

**William Saroyan and John Steinbeck: A
Comparison in Literary Outlooks on the
Great Depression and Poverty**

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This senior thesis is dedicated to my parents and to my two
thesis advisors, Mr. Schmidt and Professor Matthews, for being
awesome and helping me through this way more than I
deserved.

William Saroyan and John Steinbeck, two Californian writers who addressed the issue of poverty repeatedly in their works, are perfect examples of how similar childhoods can produce distinctly different outcomes. Both authors grew up under relatively similar circumstances, and both came face-to-face with poverty several times over the course of their lives. Saroyan and Steinbeck knew exactly what kind of effects poverty could have on one's life.

Saroyan, the child of immigrants, was forced to live in an orphanage for several years because his mother was unable to support the family by herself. Steinbeck's father's business failures, on the other hand, left him feeling inadequate and unable to support his own family, and he withdrew emotionally from his own children. Because of poverty, both Steinbeck and Saroyan spent their formative years without parental figures, and they felt the lack keenly. They rose to fame at about the same time during the 1930s, and they were both popular writers during the Depression. Their two first critically successful works, *The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze* and *Tortilla Flat*, showed a similar sort of romanticism about poverty, recognizing its hardships and the toll that it takes, but ultimately focusing on different themes. As they developed as writers, however, their outlooks on poverty changed significantly. Steinbeck's focus moved to the harsh reality of Depression poverty and the injustices perpetrated by big business and commercial farms, eventually

focusing on the way individuals might meet each others' needs as communities and force a fairer distribution of wealth. In his definitive Depression novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck doesn't just attack the intolerable conditions which migrant farm workers, or "Okies", were forced to go through; he calls for social change—though of a non-revolutionary sort—throughout the entire country. The revolution must be in the hearts and minds of the people who are suffering; by relating and connecting to each other, and shifting from an individualistic mindset to a communal one, they can become strong enough to make a difference and change the system. Saroyan, on the other hand, presented poverty as something that simply is. Unlike many Depression authors, he did not call for social change. Saroyan wrote about many poor characters during the Depression—his first popular story was about a young man who actually dies because of his destitute state—yet his focus was almost never on the poverty itself. Using the backdrop of poverty, Saroyan wrote almost deceptively optimistic stories about the importance of art and love of humanity, starring starving artists, melancholy prostitutes, and gruff, kind-hearted saloon keepers. Critics attacked him for being overly sentimental and ignoring real problems, but at the time his writing style was a refreshing change in a bleak literary atmosphere. Saroyan's goal was never to instigate social change; it was to restore people's faith in humanity, as well as his own, and it was perhaps

because of this as much as because of his own stubbornness that he failed to evolve significantly as an author during the years of the Depression. Because of their similar circumstances, comparing and contrasting Saroyan and Steinbeck's early lives and later work is particularly interesting; it shows us two radically different reactions to the Depression, but it also shows how the impetus for both had analogous roots.

Saroyan and Steinbeck's early lives actually had several similarities. Both of them grew up in the same state, relatively near each other, and only a few years apart. They had several similar life experiences that parallel each other, got famous at about the same time, and had the same desire out of life—to become writers. Of the two authors, William Saroyan was the most personally acquainted with poverty and its effects on the family. His parents had married in Armenia and had four children; William, born in 1908 in Fresno, California, was the only child born in the United States. Saroyan's father, Armenak, had been a successful preacher on the East coast, but always privately wanted to be a writer. Years later, when Saroyan himself aspired to write, his mother showed him his father's scraps of writing, and he was sadly disappointed in what he saw. When he and his wife Takouhi moved to California, however, he did not have the opportunity to pursue that dream. Although he had been a successful preacher in the East, Armenak was unable to make a living in California. He was attempting (and failing) to

make money by raising chickens when his appendix ruptured. When Saroyan was only three years old, his father died, leaving it up to Takouhi to take care of their children; Henry, Cosette, Zabel, and William. By the time he was four, Saroyan's mother had faced the inevitable; at the moment, she was not able to care for her children. Promising them that they would be together as soon as she could take care of them again, she brought her four children to the Fred Finch orphanage at Oakland. Saroyan was four at the time, and he stayed with his siblings in the orphanage until he was nine years old, when all the children were able to reunite with their mother in Fresno. Being deprived of parental love, especially his father's, in early childhood was something that affected him greatly, and some of his works addressed this—for example, *Third Day After Christmas* (1926), where a boy's father tells him to wait for him on a street corner, but never returns, and a bartender takes him under his wing. However, he loved his mother dearly, something which his work also reflected.

Saroyan was not the best student, and he constantly talked back to his teachers and rebelled against the “assimilation” approach that he saw directed towards the children of immigrants. Saroyan had a problem with authority figures in general, and hated the idea of being taught by people who thought could never understand him; it was an attitude that he would continue to hold all through his life, most notably with the critics of his work. By the age of thirteen, Saroyan had transferred from his junior high to a

technical one in order to learn typing. Four years later, he dropped out of school entirely. Saroyan found temporary work, supporting his family with a number of odd jobs, and eventually he got a lasting job working with his brother on a paper route. By then, however, all his jobs were not much more than diversions; Saroyan had already come to the decision that he wanted to become an author. In accordance with this plan and to the great consternation of his family, he set out for New York City in 1928 with the dream of becoming a famous writer. Once in the city, however, he achieved no success at all. Although Saroyan was an incredibly prolific writer, nobody was interested in his work, and after a few months he returned to California. Back home again in San Francisco, he received a less-than-warm welcome; because of his frivolous New York adventure, Saroyan had become a black sheep in the eyes of his family. Although he resented his ostracism, Saroyan continued to write as prolifically as before, and his dream of authorship was still very much alive. In the early thirties, he managed to get several of his short stories pseudonymously published in the Armenian journal *Hairenik*; although the journal itself was predominantly written in Armenian, they had English sections for translated Armenian literature and English stories by Armenian-American writers. Saroyan would later claim that Sirak Goryan, the fake identity with which he had submitted the stories, was in fact his cousin, and actually submitted stories under both names to the same people as a joke. Though he was being published, Saroyan had yet to achieve any

national renown, and his family still saw his pursuits as fruitless; in 1934, however, that would all suddenly change.

It was in 1934 that Saroyan submitted a short story called “The Daring Young Man On the Flying Trapeze” to *Story* magazine. Once *Story* published Trapeze, Saroyan was approached by people who found the story fresh and interesting; they wanted him to write more short stories and perhaps publish a collection. Prolific as always, Saroyan provided plenty of material, and the eponymous *The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze: And Other Stories* came out in the same year to great critical success.

