Steinbeck's Subversive Cultural Capital: The Grapes of Wrath and the Problematic Canonization of the Lower Classes

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Steinbeck’s Subversive Cultural Capital:

*The Grapes of Wrath* and the Problematic Canonization of the Lower Classes

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Introduction

“There is a failure here that topples all our success . . . and 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.”

-John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939)

In 1939, after months of strenuous research and preparation, John Steinbeck published what would later become known as his most notable work of art and one of the most widely read American novels on the working-class condition. In his introduction to the novel, Robert DeMott reports that Steinbeck told Carl Wilhelmson that he had “Never worked so hard in [my] life” as he did during the five months he spent researching for *The Grapes of Wrath* (viii). The novel tells the story of the fictional Joad family’s move westward during the 1930s Dust Bowl migration and has for decades “symbolize[d] the Depression-era dispossession of working-class Americans” (Coles and Zandy 524). After Tom Joad is released from prison, he returns home to find his homeland destroyed by poverty, repossession, and the strange environmental phenomenon of debilitating dust. After tracking his dispossessed family to a relative’s home, he is reunited with his former preacher, Jim Casy, his parents, Ma and Pa Joad, his siblings, Noah, Rose of Sharon, Al, Ruthie, Winfield, and his grandparents, who all plan to move westward in hopes of survival. Steinbeck’s reflection of this experience, as well as the reception of the text itself both then and now, enriches an understanding of American class and literary politics—a politics where individualism and success rest problematically on the possibility of cultural hegemony, and the exclusion of the socioeconomic “Other.”

Stokes 1
Despite Steinbeck’s “less-desirable” focus on the economically disempowered populations of his time, the novel’s circulation reached high levels of inter-class readership, and elicited an incredibly wide spectrum of responses. Even months before its first printing, a massive fifty-thousand copies of the novel were pre-ordered, of which 19,804 were released in the first printing; within the first month of its release, the novel made the list of national bestsellers in *Publisher’s Weekly* and was selling at the daily rate of 2,500 copies (French 105-6). Reviews ranged from strong praise of the novel as a work of art (“The Finest Book John Steinbeck Has Written”) to dismissal of the text as an “obscene” work of “propaganda in the vilest form” (French on Joseph Henry Jackson 111; Shockley 118, 121). In the following decades, the book reappeared continuously in schools and literary groups as a censored text that was removed and replaced periodically in libraries and curricula. This widespread controversy and readership paired with the novel’s 1940 film debut and Steinbeck’s 1962 receipt of the Nobel Prize catapulted the text from pop culture into the respected canon of twentieth-century American literature. Few historical novels have concurrently undergone such popularity and criticism—of those few, perhaps none were more connected to and affected by distinctly “American” socio-economic history and class culture. Much of the novel’s criticism hinged upon the truth or plausibility of the story, which demonstrates not only an American tendency towards economic blindness, but also the unique way that poverty is addressed in what is deemed “valuable” American literature. Through its production and reception, *Grapes* both highlights and challenges this distinctly American literary erasure of “class” as a critical lens and category of identity.

Under the task of exposing the darker sides of our national class history, Steinbeck’s work demonstrated the plausibility of including a working-class narrative in the American
literary canon, and thus serves as a prototype for modern development of class criticism in literary studies. Due to current academic undervaluing of privilege studies and class-based criticism, the text runs the risk of being read as historical fiction rather than relevant social commentary, particularly because the admission of a text like *The Grapes of Wrath* into the literary canon has remained largely unduplicated in our more recent cultural history. Thus, in order to fully appreciate the text as a site of changing meaning rather than a monolithic resolution to the issues of working-class, it is crucial to understand class politics through the many contextual forces that affected the novel in Steinbeck’s time, as well as what the text can reveal about our current socio-literary landscape. *Grapes* not only challenged the ideologies of a generation stricken by the effects of the Great Depression, but also continues to challenge our current day constructions of poverty and success, which were built upon idealist American desires to contrast British class hierarchy during the eighteenth century. Without the further development of the critical lenses of class and privilege studies, our literary and national consciousness would remain incomplete; class analysis allows for a deeper understanding of the socio-political weight of the text, and also encourages an examination of the author’s place within the system of class-based cultural circulation that *Grapes* critiques. As in Steinbeck’s case, authorial access to cultural capital can become rich with tension in the author’s acquired “privilege” to write about poverty, but such access also allows for subversion of the dominant order and the rewriting of an imbalanced legacy of representation.
The Literature of Poverty: An Unheard Legacy

“For our silenced people, century after century their beings consumed in the hard, everyday essential work of maintaining human life. Their art, which still they made—as their other contributions—anonymous; refused respect, recognition; lost.”

