be secured by her consent, or by a just war. (Taylor 205)

The concept of feminism emerged out of women’s need to resist the male dominance and oppression to which they had been subjected for centuries (Rivkin & Ryan 765). The American women’s movement, spearheaded by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, emerged in the United States in 1848, and saw women fighting the United States constitution for, amongst other things, the right to vote. It took more than seven decades before the 19th Amendment was added to the United States constitution in 1920, which granted women suffrage in national politics (Johnson Web).

The feminist inroads of the 1920s were abruptly halted with the economic depression of the 1930s and World War II in the 1940s. Only towards the 1960s did the fight for

women's liberation pick up again. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* struck a chord among millions of women who were discontent with their roles as mere wives and homemakers (Johnson Web).

The civil rights movement of the 1960s became a catalyst for the liberation of women of colour, and women such as Rosa Parks, Anne Moody, and Fannie Lou Hamer actively challenged the laws and policies designed to discriminate on the basis of colour and sex. This decade proved successful for women in many aspects and saw the emergence of several distinguished feminists, such as Kate Millet, Germaine Greer, and Juliet Mitchell, who publicly pushed the boundaries of women's liberation (Johnson Web).

During the 1970s women's rights groups focused their energies on women's second-class status in higher education. As a result of the increasing pressure exerted by these groups, more than three hundred colleges in the United States began developing programmes in women's studies (Johnson Web). This decade also saw a radical change in marriage and family laws and in most countries a wife's property rights, became, for the first time, identical to her husband's, thereby moving the state of marriage toward a partnership of equals.

As a result of the pioneering achievements made by women during the 1960s and 1970s, women in the 1980s were encouraged to enter almost any profession or occupation they wished, and the United States saw, for the first time, women being appointed to the United States Supreme Court, and traveling in space, while in western and northern European nations women were elected heads of state (Johnson Web).

During the 1970s “French feminism” emerged as a reaction to the predominantly Anglophone school of feminist thought. Fronted by French intellectuals Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, French feminism distinguished itself from Anglophone feminism by focusing more on philosophy, linguistics and psychoanalysis (Martin Web). French feminism is strongly influenced by existentialism, phenomenology and deconstructionism, and is characterized by the extensive use of esoteric philosophy. Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray never worked together and their work does not comprise a coherent intellectual movement, however, all three are known for their concepts and interrogations of subjects such as sexuality, sexual difference, subjectivity, the body, and the unconscious, and have been hugely successful and influential in the school of feminist thought (Martin Web).

One of the earliest texts concerning the marginalization of women was written by eighteenth century feminist Mary Wollstonecraft. Like Pufendorf and other early libertarians, Wollstonecraft was intent on fighting against the injustices suffered by women in a patriarchal society. “I do earnestly wish to see the distinction of sex confounded in society, unless where love animates the behaviour”, she said, before the publication of her most famous work, *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Taylor 199). In this work, Wollstonecraft criticizes the misogynistic beliefs of that time that women were incapable of rational and abstract thought, and argues that women are diminished and rendered weak and irrational due to a “false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men who, considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers” (Wollstonecraft 1).

Although Wollstonecraft has been hailed as a pioneer in the school of feminist thought and *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which has been regarded as the “intellectual manifesto of western feminism, criticism has been strong nonetheless (Taylor 199). The publication of *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman* coincided with the publication of the second part of Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man*, and in light of this, Wollstonecraft was perceived as a the “blood-stained Amazon, the high priestess of ‘loose-tongued Liberty’ whose views, ‘if received, must overturn the basis of every civilised state’” (202). Not only the male anti-feminists were critical of her work, but also many influential women condemned the book and the ideas it contained. Evangelical writer, Hannah More even claimed that “there is something fantastic and absurd in the very title, ... there is no animal so much indebted to subordination for its good behaviour as woman” (qtd in Taylor 202). Despite the criticism, Wollstonecraft’s work has proven invaluable to the later generations of feminists.

2.1.2 Simone de Beauvoir 1908-1986

Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1948) has become a fundamental capstone within the feminist school of thought. The central issue in de Beauvoir’s theory is the question, what is a woman? Woman, she argues, is defined by man, “not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being. (...) Man thinks himself without woman. Woman does not think herself without man” (de Beauvoir 5-6). Hence, man constructs himself as the absolute, the ‘One’, and thereby inevitably renders woman the ‘Other’. This duality between Self and Other has always existed in pairs such as day-night, good-evil, left-right, sun-moon and so

on. “No group,” de Beauvoir says, “ever defines itself as One without immediately setting up the Other opposite itself” (6).

Although de Beauvoir’s efforts in allocating a place for women within the social and symbolic order in a patriarchal society has gained high acclaim, a number of feminists, most notably Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, criticize de Beauvoir for being anti-feminine and seemingly wanting to reinstate a “masculine universal under the name of neutrality and reason”; thus, de Beauvoir is regarded as rejecting femininity in order to “assimilate women to the universal” (Zakin 105). Emily Zakin, however, argues that de Beauvoir is concerned not only with politics of equality, but also with “openness to the other, of alterity and ambiguity,... a universal that is open to the feminine, rather than dismissive of it” (105-106).

In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir examines each distinct era of human history in relation to patriarchy and the oppression of women, and comes to the conclusion that patriarchy “was neither an accident nor the result of a violent revolution” (de Beauvoir 88). Rather, patriarchy established itself as a result of the “biological privilege [that] enabled men to affirm themselves alone as sovereign subjects” (88). De Beauvoir argues that although women of the pre-agricultural period in all likelihood were forced to perform hard work and were involved in battle as much as any man at that time, women were held back by their biological destiny of pregnancy, childbearing and menstruation. Pregnancy and child rearing, in particular, confined women to the more sedentary activities of hunting and gathering, which resulted in more aggressive, protective activities being relegated to men. This division of communal responsibilities thereby created a greater dependency of females on males (de Beauvoir 74).

Although biology has created inequality amongst men and women from the beginning of civilization, de Beauvoir offers that male superiority was discernable in the pre-agricultural periods. In other words, male dominance was simply “lived in an immediate form, not yet posited and willed”; no one tried to compensate for the physical engagements of woman, “but neither does anyone try to break her down, as will later happen in paternalistic regimes” (78).

In regards to gender roles, de Beauvoir argues for the “decolonization of women” from traditional gender roles, which, according to her, often enslave women and alienate them from themselves and society (qtd in Simons & Benjamin 333). She believes that “in today’s world as it is in our Western civilization, maternity is a trap for women because it enslaves them to man, to the home” (341). Motherhood, de Beauvoir says, is a role that women are forced into and alienates them on two distinct levels: firstly, a mother is alienated from her body, as she lacks control over her reproductive function unless she uses contraceptive technology to actively prevent pregnancy, and secondly, it alienates her from social control, as society expects her to fulfil the role of the mother at some point in her life and thereby is able to force her from a public into a more private sphere; In other words, “instead of integrating the powerful drives of the species into her individual life, the female is the prey of the species” (qtd in Lázaro 97). Naturally, de Beauvoir’s view of the maternal instinct as “cultural fiction” is often met with the argument that “a desire so commonly and so compellingly felt ought for that very reason to be considered organic and universal” (Butler, *Sex and Gender*, 42). Arguments such as that consequently lead to motherhood being promoted as the only option, as a compulsory social institution. This desire to interpret maternal feelings as “organic necessities,” Judith Butler argues, “discloses a deeper desire to disguise the choice one is making. If

motherhood becomes a choice, then what else is possible?” (42). This kind of questioning, Butler says, often elicits a deeply entrenched fear over the possibility of disrupting traditional social sanctions and “leaving a solid social station and place” (42).

Receiving criticism for her controversial views on this topic, it is important to keep in mind that de Beauvoir’s critique of motherhood and maternity was conceived at a time when contraceptive methods were largely unavailable and abortion was illegal thus leaving woman with minimal choice with regards to her own body, leaving her trapped and losing both her bodily integrity and her independence. De Beauvoir simply argues that “maternity must take place in a context of choice, that it not be imposed as a destiny or mythologized as an essence, since such a teleological conception is a violation of women’s becoming” (Zakin 114).

Like several other feminists, de Beauvoir regards marriage as an oppressive patriarchal institution designed to rob woman of her autonomy and independence. Not only does she take her husband’s name, she joins his religion, integrates into his class, and owes him her virginity and strict fidelity (de Beauvoir 454-455). As the man is the Self, the producer, the one who opens a future to woman simply by marrying her, he embodies transcendence, while woman, the Other, “is destined to maintain the species and care for the home, which is to say, to immanence” (455).

Although some critics have strongly disagreed with de Beauvoir’s critique of marriage, Andrea Veltman argues that de Beauvoir regarded marriage as oppressive and involving a moral wrong when it “facilitates the transcendence of one spouse by relegating the other to the round of relatively uncreative chores needed to maintain life in the home” (Veltman 122). Transcendent activities include inventing, exploring,

studying, creating, writing, and other such activities which enable humans to find a sense of fulfilment and self-actualization. Achieved through work and action, transcendence either “(1) produces something durable, (2) enables individual self-expression, (3) transforms or annexes the world, or (4) in some fashion contributes to the constructive endeavours of the human race” (123).

Immanence, on the contrary, produces nothing durable, but merely perpetuates life or maintains the status quo. Activities of immanence, according to Veltman, include everyday tasks that sustain the body and mind, like cooking and cleaning, as well as “bureaucratic paper pushing” and child birth” (123). De Beauvoir characterizes immanence as repetitive, uncreative and futile; immanence is time consuming and requires labour, but in the end accomplishes nothing (de Beauvoir 455). The combination of necessity and futility involved in maintaining life, inevitably makes certain forms of immanent activity repetitive: “cooking, cleaning and washing, ... are necessary for the sustenance of life but are immediately consumed, negated, and brought to nothing but the maintenance of life itself. They must therefore, be continually performed and re-performed” (Veltman 124).

Human life needs the maintenance of immanence to sustain life, but in relation to the question of human existence, only transcendence gives justification; immanence cannot. The *raison d'être*, the reason for living, achieved through transcendence only, thus remains out of reach for those who are oppressed and instead relegated to the labour of immanence (124). Thus marriage enables men to achieve greater opportunities for transcendence by consigning women to the labour of maintaining life. The oppression of marriage has, according to de Beauvoir, two principle components: “first, the relegating of wives to activities of immanence; and second,

the resulting freeing of husbands for transcendent activities” (125). While the repetitive tasks of housekeeping are necessary for life, they lend no significance, and thus a housewife achieves nothing for herself, but transfers her *raison d’être* to the man she lives and labours for (126). In other words, while man relies and depends on a female Other to perform activities of immanence, his dependence is not an existential one; he does not rely on her for the justification of his existence (125).

As many critics of de Beauvoir’s theory have pointed out, not all marriages are oppressive as not all wives are trapped in their status of immanence. Veltman, however, argues that the target of de Beauvoir’s critique is not marriage *per se*, as the activities of immanence are not inherently oppressive, but rather become oppressive when “one continually labours at these activities” (128). Marriages, in which a sense of equality and balance between the man and the woman exists, are not oppressive, de Beauvoir says. As a growing number of women have entered the work-force on a full-time basis, men have increasingly been found to take on certain domestic chores in the home. However, Veltman argues that

helping husbands disproportionately take on the more rewarding varieties of domestic work, such as cooking for guests and taking children on outings. ...

The inequities in husbands and wives’ domestic work that free men from domestic drudgery and serve the interest of the husbands, ... are the result of a largely successful and intentional male resistance to change gender inequities at home (132).

So while many husbands are lending a hand in activities of immanence, in the end the wives, regardless of their earning capacity, regardless of race or class, or even how feminist their gender ideologies are, are the ones who perform the majority of

the labour. Despite de Beauvoir's critique of the institution of marriage, she remains optimistic as she believes that marriage is capable of transforming into a more egalitarian institution (139).

2.1.3 Judith Butler 1956-

Influential American feminist, Judith Butler's philosophical writings on identity have provided revolutionary ways of rethinking gender. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler seeks to challenge the presumptions which have limited the meaning of gender to "received notions of masculinity and femininity" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* viii). Fearing that the school of feminist thought all too often fell into the trap of idealizing certain expressions of gender that, in turn, produced new forms of hierarchy and exclusion, Butler says that the aim of this text was to "open up the possibility for gender without dictating which kinds of possibilities ought to be realized" (viii).

Butler continually attempts to subvert and implode the very basis of identity, which involves more than the deconstruction of gender into its socially constitutive parts as either feminine or masculine, but rather it entails the recognition that the seemingly knowable sex categories of 'male' or 'female' are themselves fundamentally unstable productions that serve to make masculinity and femininity intelligible (Nayak & Kehily 460). Butler further challenges the binary gender system for its belief in a "mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it", arguing that the opposite cannot be true either, as if the construct of gender is seen as independent of sex "gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a

male one, and *woman* and *female* a male body as easily as a female one” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 9).

Butler controversially challenges the generally accepted sex/gender distinction which implies that culture is to gender as sex is to nature and suggests that sex is already a gendered category; thus, gender cannot be defined as the cultural interpretation of sex (10). According to Butler, gender constructs sex, “it is tacitly at work in the assumption that the sexes are by nature two but concealed by the representation of sex as “‘prediscursive’ prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts “ (7). Gender, then, Butler argues, is not an identity, but a discourse that helps to effect the distinction between nature and culture on which it purports to rest.

In other words, according to Butler, gender is neither the cultural construction of sex, nor identity, instead she introduces the concept of *gender performativity*, which suggests that gender “is a matter of doing and its effects rather than an inherent attribute, an intrinsic feature” (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 2). Basing her theory on Jacques Derrida’s reading of Kafka’s *Before the Law*, where

the one who waits for the law, sits before the door of the law, attributes a certain force to the law for which one waits. The anticipation of an authoritative disclosure of meaning is the means by which that authority is attributed and installed: the anticipation conjures its object (Butler, *Gender Trouble* xv).

Butler argues that it is the same with gender, that it “operates as an interior essence that might be disclosed, an expectation that ends up producing the very phenomenon that it anticipates” (xv). Butler further argues that gender performativity

cannot be understood as a singular or deliberate act, but rather gender reality is created through the ritualized repetition of hegemonic norms (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 2). Gender, thus, is not so much a construct of a specific sexual identity, it is rather an enactment, “a performed moment, in which sexual identity “becomes” through the movement of enactment in the body” (Kubiak 91). In other words, “one is not simply a [gendered] body, but, in some very key sense, one does one’s body” (Butler, *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution* 521). In this sense, Butler’s theory agrees with Simone de Beauvoir’s claim that “one is not born, but, rather, *becomes* a woman” as this notion suggests that gender is not a stable identity, but rather, gender is an identity, “instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (519). As gender constitutes merely a series of repeated acts, Butler argues that there is no gender prior or beyond the experience of performativity. Thus, without the repetition of performance, gender would cease to exist.