Although Saroyan’s writing was not without its flaws, the critics asserted, the optimistic stories he told were new and exciting, and everyone was looking forward to seeing what the young author would come up with as he refined his talents. William Saroyan had gone from black sheep to overnight success in a matter of months. Instead of attributing some of his newfound fame to the efforts of his publicists and publishers, Saroyan saw it as something inevitable; he had always known that he had the ability to be great, and now that greatness was being recognized. Even in 1934, as a new and inexperienced author in his twenties, Saroyan blew off his negative reviews and did not bother thoroughly reading the positive ones. Although his publishers and mentors encouraged him to attempt a full-length novel, Saroyan was hesitant to try. Instead, he focused on hammering out more short stories to create a second collection. In 1936, *Inhale and Exhale*,

another collection of short stories, was published. Unlike *Trapeze*, however, *Inhale and Exhale* was far from a success. Critics accused Saroyan of repeating the same messages from his earlier work and not growing as an author, and he was once again requested to write a novel. Saroyan, however, was convinced of his work's genius, and blamed the publishers for not promoting the book enough. He shrugged off the critical attacks, claiming that they did not understand his work, and began work on a third short story collection, one which he assured his publishers would be his best yet. Over the next few years, the same pattern played itself out; Saroyan produced short story after short story and published more poorly-received collections, stubbornly refusing to see validity in any of the critics' charges, and his publishers and friends grew steadily more irritated by his behavior. William Saroyan had dug himself into a rut.

Instead of deciding to work on a novel, however, Saroyan decided to take on a new literary field; he started writing plays. *My Heart's in the Highlands*, his first play, was put on in 1939 at the Guild Theater in New York. It had moderate success, and received far better critical reception than his recent short stories, but Saroyan did not feel that it got the respect it deserved. In 1939, Saroyan also wrote his most famous and enduring play, *The Time of Your Life*. It opened in the same year on Broadway, at the Booth Theater, and was incredibly well received. Critics loved *The Time of Your Life*, and in 1940 it received the Pulitzer Prize for drama; Saroyan refused to accept the

award, however, claiming that the prize should have gone to *My Heart's in the Highlands* instead, and that commerce should not be judging the arts in the first place. Later on, Saroyan would fall into the same trap with plays as he had with his short stories, producing more and more plays that nobody wanted to produce and blaming them, not him, for not seeing the worthiness of his work, and his critical reception would once again worsen; nevertheless, in 1940, as the effects of the Depression started to grow weaker, he was still seen at being at the top of his game. People expected the best of him, and he expected the same of himself. It is at this point in his career, when he was still successful and relevant, that this thesis will leave him.

Like William Saroyan, John Ernst Steinbeck was born and raised in California; he was born in 1902 to his parents, Olive and John Sr. The third of four children, he was also the Steinbecks' only son, and during his childhood his mother and sisters spoiled him constantly. His parents were descended from immigrants—German on his father's side, Irish on his mother's—but, unlike Saroyan, Steinbeck never had to worry about true poverty. When Steinbeck was young, John Sr. suffered multiple business failures and lost a great amount of his family's money; although he was able to get a respectable job through connections in the Salinas community, and the family was always able to live comfortably, the ordeal had lasting psychological effects on Steinbeck's father. Feeling inadequate because of his previous failures, he withdrew emotionally from his own family, forcing

Olive to take control of things at home. Thus, John Steinbeck Jr. grew up with an emotionally distant father and an overbearing and controlling, albeit loving, mother.

Olive Steinbeck was a strict mother and an educated woman with a strong moral code. Although she loved all of her children deeply, and she felt that John had the makings for brilliance, she pushed him to achieve, perhaps too hard. She pressured him to join extracurricular clubs and do better at school, but Steinbeck, who was withdrawn by nature, did not usually respond well to her efforts. As a former teacher, Steinbeck's mother influenced his education and possibly his eventual decision to become a writer; for good or ill, she and her high expectations were a force that would affect John all his life. At school he was a quiet, average student, made even more shy than usual because he had skipped the fifth grade and was a year younger than everyone else. Because of the size of Salinas High School, however, even withdrawn students like Steinbeck had to participate in school activities, and he was surprisingly popular; in senior year, he was even voted class president. After graduating high school, he went on to Stanford University; although he learned much about writing there, and he met several lifelong mentors, he never actually graduated from college. Steinbeck spent six years on-and-off at Stanford overall. At college, he started consciously trying to break away from the image he had lived with all his life. Until college, Steinbeck had been a socially awkward, ungainly boy who was simultaneously henpecked

and spoiled by his mother; as a college student, he styled himself as a freely drinking, rakish character. The reality, however, was much less glamorous; although Steinbeck did make a bit of a break with his family, refusing to visit them every weekend as his mother had insisted, and almost immediately found himself in an academic slump, his social life was hardly burgeoning. In the fall of his sophomore year, however, things suddenly changed. By November, 1920, Steinbeck had multiple incomplete courses to make up and was on academic probation; when his mother got wind of it, she went directly to Stanford and forced Steinbeck to see the dean. When she realized that her son was, in all likelihood, not going to make it through the semester, let alone college, she was completely furious. In the face of the academic and familial pressure, Steinbeck decided, naturally, to get work on a ship and run away to China. Leaving a note for his roommate, he left Stanford and tried and failed to find a job as a sailor, spent several weeks working at a department store in Oakland, and then returned home. Steinbeck had no desire to continue attending Stanford—at least not until he was emotionally ready for it—and knew that he needed to spend some time doing something different. He and a friend had spent the last summer working with the “bindlestiffs”, migrant agricultural workers, on his father’s old company. Once he returned to Salinas, his family was surprisingly welcoming to Steinbeck; he knew, however, that he would not be able to stay there long. He took a job at a ranch for several months, returned home, and then left again. Although the work he did was physically taxing, he found his

coworkers fascinating, and he could never stay at home for long without his mother starting to dominate him again. Steinbeck spent several years wandering around California, taking rough temporary jobs on ranches and mingling with the same hoboes and bindlestiffs who he would base his own characters on in later days. In the winter of 1923, however, Steinbeck reapplied to Stanford and was accepted. Steinbeck felt he was ready for the work that college entailed, and he was generally right, although many of his grades were mediocre. The only classes that Steinbeck put great effort into were the ones that he enjoyed. Steinbeck made many lifelong friends at Stanford, and several professors influenced him greatly; perhaps the most important was Elizabeth Mirrielees, who taught a short story class he attended. Mirrielees was a strict teacher, but she was also friendly and approachable, and her dedication to writing concisely would influence Steinbeck's own writing style for the better. In 1925, Steinbeck left Stanford again, although he had not passed enough classes to get a degree, and that summer he decided to move to New York City and become a writer, just as Saroyan would several years later. Until November, Steinbeck earned money working at a lodge on Lake Tahoe; by December, he had gotten to New York, working on a ship that made its way there through the Caribbean. Also like Saroyan, however, Steinbeck would not end up accomplishing much with his journey. He stayed with his sister Beth and her husband, and quickly got a job working on the construction of Madison Square Garden, but the work was backbreaking and left him little time to read and write. Eventually,

Steinbeck moved to a hotel and got new work as a court reporter through his brother-in-law, but he frequently slacked off on the job and was eventually fired. Although Steinbeck had brief hopes of authorship when Guy Holt, an executive at a publishing firm, showed interest in his stories, his dreams were dashed soon afterward; just as he had finished a manuscript of his work and brought it to the publishing firm, he found that Holt had left and nobody else was interested. Steinbeck was broke and unemployed in New York, and his chances of getting published were nonexistent; just like Saroyan, he had to face the inevitable. He found work once again, this time on a ship that was going to San Francisco, and by June of 1926 he had returned to Salinas and reunited with his parents. He spent the next few years living in Lake Tahoe, trying to write a novel.