-Tillie Olsen, Silences (1962)

Grapes’ categorization as a revolutionary text rests on the fact that it challenges the dominant conventions of exclusive American literary culture, which has historically failed to represent lower class writers and characters in a manner reflective of our national class populations. Rather, the canon seems to have remained strongly tailored to upper class representations of socially constructed “High art,” due to the cultivated preferences of scholars and critics whose social positions grant them power at the site of cultural formation. That is not to say, however, that there has not been a progression in the last ten years towards a larger body of representation with regard to class diversity; in the introduction of American Working-Class Literature: An Anthology (2007), editors Nicholas Coles and Janet Zandy highlight the revolutionary nature of their publication as “a body of work that has never before been collected and made available to readers in the form of an anthology” (xxvii). Although this not the first or only class-based literary anthology of its time (see the 2001 publications, Literature, Class, and Culture: An Anthology and Growing Up Poor: A Literary
Anthology), the authority granted to Coles and Zandy’s 2007 anthology by Oxford University Press is in itself quite revolutionary, despite that the publisher is not originally U.S.-based. By being published through what is considered one of the main sites of literary power, the anthology is paradoxically recognized as an inductee into literary high culture. Their analysis of literary and working-class culture aims to reveal a long history of working-class invisibility, and pinpoints a “lack of economic and political power” as a factor in the narrative exclusion of the lower and working classes. As in John Guillory’s concept of cultural capital, Coles and Zandy highlight the powerfully exclusive nature of the literary canon through its perpetual avoidance of “mass culture” and pursuit of a socially defined “High Culture” (Guillory xii). This construction of “High Culture”—in both the literary and social sense—has facilitated the invisibility of poverty narratives in the United States and thus silenced what Coles and Zandy expose as “more than 250 years of literary witness” to the lower- and working-class condition (xix).iv

Grapes was written into this silence, only a few years after the 1929 stock market crash and in the midst of the natural phenomena of the dust bowl (1930-1936) which was caused by severe drought and over-exhausting crop rotation cycles. As a result, nearly 100,000,000 acres of the southern parts of the Great Plains were affected.v This catastrophe forced hundreds of thousands of families from their barren farms, either by starvation, sickness, or repossession, and pushed them westward in hope of finding work. This period of the Great Depression catapulted issues of unemployment and poverty into the forefront of American fear and allowed for a minor appropriation of working-class literature in small publications, although few of these works have arguably been “canonized.” In her book Silences, depression-era working class writer Tillie Olsen pinpoints “Class...[and] its
relationship to works of literature” as “the great unexamined”—words which were, ironically, not published until after the sexual revolution in 1978 (Olsen 264). vi Olsen believed this “silencing” through lack of non-labor time reflected the obstacles of the working-class (particularly female) writers during her meager but blooming career as a young writer in the 1930s, during which time she too was silenced by an inability to publish and therefore gain power through circulation. In her later publications, Olsen’s ideas on exclusion of the working-class voice have been widely overlooked in exchange for an emphasis on her feminist investigation of the silenced female voice. In other words, our modern cultural awareness of feminism and gender politics lends itself more willingly to a reading of Olsen as early feminist rather than early proletarian writer. As a result, scholarly inclination to separate identity into “either/or” categories eliminates the possibility for a fully enriched and multi-faceted reading of class as it overlaps with other identity categories. vii However, American cultural tendencies towards class blindness—both socially and academically—do not often privilege a Marxist or class-based reading as the primary lens for viewing literature. The pertinence of her analysis, particularly among the developing fields of race and gender analysis, seems a testament to our cultural misreading of the importance of class and privilege, not only during Olsen’s time but also into the twenty-first century.