Butler further argues that gender performativity is an activity through which the subject is only made intelligible through action, however, she says that “there need not be a ‘doer behind the deed’, but that the ‘doer’ is variably constructed in and through the deed” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 142). Irene Meijer and Baukje Prins, argue that Butler’s theory of gender performativity implies that the construction of gender identity is made not only by repeating the difference between female and male, femininity and masculinity, but also by “constantly affirming the hierarchical opposition between femininity and *unfemininity*, between masculinity and *unmasculinity*” (283).

Butler argues that “regardless of the pervasive character of patriarchy and the prevalence of sexual difference as an operative cultural distinction, there is nothing

about a binary gender system that is given... Gender is not passively scripted on the body, and neither is it determined by nature, language, the symbolic, or the overwhelming history of patriarchy. Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure, but if this continuous act is mistaken for a natural or linguistic given, power is relinquished to expand the cultural field bodily through subversive performances of various kinds” (*Performative Act and Gender Constitution* 531).

With these revolutionary concepts, influenced by theorists such as Althusser, Derrida, and Lacan, Butler has significantly contributed to a new understanding of gender and the performance of gender roles which is significant in the analysis of John Steinbeck’s female characters.

2.1.4 Gayle Rubin 1949-

Feminist anthropologist Gayle Rubin has offered a significant contribution to the school of feminist thought with her theories on the oppression of women. Her article *The Traffic in Women*, published in 1975, became a key text of feminist argument in the 1970s. In this article, Rubin attempts to reframe the story of woman by shifting the focus from the body onto kinship and claiming that the oppression of women is entirely socially rather than biologically determined (Kipnis 434).

Rubin argues that although Marxism, as a theory of social life, is unconcerned with sex, there is no other theory which accounts for the oppression of women “with anything like the explanatory power of the Marxist theory of class oppression” (Rubin 771). In fact, several feminist theorists have applied Marxism in an attempt to

interrogate the situation of women, with the result that women have been seen as a reserve labour force for capitalism; that the generally lower wages of women provide extra surplus to the capitalist employer, and that the unpaid labour of housework, which is generally performed by women, contributes to the ultimate quantity of surplus value realized (773).

In her interrogation of women's status in patriarchal societies, Gayle Rubin identifies the "exchange of women", as a major cause contributing to the subjugation of women, thereby implying that the oppression of women is rooted within social systems, rather than biology (779). This trafficking of women involves any act in which women are given away, traded or exchanged through the hands of men, including the ritual of marriage, where the father gives away the bride. Rubin argues that this system of exchange indicates that men have certain rights over women, (and that women do not have the same rights over men), nor do they have full rights to themselves. Hence, the subjugation of women can be viewed as a "product of the relationships by which sex and gender are organized and produced" (780). Similar to Luce Irigaray, Rubin argues that the traffic in women results in women being reduced to being a conduit of a relationship rather than a partner to it. This concept also ties in with de Beauvoir's notion of women as the Other, always excluded from the hegemonic structure of patriarchal society. Rubin says that, although the exchange of women does not necessarily indicate that women are objectified in the modern sense, it does imply a distinction between the giver and the gift.

If women are the gifts, then it is men who are the exchange partners. And it is the partner, not the presents, upon whom reciprocal exchange confers its quasi-mystical power of social linkage. The relations of such a system are

such that women are in no position to realize the benefits of their own circulation. As long as the relations specify that men exchange women, it is men who are the beneficiaries of the product of such exchanges – social organization (779).

In terms of gender identity, Rubin argues that the division of the sexes, which consequently leads to the repression of certain personality traits, has the effect of oppressing both genders. Women are encouraged to repress certain 'masculine' characteristics, while men are required to suppress the 'feminine' traits of their personality, thus the same social system "which oppresses women in its relations of exchange, oppresses everyone in its insistence upon a rigid division of personality" (782).

2.1.5 Luce Irigaray 1932-

As with Rubin, Luce Irigaray focuses on the exchange of women as the primary means of sexism and female oppression. In her essay "Women on the Market", Irigaray uses Marx's analysis of commodities as the basis of her interrogation of the oppression of women, as it can be understood as an interpretation of the status of women in patriarchal societies. The economic, social and cultural order of a patriarchal society is rooted in the exchange of women; a practice in which men circulate women amongst themselves (Irigaray 800). Irigaray argues that all the systems of exchange that organize patriarchal societies are always dominated by men, as the production of signs, commodities, and women is always referred back to men. For instance, when a man 'buys' a woman, he pays the father or the brother,

never the mother of the bride. In this sense, women are always passed on from one man to another, from one group of men to another. “The work force,” Irigaray says, “is thus always assumed to be masculine, and “products” are objects to be used, objects of transaction among men alone” (800).

Irigaray argues that the exploitation of women has reduced them to mere commodities that can be exchanged, produced, consumed and valorised (810). A woman has value only in her relation to men, never as an individual subject in relation to herself. Like a commodity, which is a dual entity, a woman is divided into two irreconcilable ‘bodies’: her natural body and her socially valued, exchangeable body, which is always valorised in terms of masculine values (804). Value can only exist when a relationship has been established, and relationships can only be established with the help of two exchangers, and not by the commodities themselves, thus for a commodity, in other words a woman, to have value, two men, at least, have to invest in her. “The commodity,” Irigaray says, “is disinvested of its body and reclothed in a form that makes it suitable for exchange among men” (805).

Irigaray also addresses the status of women and the roles in which they are cast in a patriarchal social order, saying that it is the exchange of women among men that establishes the operations of patriarchal societies. In this kind of social order, women represent a natural value and a social value, and their ‘development’ lies in the passage from the one to the other. The role of the mother puts woman in a situation that excludes her from the exchange between men. Irigaray explains that

mothers, [as] reproductive instruments marked with the name of the father and enclosed in his house, must be private property, excluded from exchange...As both natural value and use value, mothers cannot circulate in

the form of commodities without threatening the very existence of the social order (807).

Mothers are essential in this social order as they are, through maternity, child-rearing and domestic maintenance, reproductive of children and, thus, in extension, of the labour force:

Their responsibility is to maintain the social order without intervening so as to change it. Their products are legal tender in that order, moreover, only if they are marked with the name of the father, only if they are recognized within his law: that is, only insofar as they are appropriated by him (807).

The role of the virginal woman, on the contrary, symbolizes pure exchange value. According to Irigaray, she is nothing but the possibility, the sign of relations between men. "In and of herself, she does not exist: she is a simple envelope veiling what is really at stake in social exchange" (807). In other words, her natural body disappears into its representative function. "Once deflowered, [the virginal] woman is relegated to the status of use value, to her entrapment in private property; she is removed from exchange among men" (808).

The prostitute, representing yet another role to which women are confined, is "explicitly condemned by the social order, [yet] she is implicitly tolerated" (808). In her case, Irigaray argues, the womanly qualities of her body have value as they are regarded as 'useful', however, only because they have already been appropriated by men. "Prostitution," Irigaray says, "amounts to *usage that is exchanged*. Usage that is not merely potential: it has already been realized. The woman's body is valuable

because it has already been used” (808). In this sense, the womanly body has once again become nothing more than a vehicle for relations among men.

Regarding female sexuality, Irigaray argues that the economy of desire remains strictly in the hands of men, and that woman, although she embodies the object of desire, never has access to desire herself. The characteristics of feminine desire derive from

the valorisation of reproduction and nursing; faithfulness; modesty, ignorance of and even lack of interest in sexual pleasure; a passive acceptance of men’s “activity”; seductiveness, in order to arouse the consumers’ desire while offering herself as its material support without getting pleasure herself...

Neither as mother nor as virgin nor as prostitute has woman any right to her own pleasure.” (808)

Woman’s fundamental role in patriarchal societies, Irigaray concludes, is merely to put men in touch with each other, establish relations between them, without ever gaining access to the social order herself. The maintenance of this system where women are the symptom of the exploitation of individuals in society that rewards them only partially, or even not at all, for their so-called labour, can only be disrupted if women left behind their condition as commodities and started “socializing in a different way the relation to nature, the body, language, and desire” (810-811).

In later years, particularly in the essays “J’aime à toi” and “Essere due”, Irigaray has focused her attention on the exploration of intersubjectivity. In this highly evocative writing on the mutual transformation and recreation in and through love relationships,

Irigaray attempts to create and define a new model of possible relations between men and women that exclude the submission of either one to another (Ince 123).

2.1.6 Hélène Cixous 1937-

French feminist, Hélène Cixous, became known in the Anglophone world only after the translation of her work *The Laugh of the Medusa* in 1976, and *The Newly Born Woman*, translated in the mid-eighties (Shiach Web). In her writing, Cixous aims at illuminating the relationship between language and culture, and more specifically, how the politics of language determine the roles assigned to women. In her essay, “Castration or Decapitation?”, Cixous discusses the effect of a masculine economy when imposed on woman.

In her essays, “L’Arc”, Cixous discusses the kind of blackmail that exists in the patriarchal community that serves to make women feel guilty. Not only do women feel guilty, says Cixous, they have been trained to do so. It is this kind of repression that needs to be attacked, and “woman must develop a rapport with her unconscious which is not stereotyped, downtrodden: she must revive herself, recover her vital forces, she must dare *herself*, she must dare to be herself” (qtd in Makward 26). The only way to do this, Cixous says, is through a learning process where woman learns to know herself, think for herself, and reflect upon herself, otherwise she will remain ignorant and blind, and thus alienated.

Cixous often voices her strong objection to male writing and thinking, which, according to her, is cast in binary oppositions. Cixous argues that men have unnecessarily segmented reality by coupling concepts and terms in pairs of polar opposites, one of which is always privileged over the other, for instance day/night,

activity/passivity, culture/nature, high/low and so on. These dichotomies, Cixous says, find inspiration in the fundamental dichotomous couple man/woman “in which man is associated with all that is active, cultural, light, high, or generally positive and woman with all that is passive, natural, dark, low, or generally negative” (Tong 224). Furthermore, the first term in this man/woman dichotomy is the term from which the second departs or deviates. “Man is the self; woman is his Other. Thus, woman exists in man’s world on his terms” (Tong 224). Although it is extremely difficult to challenge the symbolic order when the only words available to do so are words that have been issued by this order, Cixous challenges and encourages women to write themselves out of the world men have constructed.

2.1.7 Sherry B. Ortner 1941 -

In her article, “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture”, American cultural anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner examines the secondary status of women in society. Ortner claims that the subjugation of women is “one of the true universals, a pan-cultural fact”, as it exists within every type of social and economic organisation in every culture and society (5). Ortner identifies three types of ‘data’ that can be considered evidence of female oppression in any given culture:

- a) elements of cultural ideology and informants’ statements that explicitly devalue women, according them, their social roles, their tasks, their products, and their social milieu less prestige than men and the male correlates; b)
- symbolic devices, such as the attribution of defilement, which may be interpreted as making a statement of inferior valuation; and c) social rules that

prohibit women from participating in or having contact with some realm in which the highest powers of the society are felt to reside (7-8).

On any or all of these counts, Ortner argues, women are subjugated in every known society. “The search for a genuinely egalitarian, let alone matriarchal, culture, has proven fruitless and it is important for the woman’s movement at large to face up to this fact” (8).

Certain cultures and societies may give the impression that femininity and masculinity are valued equally, such as the ideology of Taoism in China, which stipulates that the female principle yin, and the masculine principle yang, are equal in terms of value. A closer examination of Chinese culture and practice, however, reveals a long tradition of female oppression and subjugation, unmasking China as the archetypal patriarchal society. Ortner thus stresses the importance of recognizing the distinction between a culture’s general ideology and the actual social structures, as these realities often stand in stark opposition to each other (6).

Ortner, following in the footsteps of Simone de Beauvoir, attempts to explain the universal subjugation of women via biological determinism. Ortner, like de Beauvoir, however, comes to the conclusion that biological differences inherent in men and women do not adequately account for the patriarchal oppression of women. At the source of female devaluation, Ortner argues, lies the fact that women are identified, and symbolically associated with nature, while men are identified with culture. “Since it is always culture’s project to subsume and transcend nature, if woman is part of nature, then culture would find it “natural” to subordinate, not to say oppress, her” (12). Returning to biological determinism, Ortner argues that although biological differences alone do not account for the oppression and subordination of women, the

woman's body and its function do seem to place her closer to nature, as opposed to men, whose physiology allows them more freedom to pursue the projects of culture. Thus, woman's body confines her to social roles that are in turn viewed to be at a lower order in culture and thus more "like nature" (12).

Regarding female physiology, Ortner argues that many processes and parts of the female body "serve no apparent function for the health and stability of the individual woman; on the contrary, as they perform their specific organic functions, they are often sources of discomfort, pain and danger" (13). A woman's breasts, for instance, are irrelevant to personal health and serve no other purpose than feeding the offspring. Menstruation, although essential to the reproductive functions of woman, is often uncomfortable, sometimes painful, and, in some cultures, interrupts a woman's daily routine, often restricting many of her activities and social interactions. During pregnancy, a substantial share of vitamins and minerals ingested is used to nourish the foetus, leaving the woman depleted of strength and energy, and finally, childbirth itself is painful and dangerous. This, Ortner argues, is what de Beauvoir was referring to in the statement that "the female is more enslaved to the species than the male" (Beauvoir 60).

Mirroring de Beauvoir's notion of immanence and transcendence, Ortner argues that man, in addition to ensuring the continuation of his species, also "remodels the face of the earth", creating, inventing, and shaping the future, while woman's body,

seems to doom her to mere reproduction of life; the male, on the other hand, lacking natural creative functions, must (or has the opportunity to) assert his creativity externally, "artificially," through the medium of technology and

symbols. In doing so, he creates relatively lasting, eternal, transcendent objects, while the woman creates only perishables – human beings (14).

Although being associated and identified with nature, woman, as a fully conscious, thinking, speaking being, needs to be recognized as an entirely involved and committed member of culture. Herein lies the irony, Ortner argues, as “woman’s consciousness – her membership, as it were, in culture – is evidenced in part by the fact that she accepts her own devaluation and takes culture’s point of view” (15). In other words, woman’s involvement in culture seems to have led her to accept the logic of culture’s arguments, and reach culture’s conclusions along with men. As a result of this ambiguous state, being more like nature than man, yet undeniably recognized as a participant in culture, woman thus appears as “something intermediate between culture and nature, lower on the scale of transcendence than men” (16).