His first novel, *Cup of Gold*, was published in 1929, but it garnered no critical approval and had mediocre sales. Steinbeck was undaunted, however, and had already begun to work on his second novel, *To a God Unknown*. He and his fiancée, Carol, were living in Pacific Grove at the time, and she was an incredibly faithful and helpful partner in his writing endeavors. He also met his lifelong friend and inspiration Ed Ricketts, a marine biologist who would later on feature, fictionalized, as a character in several of his novels. Although *To a God Unknown* was initially rejected by publishers, Steinbeck was able to publish another novel, *The Pastures of Heaven*, in 1932; it met a similar lack of critical interest and failed to sell even a thousand copies. By

this point, the Depression was in full swing, and Steinbeck and Carol, now married, were near broke and relying on John Sr. to support them. Steinbeck was rewriting *To a God Unknown* when his mother had a massive stroke and was paralyzed on the left side. Steinbeck was torn. On the one hand, he was terrified and angered by the idea of having to take care of his mother at the cost of his career. On the other, he was terrified and angered by the idea of having her die still believing that her son had still accomplished nothing. As his mother's condition worsened, he wrote frantically, beginning what would become *The Red Pony* and *The Long Valley*, and he became interested in writing about the *paisanos* of Monterey. *To a God Unknown* was published in 1933, and fared the same as his previous novels, but Steinbeck was still writing. Prolific as ever, he was already deeply involved in the book about *paisano* life which would later become *Tortilla Flat*. In February of 1934, Olive Steinbeck died in her sleep; in March, he was finished with *Tortilla Flat*. His publishers initially told Steinbeck that the book was not suitable for publishing, and he would do better by focusing on short stories; Steinbeck was sure that the novel was great, however, and he sold it to a different publishing company. *Tortilla Flat* was published in 1935, the same year that Steinbeck's father died; just as before, he was already writing again—he had begun his first protest novel, *In Dubious Battle*. Unlike his three previous novels, however, *Tortilla Flat* was a critical and commercial success. Reviewers liked the book, and Steinbeck was suddenly in the critical spotlight. When *In Dubious Battle* (1936) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939)

were published, they were similarly successful; however, their messages that the books conveyed were not taken well by everyone. Many people, particularly those running the big farming and banking organizations of California, saw his work as being socialist propaganda that exaggerated the reality of the Okies' plight and attacked them personally, and they reacted accordingly, culminating in a ban on *The Grapes of Wrath* in Kern County's schools and libraries that lasted until 1941. Although people banned and even burned his books, the backlash only contributed to his further notoriety.

Saroyan and Steinbeck had numerous similarities in their childhoods. They both grew up with absent father figures and somewhat dominating mothers, and had difficulties with their families well into adulthood. They lived only a few hours apart in California. And they both knew, from their youngest years, that they were going to be writers. Even their rises to success—the failed trip to New York, the years of disappointment, and the sudden fame garnered by a single work—parallel each other. But it is there that the similarity ends. Although Saroyan and Steinbeck also had an inherent sense that something in the world was wrong, as almost everybody did during the Depression era, they approached the problem in different ways. Steinbeck's focus was more explicitly political, whereas Saroyan's was on the inner self and people's relations with each other. Their different themes can be seen in their writing and in their later lives; this thesis, however, will only focus on their writing.

Looking at their breakout hits, *Tortilla Flat* and *The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze*, one can see that the differences between the two authors are evident from the very beginning. The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze. The story it tells, that of a young, unsuccessful writer living in the city who has no money and can't find a job, could easily be about Saroyan himself, during his fruitless months in New York City; the only divergence is at the end of the story, when the young author starves to death. Poverty is at the very heart of the story; the protagonist has no food because he has no money, except for a single penny, and there are no jobs available for him. From the beginning of the story, he is destined to die because there are no opportunities for him.

Despite its grim subject matter and almost dreamlike writing style, Trapeze is a surprisingly optimistic, romantic story. Although the protagonist is not able to make a living in the real world, and he ultimately dies without having accomplished anything tangible, there is a sort of peace in his death. The young man, an artist, is aware that he cannot get a job, cannot buy food, and thus cannot live, but there is no attack on society for not meeting his needs. Saroyan's focus is not on the poverty that the man dies from, or the system that allows him to die; instead, it is on the artist's soul. Saroyan describes two kinds of worlds—the physical one, where the young man is ultimately not able to live, and the world of the mind and soul, where art is

the most important thing, and which the young man ultimately chooses to be. Even though he dies, he has done all he can do in both worlds, and there is something noble about his failure and precision; when he dies, he does so with dignity and a sort of discipline. He knows from the start that he will die, in a sense, and rejects options that might save his life but cost him more important, intangible things: “He might even visit the Salvation Army—sing to God and Jesus (unlover of my soul), be saved, eat and sleep. But he knew that he would not. His life was a private life. He did not wish to destroy this fact. Any other alternative would be better.”¹ The young man doesn’t entirely reject the real world in favor of sleep—in fact, Saroyan mentions that he has sold his books for money beforehand—but now that his death is inevitable, he is not going to beg for life. He is going to die as artistically as possible, leaping gracefully from one world to the next just like the man on the flying trapeze, and Saroyan believes that there is merit in that. “A trapeze to God, or to nothing, a flying trapeze to some sort of eternity; he prayed objectively for strength to make the flight with grace.” The protagonist’s main regret, soon before he dies, is that he was not able to read as many books as he wanted. In a way, the real world even denies a part of the artistic world, as is shown when the young man attempts to get a job at an agency.

At length he was granted this great privilege and was questioned by a thin, scatter-brained miss of fifty.

¹ William Saroyan, “The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze”, *The William Saroyan Reader* (New Jersey: Barricade Books Inc., 1986), page 54.