Guillory’s Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation (1993) revisits the same conundrum of class in canonical literature that Olsen describes in the 1965 publication of Silences. viii Guillory writes, “without aspiring to either a consistent Marxism or post-Marxism, I have sought rather to make visible the relative absence of class as a working category of analysis in the canon debate” (viii-ix). His singular focus on class as a worthy category for analysis seems an important starting point in promoting socioeconomic standing
as a valid interpretive category in literary studies. Additionally, his aversion to a label of "Marxism" demonstrates the need for a new class-based literary revolution, which would ideally lead to a development of class study as a worthy form of literary analysis. By suggesting that such a study can stand on its own as critical literary tool, Guillory has demonstrated an awareness of our current class-based criticisms as existing only in the shadow of other, more acceptable current forms of literary discussion.

For example, the plight of the poor or working-class individual seems often to arise from an analysis of the "Southern experience," with which rurality and labor have historically been fused. Consider, for example, Mark Twain, William Faulkner, and Zora Neale Hurston as examples of Southern writers whose texts are more commonly read as regional rather than sociological on a national level. Similarly, the acceptance of multicultural theories, immigrant narrative, and Postcolonial literatures into university curricula has signaled a trend in the new academia of racial awareness and cultural "Otherness." Within these categories, the discussion of poverty may arise in the context of the experience of the racial "Other," or as a subset of racial history and exclusion, but may not necessarily illicit a larger analysis of socioeconomic "Otherness" as an identity category on its own. The rise of feminist criticism may have allowed for the visibility of female economic disadvantages, but only as a tool to highlight issues of feminine identity and oppression, rather than their applicability to larger class groups. This contemporary privileging of feminist and multicultural readings may be a result of a categorical adherence to recent ideological changes in the American sociopolitical terrain, as a result of the historical successes of both racial and gendered revolutions in the U.S (Civil Rights Movements, the Women's Movement, sexual revolution, etc.). In other words, there has yet
to be a nationally visible revolution in working-class rights, specifically in light of national communist fears and socialist aversion. Hence, it appears unlikely that class-based texts and socioeconomic theory be highly valued in critic circles, literary publications, and university classrooms, as the very force that denies the experiences of the impoverished also maintains a sense of idealistic nationalism through American individualism. Without addressing class as a valuable form of textual analysis, however, our national and literary perceptions will suffer inaccuracy and incompleteness; it is this social and canonical incompleteness that *Grapes* aims to challenge.

To understand the representational tensions that arose naturally from Steinbeck’s chosen subject matter, one must also maintain an awareness of the literary history that preceded and is thus reflected in *Grapes*. Sub-genre proletarian writings that surfaced “from below” during the Depression era created the cultural platform that Steinbeck required to write within a culture of working class life to which he belonged only by association, not birth. Steinbeck’s awareness of the 1930s phenomena in which working-class citizens began writing about their experiences can be seen in his appropriation of literary production onto his own working-class characters. For example, on Tom’s way home from jail, he catches a ride with a trucker who tells him:

‘I’ve knew guys that done screwy things while they’re drivin’ trucks. I remember a guy use’ to make up poetry. It passed the time . . . I remember a piece of poetry this here guy wrote down. It was about him an’ a couple other guys goin’ all over the world drinkin’ and raisin’ hell and screwin’ around. I wisht I could remember how that piece went. This guy had words in it that Jesus H. Christ wouldn’t know what
they meant . . . Guy showed me the dictionary. Carried that dictionary all over hell with him.’ (14)

The speaker’s perception of his friend’s poetry as “screwy” demonstrates the extent to which literary production is often misunderstood and discouraged when produced by the lower classes, who are excluded by the cultural assumption that art is not compatible with their experiences. This undervaluing of working class writing happens not only “from above” in the academic realm, but also from within the working-class culture that the speaker represents. In admitting that he does not understand his friend’s poetry, the speaker serves to illuminate the anomaly of working-class literary production and his own lack of access to literary education and interpretation. Similarly, his friend’s narrow literary scope—as reflected through his reliance upon the dictionary—embodies the struggle of the untrained lower-class writer, who is not often granted access to the cultural capital and reading experiences imposed by certain educational systems. For example, that Steinbeck’s character carries the dictionary (rather than, say, a collection of W. H. Auden poetry) demonstrates the tension between mass readership and selected literature that is privileged in high cultural institutions. In other words, because the dictionary is more widely accessible and taught to the masses to be a book of basic literary value, this is the more likely choice for the character Steinbeck aims to capture. In doing this, Steinbeck thus reveals the natural human desire within people of all classes to produce creative works of interpretation for entertainment and expression, despite a class imbalance in access to the literary tools required for publication.

