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A Long Journey

Dust everywhere. The 1930s were difficult for farmers and families in the Great Plains. A thick cloud of red dust coated everything in sight, changing the landscape. Crops were lost. Lives were changed. Unsure of what to do, many were displaced. They were forced to head west to search for any work that they could find. In John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, the Joad family experienced the effects of the Dust Bowl first-hand and decided to try to find work in California. Their journey included many elements which can be analyzed in great depth with the theories of Thomas C. Foster and his book, *How to Read Literature Like a Professor.*

One of the most prominent parts of the Joads’ story is the “quest,” in which they decide to leave Oklahoma and travel to California. In his book, Foster lists five criteria that qualify a character’s trip as a quest, almost all of which are met by the Joads. The entire Joad family - including family friend, Jim Casy – meets the first requirement of Foster’s list: the quester. Foster says that the quester who sets out on the journey is often “young” or “inexperienced” (3). In this case, it is not one character, but a group; the family is not necessarily young in age, ranging from small children to elderly grandparents, but the experience is new to all of them. The family’s goal of finding work in California meets two more of the items on Foster’s list. The distant destination qualifies as the “place to go” and the “stated reason” (Foster, 4). The promise of “just bein’ in the nicest places” in “little white houses among the orange trees” (Steinbeck, 79) gave them hope. On their way out west, the Joads faced many challenges, which once again goes along with Foster’s quest theory. The family was packed in an “ancient overloaded Hudson” (Steinbeck, 107), and car troubles, illness and the unfortunate death of both grandparents made the drive a struggle. Despite the tribulations, most of the group made it to California, where they continued to find out just how difficult life can be.

The hard times and the coming of new technology caused the Joads to leave their farm in Oklahoma and forced them to take the highway toward an unfamiliar destination. Not only was the actual trip west significant, but the medium of transportation was also critical to the story. The long drive on Highway 66, “the path of a people in flight” (Steinbeck, 103), made the journey so substantial. The road had to be taken in order for the Joads to survive. For them, the road led to salvation, a promised land. Foster would argue that the story and trip could only be made by “traveling through that particular landscape and those particular communities, at a given moment in history” (164-5). Highway 66 was part of that landscape, and it allowed the family to go on their quest in search for a better life.

The Joads’ arduous cross-country trek on Highway 66 was signified by an interesting inclusion to the book. Steinbeck used the entire third chapter to describe a turtle slowly plodding along, attempting to cross a road. That struggling turtle represented the Joads and all of the other people who had to relocate during the Dust Bowl. Even when a truck “swerved to hit it,” clipping the turtle and flipping it on its back “like a tiddly-wink” (Steinbeck, 13), the turtle set itself right and trudged on. That whole chapter can easily be seen as a representation of the tough journey that many people faced during the Great Depression. Foster says that the fact that the turtle’s quest to cross the road could be “reduced to standing for only one thing” (98) indicates that the chapter was allegorical, rather than symbolic. In many cases, the people had no choice but to push forward; the Joads were in that category. The people may have been knocked on their backs by the difficult times, but they often managed to find the will to keep going.

One of the most important characters in the book turned out to be the Joads’ family friend, Jim Casy. The former preacher joined the family on their quest, and he ended up playing a major role in their lives, especially once they reached California. Many of his characteristics made him valuable to the family; they also make him a “Christ figure” (Foster, 121). Perhaps the most obvious connection between Jim Casy and Jesus Christ are the initials: JC. That resemblance may not be much on its own, but it warrants further analysis. According to Foster, there is a list of attributes that can make a character a Christ-like figure. These include being “self-sacrificing” and having “disciples” (Foster, 119-20). While in California, Jim Casy proved his selflessness during a confrontation with police in a Hooverville (a shantytown built by people during the Depression). When Tom Joad got involved in the fight, Jim Casy stepped in and discretely knocked the policeman unconscious to protect Tom. He then decided to stay and give himself up in Tom’s place, saying, “Somebody got to take the blame” (Steinbeck, 237). His sacrifice for Tom led to jail time, but it also gave him an opportunity to follow in the path of Christ and change more lives.

Jim Casy’s noble actions put him in an undesirable situation, but he managed to make something out of it. Eventually, Tom caught up with Jim in a hidden camp. He found out that Jim had gotten out of jail and begun to help organizing the migrant workers. He helped lead strikes in the hopes of increasing pay and improving conditions for the workers; they became his followers, or “disciples” (Foster, 120). Jim’s success in becoming a leader brought him back to his days as a preacher. He found a purpose. However, similar to Christ, his time came early. When some corrupt police officers stumbled upon the campsite, they identified Jim as a leader in the strikes and called him a Communist. The scene quickly escalated, and one of the officers swung at Jim with a club, which “crashed into the side of his head with a dull crunch of bone” (Steinbeck, 345). That “wound” to the head killed him, but it also strengthened Jim’s likeness to Christ, matching the first item on Foster’s list of Christ-like characteristics. Much like the biblical figure, Jim Casy died trying to help those in need.

Steinbeck’s epic account of the great migrant migration contains numerous of examples which apply to Thomas Foster’s theories. In particular, the use of of a quest to California showed just how hard the era was for families like the Joads. The powerful imagery and tale of the struggling family was eye-opening. The plight of the farmers affected by the Dust Bowl can be hard to imagine, but in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck creates a visual that makes it all too real.