Now tell me, she said; what can you do?
He was embarrassed. I can write, he said pathetically.
You mean your penmanship is good? Is that it? said the elderly maiden.
Well, yes, he replied. But I also mean that I can write.
Write what? said the miss, almost with anger.
Prose, he said simply.
There was a pause. At last the lady said:
Can you use a typewriter?
Of course, said the young man.²

The woman is thinking in purely practical terms, unlike the young man; also unlike him, she has a job and a way to survive. The young man may die in the end because the world isn't able to accommodate him, or because he isn't able to accommodate the world, but he also has something that people like the woman aren't even able to comprehend. He has the soul of an artist, and because of that, it doesn't matter that he dies; he makes his death itself a work of art.

Tortilla Flat, on the other hand, addresses poverty differently. The focus of the book, in a way, is actually on the poverty of the *paisanos* in the book. When the main character, Danny, receives two houses from his dead uncle, the property slowly starts to change him as a person—ultimately, it ends up destroying him. Although the book addresses plenty of other themes, including a heavy King Arthur parallel, the difference between landowners and the “land-free” characters that populate *Tortilla Flat* is at the center of its meaning. The *paisanos* have no land and no money, yet they are liberated in

² Ibid, page 55.

much more important ways, just like Saroyan's daring young man. Unlike Saroyan, however, Steinbeck places no importance on authors or the artistic soul. His focus is simply on living. The paisanos aren't going to nobly die of starvation, regretting only that they didn't read enough books; instead, they get constantly drunk and have dalliances with women and go camping out around Monterey, but that doesn't make them worth any less as characters. They take joy in life and what it has to offer, and if they were starving to death in New York, chances are they would find a way to survive, even if it meant accepting some sort of charity. That doesn't make them less worthy as people. Steinbeck's own life was full of unidealized experiences like the ones his paisanos have—or at least he wished it was—but there is no denying that he romanticizes poverty, to an extent, in the book. The landless paisanos, living on the fringe of society, are treated as free-living, fun-loving people, and when they do get material wealth, as Danny does, it ends up destroying them and everything that makes them such likeable characters. Material things can only tie them down and ruin them, and eventually they must either be destroyed or become the destroyer. In a lighter example, when "Sweets" Ramirez gets a vacuum cleaner, she uses it to entrap Danny and make him stay at her house, although she has no electricity to plug it in to and the vacuum itself has no motor. Even in a mild case like this, the purity of the paisanos will end up being corrupted by material things. The fable-like writing style of the book only serves to heighten the sense of romantic innocence that the characters have about them—instead of dwelling on the

dark side of poverty, Steinbeck makes it clear they live a simple, almost idyllic life, and they're perfectly happy with it.

As the property begins to weigh more heavily on Danny, he starts to change into a darker, unhappy person. His friends recognize the changes taking place in Danny, but they have no idea how to help him. The fact that all of his friends are living in the same house with him doesn't matter; in an almost indefinable way, the property is taking control of Danny's life and destroying the simple lifestyle that he holds dear. When Danny goes mad and lives in the forest, he is attempting to escape the burden of his property and material wealth, but even by doing that, he cannot escape. Ultimately, he returns to the house. In the climactic scene of the book, all the people of Tortilla Flat throw a party for Danny, similar to the great party thrown for Doc in a later work of Steinbeck's, *Cannery Row*. Unlike the party in *Cannery Row*, however, it ends in tragedy; Danny goes mad once more and, after getting drunk, sleeping with many women, and challenging everyone to a fight, runs away from the house one final time.

Danny, say the people of Tortilla Flat, had been rapidly changing his form. He had grown huge and terrible. His eyes flared like the headlights of an automobile. There was something fearsome about him. There he stood, right in the room of his own house. He held the pine table-leg in his right hand, and even it had grown. Danny challenged the world.

"Who will fight?" he cried. "Is there no one left in the world who is not afraid?" The people were afraid; that table-leg, so hideous and so alive, had become a terror to them all. Danny swung it back and forth. The room grew chill, and a silence seemed to roar in the air like an ocean.

“No one?” Danny cried again. “Am I alone in the world? Will no one fight with me?” The men shuddered before his terrible eyes, and watched, fascinated, the slashing path of his table-leg through the air. And no one answered the challenge.

Danny drew himself up. It is said that his head just missed touching the ceiling. “Then I will go out to The One who can fight. I will find The Enemy who is worthy of Danny!”³

In this final fight, Danny meets his own end; though we never see how he dies, the next time he appears, he has fallen, dead, into a forty foot gulch. Ultimately, in challenging The One, Danny is defeated. Property has taken its toll on Danny, and it proceeds to take its toll on the friendship of all the *paisanos*. After Danny’s funeral, the *paisanos* accidentally burn his house down, finally destroying the cause of their friend’s ruin, but when they leave the house, they all leave separately: “Danny’s friends still stood looking at the smoking ruin. They looked at one another strangely, and then back to the burned house. And after a while they turned and walked slowly away, and no two walked together.”⁴ Ultimately, this parallels the King Arthur legend, which was Steinbeck’s intent all along; however, there is no denying that without Danny’s inheritance of the houses, none of this would ever have happened. In a way, Steinbeck is just as romantic as Saroyan when it comes

³ John Steinbeck, *Tortilla Flat* (New York: The Viking Press, 1935), Page 201-202.

⁴ Ibid, Page 213.

to depictions of poverty; though his *paisanos* are clearly men who want to live beyond everything else, as opposed to Saroyan's daring young man whose main aim is to die gracefully, the description of their actual situation is incredibly idealistic. What the *paisanos* are, all romanticism aside, is lovable bums, and they drift from day to day in an idyllic world, despite all its poverty. Although Steinbeck decries the evils of property and shows no examples of "good" landowners, he also isn't advocating the *paisanos'* lifestyle in the real world, because it simply doesn't exist. As a collection of fables, *Tortilla Flat* is a good story, but the noble bums who Steinbeck describes just don't exist in the real world, and I think that he, as well as Saroyan, knew that. The more important aspects of the book are its tone and its themes on property's effect on a man.

Steinbeck and Saroyan's initial works, *Trapeze* and *Tortilla Flat*, address different kinds of poverty and have completely different central themes, but they do have one thing in common—their idealism. Their heroes, despite their differences, are both noble in their own ways. Saroyan's young author is resigned to death, but because he is an artist, he faces it with strength and grace. Steinbeck's *paisanos* may be bums, but they are noble bums—despite their drinking and wild life, their friendship is still special, and they are all good people. This is demonstrated when the *paisanos* band together to feed the unwed Teresina Cortez and her many children, albeit by stealing food themselves. Like the Knights of the Round Table, who they are continually

compared to, the *paisanos* are noble and helpful people—as the whole community of Tortilla Flat is, in fact. Still, despite these early similarities, the differences in the two authors’ focuses are evident from the start. For example, Saroyan’s characters are centered in the city, whereas Steinbeck’s *paisanos* live around the Monterey area and have a more rustic lifestyle. As time went on, these two authors’ paths would separate even further, and ultimately their focuses would end up being very different. *In Dubious Battle* illustrates Steinbeck’s shifting focus—within just two years, he had gone from writing a fable-like story that romanticizes poverty to a novel that clearly addresses the hardships that go with poverty and the harsh reality of organizing and fueling a strike.