He invokes Olsen’s phenomena of working-class “silencing” in that the trucker’s poem is originally spoken orally, but not recorded—similarly, the trucker’s natural inclinations towards poetics are derided rather than fostered, and thus do not hold promise of
advancement through literary training, publication or circulation. In this way, Steinbeck represents the phenomena of the unrecorded working-class voice and culture, due to a literary disinclination to honor the capacity of the lower classes to create art. By exposing the systematic class bias of constructions of “art” and access to cultural power, Steinbeck has created the possibility for future exposure of class-based narratives.

“Dangerous” Americanisms: Literature as Nationalist Ideology

As a writer concerned with the experiences of migrant workers during the Dust Bowl migration, Steinbeck demonstrated an understanding of the role of the realist writer in American society. In a journal entry dated June 18th 1938, he writes: “if I could only do this book properly it would be one of the really fine books and a truly American book”; in a September article of The New York Times, Stanley Young foresaw a similar potential when he wrote that Steinbeck “may become a genuinely great American writer” (J. Steinbeck, Journals 29; Young 89). These predictions can be justified by Sean Bernard’s modern defense of American class-realism as canonical, which he establishes his article “How to Write about the Poor.” Bernard notes, “the poor are part of our national landscape. They should be part of our literature” (n. pag.). By subscribing to this mode of thought, both Steinbeck and Bernard (and potentially Young) frame the truly “American Novel” as one that reflects our nation in the same way that Joyce held a mirror up to Dublin in The Dubliners. In other words, a privileging of a literature that presents a faulty sense of socioeconomics simply because it resonates with dominant national ideologies can be seen as paradoxically
"un-American" in its sacrifice of accuracy for the sake of idealism. Rather than viewing the literature of poverty and class as a potential threat to dominant anti-communist sentiments, such works need to be valued as some of the truest forms of American literature in that they challenge and revise dangerous U.S. ideologies of upward mobility and individualism.

The reason for the American cultural exclusion of the socioeconomic “Other” seems to lie largely in the requirement that the American literary canon maintain a sense of nationhood through its chosen canonical works, and rests heavily on national history. Gregory S. Jay highlights this distinctly “American” academic exclusion when he writes: “the kinds of works studied in ‘American’ literature courses and the kinds of issues raised in ‘American’ literary scholarship . . . continues to depend upon, and reproduce, the oppressive nationalist ideology which is the nightmare side of the ‘American dream’” (Jay 264).

Moreover, literary deviance from representation of the “ideal America” is grounds enough to classify a work as political, as is the case for Steinbeck and other social realists. As Guillory explains, “Canonical texts are the repositories of cultural values [and] The selection of texts is the selection of values” (Guillory 22-23). In light of this reciprocal relationship between literature and culture, it is important to take note of the long and complex system of class, society, and history, as well as of our institutionalization of cultural values, which may help explain why a text like Grapes faced adversity before and after publication. By examining the politics of the canon and American ideology, we can begin to understand why an exclusion of the “poor man’s” narrative—both today and before Steinbeck’s time—is not only probable, but also necessary in maintaining a sense of nationalism that is rife with contradiction.

Stokes 11
Much of the early formation of U.S. utopian ideology rested on the American desire to become distinguished from the hierarchy of British inheritance and caste that prevailed before and during the twentieth century. In _American Literature and the Dream_ (1955), Frederic Carpenter writes, “American literature has differed from English because of the constant and omnipresent influence of the American dream upon it [which is often defined by] . . . the words ‘freedom,’ ‘progress,’ and ‘democracy’” (3). As a result, “American” values of the 1900s quickly became rooted in the idealistic concept of class permeability or “classlessness,” which is perpetuated by the narrative of upward mobility and American individualism. Our assumption that individualism holds the key to success not only promises class mobility but also excuses the cultural disregard for those who have not or cannot rise. As a result, this ideology has helped to cultivate the notion that those who do not rise have simply chosen not to, or that their underdeveloped morals prevent them from fulfilling the Protestant work ethic. This prevailing tendency to essentialize the poor can be seen in such texts as Horatio Alger’s _Ragged Dick_ (1895), in which physical unsightliness and lack of personal drive characterize the anti-heroic poor whom our antagonist leaves behind in his socioeconomic rise to the top. John Whalen-Bridge examines this tension between individualist possibility and communal stagnancy as the birth site of American political fiction: “the American experience of limitless possibilities has long been on a crash course with itself, we are still faced with a variation on the same old theme: the limitless individual is trapped within a shrinking, oppressive world” (Whalen-Bridge 171). Given this explanation, it seems unlikely that the overpowering ideology of the individualized “American Dream” would allow for a literary inclusion of the anti-Dream, in which a community remains within the lower class, unable to break free from their socioeconomic
structures. *Grapes* can be seen to represent the American anti-Dream, as the novel’s focus is largely communal rather than individualist, and—unlike “Ragged Dick”—none of the Joads are permitted to “rise” by permeating societal class boundaries in an act of upward mobility. By showing their group journey and struggle rather than creating a resolution to the issue of poverty, Steinbeck has highlighted that generational poverty is result of a systematic disparity between our theory and our practice of idealized Americanisms.