Ortner further discusses the concept of the family in her examination of women’s oppression, arguing that woman’s role of socializing infants and children not only confine her to the domestic sphere, but also further tie her to nature, as she is seen as the primary agent acting on behalf of culture to socialize nature. The importance of this task bestowed on woman, should firmly place her right next to man in the realm of culture, however, even in the case of childrearing and socialization, woman’s influence is almost always at some point rendered irrelevant. Ortner points out that

in virtually every society there is a point at which the socialization of boys is transferred to the hands of men. The boys are considered, in some set of terms or another, not to have been “really” socialized yet; their entrée to the

realm of fully human (social, cultural) status can be accomplished only by men (19).

This notion, Ortner says, is reflected in the educational system of most societies, where most primary educators are female, as opposed to tertiary professors, who are predominately male (19).

These attempts at explaining the universal oppression of women has gained recognition in the fields of both cultural anthropology and feminist thought. Ortner stresses, however, that the entire scheme on which her theory is based is construct of culture rather than a given of nature, thus, woman is not 'in reality' any closer to nature than man. The situation of women can only change, says Ortner, if a different cultural view emerges, if women are allowed to fully participate in, and actively appropriate the fullest range of social roles and activities available within the culture.

2.2 Feminism and Literature

The ideological effects of patriarchy are visible in all aspects of Western society. As a result, feminism as a literary theory aims to investigate and expose the ways in which patriarchal ideology is embedded in literature (Tyson 91). Literature provides the means for writers to express ideas, reflect reality, and influence readers. Hence, literature can be a powerful tool in transmitting limiting, power-based ideologies from one generation to the next (Tyson 91).

In the past centuries, the literary works of male authors describing experience from a white male point of view created the standard of universality, which resulted in their works being considered as representative of the experience of all readers (Tyson

84). Reflecting on ancient Greek and Roman literature and mythology, which represents subjugated women and female monsters, Tyson argues that it is evident that the roots of Western civilization is deeply seated in patriarchal ideology (92). Tyson claims that as a result of the long-standing tradition of patriarchy, “the development of the Western canon of great literature, including traditional fairy tales” are the products of patriarchal ideology (92).

Several feminist thinkers, such as Virginia Woolf and Elaine Showalter have highlighted the difficulties women writers face in patriarchal societies and have attempted to find ways of empowering the female voice, which has largely been silenced in the tradition of male authored literature.

As one of the aims of feminist theory is to expose the ways in which “patriarchal ideology works to keep women and men in traditional gender roles and thereby maintain male dominance”, questions such as the following can be a point of interrogation when examining literature through the lens of feminism (Tyson 91):

- How are the women characters portrayed?
- What does the novel reveal about the economic, political, social or psychological operations of patriarchy?
- Does the author reinforce or undermine patriarchal ideology?

2.2.1 Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar

In their interrogation of the subjugation of women writers and the oppression of the feminine in literature, distinguished literary critics and authors Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar expose Western literature to be firmly rooted in patriarchal tradition.

There exists, they argue, an age-old belief in patriarchal society, that the pen functions as a metaphorical penis, and thus reserves the art of writing solely for men (3). This seems to be the opinion of English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, who, in 1886 said that “the artist’s most essential quality is masterly execution, which is a kind of male gift, and especially marks off men from women, the begetting of one’s thought on paper, on verse, or whatever the matter is. ... The male quality is the creative gift” (Hopkins 133). Thus, Gilbert and Gubar argue, male sexuality is not only metaphorically but actually the essence of literary power. “The poet’s pen is in some sense (even more than figuratively) a penis” (Gilbert & Gubar 4).

In addition to the pen being thought of as solely a male instrument, the patriarchal notion that a writer ‘fathers’ a text, just as God fathered the world is firmly rooted in Western culture. Literary critic Edward Said points out that most literary texts follow a “series of genealogical connections: author – text, beginning-middle-end, text – meaning, reader – interpretation, and so on. Underneath all these is the imagery of succession, of paternity, or hierarchy” (Said 83). In this sense, the male writer is thus perceived to be almost godlike, as it is in his power to create through his literature, an “alternative, mirror-universe”, populated with characters he has ‘fathered’ and thus, by implication of the word ‘paternity’, owns (Gilbert & Gubar 5). Thus, according to Gilbert and Gubar, “because he is an *author*, a “man of letters” is simultaneously, like his divine counterpart, a father, a master or ruler, and an owner; the spiritual type of a patriarch, as we understand that term in Western society” (7).

This kind of patriarchal theory of literature leaves little, if any, space for women writers. The fact that the pen has been defined as a male tool, makes it wholly unsuitable and inappropriate, even alien to women, Gilbert and Gubar argue.

Furthermore, if women lack the generative literary power that men possess, then men who lose this power are robbed of their manhood and become eunuchs – or, by extension – like women. This notion, French thinker Roland Barthes says, is illustrated by Marquis de Sade, who, when imprisoned, was denied “any use of pencil, ink, pen, and paper” ... [and was] figuratively emasculated, for “the scriptural sperm” could flow no longer, and “without exercise, without a pen, Sade [became] *bloated*, [became] a eunuch” (qtd in Gilbert & Gubar 10).

Not only does patriarchal ideology dictate that “literature is not the business of a woman’s life”, as expressed by poet Robert Southey, in a letter to Charlotte Brontë in 1837 (qtd in Gérin 110), it also stipulates that the literature by women writers is inherently devoid of what American writer Richard Chase termed “the masculine *élan*”, referring to the penetrating intelligence and hyperalert sensibility of the male writer (qtd in Gilbert & Gubar 9). Thus, patriarchal ideology permits men to vehemently criticize women writers on the basis that their literature “lacks a strong male thrust” (as uttered by American writer Anthony Burgess regarding Jane Austin’s literature) and effectively contribute to the silencing of women (Burgess 74).

In their work *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar further explore the patriarchal literary tradition and argue that patriarchal ideology in male literature is clearly visible, particularly in the form of gender roles. Throughout the history of literature, women have played specific roles. In the Middle Ages it was often that of the pure virgin or the mother goddess, inspired by the Virgin Mary, a female role Sherry Ortner defined as “merciful dispenser of salvation” (Ortner 86). The secularisation of nineteenth century society resulted in this image of female purity no longer being represented by “a madonna in heaven, but by an angel in the house”,

emphasising the value placed on female domesticity and devotion to the family (Gilbert & Gubar 20).

Throughout the ages, male writers have cast women in the roles of angelic virgin and mother goddess, with the result of confining them to contemplative purity and passive inactivity, traits which have come to represent the feminine ideal, while men remain the instigators of significant action. Thus, Gilbert and Gubar argue, it is exactly

because women are defined as wholly passive, completely devoid of generative power ... that they become numinous to male artists. For in the metaphysical emptiness their “purity” signifies they are, of course *self-less*, with all the moral and psychological implications that word suggests (21).

Patriarchal literature has long followed the tradition that the virginal woman has to die in order to reach a level of sainthood. As Edgar Allan Poe once said, the death of a beautiful woman “is unquestionably the most poetic topic in the world” (qtd in Quinn 982). Thus, the beautiful, angelic woman’s key act, namely to be self-less, “is the surrender of her self – of her personal comfort, her personal desires, or both ... while it is precisely this sacrifice which dooms her to both death and to heaven. For to be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be dead” (Gilbert & Gubar 25). This image of the dead woman has led to a distinction of the feminine between flesh and spirit, and by extension, good and evil, as the moment a tinge of the supernatural is attributed to the female, immediately the image of a witch, a monster, a magical creature is created, and yet again women are depicted as standing “both under and over (but really simply outside of) the sphere of culture’s hegemony” (Ortner 86).

Patriarchal literature thus suggests that for every pure and virginal woman there must be an equally important negative image that embodies the image of the monster. Thus, while male writers praise the “simplicity of the dove, they invariably castigate the cunning of the serpent” embodied in female form (Gilbert & Gubar 28). Similarly, all indications of aggressiveness and assertiveness, which are typical characteristics of ‘significant action’ are deemed monstrous in women precisely because they unfeminine and, therefore, are unsuitable to a life of “contemplative purity” (28).

As the silencing and marginalisation of women is deeply rooted in the tradition of male authored literature, it is paramount for women writers to regain their voice and attempt to break the restraints placed upon them by the patriarchal ideology of society. Gilbert and Gubar argue that tendency to portray women as either angels or monsters is so deeply ingrained in the Western literary canon, that not only can it be found in the writings of Dante, Milton, Goethe, and Dickens, amongst many others, but also in the writing of many women writers. Gilbert and Gubar point out women writers, such as Mary Elizabeth Coleridge and Aurora Leigh, who have consecutively defined themselves as angel-women or as monster-women, have been trapped in the “glass coffins of patriarchy” (to use an image from Snow White) (44). However, despite the obstacles that women writers have faced for centuries, “the fears of sterility and the anxieties of authorship from which women have suffered”, many female writers, including Anne Finch, Emily Brontë, and Emily Dickinson, have succeeded in freeing themselves from the “suffocating tight-laces” of patriarchal ideology (44). Thus, Gilbert and Gubar argue, a woman writer, in search of herself, needs to be aware of the images that have been generated for her and strive to rise from the “glass-coffin of male authored texts” (44).

Under particular investigation in this project, is the oppression of women and the silencing of their voices, both by the male characters in the novels and by the author himself. When looking at the selection of novels by John Steinbeck interrogated in this project, it is clear that a feminist reading of these works is necessary. Gilbert and Gubar's notion of the 'angel / monster' image of females that often exists within patriarchal literature will be especially interesting in analysing the female characters in Steinbeck's novels. Like many other male writers, it is evident that Steinbeck often falls into the trap of creating female characters who adhere to the roles of either angel or monster, while his male characters are typically more rounded and less confined to stereotypical roles.

Furthermore, Steinbeck's female characters are often forced into rigid positions, such as the role of the mother, the daughter, the wife, and the temptress. The significance of these roles and the consequences they bear for these women will be investigated using Butler's concept of performativity in gender roles.

In any critical analysis, it is important to deconstruct the silences. Hence, from a feminist point of view, it is important to analyse not only the female characters of a novel, but it is equally important to examine the lack of women characters and the lack of feminine presence. This is the third issue this dissertation will investigate, as one of Steinbeck's novels in particular, namely *Of Mice and Men*, is characterized by the glaring absence of female characters. As this novel contains only one female character, it is interesting to examine the particular role of *femme fatale* Steinbeck has given her, as the patriarchal ideology existent in male writing, is most clearly exposed through this character.

As the three novels, *In Dubious Battle*, *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath* which will be examined in this paper, were written during the 1930s, it is helpful to explore that particular era and investigate whether Steinbeck's writing in any way reflects the existing societal and political situation of that time.

3. Steinbeck's Silenced Women: An Analysis

Since his first widely-read novel, *Tortilla Flat* (1935), was published, Steinbeck has consistently associated his name with the underprivileged, the poor and the downtrodden. Steinbeck's characters are typically portrayed as male, heterosexual, and working class, such as political ideologists and strike instigators Jim and Mac in *In Dubious Battle*, farmhands Lennie and George in *Of Mice and Men*, and the migrating Joad family in *The Grapes of Wrath* (Walicek 759). These characters, the broken and oppressed migrant workers in the search of metaphorical and literal greener pastures, have become symbolically significant in the post-war United States due to the challenges they pose to the American Dream. A central image in almost all of Steinbeck's writing is the earthly paradise, represented by the Californian fruit orchards and humanity's continuous yearning for a better life. Louis Owens argues, however, that "there are no Eden's in Steinbeck's writing, only illusions of Eden, and in the fallen world of the Salinas Valley – which Steinbeck would later place 'east of Eden – the promised land is an illusionary and painful dream" (17).

These themes and characters, Don Walicek says, present "a vision of masculinity far from monolithic", and are infused with a view of maleness that varies along the lines of age, ethnicity, and social class (759). It is curious that Steinbeck, who continuously fought for the marginalised and oppressed, utterly ignores the plight of

women in most of his writing, as his focus remains unwaveringly on the struggles of men. He is a man and narrates with a male voice, while silencing the women and denying their personhood.

Dagmar Schulz theorises that this glaring absence of female subjectivity and insight stems from Steinbeck's personal relation to women, which was, at best, problematic, otherwise, Schulz says, "he would not have had to emphasize his manliness in the way he did" (37). Steinbeck's problematic relation to women is particularly evident in a letter written shortly after the divorce from his second wife, Gwyn. Steinbeck wrote:

The breed of American women ... they have the minds of whores and the vaginas of Presbyterians. They are trained by their mothers in a contempt for men and so they compete with men and when they don't win, they whimper and go to psychoanalysts. The American girl makes a servant of her husband and then finds him contemptible for being a servant. American married life is the doormat to the whore house. ... The impulse of the American woman to geld her husband and castrate her sons is very strong. This feeling has been brought home to me by Mexican women who are quite content to be women and who are good at it as opposed to ours who try to be men and aren't good at it at all. (qtd in Steinbeck & Wallsten 343)

In addition to reflecting a misogynistic view of women, this excerpt reveals a discomfort and fear of women, especially women who "try to be men", and refuse to conform to traditional gender roles that confine them to passivity and virginal purity. This fear of the 'new woman', observed in a great deal of patriarchal literature, is perhaps the reason why Steinbeck often chooses to confine his female characters to

the margin by silencing them and making them responsible for the demise of men, as can be seen in the selected texts under investigation.

3.1 In Dubious Battle

Steinbeck's fifth published novel, *In Dubious Battle*, written in 1936, became the first novel in the Dustbowl Trilogy, a series of three novels created by Steinbeck in order to highlight the plight of the migrant workers and the appalling working conditions they suffered. *In Dubious Battle* portrays the desperation and hopelessness faced by a group of men who are trying to free their fellow workers from a life of poverty and enslavement to the capitalist system. The apple strike, which serves as the central event in the novel, is based on the many strikes that took place in the United States, and particularly California, during the 1930s. Steinbeck, who had witnessed first-hand the Cotton Workers strike in 1933 and the Longshoreman's strike in 1934, confirmed that the novel was based upon actual events, saying that "In this book I was making nothing up" (Melnic 97).

The novel *In Dubious Battle* centres around the character Jim Nolan, an aimless young man in search of purpose and direction in life. After forming a close friendship with the charismatic political activist, Mac, Jim finds himself entirely consumed by political ideology and finds a new sense of focus and determination in his life. The two men successfully instigate a strike among the apple pickers in a California valley, and Jim is eager to take on a leading position, but is continuously held back by Mac, who has a strong need to protect Jim. At the climax of the novel, the strike

has eventually spiralled out of control and a number of men are killed, among them Jim.