In Dubious Battle, written in 1936, marks the beginning of Steinbeck’s “protest novel” period, which would culminate in 1939 with *The Grapes of Wrath*. The very plot of the novel centers on a protest in Californian fruit farms, and the main characters are the protestors and the members of an unnamed “Party” who support the strikers and, behind the scenes, help instigate and advance the strike itself. Jim Nolan, the main character, is a new recruit to the Party, and he begins the story as a young man who wants to make a difference and have control over his own life:

Nilson touched the desk here and there with his fingertips. “Even the people you’re trying to help will hate you most of the time. Do you know that?”

“Yes.”

“Well, why do you want to join, then?”

Jim’s grey eyes half closed in perplexity. At last he said, “In the jail there were some Party men. They talked to me. Everything’s been a mess, all my life. Their lives weren’t messes. They were working toward something. I want to work toward something. I feel dead. I thought I might get alive again.”⁵

Though Joe is no idealist, he still has hope and a genuine enthusiasm for what he’s doing. Working for the Party makes him feel alive and purposeful; it gives his life a meaning that he has never felt before.

Mac said sharply, “Well, you typed a few letters tonight. Do you feel any better?”

Jim sat down again. “I liked doing it, Mac,” he said softly. “I don’t know why. It seemed a good thing to be doing. It seemed to have some meaning. Nothing I ever did before had any meaning. It was all just a mess. I don’t think I resented the fact that someone profited from the mess, but I did hate being in the rat-cage.”⁶

Mac, on the other hand, is a more hardened figure. Years of working in the Party have made him cynical, if not outright bitter, and he serves as a more experienced mentor to Jim, at the same time as he is his polar opposite. As Jim and Mac embark on Jim’s first real assignment, to help start up a strike on a Californian fruit farm, both of them will undergo change, and Steinbeck will describe real poverty—not the fanciful, free-living poverty of Tortilla Flat, which serves its own purpose, but the kind of dark, honest

⁵ John Steinbeck, *In Dubious Battle* (New York: The Viking Press, 1936), Page 7.

⁶ *Ibid*, 21.

poverty which really did exist in 1930s California, and which Steinbeck was only too familiar with.

When Mac and Jim initially come to the farm, the workers aren't thinking of a strike, but there is tension brewing, and, given their living conditions, that's hardly unsurprising. However, there is nothing explicitly rebellious in the atmosphere until Jim and Mac start to stir up the workers. A man named Old Dan's mortal injury provides fuel for the fire, and soon the workers are furious and all on strike—as Mac comments, however, they will not stay that way for long if they do not receive outside help. The strikers aren't fighting nobly for a pure cause, though they certainly have the right to protest their conditions; ultimately, they're just a mob of average people who are driven by suggestion, and who have human needs. They need food and shelter to keep going, just like anybody else, and providing them with these is half of the Party's struggle. Although the negotiators sent by the farms are depicted as being cold and business-minded, the book doesn't explicitly attack them. And although the people who support the party, like Al Anderson and his father, who give the strikers a place to live, are ultimately ruined by the conflict, Steinbeck is not attacking the strike for hurting them either. In fact, he focuses more and more on Jim personally, who continues to change as the novel proceeds. As Mac himself says, “You're turning into a proper son-of-a-

bitch. Everybody's going to hate you, but you'll be a good party man.”⁷

Although Mac gets attached to Jim as a friend and a partner, Jim becomes more rational and less idealistic. Now that Jim has seen the human reality of a strike, he no longer mentions working for the Party because it fulfills him. Instead, he turns cold and manipulative in a way that disturbs even Mac.

Jim said softly, “I wanted you to use me. You wouldn't because you got to like me too well.” He stood up and walked to a box and sat down on it. “That was wrong. Then I got hurt. And sitting here waiting, I got to know my power. I'm stronger than you, Mac. I'm stronger than anything in the world, because I'm going in a straight line. You and all the rest have to think of women and tobacco and liquor and keeping warm and fed.” His eyes were as cold as wet river stones. “I wanted to be used. Now I'll use you, Mac. I'll use myself and you. I tell you, I feel there's strength in me.”⁸

Jim has, in fact, become an ideal Party member, but he has renounced his own humanity and forgotten what made him want to join the Party in the first place. Steinbeck suggests that such an extreme change may not be the norm for all Party members, but that one does take place to some extent. At the climax of the story, when Jim is about to make a final effort to sway the strikers, he is shot to death. Even his face is removed by the explosion, symbolically erasing his identity. Although Mac has grown to care for Jim, and is clearly thrown into shock by his death, he immediately does the only thing that he, as a party member can do; he uses his sacrifice as a tool for

⁷ Ibid, page 241.

⁸ Ibid, 249.

riling up the protestors, and the novel ends on his near-mechanical propaganda.

Mac shivered. He moved his jaws to speak, and seemed to break the frozen jawas loose. His voice was high and monotonous. "This guy didn't want nothing for himself—" he began. His knuckles were white, where he grasped the rail. "Comrades! He didn't want nothing for himself—" ⁹

In the end, the impulse to make a speech is practically automatic. Even though somebody who he cares for has just died, horribly, Steinbeck doesn't use language to convey that Mac is giving the speech to honor his memory, or to "fight the good fight" by using Jim as he would have wanted to be used. There are no indicators that the strikers will win because of this final sacrifice—all signs point to this being a last-ditch attempt that may not work in the slightest. Mac is simply talking because he has to; as a Party member, he hasn't got time for human grief. All he's able to do is keep the mob moving. Clearly, Steinbeck isn't glorifying strike, nor is he exalting following the Party—or the Communist party, its real life equivalent—as the best possible option for solving social injustice. Such mobs rarely are driven by genuine emotions in the long run, and in order to organize them and actually effect change, one has to sacrifice their own human self. Exactly what he does advocate is never made explicit in *In Dubious Battle*, but it will be made clear later on in his ultimate protest novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*.

⁹ Ibid, 313.