In his 1955 book *American Literature and the Dream*, Carpenter analyzes the presence of the individualist “Dream ideology” in nineteenth century American literature and thought. During this time, he pinpoints the Transcendentalist movement as closely linked with a development of a strongly democratic nation, particularly through the works of Whitman, Thoreau and Emerson, who “celebrated this dream of new America, freed from the courtly traditions of Europe” (8). Despite his focus on the nineteenth century writers, he does note that “not [un]till 1931 was it described specifically as ‘the American Dream’—‘that dream of a better, richer, and happier life for all our citizens of every rank’ . . . this dream has been our distinction, but not our salvation” (Carpenter on J.T. Adams 5). J.T. Adams’ clearly defined “American Dream” arose just two years after the 1929 stock market crash, a pivotal—and likely not coincidental—moment in American history, when the idealism of individual economic mobility was at its most vulnerable.

The disillusionment and frequent un-attainability of the American Dream thus became most apparent in the years leading up to the most economically turbulent era in twentieth century U.S. history. The period of the Great Depression (1929-1941) brought a new visibility to the experience of the proletariat, and thus their voices as authors began to emerge into the national landscape in ways they had not before been able to (Coles and
Additionally, Roosevelt’s New Deal—enacted from 1933-1936—provoked national awareness of the severity of poverty, and strove to improve the lot of the unemployed and impoverished. During this era, Roosevelt established extensive legislation to protect the American laborer, including the Wagner Act, the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the Social Security Act, the United States Housing Authority, Farm Security Administration, the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, and the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938. In the anthology of American Working-Class Literature, Laura Hapke highlights this new visibility of the laborer during the Depression era as fundamental in the changing literature of the time:

For the first time in American literature a truly wide landscape emerged, peopled by sharecropping blacks, Mexican farmworkers, Dust Bowl migrants, Detroit autoworkers, men in lumber, men in sweatshops, and women in canneries, peafields, homes, and commercialized sex venues. (367)

In Hapke’s view, the increasingly public consciousness of the lower- and working-class condition allowed for a diverse group of previously unrecorded voices, all of whom were unified—perhaps for the first time in the arena of cultural production—by their class standing. Coles and Zandy further highlight the class diversity of writers during this time period: “in the 1930s, most of the authors of this wider literary landscape were worker-writers . . . giving voice to their stories and social visions in their own language” (367). The dual meaning at play in their use of the term “language” can apply not only multi-culturally and multi-lingually, but also connotes a language of “culture” that defines one’s class standing. When one-third of Americans were reported as being unemployed during the worst of the Depression, the culture of poverty became a strikingly pertinent and unifying reality.
As a result, proletariat writers emerged as a cultural group with unified experiences: “a major goal of the proletarian literary movement was to produce not only new readers for new forms of writing, but new writers as well” (369). Thus, the previously unheard Others, as Olsen described them, were able to use the changing politics of the Depression era to cultivate the possibility of future literary inclusion.