Having spent a considerable amount of time in the field, observing and interacting with migrant workers and leaders of labour organizations, Steinbeck aimed at creating a novel which would accurately portray the lives of these people who were “not migrants by nature ... [but] gypsies by force of circumstances” (Steinbeck, *The Harvest Gypsies* 5). The manuscript of *In Dubious Battle*, first completed in 1933 was initially rejected as the editor, known for his communist sympathies, regarded the Marxist ideology of the strike organizers as inaccurate and was under the impression that Steinbeck lacked the knowledge to write a political novel like this (French ix). Three years later, however, the novel was published and received great acclaim from critics and readers alike and, much to Steinbeck’s surprise, landed immediately on the bestseller lists.

In Dubious Battle has been the subject of numerous scholarly analyses, largely because of its strong political theme, reflecting the political upheaval in the United States in the 1930s. The fact that Steinbeck is known for his sympathies for the working class coupled with the nature of this novel’s political affiliations, has invited countless analyses from a Marxist perspective and Steinbeck has been praised for his representation and portrayal of the working man. When scrutinizing the novel from a feminist view, however, another issue comes to light for which Steinbeck is also known: his overwhelming underrepresentation of women and the glaring absence of female characters in many of his novels. *In Dubious Battle* is precisely such a novel, as it contains numerous well-rounded male characters and only one

lone female character, whose existence in the novel is barely, if at all, necessary to the development of the plot.

As is typical of many of Steinbeck's novels, *In Dubious Battle* places strong emphasis on the different relationships between men, such as those between friends (Jim and Mac), subordinates and superiors (London and the workers), fathers and sons (Anderson and Al). The women are either portrayed as being bad, dirty, and harmful to the development and well-being of men, or as virginal, immature and child-like. One of the first female characters introduced in the novel, is the old woman who is meant to deliver Lisa's child. The woman, "old and wrinkled" and with "nails [that] were long and broken and dirty", epitomizes the notion of the 'bad' woman, the witch, an image which stands in stark contrast to the young and frightened Lisa (*In Dubious Battle* 43-44). The particular words used to describe the old woman, and the other women in the novel, too, for that matter, emphasize the patriarchal discourse used to describe the feminine, and which serves to further undermine and marginalize the status of women. 'Fortunately' Mac arrives and, with his usual air of confidence and authority, manages to organize the frightening situation in the birthing tent. His first order is to "kick that old girl out" and take over the responsibility of delivering Lisa's baby (44). Mac later admits to Jim that he has never seen a birth before: "God, I was lucky it came through all right. ... That old woman knew lots more than I did" (48). With his 'natural' male sense of order and superiority, Mac is able to create "much needed authority, order and hierarchy to the scene of darkness and chaos" (Adair 54). While the "old woman was crouched in a corner", the men, under Mac's command, get to work:

A change was in the air. The apathy was gone from the men. .. A current of excitement filled the jungle, but a kind of joyful excitement. ... The men seemed suddenly happy. They laughed together as they broke dead cottonwood branches for the fire (*In Dubious Battle* 46).

This scene, Vivyan Adair argues, highlights women's "deformed sexuality, filth, and ignorance", while the men are seen to "bring light, order, and propriety to women's sexualized, dark, and chaotic "jungle" (54). This image of Mac confidently taking on the role of the leader, mobilizing the men, who, listless and apathetic at first, respond to his voice of authority, and banish the ignorant and dirty old woman, reflects the traditional dominance and authority of men over women, as described by de Beauvoir, even when, as in this case, the women have more knowledge and experience than the men. The men's "joyful excitement" at performing tasks that could potentially save a woman's life and that of her baby, indicates a kind of thoughtlessness and ignorance towards the gravity of the situation. In other instances in the novel, where men are hurt, and in much less danger of dying than a woman during childbirth, the men show far more concern, indicating the marginal importance women have in the mind of men.

Shortly after delivering the baby, Mac says to Jim: "We've got to use whatever material comes to us. That was a lucky break. We simply had to take it. 'Course it was nice to help the girl but hell, even if it killed her – we've got to use anything" (*In Dubious Battle* 48). The fact that Mac views Lisa's situation as a way to gain the other men's trust and approval, and shows no real concern for her health and well-being, highlights the feminist notion of women serving as stepping stones to men's greatness in patriarchal societies. Rubin and Irigaray both argue that the subjugation

of women is rooted in the social systems of capitalism, dominated by men, where women are reduced to objects or products to be used by men (Irigaray 800). The fundamental role of women, and, in this case, Lisa, is merely to establish relations between men, without ever gaining access to the social order themselves (810-811).

Lisa, while being the only female character of importance, is nonetheless an extremely marginalized character who is of no importance to the development of the novel. Lisa is a typical 'good' woman, meaning that she is passive, silent, and offers no resistance to the dominance of the men in her life. In a novel filled with male characters, Lisa really stands out as a lone female surrounded by men. Her father, London, is a kind but dominant and imposing man, her husband, albeit a quiet and basically non-existent character, controls her by virtue of being her husband, the men in the camp desire her, and even her child, whom she nurtures and cares for, is male. The absence of any females in Lisa's life is glaringly obvious, as Steinbeck makes no mention of her mother or other significant females in her life. She is thus the perfect example of Cixous' "woman [who] exists in a man's world, on his terms" (qtd in Tong 224).

Being a 'good' woman, Lisa is extremely shy, often frightened, painfully self-conscious, and is always seen to blush whenever she is addressed by a man. When she speaks, she whispers and stutters, her eyes either wide-eyed or cast downward. Jim, who does not view her in a sexual manner, treats her with an air of patronizing superiority, occasionally calling her "kid" and saying things like: "I'm going to talk to you, Lisa. You won't understand, and it won't matter, not a bit" (245).

Jim also draws attention to her seeming ignorance regarding life outside her tent:

“Don’t you ever move around?” Jim asked.

“Huh?”

“You just sit still. All these things go on around you, and you pay no attention. You don’t even hear.” (207).

The fact that Jim makes it sound as if her ignorance is a choice, as if she is willingly confined to her living quarters points to his own ignorance regarding the lack of freedom and independence that women like Lisa have to suffer. Here de Beauvoir’s notion of male transcendence, the men fighting the injustices in the world, versus the immanence of women, idly wasting their days with unimportant things, surfaces.

While Jim displays little awareness of the situation of women, particularly women like Lisa, Mac views women almost exclusively in a sexual light. Shortly after delivering Lisa’s baby he says to Jim: “You know, she’ll be a cute little broad when she gets some clothes and some make-up on. ... I never saw such a bunch of bags as this crowd, ... Only decent one in the camp is thirteen years old.” (58). Later in the novel, as he and Jim visit London’s tent, Mac looks at Lisa and says:

“Lisa you’re a lucky little twirp, you just had a kid. You’d have me in your hair.”

“Huh?”

“I say: How’s the baby?”

“All right.”

Mac nodded gravely at Jim. “I like a woman who doesn’t talk too much.” (201)

Mac's preference for women who are silent, reflects his role of representing the traditional male figure in patriarchal literature, who has little regard for women as individual, autonomous beings. For men like Mac, women are supposed to conform to their traditional roles which involve being submissive, unobservant, deaf, dumb, and blind, and in every way inferior to the most ordinary, average male (Prose 9). The silencing of women and female voicelessness is a social phenomenon which often finds manifestation in literature. Many women writers have attempted to deal with this issue by creating female characters who learn to express themselves and thus are able to reclaim their voice, and by extension, their power (Trites 202-203). To deny a woman her voice, which is a common practice in patriarchal literature, effectively disconnects her from her surroundings and ensures her repression and subjugation, as can be seen in the case of Lisa in *In Dubious Battle* (214). Instead of empowering her, Steinbeck successfully isolates Lisa by silencing her, both literally and symbolically. The fact that Mac sees Lisa's voicelessness in a positive light, serves to emphasize the patriarchal belief that the epitome of femaleness lies in her silence and subjugation.

This notion of female silence further brings to mind the concept of female selflessness and sainthood, which, according to male authors, such as Edgar Allen Poe, can only be achieved in death (Gilbert & Gubar 25). The image of the dead female further underlines the patriarchal belief that women should only display characteristics which renders them death-like, such as submissiveness, ignorance, and silence.

Apart from Lisa, the other women at the camp are mere shadows, never receiving enough attention to be regarded as character. "They are 'whores'", Adair says, "who

play no active role in the strike but are nevertheless constructed as disruptive since sex is depicted as the cause and result of uncontrolled violence” (54-55). The sexualisation of these women in the background is consistent throughout the text. For instance, Mrs Dakin, “a fine, big-bosomed woman with a full face, with little red pots of rouge on her cheeks” and “husky voice” serves no other purpose in the novel than being an object of pride for her husband. Without being given a first name, and having no independent identity or purpose, Mrs Dakin is created solely in relation to her husband – serving as ‘the other’ to his Self. This dichotomy between Self and Other, as conceptualized by de Beauvoir, has always existed within the hegemonic structures of patriarchy and is represented by other dichotomous pairs in which the negative is always associated with the feminine and the positive with the masculine (de Beauvoir 6). De Beauvoir’s notion that man constructs himself as the One, and regards himself as an autonomous being, who can “think himself without woman”, while woman exists only in relation to man, is unquestionably accepted by the female characters in this novel. Mrs Dakin is only the most obvious example of a woman who lacks autonomy. Her entire existence as a literary character is due to her husband, and like Lisa, she has no impact on the development of the novel, or on the lives of any of the characters. She simply exists, as a dutiful wife and mother to her husband and children, and a sexual attraction to the other male characters.

Lisa, too, serves as the Other, existing only in relation to the men around her. Her existence is utterly irrelevant were it not for the fact that the male characters need her in certain ways, either to emphasize their gentle and good nature (Jim), or to further their own agenda (Mac). Her passive acceptance of the circumstances in which she finds herself stands in stark contrast to men’s fiery, and sometimes violent, opposition to their situation. While the men are out fighting a powerful

enemy, willing to sacrifice everything, for the hopes of a better future, Lisa spends her days in solitude, hiding in her tent, nursing her baby and generally being ignored by those around her. Furthermore, by her being a mother and a wife, Lisa is the perfect representation of de Beauvoir's notion of woman's enslavement to the species (de Beauvoir 60). Motherhood and marriage, according to de Beauvoir, serve to enslave women to the man and the home, and alienates them from society. This is clearly the case with Lisa, as she is perpetually confined to the background, hindered to escape her situation by her role as a mother (341). Furthermore, de Beauvoir states that while the masculine symbolizes transcendence, activity, self-realization, and freedom, the feminine represents immanence, passivity, futility, and dependence. Thus, by acting as the Other to his Self, the woman, with her self-sacrificing ways, enables the man to be autonomous and place himself in the centre of the hegemonic structure.

Another nameless woman appears later in the novel as Jim walks through the camp and suddenly spots the dark-haired woman with the "long white throat", combing "her hair with long, beautiful sweeps of her arm" (236). Jim cannot tear himself away from this vision: "You make me feel good," he said". His illusion of this 'angel', however, is crushed, when she reveals herself to be sexually promiscuous and not at all angel-like: "[W]hen he passed along ... the tousled head darted out and the husky voice whispered, "Come on in, quick, he's gone now" (236). The incident leaves Jim looking "tickled to death", as Mac observes, and makes him think of his mother, and how she introduced him to the image of the Virgin Mary (236). The fact that Jim was not interested in a sexual encounter with the woman, and that he immediately afterwards thinks of his mother and the Virgin Mary, serves to emphasize his intentions as being pure and uncorrupted, unlike Mac, who can only think of women

in terms of sexual desire. The image of this woman as both a pure angel and a sexually promiscuous whore is a reflection of Gilbert and Gubar's notion of the angel/monster which is deeply embedded in male-authored literature (Gilbert & Gubar 28). This woman was thus created as the negative embodiment of femininity and to serve as an opposite to Lisa's pure and virginal character.

In *In Dubious Battle*, Steinbeck further devalues women by portraying them as "bedraggled" and "listless and stale" (*In Dubious Battle* 137) and likening them to animals: "The women crawled like rodents from the tents" (197). Lisa's comparison to a bird is perhaps marginally less offensive; however, it still serves to depict her as fragile and helpless. This apparent superiority with which both Steinbeck, as well as his male characters, treats women, can be explained using Ortner's notion that the source of female subjugation lies in the fact that women are associated with nature, while men are identified with culture. Ortner argues that it is culture's perpetual project to transcend and dominate nature, thus men have a 'natural' instinct to subordinate and subsume women (Ortner 12).

As is evident in many of his works, Steinbeck tends to cast his characters in their traditional gender roles. In *In Dubious Battle*, however, there is one character, namely that of the doctor, who does not display any of the typically masculine traits like the other men. He is described as a "young man", whose "face was almost girlish in its delicacy, and his large eyes had a soft, sad look" (*In Dubious Battle* 96). These characteristics, from the large eyes, to the delicate face indicate a distinct femininity not existent in any of the other men. His character is also radically different from the others, and often his demeanour bears a strong resemblance to that of Lisa. Doc Burton lacks any aggressiveness in his character; on the contrary, he is often meek

and careful in the way he speaks and acts, and his authority is questioned. He is often seen to be “chuckling softly” or “laughing apologetically”, and on one occasion even reprimands himself for speaking too much: “I shouldn’t have talked so much. But it does clarify a thought to get it spoken, even if no one listens” (115).

With this statement, Steinbeck forces the traditional feminine qualities, to which he has also subjected Lisa, upon the doctor and, in relation to the extremely masculine Mac, makes him appear essentially feminine. Not only the external characteristics mark the doctor as different from the other men, but his way of thinking is different too, according to Mac:

“D’you hear that, Jim? That’ll show you what Burton is. Here’s a couple of fine dogs, good hunting dogs, but they’re not dogs to doc, they’re feelings. They are dogs to me.” (115)

Here Mac clearly makes a distinction between Burton and men like himself, feminizing Burton by mentioning his feelings and emphasizing his own rational, unemotional masculinity. In other words, Mac puts himself up as the One, while Burton serves as his other. Mac’s next utterance – “If he wasn’t a doctor, we couldn’t have ‘im around” - further serves to feminize the doctor and undermine his masculinity, as this comment reminds the reader of the sentiments Mac expressed towards Lisa after he delivered her baby (115). Like Lisa, Doc Burton is valuable solely because of his usefulness to Mac’s personal agenda.

Jim’s masculinity is also undermined, as he and Mac seem to develop a co-dependent relationship, with Mac in the role of the ‘parent’ and Jim in the role of the child.

“What are you going to do, Mac?”

“Me? Oh, I thought I’d take a look around, see if everything’s all right.”