The plot of *The Grapes of Wrath* centers around the travels of the Joads, an Oklahoma tenant farming family that is evicted from their land during the Depression and forced to go west in order to find any work at all. By writing a novel about them, Steinbeck is also addressing all the “Okies”, from Oklahoma or not, who migrated to California once they were removed from their own land. Although the final message of the book is less harsh than one would expect, given its subject, Steinbeck clearly addresses the poverty of the Okies. The Joads’ journey, from dust bowl Oklahoma to fruit farms in California, is a long, harsh one, and it is made worse because there is no connection between the people. People who should, somehow, be connected and sympathetic to each other simply aren’t—they just have to make a living, and feeling for others is not as important. Because of the structure of business and the economy, Steinbeck suggests, people’s relationships have been structured in such a way; it is only when they have lost everything, as the Joads and the other Okies do, that they can begin to connect to other people. The Joad’s journey, both physically and symbolically, is at the very center of the novel’s meaning. At the beginning of the novel, the Joads’ lives revolve around their family, and their land; that is the center of their universe. Once they lost their property, however, the rest of their old lives begin to disintegrate similarly, and the Joad family rapidly begins to break apart.

Though Grampa Joad initially fantasizes about living and eating grapes in the paradise that the Joads picture California as being, he eventually ends up wanting to stay in Oklahoma. His spirit, more than anything, is still rooted to the land where his family has been for years and years, and because he is unable to change this, he is unable to survive when the family goes on the move. Grampa dies, and Granma follows him shortly after; though she and Grampa bickered constantly when they were alive, she is still unable to live without him. Noah, who is described as being “strange” and mentally slow, is also eventually removed from the family, though leaving is his own choice. Perhaps most significant of the voluntary departures, however, is that of Connie Rivers, Rose of Sharon’s husband and the father of her baby. Although Rose of Sharon’s unborn baby serves as a symbol of potential rebirth and renewal throughout the book, it will be a baby without a father. Although Connie has grand plans for improving himself, studying at night, and becoming a successful store owner, he is at heart a scared young man who isn’t able to handle the reality of what is going on in his own life, and he runs away from that reality and abandons Rose of Sharon to carry their baby by herself. His typical, unspecific American dream of success and a family cannot exist in the real world. Even Tom Joad, on the run after having killed two men, is eventually forced to leave the family against his will. At the end of the book, there is one final departure from the family—Rose of Sharon’s baby, instead of being a sign of new hope for the Joad family’s future, is born dead. As *The Grapes of Wrath* draws to a close, Steinbeck seems to have

come to an incredibly bleak conclusion. The Joads are a shadow of the family they once were, they are stuck in the middle of a flood, and their one symbol of hope is gone forever—but Steinbeck is not finished with his novel, and his final message is not meant to be a bleak one. When the Joads come upon a starving man in a barn, Rose of Sharon decides to save his life by nursing him.

For a minute Rose of Sharon sat still in the whispering barn. Then she hoisted her tired body up and drew the comfort about her. She moved slowly to the corner and stood looking down at the wasted face, into the wide, frightened eyes. Then slowly she lay down beside him. He shook his head slowly from side to side. Rose of Sharon loosened one side of the blanket and bared her breast. “You got to,” she said. “There.” Her hand moved behind his head and supported it. Her fingers moved gently in his hair. She looked up and across the barn, and her lips came together and smiled mysteriously.

Even though her own child has died, she has enough faith in humanity to take care of the man with a faculty that would once have only been for her own family. It is an almost religious moment; Rose of Sharon, whose name is actually a biblical reference, is almost reminiscent of the Madonna, and the imagery is not unintentional. This, not the storm or the stillborn child or the corrupt factory farms, is the image that Steinbeck chooses to close *The Grapes of Wrath*. Although Rose of Sharon’s baby, the perfect representation of all the old family values that the Joads once had, no longer exists as a being, there is still connection and caring. There is still love. By ending the book by having Rose of Sharon use her motherly assets, not to feed her baby, but to save a starving man who the Joads don’t even know, Steinbeck is

cementing the new kind of relationship the book advocates. It's no longer all about the family, or all about taking care of oneself; because of the migration and changes that the Joads, and America in general, are forced to undergo, they transform into a different society entirely. The family, as it once was, has fallen apart—Granpa, Granma, Connie, Tom, Noah, and even Rose of Sharon's baby have all left, in their own separate ways—but in the end, Steinbeck does not focus on the pain and fragmentation that this has caused. He focuses on the way that the Joads, who know that they have to live, no matter what, adapt to the new world. Individualistic American dreams like Connie's cannot survive, and neither can people who, like Granma, Muley, and Granpa, are too connected to their land—but the Joads can, because they have to. Just like the pioneers who traveled west a hundred years before them, the Joads and the rest of the Okies are strong, and when they band together, truly connected to one another, they are even stronger. All the Okies want is to be able to live—to have a house and a job and food to eat, and to keep the family together—but America is not the kind of place where they can just go and have that happen. The American dream of starting with nothing, working hard, and finding success is simply impossible to achieve, for the Joads and everyone else, but all that means is that the American dream, like the American family, has to change. Personal success and the success of the family are being replaced by a desire to help everybody achieve success; Rose of Sharon's longed-for baby may be dead, but the connection and love that occur when she selflessly breastfeeds a dying man,

instead of that baby, are as alive as ever. This is part of the same semireligious brotherhood and unity that Casy, the lapsed preacher, exhorts throughout the novel, but it also has effects on the secular world that surrounds it. It is only by banding together and becoming one that the Okies, and all the people whose needs are dangerously unsatisfied by the current system, can change America.

One man, one family driven from the land, this rusty car creaking along the highway to the west. I lost my land, a single tractor took my land. I am alone and I am bewildered. And in the night one family camps in a ditch and another family pulls in and the tents come out. The two men squat on their hams and the women and children listen. Here is the node, you who hate change and fear revolution. Keep these two squatting men apart; make them hate, fear, suspect each other. Here is the anlage of the thing you fear. This is the zygote. For here "I lost my land" is changed; a cell is split and from its splitting grows the thing you hate—"We lost *our* land." The danger is here, for two men are not as lonely and perplexed as one. And from the first "we" there grows a still more dangerous thing: "I have a little food" plus "I have none." If from this problem the sum is "We have a little food," the thing is on its way, the movement has direction. Only a little multiplication now, and this land, this tractor are ours.

At the same time that Steinbeck focuses on the shift in the American family, however, he does not gloss over the treatment of the Okies and the harsh reality of experiencing the Dust Bowl. The reason that banks and fruit farms were so enraged by this novel is obvious; he points out the injustice perpetrated by big businesses, and to a certain extent he does attack them. Steinbeck's critique of big business is obvious from the very start, when the Okies are kicked off their land by a heartless corporation. The company

doesn't care that the Okies have been living on the land for generations; if the individuals working for the companies do care, and they often do, they make up excuses for themselves that absolve them of any blame or need for connection to the suffering people. It's not *them* kicking the Okies off their land, it's simply what they have to do because people higher than them have ordered them to do it. The *company* is what makes them do it; ultimately, even the people at the company have higher-ups telling them what to do, despite what they want. The company has become a monster that has nothing to do with any actual people or genuine connections--it's just business, and everybody has to eat. Early on in the novel, a tractor-driver and a tenant have a conversation; the tenant wants to shoot the man responsible for evicting him and his family, but the tractor driver knows that shooting him isn't the right way to do it. He's at the lowest leve

The driver said, "Fellow was telling me the bank gets orders from the East. The orders were, 'Make the land show profit or we'll close you up.'"