Despite this new cultural backdrop of acceptable Depression-era literature, few novels accomplished the same notoriety as *The Grapes of Wrath*, possessed the same crafted narrative scope, or sustained themselves through times of such harsh criticism. At once, the text seemed to create both a historical portrait of the times and a fulfillment what Elanor Marx had hoped for in 1891 when she wrote, “one of these days the Uncle Tom’s Cabin of capitalism will be written” (Marx and Aveling 18). Steinbeck and his revolutionary novel, though linked forever to the era of its production, must therefore be understood as a timeless part of the American cultural fabric. The text not only reflected its contemporary history but has also affected the literary history of critical reception and censorship; moreover, it has allowed for discussions of author-subject relationships and cultural class assumptions for decades to come. It is a text that can easily be read in the context of today’s economic stratification and prompt the same questions about class politics. In a surface-level analysis, the current state of our economy is not much different than the years preceding the 1930s depression era from which Steinbeck wrote; with the threat of economic crisis and U.S. poverty rates at a 15-year high, our nation and our literature must begin to un-silence the voices of production and survival, in the same way that Steinbeck saw a need to reveal the plight of Dust Bowl migrants.

A modern day re-reading of *Grapes* provokes us to look, as Bernard does, for other
recent examples of such a feat attempted in fiction—unfortunately as of now, these literary examples remain few and far between. However, with the publication of the Coles and Hapke anthologies, as well as new criticism on the subject of class-consciousness in literature, it seems that the legacy of the proletariat novel may not have been forgotten. In the shadow of writers like Langston Hughes, Sinclair Lewis, and Edith Wharton, the veins of American class-consciousness seem to run far too deep to remain un-awakened in the present scope of literary criticism. Due to its ability to bridge reality and fiction, the political and artful, the “mass” culture with High Culture, John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) stands out as a novel that accomplished what continues to seem nearly impossible for the American writer. Its subsequent effect on the political realm of the 1940s, along with its ultimate recognition as a crafted piece of valuable literature, stands as a striking example of the power in fiction and the crucial—though occasionally unstable—role of the author in contemporary American society.

**Politics of The Canon: Johnson’s Legacy Realized?**

The accessibility of Steinbeck’s prose and his artful focus on the narrative of the “common people” cultivates a wider class readership and therefore reawakens Samuel Johnson’s original eighteenth-century conception of the literary canon. Johnson’s multi-volume criticism of the poets of his time, entitled *Lives of Poets* (1777), was one of the first works of its kind to establish a collection of “valued” writers, and “marks the real beginning of the canon of English literature—the canon that continues substantially unchanged today,
replicated in anthologies and taught in secondary schools and universities” (Common Reader 15). In a historical investigation of the construction of the canon, however, it appears that our contemporary literary power dynamics do not reflect Johnson’s early conceptions of non-exclusive literary access and representation. His intentions for the canon were inherently linked to issues of class standing through his own anti-elitist desires to make literature accessible to the masses. In a time when British print culture was increasingly commercial due to recent advancements of printing technology, Johnson’s work reaffirmed those who felt that the value of the written word had declined drastically through increased publication. His work also functioned as a “standardization of English,” which was reprinted and distributed to the public regardless of social class standing (E.D. Hirsch 78). Johnson himself “opposed the elitism of the pre-print era that saw literature as belonging essentially to the courtly minority enjoying pleasures too recherché for ordinary mortals” (Kaplan and Rose 19). As a result, Johnson believed in “freedom, liberty, and the enhancement of life for ordinary people, for his common reader,” which links his conception of “literature” closely to the experiences of his “common readers,” and creates the boundaries for a theoretically permeable and ever-changing body of canonical works (20). Like Johnson, Steinbeck allowed for and relied upon a mass-readership of his novel through sales numbers and circulation, which prompted his high ranking on bestseller lists as well as his nomination for the literary Nobel Prize. In Martin Staple Shockley’s 1944 article entitled “The Reception of Grapes of Wrath in Oklahoma,” he quotes book shop owner, Hollis Russell, who says: “‘People who looked as though they had never read a book in their lives came in to buy it [Grapes]’” (Shockley 118). This class-based perception—if assuredly accurate—proves that
Steinbeck’s readership base was comprised not only of literary scholars, but also of the very people about which he’d written.