“I want to go with you. I just follow you around”

“Sh-h, don’t talk so loud”... “You do help me, Jim. It may be sloppy as an old woman, but you keep me from being scared.”

“I don’t do anything but pad around after you,” said Jim.

“I know. I guess I’m getting soft. I’m scared something might happen to you. I shouldn’t have brought you down, Jim.” (116)

In these lines, the balance of power is clearly in Mac’s favour. He is the parental figure who cares and worries about Jim like a child. Jim takes on the subservient role of the child as he looks up to Mac to guide him and, as he admits himself, follows Mac wherever he goes. This, in many ways, feminizes Jim, as he is treated more delicately and with more care than any of the other, more masculinized men. Steinbeck further likens Jim to Lisa, when Mac says: “Listen, Jim, you didn’t get bothered by what Doc said, did you?” and Jim replies: “No. I didn’t listen.” (116). The fact that Mac is worried that Jim might be upset, indicates that he views Jim as less masculine, as, traditionally speaking, only women are concerned with emotions and feelings. Jim’s statement that he “didn’t listen” is significant, as it mirrors the conversation he has with Lisa at a later point where he draws attention to her feminine ignorance, saying that not only does she not care, she does not even listen, which is precisely what he himself chooses to do when he plays the role of the submissive. Jim is further feminized when he is confined to the tent after sustaining

an injury. Like Lisa, he has to spend his time in passivity, waiting for the others to bring him food and look after him.

In Dubious Battle reveals Steinbeck's problematic portrayal of both the masculine and the feminine, as the novel is open to Lisa's suffering and silencing, while simultaneously offering a portrayal of female inadequacy and the male dominion thereof. This marginalization of women and feminization of certain men is seen again in the Dustbowl Trilogy's second novel *Of Mice and Men*.

3.2 Of Mice and Men

In 1935 Steinbeck started working on a new story that would become, *Of Mice and Men*. The 1937 published short novel, which was first intended to be a children's book, became one of Steinbeck's most celebrated works, and has inspired several theatre and film adaptations. In this novel, Steinbeck once again bases his description of the characters and setting on actual encounters with migrant workers, with the aim to expose the struggle and hopelessness experienced by these victims of circumstance. The popularity of this work, to a large extent, stems from Steinbeck's uncanny ability to capture the goodness and humanity inherent in even the most crude and wretched characters. Furthermore, the moral dilemmas presented in the novel, coupled with the objective and non-judgemental narration, a hallmark of his writing, give *Of Mice and Men* depth and complexity.

Of Mice and Men tells the story of two farmhands, George Milton and Lennie Small, who travel up and down the Salinas valley in search of work. The two men share a strong bond, and the dream that keeps them going is that one day they will have

enough money to own a farm and live off the land. The farm in Solidad, where George and Lennie have found employment, acts as the setting of the climax of the novel, when Lennie, whose limited mental capabilities preclude rational thought, accidentally kills the boss's daughter-in-law. As a result, George is forced to make an impossibly difficult moral decision concerning Lennie's life.

The title of the novel, taken from the poem *To a Mouse* by Robert Burns alludes to the central theme of the novel:

But Mousie, thou are no thy-lane,
In proving foresight may be vain:
The best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men,
Gang aft agley,
An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain,
For promis'd joy! (Burns 296)

Peter Lisca argues that just as "Burns extends the mouse's experience to include that of mankind, *Of Mice and Men* extends the experience of two migrant workers to the human conditions" (*The Wide World of John Steinbeck* 40-41).

The theme of the fallen man attempting to find or create a new Eden, a theme that is commonly found in Steinbeck's writing, is, in *Of Mice and Men*, represented by the farm about which George and Lennie dream. The farm, portrayed as a place where men will be able to live in peace and unity, parallels the abstract qualities of the biblical Eden (Burkhead 60). George and Lennie's dream never materializes, and "[i]n withholding Eden from his characters," Burkhead says, "Steinbeck confirms that such searching will always be fruitless" (60). This nihilistic belief that nothing has any value, particularly in terms of religious and moral principles, is a clear expression of

the hopelessness and cynicism of existential ideology, which is a predominant characteristic of modernist writing.

Another central theme in this novel is the theme of friendship, and as in *In Dubious Battle*, it is the relationship between men upon which Steinbeck focuses. The bond between George and Lennie is characterized by a mutual commitment to each other, and although the power dynamics are out of balance between the pair, George needs Lennie just as much as Lennie needs George in order to realize their dream. Critics have argued that George and Lennie represent the dichotomy of masculinity and femininity, with George representing the patriarch. He is the creator of their mutual dream, he is in charge of the finances and often exerts his dominance over Lennie, particularly when he dictates when Lennie can and cannot speak. Lennie, on the other hand, with his nurturing, submissive and dependent character, embodies the principles of femininity (Emery 126). “Ultimately,” Emery says, “George’s need and desire to confirm his membership in the powerful and dominant community drives him to kill his partner as a sacrificial rite of initiation” (125).

While the majority of critical analyses of *Of Mice and Men* have primarily focused on the political content of the novel as an illustration of the failings of capitalism, others have pointed out the sociological issues, such as the “unenlightened treatment of old people and the mentally retarded” (Goldhurst 50). This blatant ignorance for the subjugation of women in the novel, points to the patriarchal tendency of preserving the patriarchy (Emery 125). Jean Emery, however, claims that the novel is not merely a tragic story of a failed economic dream, but rather, “the story actually demonstrates the achievement of a dream – that of a homogenous male fraternity

not just to repress, but to eliminate women and femininity. ... [It] depicts the rescue of men from women" (125).

In this novel, Steinbeck continues his tradition of marginalizing and subjugating women according to patriarchal ideology. Like in *In Dubious Battle, Of Mice and Men* contains only one proper female character, and like Lisa, this character is utterly underdeveloped and is severely mistreated by both the author and the other male characters. The most obvious way in which Steinbeck chooses to diminish this female's status is by denying her a name. She is simply identified as belonging to her husband and is known as Curley's wife. This namelessness is significant as it denies her a fundamental identity and a sense of self. The fact that she is distinguished from other women merely by her relation to a man is precisely the kind of subjugation discussed in Rubin and Irigaray's theories concerning the trafficking in women and the male sense of ownership regarding females.

Cynthia Burkhead further argues that Curley's wife's namelessness is significant as it diminishes her importance and fails to elicit sympathy for her in the mind of the reader (61). "Without a name," Burkhead says, "Curley's wife does not seem as real a person as a character with a name, an identifying marker. Thus, her death at Lennie's hands is less tragic than if she were named" (61). Furthermore, without a name to properly distinguish her from other women, she becomes representative of women. In that sense, what applies to her, thus applies to all women. Since Steinbeck's portrayal of Curley's wife can be considered negative, it reveals a certain authorial negativity towards women in general (61). The men's antagonism is evident in the words they use to refer to Curley's wife, including "tramp", "tart", "bitch", "tease" and "jailbait" amongst others, and reveals a deep seated discomfort and

hatred for women, an attitude also evident in the author himself. It is important to note that all these words are sexually charged terms negating her personhood referring to her only as a sexual being. The two last terms in particular, suggest her destructive intent to men. Emery further notes that “by refusing to her name, these men attempt to rob her of her power over them, just as a superstitious and primitive native might refuse to invoke the name of a feared spirit” (127).

In this male world that exists in *Of Mice and Men*, women and feminine traits are considered intruders and threats to the men, and the novel seems to suggest that men need rescuing from the dark and destructive grip of women (Emery 128). The fact that it is a woman who is responsible for the destruction of man and his dreams, reflects the biblical story of Eve, the original fallen woman who is responsible for the misery of all mankind. According to Gilbert and Gubar, this tendency to portray the female as a monster is a distinct characteristic of male-authored literature and is found throughout the Western literary cannon (28).

Steinbeck’s hostile attitude towards Curley’s wife is evident in his portrayal of her as a temptress and a whore:

She had full, rouged lips and wide-spaced eyes, heavily made up. Her fingernails were red. Her hair hung in little rolled clusters, like sausages. ... She put her hands behind her back and leaned against the door frame so that her body was thrown forward. (*Of Mice and Men*, 54)

Immediately after first meeting her, George says: “Jesus what a tramp. ... So that’s what Curley picks for a wife. ... [S]he’s a rattrap if I’ve ever seen one” (55-56).

George's hostility towards the woman reflects the way the rest of the men on the ranch feel about her. One of the young ranch hands, Whit, warns George:

[S]tick around an' keep your eyes open. You'll see plenty. She ain't concealing nothing. I never seen nobody like her. She got the eye goin' all the time on everybody. I bet she even gives the stable buck the eye. (75)

In contrast to Curley's wife's roaming, 'evil' eye, Slim, a long-term labourer on the ranch, is portrayed as having "calm, Godlike eyes" (64).

Curley's wife's depiction as being evil, disloyal, and seductive, is further emphasized by her physical description. Burkhead notes that she is almost always depicted as wearing some form of red clothing. Traditionally, the colour red is associated with violent passion and disorder, and thus reinforces the male characters' suggestions that she is a whore and a 'bad' woman (61).

Curley's wife's existence is perceived as a disruption to the male hegemony on the farm, and her behaviour is regarded as a "corrupting threat to the group" (Burkhead 61). She frequently appears in places where she is not supposed to be, such as the male territories of the bunkhouse and the barn. Her intrusion is continuously highlighted as the men constantly dismiss her and openly display their discomfort at her presence, fearing both her reputation as a temptress and Curley's wrath. Her blatant disregard to be confined to 'her' space – the main house, or more specifically, the kitchen – and Curley's inability to control her "creates chaos amidst the orderliness of the farm" and she is thus perceived as a threat to the calm and stable world of the men around her (Burkhead 61). In terms of Ortner's theory on female subjugation, Curley's determination to control his wife, mirrors culture's need to

dominate nature. The representation of Curley's wife as a menacing force reflects the unruly wildness of nature, which threatens culture, and thus needs to be suppressed.

Curley's wife's portrayal as a 'monster', the complete opposite of the pure and virginal angel, is further emphasized by the enormous power she holds over the men. As she rightly observes: "If I catch any one man, and he's alone, I get along fine with him. But just let two of the guys get together an' you won't talk" (*Of Mice and Men* 102). Presumably, the reason why the men tend to avoid her when in the presence of another man lies in the fact that none of them want a witness to their interaction, however innocent in nature, with the temptress who is Curley's wife. The men are aware of the consequences any inappropriate behaviour could spur, and attempt, at all costs, to maintain a guilt-free conscience. As indicated by Lennie's last encounter with a woman at the previous work place, where he was falsely accused of rape and thus forced to leave the ranch, Steinbeck's female characters tend to use their sexuality to wield their power over men. Curley's wife does so too, when she threatens Crooks, the stable hand:

"You know what I can do to you if you open your trap?"

Crooks stared hopelessly at her, and then he sat down on his bunk and drew into himself.

She closed on him. "You know what I could do?"

Crooks seemed to grow smaller, and he pressed himself against the wall.

"Yes, ma am."

“Well, you keep your place then, Nigger. I could get you strung up in a tree so easy it ain’t even funny.” (106)

Her power, even to the point of life and death, lies in her sexuality, and she is clearly not afraid or even ashamed to use it in her favour. This open acknowledgement of the power of female sexuality is strictly discouraged in patriarchal cultures, as sexual prowess and desire are typically reserved for males, while females are characterized by their frigidity and sexual passivity. By acting against the norm of her gender, and refusing to play the part of the angel, Curley’s wife is inevitably transformed into a monster (Moi 57). The negative influence of her presence is not confined to the workers on the ranch; Curley’s raging jealousy is fuelled by her actions, and, as Candy observes: “...Curley is cockier’n ever since he got married” (*Of Mice and Men* 50). Here Curley’s wife is explicitly blamed for the negative behaviour of her husband. In regard to jealousy, de Beauvoir argues in *The Second Sex*, that in a patriarchal society, men have every right to be jealous as women can be suspected without reason and constantly have to prove their innocence (212). This holds true for Curley’s wife, who is judged and condemned by a stranger (George), and viewed as treacherous and disloyal by the men on the ranch.

Despite Steinbeck’s negative portrayal of the feminine, Curley’s wife possesses a certain perceptiveness and awareness that mark her as far more than a foolish and shallow whore. Her ability to recognize the anxiety that surrounds the men in her presence, allows her to comment on the fear that is embedded in the men: “You are all scared of each other, that’s what. Ever’ one of you’s scared the rest is goin’ to get something on you” (*Of Mice and Men* 102).

In the argument that follows between her and Crooks, a new depth to Curley's wife's character is discovered, namely that she is deeply unhappy about the situation she finds herself in:

"Well, I ain't giving you trouble. Think I don't like to talk to somebody ever' once in a while? Think I like to stick in that house alla time?"

Candy laid the stump of his wrist on his knee and rubbed it gently with his hand. He said accusingly, "You gotta husban'. You got no call foolin' aroun' with other guys, causin' trouble."

The girl flared up. "Sure I gotta husban'. You all seen him. Swell guy, ain't he? Spends all his time sayin' what he's gonna do to guys he don't like, and he don't like nobody."

"I had enough," [Candy] said angrily. "You ain't wanted here. We told you you ain't. You ain't got sense enough in that chicken head to even see that we ain't stiffs." (103-104)

Later, immediately prior to her murder, Curley's wife confides in Lennie, telling him how she could have been an actor, but instead she ended up marrying Curley: "I don' *like* Curley. He ain't a nice fella. Could been in the movies an' had nice clothes – al them nice clothes like they wear. ... Because this guy says I was a natural" (115). Using de Beauvoir's theory to analyse Curley's wife's situation, it is clear that the regret and resentment in her tone stems from the fact that she has had to sacrifice her life of transcendence, and instead, through the oppressive marriage to Curley, has been relegated to a life of immanence. The entrapment that she

experiences as a result of her marriage has left her isolated and alone, stranded in a man's world where she is neither accepted nor respected, and only barely tolerated. It is not coincidental that it is Lennie, in whom she confides, as he is the only person who does not openly despise her, and she identifies with him as he, too, is an outsider in the male hegemony that exists on the ranch (Burkhead 52). His child-like demeanour and effeminate ways make him less threatening than the other males, and thus enables Curley's wife to lower her guard and voice her unhappiness. Thus, it is evident that even a 'bad' woman, like Curley's wife, who attempts to resist the oppression and subjugation of the men around her, by overtly expressing her sexuality and refusing to play the role of the submissive virgin, is silenced and denied a voice by the men around her, as well as the author himself. Only through the encounter with a less masculine person, someone who, in a strictly patriarchal community, is viewed as unmanly, can the woman regain her voice. Ironically, it is this moment of intimacy and trust, a moment that uplifts and strengthens Curley's wife that ultimately leads to her death. The manner in which she is killed, the brute strength Lennie uses to break her neck with his bare hands, attests to the violent and hostile attitude of the masculine towards the perverted feminine:

She struggled violently under his hands. Her feet battered on the hay and she writhed to be free; and from under Lennie's hand came a muffled screaming. .. He moved his hand a little and her hoarse cry came out. Then Lennie grew angry. "Now don't," he said. "I don't want you to yell. You gonna get me in trouble jus' like George says you will. Now don't you do that." And she continued to struggle, and her eyes were wild with terror. He shook her then, and he was angry with her. "Don't you go yellin'," he said, and he shook her;

and her body flopped like a fish. And then she was still, for Lennie had broken her neck. (117)

This scene very graphically illustrates the masculine need to subdue the feminine, culture's unrelenting dominance over nature. It also depicts the ultimate silencing of the woman, as Curley's wife is silenced, not only metaphorically, but also literally, forever.