"But where does it stop? Who can we shoot? I don't aim to starve to death before I kill the man that's starving me."

"I don't know. Maybe there's nobody to shoot. Maybe the thing isn't men at all. Maybe, like you said, the property's doing it. Anyway, I told you my orders."

"I got to figure," the tenant said. "We all got to figure. There's some way to stop this. It's not like lightning or earthquakes. We've got a bad thing made by men, and by God that's something we can change."¹⁰

Steinbeck repeatedly describes big businesses in general as being out of control and having nothing to do with real people. Not even the bankers and

¹⁰ John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York: The Viking Press, 1939), Page 52.

company owners have full power over what they themselves have created, and as it goes on it destroys more and more people, and they have less and less control over what it actually does. First, it is the tenants who are its victims, but as time goes by, business finds new ones—small business owners, small-scale subsistence farmers, local banks—and the scale of its destruction grows larger and larger as it becomes more and more alien to the people whose lives it controls. As the tenant says, there has to be some kind of solution, some way of changing the man-made monster, and Steinbeck spends much of the novel exploring possible answers to the problem. The Hoovervilles, where the Joads stay during their journey to California, certainly don't solve anything; one would expect the government-sponsored camp where they stay to be better. The facilities at Weedpatch are superior—there are some luxuries there that the Joads never actually experienced before they were evicted, like flushing toilets—and the people there are generally helpful. But even though the camp works well at first, the fact remains that the Joads are unable to get work outside of it. As long as the companies and factory farms are still around, it doesn't matter that the government camps are full of well-meaning people and have dances and flushing toilets—ultimately, they won't be able to find work, and the companies will be free to send agitators to try and insinuate their way into the work camps and arrest whatever “communists” they find there. Still, Weedpatch is better than the peach orchards and cotton fields that the Joads subsequently work on. The

association of cotton picking with slavery is one that fits well enough; though the Joads do well

In the end, what changes America isn't going to be any of the options that Steinbeck explores earlier on; it is simply the wrath of the people. Steinbeck writes this as being inevitable; there is strength in numbers, and as more and more people learn that they need to connect with one another, there will be more and more people opposing the system that cannot help them. In what is perhaps the most poignant section of the book, Steinbeck describes the waste that the landowners have created.

The works of the roots of the vines, of the trees, must be destroyed to keep up the price, and this is the saddest, bitterest thing of all. Carloads of oranges dumped on the ground. The people came for miles to take the fruit, but this could not be. How would they buy oranges at twenty cents a dozen if they could drive out and pick them up? And men with hoses squirt kerosene on the oranges, and they are angry at the crime, angry at the people who have come to take the fruit. A million people hungry, needing the fruit—and kerosene sprayed over the golden mountains.

And the smell of rot fills the country.¹¹

There is something terribly unnatural about all of this, Steinbeck is saying. People like the Joads, who simply want to live honestly, work, and eat, are starving in a land of plenty. And the people who have that plenty, the landowners and bankers and the ever-present company, are simply standing by, because turning a profit is more important than feeding them. The

¹¹ Ibid, page 476.

government cannot help the people, and the landowners turn them away. The only thing that the people can do is watch the food rot and grow angrier and angrier. As Steinbeck says, giving the novel its title, "... in the eyes of the hungry there is a growing wrath. In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage."¹²

Given this rather ominous message, it's no surprise that landowners wanted the book banned, but one should also keep in mind that Steinbeck does not conclude the novel on this note. Instead, he chooses to end with Rose of Sharon suckling the starving man. His final message is not one of aggression and revolution, even though he recognizes the injustice and describes it in vivid detail; it is simply one of cooperation and love. It is the shift from individual-centered values to communal ones that Steinbeck seems most interested in advocating, and he focuses on how that shift plays out both on the family and on the national level. It is a definite change in style and content from the more lighthearted storytelling in *Tortilla Flat*, though not a condemnation of it; he simply has changed his focus.

At the same time that *The Grapes of Wrath* was being banned, William Saroyan's *The Time of Your Life* was being celebrated. Unlike Steinbeck, however, Saroyan had changed much less as an author, and it was clear that the two authors had gone in two different directions. As in *Trapeze*, all the

¹² Ibid, page 477.

action of *The Time of Your Life* is set in the middle of the city; most of the scenes are set in Nick's Pacific Street Saloon, a bar in San Francisco.

Saroyan doesn't think that the country is undergoing some kind of revolutionary shift, as Steinbeck does, and he isn't interested in attacking institutions or effecting social change. Saroyan's interest, in this play, is simply the lives and dreams of the various eccentric characters that go to Nick's. In a way, *The Time of Your Life* is a very romantic story; although most of the characters are clearly not well-off, and Nick's bar itself is a dingy old place that is a hang-out spot for prostitutes and lowlifes, Saroyan doesn't focus on the ugly side of the place. Much of it focuses on Joe, a man who frequents the bar and uses his mysteriously-acquired money to fulfill his own nonsensical requests and help people change their lives for the better. Joe himself is a blank slate; we never find out how he got so rich, or why he wants to help other people with his money. All we do know is that he is a force of change who Almost everybody who goes to the bar wants something more out of life than they have, but at Nick's they can interact with one another and move toward those dreams in their own ways—with Joe's help, of course. If Saroyan does have any problem with the world around him, it's simply that it cannot accommodate people like those at Nick's bar, and that it has become an ugly place; as Harry, the saddest comedian in the world, says, "Nobody's got a sense of humor anymore. The world's dying for comedy

like never before, but nobody knows how to *laugh*.”¹³ Saroyan’s advice to the watcher of the play is simple and encapsulated in the opening.

In the time of your life, live—so that in that good time there shall be no ugliness or death for yourself or for any life your life touches. Seek goodness everywhere, and when it is found, bring it out of its hiding-place and let it be free and unashamed. Place in matter and in flesh the least of the values, for these are the things that hold death and must pass away. Discover in all things that which shines and is beyond corruption. Encourage virtue in whatever heart it may have been driven unto secrecy and sorry by the shame and terror of the world... Remember that every man is a variation of yourself. No man’s guilt is not yours, nor is any man’s innocence a thing apart.¹⁴

This is exactly what Joe does. When people come to Nick’s who, like Harry and Wesley, have talent that nobody else will even pay attention to, Joe sees that inner talent and convinces Nick to give them a place at the bar. When Kitty Duval, a miserable whore with a heart of gold, comes into the bar, Joe treats gently and breaks down her defenses, then sets her up with his flunky Tom. All Kitty has ever wanted, as she says, was a young doctor who she could love; really, she just wants somebody who will love her and care about her like no one else does. Though Tom is no doctor, he falls in love with her almost instantly, and the two of them find something to love in one another. As Nick tells Kitty, Joe treats everybody at Nick’s with sympathy and respect; he sees the human beings they are and acts accordingly, which is all that Saroyan expects of us. In the depersonalized, dark world that the

¹³ William Saroyan, “The Time of Your Life”, *The William Saroyan Reader* (New Jersey: Barricade Books Inc., 1994), page 389.