The Johnsonian framework for canon formation may be complicated by contemporary structures of literary authority and academic exclusivity, fed by an increasing scholarly fear of “low art.” For this reason, Johnson’s concept of the canon as democratically constructed (appealing to the masses) seems contradictory, particularly because the current-day classification of art and literature is inherently bound to the arbitrary class values of the “elite.” However, his humanitarian view of the function of literary works, as well as his concept of canonical changeability, implies the need for a stronger investigation of the coded class power politics inherent in canonization. It is this very power dynamic inherent in cultural formation that Steinbeck challenges in *Grapes* through his privileging of the working-class experience as artful and therefore worthy of deeper examination. Not only does Steinbeck resist representing the “High class” culture into which he, as a writer, was accepted, but he also disrupts our modern Anti-Johnsonian assumption that literature is meant to be read and understood exclusively by the elite. In this way, both Johnson and Steinbeck reveal and critique the politics of power inherent in labeling and canonizing “good” works of literature. On the subject of dominant literary values, Gregory S. Jay writes:

Michel Foucault stressed the inseparability of knowledge and power . . . In response we need to question the aesthetics of power and the power of aesthetics. Once one demonstrates that the power of a text to move a reader is a culturally produced effect—that literary ‘taste’ is not natural but taught, and taught in a way that reproduces values that go beyond aesthetics—then the issue of power becomes of vital pedagogical concern. (278)
Jay’s discussion of the potential changeability of the canon analyzes “taste” as cultivated by class standing (and thus, by their access to cultural capital)—which implies that to add or change texts, the cycle of cultural reproduction of taste must be exposed and altered. He cites an increased acceptance of feminist and multi-cultural readings, and texts, in university and scholarly settings, which by their very existence have challenged the dominant ideologies of white masculinity that have subjugated Western literary experience. This reading of the challenges facing progressive ethnic and gendered literary inclusions can also be more explicitly applied to “lower-class” Otherness: “the canon is not, as Gerald Bruns reminds us, ‘a literary category but a category of power’ (81)” rather it is to ‘defend ‘culture’ against the encroaching barbarians and retain control of the national (self-) consciousness’” (Kaplan and Rose 5). Jay’s use of the term “barbarians” implies the constructed nature of an “outsider” who dwells beyond the lines of the literary community and university education. Hence, he highlights—and in many ways echoes—Foucault’s concepts of knowledge and power, as well as Guillory’s discussion of cultural capital. A synthesis of these critical perspectives creates the foundation of class study, which can then be applied to Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* in order to fully understand the unresolved issues of social standing that Steinbeck first presented almost 70 years ago.

With the modern function of the canon as a class-based, exclusive “category of power,” it seems counterintuitive that a novel like *Grapes*, based in the “lower-class” world, would become so revered in American culture. Despite its noteworthy accomplishment of artistry, social realism, and political import, the critical responses to such a work have always been mixed. Strangely, despite *Grapes’* attempts at class empathy, even interpretations of the text have fallen victim to class-blindness, and many critical analyses of *The Grapes of Wrath*
have viewed its textual representations of poverty simply as a required subset to the historical and regional identities of the characters. Perhaps this is the more comfortable method of analysis—by viewing the identity of poverty as a closed-system linked only to the past, or to those forms of “Otherness” already neatly established and resolved, the critic need not attempt to question the dominant order of class and economic elitism that continues paradoxically to both run and ruin our nation. The admission of “lower class” identities into dominant literary culture could potentially call into question the very pillars of American ideology that have informed a long history of canon formation and the shaping of our “High Culture.” Even after the potentially groundbreaking publication by Oxford University press of the 2007 *American Working Class Fiction* anthology, the question still remains: Are the narratives of the impoverished and working classes that have begun to re-surface sustainable under our current American literary politics? Will they be heard?

**Working-Class Fiction: The Tension of Art and Politics**

When addressing *The Grapes of Wrath* as a work of political fiction written during an economically turbulent era, a complete analysis requires closer investigation of the challenges that Steinbeck faced as an author. Like the text itself, Steinbeck is grounded within a temporal landscape, and his personal views, goals, and sociopolitical identity may affect the way we read and think about *The Grapes of Wrath*. For example, it may be easier to dismiss a chauvinist reading of the text when considering the important role that women played in Steinbeck’s life and the creation of the novel. A Marxist reading of the text
emphasizes the structures of social and economic class within which Steinbeck must function, particularly because it is this very class framework that inspired many of his literary works. Additionally, the nature of political fiction elicits a need for awareness of the author’s life and activism, which Steinbeck did not feel fit for. While the relationship between author and subject of a text is often filled with tension, this relationship seems further complicated within the framework of political fiction, and more specifically, in the socio-historic situation from which Steinbeck wrote.