After *Of Mice and Men* was adapted for the theatre, the play's Broadway director criticised the character of Curley's wife for being "too underdeveloped", saying that she should have been "drawn more fully" (Gladstein 203). In response to the criticism, Steinbeck attempted to give more depth to the character by explaining her background and the reasons for her predatory behaviour. In a letter to Claire Luce, the actor portraying Curley's wife, Steinbeck wrote that the character grew up in an abusive household and thus never learned to trust (Steinbeck & Wallsten 154). Regarding her sexual overtness, Steinbeck said that "She is a nice, kind girl and not a floozy.... She is not highly sexed particularly but knows instinctively that if she is to be noticed at all, it will be because some one finds her sexually desirable" (qtd in Steinbeck & Wallsten 154-155). Based on this attempt to justify his depiction of Curley's wife, coupled with the portrayal of Lennie, Jean Emery argues that Steinbeck's sympathy lies with the feminine. A close examination of the novel, however, proves the opposite: Steinbeck's writing is saturated with sympathy for the men, while the women are systematically negated. In addition, Burkhead argues, authorial intent is of no interest to the literary critic, as the only thing that matters is what is presented in the text. Thus Steinbeck's attempt at rectifying the audience's perception of Curley's wife proves futile.

From beginning to end, *Of Mice and Men* is filled with patriarchal notions of masculinity and femininity. Nowhere in the novel, however, does Steinbeck's misogynistic attitude become more evident than in the treatment of Curley's wife after her death: "She was very pretty and simple, and her face was sweet and young. Now her rouged cheeks and her reddened lips made her seem alive and sleeping very lightly. The curls, tiny little sausages, were spread on the hay behind her head, and her lips were parted" (*Of Mice and Men* 119).

This image of Curley's wife stands in stark contrast to the previous descriptions. No longer is she depicted as a seductive temptress, but instead she seems child-like and innocent. Although some critics have praised Steinbeck for portraying Curley's wife as "pretty, sweet, and young" in death, it is precisely this image that emphasises the author's adherence to patriarchal ideology discussed by Gilbert and Gubar. The notion that the woman, evil and monstrous in life, becomes virginal and pure only in death reflects the patriarchal sentiments that women can reach sainthood only if they are dead, only then can the whore be transformed and redeemed (Emery 132).

The reactions of the male characters to Curley's wife's death further serve as an example of how women are reduced to objects through the process of 'othering' as discussed by Irigaray and Rubin and de Beauvoir (Burkhead 62). George's grief is not directed at her death, but at the consequence her death has for him and Lennie. Burkhead suggests that George almost resents Curley's wife for getting herself killed, and destroying his dream, thus blaming her death on her depraved, abhorrent behaviour (62). Old Candy's reaction is one of vehement anger: "You God damn tramp", he said viciously. "You done it, di'n't you? I s'pose you're glad. Ever'body

knowed you'd mess things up. You wasn't no good. You ain't no good now, you lousy tart." (*Of Mice and Men* 122)

Curley's own reaction suggests that he is angry for losing a piece of property, rather than his wife. Instead of taking a moment to mourn her death, he immediately initiates his revenge on Lennie. Leaving Curley's wife's body where they found it, the men take off, none of them apparently affected by the loss of a human life; instead each sees her death as an obstacle to his own happiness (Burkhead 62). That Curley's wife is cursed and blamed even in her death only serves to emphasize the patriarchal ideology embedded in the text, and in Steinbeck's portrayal of her. He has effectively denied the female voice and relegated her to the role of the monster. By casting her in this role, however, Steinbeck exposes Curley's cruelty, inadequacies and futile aggression. The novel does, to a certain extent, acknowledge his responsibility for turning his wife into the person she has become: a lost and insecure woman who relies on her sexual attractiveness to compensate for the void in her emotional life.

By comparing *Of Mice and Men* to *In Dubious Battle* it is evident that Steinbeck consistently chooses to marginalize and silence the women, while creating sympathetic portrayals of the male characters. The theme of male friendship is consistent, and in both novels, the men rely and depend on each other. Like Lennie and George, who emulate a married couple in the way George displays his dominance and Lennie his submission, so does the relationship between Jim and Mac resemble the dichotomy of masculinity and femininity. This enacting of gender can be analysed in terms of Butler's theory on gender performativity, which entails

that gender is performed through a formal repetition of acts or hegemonic norms (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 2).

In *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck has once again created a single female inhabiting a male world. Lisa and Curley's wife, however, despite being oppressed and subjugated, are very different, both in character and in their symbolic representation. Lisa, child-like, pure and innocent represents the angel, while Curley's wife, seductive and sexually enticing represents the monster. Instead of creating two characters, an angel and a monster, within one novel, Steinbeck has linked the women across two novels, staying true to the patriarchal notion that for every virginal angel there needs to exist an equally evil monster. This notion will be further explored in the examination of the third novel in the Dustbowl Trilogy, *The Grapes of Wrath*.

3.3 The Grapes of Wrath

Published in 1939, *The Grapes of Wrath* became the final novel in Steinbeck's Dustbowl Trilogy, and arguably his most popular work to date. From the moment of its publication, the novel became an instant bestseller, selling over two thousand copies a day (Adair 35). Steinbeck was praised for his literary representation of the Great Depression, "enabling the public to make meaning of the frightening and chaotic (un)reality of poverty" and creating a sense of order in a world filled with incongruity, disorder, and cultural dis-ease (34). The graphic descriptions of the harrowing effects of poverty, starvation and disease that followed in the shadow of the economic and environmental crisis shocked and offended many of the readers,

who were perhaps not aware of the horror and misery that was the reality for the thousands of homeless families. Although Steinbeck claimed that his portrayal of the migrant families was accurate and based on his own observations travelling along Route 66 and visiting several squatter camps where the 'Okies' were forced to settle, the novel received criticism for providing "propaganda of the vilest sort" according to the Californian Farmers' Associations (Lingo 358). Steinbeck had already gained a reputation as a socialist and an active critic of the capitalist system with the publication of novels such as *Tortilla Flat* and *In Dubious Battle*, and had, according to his adversaries, upset the power structure in California (357). In a series of articles for the *San Francisco Chronicle* titled *Harvest Gypsies*, Steinbeck described the situation of the migrant workers and the attitude they were met with upon arrival in California:

The migrants are needed, and they are hated. Arriving in a district they find the dislike always meted out by the resident to the foreigner, the outlander. ... The migrants are hated for the following reasons, that they are ignorant and dirty people, that they are carriers of disease, that they increase the necessity for police and the tax bill for schooling in a community, and that if they are allowed to organize they can, simply by refusing to work, wipe out a season's crop. (Steinbeck, *Harvest Gypsies* 20)

These sentiments towards the migrant families are clearly mirrored in *The Grapes of Wrath*, as the Joad family, along with many others, struggle for their survival. Due to pressure from the farmers' associations, which were composed of corporations that profited from the corporate farming environment, and landholders such as the Bank of America, and several oil and gas producers, *The Grapes of Wrath* was

subsequently banned in several states and counties across the United States, and even in Canada, Ireland and Turkey (Lingo 356). The board of supervisors of Kern county in the San Joaquin Valley, the place where the Joad's settle upon their arrival in California, banned the novel on the grounds that it:

has offended our citizenry by falsely implying that many of our fine people are low, ignortant [sic], profane and blasphemous type living in a vicious and filthy manner, ... WHEREAS, "Grapes of Wrath" is filled with profanity, lewd, foul, and obscene language unfit for use in American homes, therefore, be it RESOLVED, that we, the BOARD OF SUPERVISORS, in defense of our free enterprise and of people who have been unduly wronged request that ... use and possession and circulation of the novel ... be banned from our library and schools. (qtd in Lingo 352)

The ban of the novel was highly controversial, and numerous supporters came in Steinbeck's defence, most notably Eleanor Roosevelt, the president's wife, who testified that the conditions described in the novel were accurate and not mere exaggeration (Meltzer 125). Despite the highly publicised criticism and controversy surrounding the novel, *The Grapes of Wrath* earned Steinbeck the Pulitzer Prize in 1940, the same year the successful film adaptation was released. The novel is also said to have been a great motivator in Steinbeck's winning of the Nobel Prize in 1962 (Lingo 372).

In contrast to the previous two short novels in the Dustbowl Trilogy, *The Grapes of Wrath* is a work of epic proportions. It follows the lives of the Joad family, who are forced off their land and, lured by the false promise of a better life, make their way to California. Leaving behind their home, and armed with a few household goods, a

meagre supply of food and what little money they have left, the Joads, consisting of Ma and Pa Joad, Grampa and Granma Joad, Uncle John, the grown sons Noah, Tom, and Al, the pregnant daughter Rose of Sharon and her partner Connie, and the young children Winfield and Ruthie, begin the long journey from Oklahoma to California. Despite the limited resources, the family, certain of the opportunities that await them in the West, invite former preacher and friend of Tom's, John Casey to come along, as he is left without a family and a place to go. The Joads, although starting their journey filled with optimism and hope, become increasingly impoverished during the course of the novel, until they end up economically and spiritually broken and bankrupt (Lisca, *The Grapes of Wrath as Fiction* 306). As the family's economic and moral reserves dwindle, the family unit itself breaks up:

Grampa Joad dies before they are out of Oklahoma and lies in a nameless grave; Granma is buried a pauper; Noah deserts the family; Connie deserts Rosasharn; the baby is born dead; Tom becomes a fugitive; Al is planning to leave as soon as possible; Casey is killed; and they are forced to abandon the Wilsons. (Lisca 306)

Despite the utter misery they have to endure, and their grief over the loss of loved ones, the Joad's experience a positive transformation as well. The hopelessness and desperation resulted in their sense of individualism being replaced by a sense of unity and community among the poor and dispossessed: "In the evening a strange thing happened: the twenty families became one family, the children were the children of all. The loss of home became one loss, and the golden time in the West was one dream" (*The Grapes of Wrath* 227). This sense of unity is portrayed in the Joads's friendship with the Wilson family from Kansas, whom they meet shortly

before crossing the Oklahoma border. Both families realise the value of friendship and community, particularly in the face of poverty and destitution. Steinbeck uses this growing awareness among the migrants to criticize the individualistic values of capitalist society, once again emphasizing the socialist values of equality and community, and offering his unwavering support for the working man.

Like *In Dubious Battle* and *Of Mice and Men*, *The Grapes of Wrath* is a novel fully immersed in the patriarchal tradition of portraying the world seen through the eyes of men, emphasizing the relationships of men to each other and to the rest of the world (McKay 50). In terms of the placement of women, however, this novel differs from the previous two, in that the women are not confined to the margin, but are central to the action in the novel and the development of the plot. In fact, the women are portrayed as essential in a time of crisis, as both men and children look to the women for answers to their survival (51). Steinbeck, however, continues to place men in the centre of the novel's world, while the women are depicted as existing only in relation to men, as can be seen in chapter one:

Men stood by their fences and looked at the ruined corn, drying fast now, only a little green showing through the film of dust. The men were silent and they did not move often. And the women came out of the houses to stand beside their men – to feel whether this time the men would break. ... After a while the faces of the watching men lost their bemused perplexity and became hard and angry and resistant. Then the women knew that they were safe and that there was no break. ... The women knew that it was all right, and the watching children knew that it was all right. Women and children knew deep in

themselves that no misfortune was too great to bear if their men were whole.

(6)

Here Steinbeck makes it clear that the women put the feelings of the men before their own, indicating that as long as the men are surviving, they will survive too. In light of Beauvoir's theory, this scene emphasizes the notion that a woman's place is rooted in the interest of others, particularly her husband and children, and that in a patriarchal society, a woman serves merely as the Other to the man's Self (McKay 51). The women act as a mirror to the men, reflecting their behaviour and actions. The men are the emotional compass which determines the women's actions and reactions. Thus, in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck has once again created women who, with their unobtrusive and supportive silence, exist only to make the lives of the men more bearable.

When examining *The Grapes of Wrath*, however, it becomes clear that women play a central role and are needed in a time of crisis. Warren Motley argues that in this novel, Steinbeck, influenced by anthropologist Robert Briffault's theories on the matriarchal origin of society, reverses the patriarchal tradition as he portrays the Joad family as shifting from a patriarchal structure to a predominantly matriarchal one (397).

Motley argues that the shock of dispossession undermined the authority of the Joad men to such an extent that they were forced to revert to a more "primitive economic and social stage", such as matriarchy, and as long as the Joads "continued to think only in terms of the self-sufficient patriarchal family," Motley says, "their efforts to overcome oppression would be doomed" (402). In the beginning of the novel, the patriarchal structure of the family is still intact, and everyone submits to their place in

the hierarchy. The traditional authority of the men is made evident in the scene where the men squat down, clustering around Grampa Joad, the titular head of the family, while the women and children “stand as if in a gallery behind them” (Motley 402). In this fashion, the family would decide on the course of action. Although the women do have a voice in the deliberations, the final decision rests with the older men, “the nucleus” of the family (*The Grapes of Wrath* 116). Motley argues that this scene is of particular significance as it reflects the intimate relationship between the farmer patriarch and his property:

In times of adversity [the man] draws his strength from his connection with the land, not from his association with society. Thus, the position of greatest authority in the Joad’s ceremonial hierarchy is the position closest to the soil. The women and children stand; ... the men who make the decisions squat. Their authority is rooted in ownership of the land... (403)

Steinbeck emphasizes the importance of work and physical labour for men, and indicates that without it, they are rendered useless and ineffective:

The last clear definite function of man – muscles aching to work, mind aching to create beyond the single need – this is man. ...For man, unlike any other thing organic or inorganic in the universe, grows beyond his work, walks up the stairs of his concepts, emerges ahead of his accomplishments. (*The Grapes of Wrath* 175)

Thus, Steinbeck indicates that the disintegration of the patriarchal structure of the family is as a result of the men losing their purpose in life, their *raison d’être*, in the words of de Beauvoir (124). No longer able to engage in activities of transcendence,

the men are left with a sense of despondency and worthlessness. While the men's work comes to a halt, however, the women remain busy, as their work of immanence, cooking and cleaning and caring for the family, perpetually continues (McKay 55). As activity is traditionally associated with the masculine, and passivity with femininity, the traditional gender roles are reversed, as the men are reduced into passivity while the women remain active. Thus, the shift from patriarchy to matriarchy seems appropriate in this situation.