¹⁴ Ibid, page 376.

characters are living in, they need a Jim to remind them to love each other and remind them of the innate goodness that they all have, even when, as in Kitty, it's been pushed down by years of bitterness and abuse. It is when people treat others as inferiors for no reason, using them and pushing them down to make themselves feel stronger, that someone is truly monstrous. Blick, the loathsome Vice Squad member who constantly tries to close Nick's, is a perfect example of this attitude, and Joe's opposite. Like Joe, Blick is nothing special in and of himself; it is the way that he relates to other people that makes him out of the ordinary. While Joe treats all men with dignity that they deserve, Blick treats them with nothing but contempt. He condescends to them and hurts them to amuse himself and make himself feel better.

NICK. Why should I get worked up over a guy like that? Why should I hate *him*? He's nothing. He's nobody. He's a mouse. But every time he comes into this place I get burned up. He doesn't want to drink. He doesn't want to sit down. He doesn't want to take things easy. Tell me one thing?

JOE. Do my best.

NICK. What's a punk like *that* want to go out and try to change the world for?

JOE (*amazed*). Does *he* want to change the world too?

NICK (*irritated*). You know what I mean. What's he want to bother people for? He's sick.

JOE (*almost to himself, reflecting on the fact that BLICK too wants to change the world*). I guess he wants to change the world at that.¹⁵

Blick does indeed want to change the world, but, unlike Joe, his desire to change it comes from nothing good or worthy. He has no deep-seated love or

¹⁵ Ibid, page 397.

respect for humanity, and he has no desire to help other people. As Nick says, “You’re out to change the world from something bad to something worse. Something like yourself.”¹⁶ At the climax of the play, however, Blick finally takes his false moralizing too far when he beats up Wesley, a little boy, and humiliates and hurts Kitty for being a whore. Forgetting the fact that he himself has unloaded the gun that he had Tom buy, Joe gets up and tries to shoot Blick himself, but he is unable to. It is an old man who pretends to be Kit Carson who actually ends up shooting Blick; Joe is not able to kill him. His first significant action in the play is rendered impotent, but this is not necessarily a bad thing. Being the character he is, Joe cannot help but refrain from hurting people, even if they’re like Blick.

The closest the play ever gets to attacking the system is when Joe talks to Tom about his money, saying:

Listen carefully. If anybody’s got any money—to hoard or to throw away—you can be sure he stole it from other people. Not from rich people who can spare it, but from poor people who can’t. From their lives and from their dreams. I’m not exception. I *earned* the money I throw away. I stole it like everybody else does. I hurt people to get it. Loading around this way, I *still* earn money. The money itself earns *more*. I *still* hurt people. I don’t know who they are, or where they are. If I did, I’d feel worse than I do. I’ve got a Christian conscience in a world that’s got no conscience at all. The world’s trying to get some sort of a *social* conscience, but it’s having a devil of a time trying to do *that*. I’ll always have money, as long as this world stays the way it is.¹⁷

¹⁶ Ibid, page 397.

¹⁷ Ibid, page 432.

Even though there is clearly something terribly wrong with the world's workings for this to be true, Joe does not try to change the system. When Tom tells him that people on the docks are saying there's going to be a revolution, Joe changes the subject entirely. He is not a revolutionary, and he's not going to help the world gain a social conscience. He is simply trying to do good things, treat the world the way it ought to be treated, and help people. Joe says that he can't do simple, good things, but it's clear that he's at least trying to do them, which is more than most people can say. His situation and opportunities for doing good may be utterly unrealistic, but Saroyan, ever the optimist, is showing us an exaggerated example of what he feels we should at least be trying to do. His writing is still static, in the sense that he has not yet moved away from his sentimental tendencies, but for him, that's not really a problem. Stubborn as ever, Saroyan sees what other people considered sentimentality as simply seeing the world for what it was—beautiful, despite everything. What does revolution matter to him? Saroyan is more concerned with helping individual people than on anything grander. We aren't living in some kind of magical bar where hookers with hearts of gold and eccentric champagne-drinking fairy godmothers interact, but many things about his play are true to life. There are people out there who, like Kitty, need love and only get scorn. There are people like Harry who have talent and want to make the world laugh, but nobody listens to them. Somebody has to listen to these people, and somebody has to love them, because when you get down to it we are all connected to each other, and we

are just the same as them. We may not be Joe, but we are all in the time of our own lives, and, like the daring young man on the flying trapeze, we must begin living it with no regrets.

In some respects—their childhoods and their faith in humanity in general—Steinbeck and Saroyan were remarkably similar; in others, they were on opposite sides of the spectrum. By comparing their lives and their early work, however, one can see just how they grew more and more different. They shared a faith in people's ability to relate to one another, but as they matured as writers, they expressed that faith in different ways. Both of them were disappointed with the state of America, but they had different reasons for that disappointment. Steinbeck had been raised with a strict moral code, and he, like so many others, was angry at the way the country was being run. He was angry at the simple facts of the Depression, of course, but he also directed his anger at the heartless, impersonal business system that was destroying the lives of innocent people. He advocated sharing and a communal mindset because he felt that they were the only way for anybody to change anything about the system. Saroyan, on the other hand, was almost angry that the real world contradicted his ideas about innate human goodness so badly. Saroyan thought that the world was inherently supposed to be a wonderful place, and yet people were disconnected from another, real artists could not survive, and so many people needed more than they had—and Saroyan himself was hardly exempt from the misery of life. And yet his

work, all through America's darkest years, was fiercely optimistic. By writing, he was trying, like Joe, to restore other people's faith and bring beauty to a world that was lacking it more than ever. Both of these men held deep convictions and tried to express them and change the world through their writing, though the opinions which they were trying to express differed in many ways. When Steinbeck, in 1962, won the Nobel Prize for literature, he said, "I hold that a writer who does not passionately believe in the perfectibility of man has no dedication nor any membership in literature."¹⁸ John Steinbeck and William Saroyan, despite all their differences in opinion and method, had that passion. It was that pursuit of human perfection during a time in America's history that defied perfection absolutely that characterized their Depression-era work, but it was their separate approaches that defined them as people.

¹⁸ John Steinbeck. (1962, December.) Nobel Banquet speech at Stockholm, Sweden.