Indeed, Ma Joad, the family matriarch, proves to be a pillar of strength and a cohesive force in the family, and she readily takes on the role of authority when the men around her fail to assert theirs. Even her physical appearance bears little resemblance to most of Steinbeck's stereotypical female characters:

Ma was heavy, but not fat; thick with child-bearing and work. [Her] dress came down to her ankles, and her strong, broad, bare feet moved quickly and deftly over the floor. Her thin, steel-grey hair was gathered in a sparse wispy knot at the back of her head. Strong, freckled arms were bare to the elbow, and her hands were chubby and delicate, like those of a plump little girl. ... Her full face was not soft; it was controlled ... Her hazel eyes seemed to have experienced all possible tragedy and to have mounted pain and suffering like steps into a high calm and superhuman understanding. She seemed to know, to accept, to welcome her position, the citadel of the family, the strong place that could not be taken. (85)

Steinbeck's portrayal of Ma Joad as lacking in traditional feminine beauty, coupled with the fact that she emerges as a leader and an authority in the family, further serves to emphasize the patriarchal notion that traditional embodiments of femininity

are unfit to take on the roles of men. A woman like Ma Joad, however, is able to do so, as she is less feminine in appearance, as well as in character. This is further evident when examining the character of Rose of Sharon, who, in physical appearance as well as in spirit, forms the complete opposite of Ma Joad. Shy, quiet, uncertain and dependent, Rose of Sharon embodies the traditional notions of the feminine, and consequently possesses no power within the family. The fact that her pregnancy enables her to receive preferential treatment at times reinforces the idea of the sacredness of motherhood, which exists in patriarchal culture, which further serves to enslave her, according to de Beauvoir (560).

Motley argues that “economically productive labor is a woman’s source of power”, thus Ma Joad’s work – from preparing the meat of the slaughtered pigs, and organizing camp, to buying food and preparing it over improvised stoves, “represents not submission but the steady shedding of her husband’s control” (406). It is furthermore significant that the tools of the men’s labour, such as the horses and ploughs are sold before the journey, but Ma Joad’s tools, the household goods, are brought along, and become of vital importance to the family’s survival. Thus, she takes on the masculine role of the provider, while the men continue to sit around uselessly, unable to perform their traditional duties. While Ma Joad’s power increases the further they travel from their home, the opposite is true for Pa Joad, the family patriarch and the other men in the family. Motley argues that this is “because leaving has not diminished [Ma Joad’s] work, her authority is intact” (407). Thus, Motley argues, power is linked to the ability to work, and as the men have lost this ability with the emergence of the crises, the power and authority has been transferred to the women.

Ma Joad's transformation from typical housewife and mother to a figure of authority comes gradually. The first time she is introduced, she is "engaged with the most symbolic act of mothering – feeding her family" (McKay 60). The second time, she is seen washing clothes, and the third time she is trying to dress the difficult and unreasonable Grampa Joad. These activities represent the most important tasks of a woman: feeding the family, keeping them clean, and taking care of their needs (60). Mimi Reisel Gladstein argues that Ma Joad has been the head of the family all along, and that her power does not grow, "only the overt expression of it does" (81). This is evident when Tom returns from prison to find the homestead deserted. "They're gone – or Ma's dead" is his first thought, implying that she would never allow the home to fall to ruin if she was there (*The Grapes of Wrath* 47). Thus, Tom associates the physical deterioration of his home with a missing mother, indicating the power she holds in regards to holding their household together (McKay 57). This subtle authority is asserted directly when Ma Joad revolts for the first time against the decisions made by the men:

Ma stepped in front of him. "I ain't a-gonna go."

"What you mean, you ain't gonna go? You got to go. You got to look after the family." Pa was amazed at the revolt. Ma stepped to the touring car and reached in on the floor of the back seat. She brought out a jack handle and balanced it in her hand easily. "I ain't a-gonna go," she said.

"I tell you, you got to go. We made up our mind."

And now Ma's mouth set hard. She said softly, "On'y way you gonna get me to go is whup me." She moved the jack handle gently again. "An' I'll shame

you, Pa. I won't take no whuppin', cryin' an' a-beggin'. I'll light into you. ... An' if ya do get me, I swear to God I'll wait till you got your back turned, or you're settin' down, an' I'll knock you belly-up with a bucket. ...

Pa looked helplessly about the group. "She sassy," he said. "I never seen her so sassy."... The whole group watched the revolt. They watched Pa, waiting for him to break into fury. They watched his lax hands to see the fists form. And Pa's anger did not seem to rise, and his hands hung limply at his sides. And in a moment the group knew that Ma had won. And Ma knew it too. .. She was the power. She had taken control. (197-198)

This scene highlights the ineffectiveness of the patriarch, who is unable to assert his power over the woman who challenges him. From that moment on, the Joad men see Ma in a different light, and seem to gain more respect for her. Her strength is not only shown in her rebellion against the men around her, but also in her ability to put the needs of others before her own, such as when she conceals the death of Granma Joad from the rest of the family until they are safely across the state border. The tremendous strength needed to deal with Granma's death alone is evident to the rest of the family, who "looked at Ma with a little terror at her strength" (*The Grapes of Wrath* 269). Aware of her own importance to the family, Ma Joad "seemed to know that if she swayed the family shook, and if she ever really deeply wavered or despaired the family would fall, the family will to function would be gone" (*The Grapes of Wrath* 86).

In comparison to Ma's grounded, earth-bound character, Rose of Sharon appears almost ethereal. Described as having a "round soft face", her hair forming "an ash-blond crown" on her head, and "full soft breasts and stomach" she represents the

traditional notion of feminine beauty, balancing the hard and masculinized features of her mother (*The Grapes of Wrath* 110). Following the traditions of patriarchal ideology in regards to pregnancy and motherhood, Steinbeck depicts the pregnant young woman as consumed with thoughts of motherhood: “[T]he world was pregnant to her, she thought only in terms of reproduction and of motherhood” (*The Grapes of Wrath* 110-111). Here Steinbeck once again confines his female character to the stereotypical role of the nurturing mother, preventing her from inhabiting any other roles, and from becoming a fully developed and rounded character. In light of de Beauvoir’s theory on motherhood, Steinbeck’s characterization of Rose of Sharon throughout the novel limits and enslaves her to the notions of maternity. Her initial dependency on Connie, trusting that he will take care of her needs, as well as those of the baby, is another characteristic of a pregnant woman, de Beauvoir says. An expectant mother needs the support of a man in order to accept her new responsibilities, “she will only devote herself joyously to a newborn if a man devotes himself to her. The more infantile and shy she is, the more she needs this (de Beauvoir 550). Rose of Sharon’s infantile reliance is evident in her repeated rendition of Connie’s fantasy to study and get a well-paying job so that he can buy them a house and a car and “a ‘lectric iron” (*The Grapes of Wrath* 192). Instead of crushing her daughter’s naïve dreams, Ma Joad, who “suddenly seemed to know it was all a dream”, pretends to believe in a bid to protect her (192).

The fascination with which pregnant women are often regarded comes to the fore in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Steinbeck continuously portrays Rose of Sharon as “balanced, careful, wise creature”, who, with a self-satisfied look on her face, often smiles mysteriously and complacently: “She ... smiled secretly. She was all secrets now that she was pregnant, secret and little silences that seemed to have meanings. She

was pleased with herself" (*The Grapes of Wrath* 151). This kind of behaviour, according to de Beauvoir, is also typical of a pregnant woman, who now

experiences the satisfaction of feeling 'interesting', which has been, since her adolescence, her deepest desire; ... at present she is no longer sex object or servant, but she embodies the species, she is the promise of life, of eternity; ... Justified by the presence within her of another, she finally fully enjoys being herself (558)

Rose of Sharon, although very child-like and immature in many ways, takes her role as a mother very seriously and often expresses her concern for the baby's well-being. Her youth and innocence, reminiscent of the angelic virgin described by Gilbert and Gubar, bring to mind the image of the Virgin Mary (Gilbert & Gubar 20). The final scene of the novel, in particular, has been the subject of various interpretations and strong reactions. The image of a young woman breast-feeding an older man caused such controversy Steinbeck was on several occasions asked to alter the ending. While many critics have attempted to analyse this scene in line with biblical imagery, others do not agree. Scott Pugh, for instance, calls any interpretation of Rose of Sharon in this scene as Madonna or Christ-like an "overreading" of the text, referring to it as an implausible act where she is "force-feeding a middle-aged man" (77). He points out that Rose of Sharon's gesture is entirely inadequate to deal with the problems of hunger for the rest of the starving population and further criticizes Rose of Sharon, saying that her "refusal to respect a dying man's own wishes, her forcing him to break social taboos and adopt an infantile and publicly humiliating position, runs counter to any claim of pure maternal or human compassion" (77). By denying Rose of Sharon any biblical comparison,

however, Pugh fails to take into consideration, amongst other things, her name, which very clearly has biblical origins. The first part of her name, Rose, is a traditional symbol of perfection, and alludes to the image of the cup of eternal life. As a Christian symbol, the rose, with its thorns, symbolizes the suffering of Christ and his love for humanity (Tresidder 162). In the Bible, Sharon is a place of beauty, emblematic of fertility, and the name itself means floral or fertile plains (Jones 325). Furthermore, the phrase or name Rose of Sharon is taken directly from Song of Songs (2:1), where it can be interpreted as the perfect flower and a symbol of God (Kennedy 22). Taking into consideration that Steinbeck usually gives his characters very conventional names (if they are given names at all), it is difficult to ignore this unusual, and very Biblical name and render its meaning insignificant.

Throughout the novel, however, it is clear that Rose of Sharon does not live up to her name. Weak, shy, dependent and immature, she forms an ironic contrast to the idealized rose of Sharon of the Bible (Carlson 174). Her transformation takes place in the final scene, where “the whimpering, self-centred girl must be tempered by suffering, even by death before she is worthy”, and by offering the sacramental gift of herself she embodies the symbol of resurrection and thus becomes a Christ-like figure (Crockett 198-199).

Besides the biblical allusions to the character's name, the final scene invites a variety of interpretations. Paul Hunter, for instance, comments on the similarity between the nursing Rose of Sharon in the barn to the biblical scene of Jesus's birth in the stable, which again points to Rose of Sharon as an embodiment of mother Mary (40). Tamara Rombold agrees with Rose of Sharon's depiction as the holy mother, but argues that the image of the biblical Mary is inverted, as she did not give

birth to a messiah. Instead, her infant serves as an inversion of Moses, as it is put in a box and sent floating down the stream, but in contrast to Moses, Rose of Sharon's infant is dead. Rambold further notes that Rose of Sharon's nursing of the starving man is filled with biblical allusions to the coming of the new heaven and new earth described in the book of the prophet Isaiah:

Rejoice ye with Jerusalem, and be glad with her, all ye that love her: rejoice for joy with her, all ye that mourn for her: That ye may suck, and be satisfied with the breasts of her consolations; that ye may milk out, and be delighted with the abundance of her glory. For thus saith the Lord, Behold, I will extend peace to her like a river, and the glory of the Gentiles like a flowing stream: and then shall ye suck, ye shall be borne upon her sides, and be dandled upon her knees. As one whom his mother comforteth, so I will comfort you; and ye shall be comforted in Jerusalem. (Isa. 66:10-13)

Taking these biblical verses into consideration, Rambold argues that Rose of Sharon, by generously offering her breast to a stranger, "heralds the "new earth" and, in the world of *The Grapes of Wrath*, takes the place of God at the Last Judgment (163).

Carlson further notes that due to the death of her infant, Rose of Sharon's maternal instinct has been frustrated, and that nursing the starving man presents itself as an opportunity to ease that frustration. Her mysterious smile, Carlson says, can be interpreted as a moment of satisfaction, when a mother is finally allowed to satisfy her maternal instincts to have the power to give life and nourishment, which she had been denied (174). Carlson further notes that the "beauty and significance of this scene derives from its symbolizing the main theme of the novel: the prime function of life is to nourish life" (174). In light of this interpretation, Rose of Sharon's character gains in significance, as she embodies the fundamental theme of the novel. By

offering nourishment to a starving man, Rose of Sharon conveys a message of hope to the Okies, and simultaneously acts as a symbol of resurrection, thereby further emphasizing her role as a Christ-like figure (Crockett 199).

Finally becoming worthy of her name, Rose of Sharon makes the selfless decision to give of herself, and help the man the only way she is able. It is noteworthy that again, the men are standing around helplessly, while the two women, Ma Joad and Rose of Sharon, instinctively know what needs to be done:

Ma's eyes passed Rose of Sharon's eyes, and then came back to them. And the two women looked deep into each other. The girl's breath came short and gasping.

She said "Yes". (535)

Martin Shockley says that this scene essentially depicts Rose of Sharon's rite of passage, as well as her surrender, as she in effect says "Not my will, but Thine be done" (89). Shockley further likens this scene to the Holy Communion, as Rose of Sharon

gives what Christ gave... The ultimate mystery of the Christian religion is realized through [her]... She smiles mysteriously because what has been mystery is now knowledge. *This is my body*, says [Rose of Sharon], and becomes the Resurrection and the Life. Rose of Sharon, the life-giver... In her, death and life are one, and through her, life triumphs over death. (89)

Thus, according to the biblical interpretations of her character, Rose of Sharon becomes the archetypal Madonna, the patriarchal idealization of the feminine.

Not all critics have read this scene in light of the biblical allusion, however. John Ditsky , for instance, interprets this scene as Rose of Sharon's rite of passage, the moment she finally reaches maturity, as she is "nursing instead of being nursed, giving instead of taking" (qtd in Adair 51). He further says that, in this scene:

Rose of Sharon becomes statuary as worn mother and starving man fuse in lasting composition... the perfect stranger finding solace of suck at the breast of the husbandless wife, the childless mother. What a forbidden, what a necessary nourishment. (qtd in Adair 51)

In this sense, Adair says, Rose of Sharon's body becomes "pure spectacle; a safe act of lack and mutilation to be looked at without fear, at once both telos and origin of man's desire" (51). This scene, Adair argues, is of great significant in "a patriarchy in disarray", as the female, a mother and a wife, is able to position herself as a sexualized, yet safe spectacle (51). The fact that Rose of Sharon is saving a man, however, can also be interpreted as the patriarchal way of ensuring the re-empowerment of man. In a novel, where the women have taken control and the men are rendered useless most of the time, Steinbeck, in the final act, finds a way to revive the patriarch, and put the woman back in the supportive role of the care-giver.

It is without a doubt that the final scene in *The Grapes of Wrath* can be interpreted in a number of ways. The intent of the author can be found in a letter written to the editor, Pascal Covici, in 1939. Here Steinbeck wrote that in the final scene, Rose of Sharon is offering a "survival symbol" and that "the giving of the breast has no more sentiment than the giving of a piece of bread. ... The incident of the earth mother feeding by the breast is older than literature" (qtd in Steinbeck & Wallsten 178).

Although many critics read *The Grapes of Wrath* as Steinbeck's literary homage to women, it is important to remember that Ma Joad and Rose of Sharon, like other Steinbeck women, are defined by their positive traits, which always involves their instinctive understanding and response to the needs to men (Gibbs 184). "Even Ma Joad, who becomes the informal leader of the Joad family ... merely represents the maternal image of endurance until the men will be ready for leadership again" (Schulz 37). The women are only valued for their ability to suppress their own desires in order to reinforce and maintain patriarchy. This ties in with de Beauvoir's theory, as the novel clearly states that the women's work of immanence continues, while the men are broken as their creative work of transcendence is disrupted. Looking at the novel through the lens of Ortner's theory, it is clear that Steinbeck's women are applauded for their oneness with nature and their ability to sustain and nurture culture.

According to Gilbert and Gubar, for every pure and angelic virgin there needs to be an equally bad and negative counterpart (28). Thus, if Rose of Sharon and Ma Joad represent the good woman, Ruthie, the twelve year old daughter, can be seen as an embodiment of the bad woman. In chapter twenty-eight, she reveals Tom's secret which forces him to flee the camp, and thus breaks up the family even further. Pa Joad, upon finding out about her act of treason, promptly and without hesitation wants to physically punish "the little bitch" (*The Grapes of Wrath* 488). Here, instead of choosing the equally immature and irresponsible Winfield, Steinbeck once again follows patriarchal tradition by casting the female in the role of the traitor and destroyer of man, indicating that a woman's character is flawed and that she acts to the detriment of man's well-being. Perhaps using such a young girl indicates that

they will grow into even more destructive and disruptive forces to men's superior position.

The patriarchal ideology in regards to masculinity and femininity in *The Grapes of Wrath* is revealed not only through the characters, but also through Steinbeck's description of the landscape. In chapter twenty-five, he feminizes the land, describing California as a fertile place where "the full green hills are round and soft as breasts" (*The Grapes of Wrath* 408). In the beginning of the novel, the men talk about how they conquered the land, how "Grampa took up the land, and he had to kill the Indians and drive them away. And Pa was born here, and he killed weeds and snakes" (38). If, as Ortner says, the feminine is represented by nature and the masculine by culture, this scene clearly symbolizes culture's need to assert its dominance over nature, the masculine need to control the females. In this case, however, nature, and thus by extension the feminine, in the form of Ma Joad, has now turned against the men and has left the patriarchal culture vulnerable and at the mercy of nature. This concept again mirrors the patriarchal notion of the feminine as a destructive and disruptive force, negatively affecting the men.

Looking at the Dustbowl Trilogy as a whole, it is clear that Steinbeck's women are compelled to choose between homemaking and whoredom, as all the female characters operate within these stereotypes. Lisa, Ma Joad and Rose of Sharon embody the good wife and mother, while Curley's wife and Ruthie represent the bad woman or evil witch. By examining the three novels, it becomes clear that Steinbeck uses the act of naming as a way of deciding which female characters are worthy of receiving a degree of individuality and personhood. Lisa and Rose of Sharon, the good women, both have biblical names (Lisa being a version of the name Elizabeth),

while the bad women, Curley's Wife and Ma Joad, who resist patriarchy and refuse to be confined to the roles of the subservient wife are denied an individual identity by remaining nameless. Both Curley's Wife and Ma Joad are solely defined by their relationship to the men, and by their status as a wife or mother, even though both characters are central to the development of the plot of the respective novels. All the male characters, however, no matter how peripheral and unimportant, are given names. In the case of Grampa and Pa Joad, for instance, who are referred to by their titles throughout the novel, Steinbeck ensures that their names are mentioned and thus their personhood is established.

A recurrent image in Steinbeck's novels is the Californian valley or garden as a metaphor of the American Eden. In *In Dubious Battle* the action takes place in a fictionalized California valley; in *Of Mice and Men*, George and Lennie dream of their slice of paradise in the form of fertile farmland; in *The Grapes of Wrath* the Joad's travel to California, the Promised Land. Steinbeck, however, continuously rejects the American vision of California as the Promised Land (Cruz 66). Thus, the Steinbeck man, although pure in heart and simple in mind, is always characterized by the failure to realise his dreams. While Jim Nolan and Lennie Small 'fail' to survive their ordeal, Mac's dream of social equality, George's dream of owning a farm, Connie's dream of achieving prosperity, and Tom, and the rest of the Joad men's dream to live a good life, seem to be perpetually out of reach in Steinbeck's existential world (Shockley 87; Crockett 197).

Conclusion

Based on a thorough examination of John Steinbeck's Dustbowl Trilogy, this project has successfully established how patriarchal ideology in literature leads to the oppression and silencing of women. Through a close scrutiny of the modernist era, and the Depression Era in particular, it is evident that the situation and status of women in society drastically changed after the onset of the Great Depression. Whereas the 1920s' affluent and frivolous lifestyle enabled western culture to experience a new sense of freedom regarding sexuality and female emancipation, the hardships of the 1930s not only stunted the expansion of women's freedom, but reintroduced and reinforced the dominance of patriarchal ideologies which is clearly visible in the economic and familial powerlessness of Steinbeck's female characters.

The patriarchal ideology existent in Steinbeck's work was analysed based on the theories of leading feminists, including Simone de Beauvoir, Gayle Rubin, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Judith Butler, Sherry Ortner, and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. De Beauvoir's theory was particularly helpful in the analysis of the relationship between men and women in patriarchal cultures, where men establish themselves as the One and thus automatically confine women to the role of the Other. On a similar note, Cixous discusses the patriarchal tradition of associating the masculine with all that is active and positive, while femininity is represented by the negative and passive. Consequently, woman, as the negative other to man's positive self, is forced to function in a man's world on his terms. Evidence of these concepts, particularly the othering of women, both by the author himself, as well as by the male characters, is evident in all three of Steinbeck's texts examined in this project.

De Beauvoir's notion of motherhood and marriage as oppressive patriarchal institutions which rob women of their freedom and independence was utilized when analysing Steinbeck's female characters, which all, except for the very young Ruthie, are confined to the roles of either mother or wife, or both. Based on evidence from the three texts, it is evident that Steinbeck follows the patriarchal tradition of attributing a sense of mystery and awe to young mothers, as Lisa and Rose of Sharon are both feared and admired by the men around them. Ma Joad, on the other hand, an older and more experienced mother has none of that mystery surrounding her, instead she is portrayed as possessing strength, endurance and self-assurance, which Lisa and Rose of Sharon lack. The only woman who is not also a mother in the trilogy is Curley's Wife. Her name, or lack thereof, alone suggests her subjugated position as a wife, and her status as a bad woman, the figurative monster to Lisa and Rose of Sharon's angelic figures, deems her unworthy of assuming the role of a mother. Her overt sexuality and her status as a temptress and *femme fatale* coupled with her depiction as the disruptive force destroying the lives of the men around her, make her the perfect embodiment of the biblical Eve and the origin of sin.

The Grapes of Wrath in particular, highlights the division of labour between the genders as described by de Beauvoir, who claims that men are concerned with activities of transcendence, which involve creative acts which enable men to find fulfilment and self-actualization. Women, on the other hand, are confined to activities of immanence, which involves housekeeping and caring for the family. This is evident in the novel when, due to the crises, the men are slowly withering as they are relegated to inactivity and denied the opportunity to be productive and satisfy their need for transcendence. As a result, the women, particularly Ma Joad, become increasingly dominant, as the men become weaker and increasingly powerless and

ineffectual. The final scene, however, can be read as an attempt to revive the patriarch and the reader can assume that the men will take on their usual roles of dominance once the crisis is over.

The performing of specific gender roles was interrogated using Butler's theory of gender performativity. That gender is a matter of doing, rather than an internalized attribute is evident when examining some of the male characters in the novels who at certain points perform a different gender. In *In Dubious Battle* and *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck is concerned with the importance of male friendship and often portrays the relationship between the friends like a marriage, where one man acts decisively masculine, while the other one takes on distinctly feminine characteristics. Mac and George both display strongly masculine characteristics in the way they are portrayed as the decision makers, and primary caretakers of their respective partners. Jim and Lennie, although very masculine in their own right, take on an effeminate role, acting in a feminine way, in relation to Mac and George, respectively. Like women, they are dependent upon the other men and have little or no autonomy and freedom. Interestingly, both Jim and Lennie die in the end, while their stronger, more masculine partners survive.

Rubin and Irigaray's theory regarding female trafficking brought a greater understanding to the social origin of the oppression of women. Rubin and Irigaray argue that the commodification of women reduces them to mere objects who can be valorised, consumed, traded and exchanged. Consequently, women in patriarchal cultures merely serve the function of establishing relations between men as the object that is circulated among them. Evidence of this theory is brought to the fore, particularly in *In Dubious Battle*, where Lisa, both in the fictional world of the novel,

as well as a literary character in the mind of the author, serves no purpose other than being an opportunity for Mac to further himself. He has to use Lisa in order to get to her father, and thus she serves as the object linking the two men and establishing and maintaining their relationship. Additionally, Steinbeck uses her to draw attention to some of the characteristics of the male characters; for instance, Mac's sexualized way of viewing women is exposed in the way he talks to and about Lisa, while Jim's pure and unadulterated character is revealed in her presence. The fact that throughout the novel Lisa is denied a personhood as Steinbeck fails to give essence to her character, further illustrates her status as an object according to Rubin and Irigaray's theory.

The fundamental relationship between the masculine and the feminine was examined using Ortner's theory on female subjugation. Ortner argues that the source of female oppression lies in the tradition of associating femininity with nature and masculinity with culture. Just as it is culture's instinct to dominate and control nature, so the masculine has an inherent need to subordinate and oppress the feminine. This theory is of great use when examining Steinbeck's work, *The Grapes of Wrath* where the masculine and feminine paradigm shift is profoundly evident, not only in the terms of the characters, but also in regards to the relationship between people and the physical environment: just as the men in the novel are losing their power to the authority of a woman, so is culture nearly destroyed by nature's retaliation.

A substantial part of this project's investigation of the literary silencing of women was explored using Gilbert and Gubar's theory on patriarchal literary tradition. The relegation of women to the role of either angel or monster is a hallmark of patriarchal literature, according to Gilbert and Gubar who argue that women are either cast in

the role of the pure and virginal angel, or the evil witch, with the angel being likened to the Virgin Mary, and the witch to the biblical Eve, the mother of original sin. This kind of portrayal of women is certainly evident in Steinbeck's writing, as throughout the novels, the women are labelled either good or evil. Lisa and Rose of Sharon, with their quiet demeanour and rosy cheeks epitomise the angelic Virgin Mary, while Ma Joad, devoid of traditional feminine beauty and elegance, represents the bad woman who dares to resist patriarchy. Ma Joad's evil, however, is faint in comparison to Curley's Wife, who serves as the personification of the female monster. Possessing no redeeming characteristics, Curley's Wife is portrayed as a destructive and disruptive force, whose actions and existence leads to the downfall of men. According to Gilbert and Gubar, this kind of one-dimensional portrayal of women is typical in male authored literature and is evident when examining the works of some of Steinbeck's contemporaries, thus exposing the extent to which patriarchal ideology is significant within the literary cannon and in Western society.

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"Dust storm, Colorado 1937"
Marrin, A. *Years of Dust: The Story of the Dustbowl*



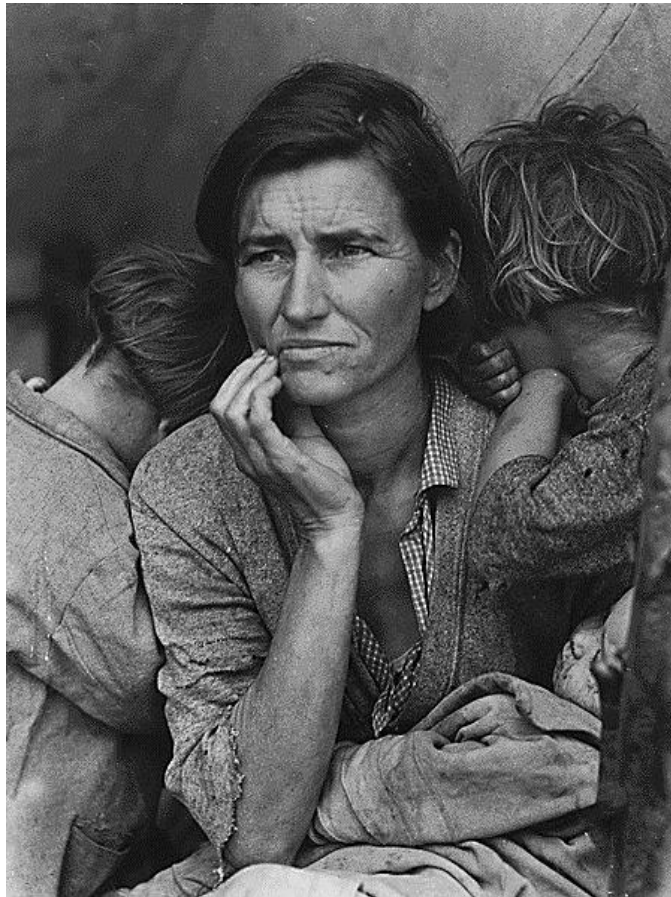
"Aftermath"
Marrin, A. *Years of Dust: The Story of the Dustbowl*



"Dust storm approaching, Kansas 1937"
www.english.illinois.edu/maps/depression/photoessay.htm



"Father and children seeking shelter"
www.english.illinois.edu/maps/depression/photoessay.htm



“Migrant Mother”

Marrin, A. *Years of Dust: The Story of the Dustbowl*



“Family walking on the highway”

Marrin, A. *Years of Dust: The Story of the Dustbowl*



“Mother and child”

www.english.illinois.edu/maps/depression/photoessay.htm



“Camping on the side of the road”

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