First, it is important to establish the elusive category of “political writing,” in which Steinbeck’s Grapes has been placed. In his article “The Political Element in Literature,” George Von der Muhll explains the contradictory nature of political activism and literary writing. He writes:

Politics is by its nature a public enterprise; it is embodied in the patterned relationships human beings develop—in more momentous instances, in arenas implicating millions . . . Great literature, on the other hand, acquires its compellingly universal qualities through synecdoche: It induces readers to accept a part . . . for a very much larger whole. (Von der Muhll 26)

Here, Von der Muhll has highlighted the distinction between public and private realms, to which activism and writing are linked respectively. The public-private dichotomy thus requires the political writer to hover between these two poles of intention, execution, and existence. As a lifestyle choice, Steinbeck’s noted reclusive existence on the fringes of the Los Gatos community during the time he wrote Grapes demonstrates his preference for the private literary realm (DeMott Journals xiii). Additionally, in Entry #92 of The Journals of the Grapes of Wrath, Steinbeck writes that he “won’t do any of these public things. Can’t. It

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isn’t in my nature and I won’t be stampeded. And so the stand must be made and I must keep out of politics” (J. Steinbeck, *Journals* 87). However, the novel’s relative success as a political work and its subsequent effects on labor policy bridged the gap between art and politics, and blurred the line between public and private. As DeMott writes of Steinbeck, “His overriding concern was humanitarian: he wanted to be an effective advocate, but he did not want to appear presumptuous . . . [Regardless,] Steinbeck found—often against his will—that he was fast becoming considered a sympathetic spokesman for the contemporary agricultural labor situation” (xxxiv). By defining Steinbeck as a “political” writer, one must keep in mind the complex ways he came to fulfill this very role he resisted.

A text that is “political” regardless of author association is proof that the classification of “political” writing is highly reliant on historical context, which in turn cultivates certain inclinations among reader response of the time. In other words, had Steinbeck written the book retrospectively from the 70s, reader response would have varied drastically due to the differences in sociopolitical climate—however, this also may have prevented the text from being seen as revolutionary in its cultural relevance, which would thus open the possibility that it be categorized as historical fiction rather than political writing. Additionally, a “political” novel’s ability to affect its readers and incite empathy secures its accomplishment of “successful” political art. Steinbeck’s approach to reader empathy through his “layered” narrative technique addresses the dual need in political fiction to mix realism with artistry; he wrote the novel in ‘five layers,’ intending to ‘rip’ each reader’s nerves ‘to rags’ by making him ‘participate in the actuality’” (J. Steinbeck and E. Steinbeck 178).

In an investigation of the framework of *Grapes* as it creates meaning, the “art” of the novel can be distinguished through Steinbeck’s use of thematic imagery, individualized
character motivations and plot detail, as well as the seamless narrative shifts between collective narration and third-person omniscient narrator—or, as Steinbeck described in his journals, the “general” and the “particular.” Both the beginning and the end of the novel create a system of meaning through contrasting themes of impotence and possibility, and the long Homeric journey that the Joads undergo throughout the text reflects the exhaustive and repetitious nature of generational struggles with poverty. In order to cultivate empathy for the migrant experience, and prompt later questions of deeper humanitarian concern, the novel begins in a state of natural desolation in the fields of 1930s Oklahoma:

As the sharp sun struck day after day, the leaves of the young corn became less stiff and erect; they bent in a curve at first, and then, as the central ribs of strength grew weak, each leaf tilted downward . . . The surface of the earth crusted, a thin hard crust, and as the sky became pale, so the earth became pale . . . every day the earth paled. (J. Steinbeck, Grapes 3-4)

Steinbeck’s extensive description of the land at the opening of the novel provides a cinematic “panning” effect, creating a backdrop out of which will arise his migrant characters. He elicits a certain degree of empathy for the terrain itself in his characterization of the land as “sickly.” For example, his personification of the corn as having weakened “ribs,” and the earth itself as having “paled” unhealthily, evokes the negated promise of the image of once “young” and “erect” corn, thus highlighting the seemingly uncharacteristic infertility of the land and crops themselves. This imagery challenges the tradition in which “the ideology of the American dream has been closely tied to the image of an abundant, tillable soil.” Thus Steinbeck’s representation of un-tillable, stagnant soil highlights his realistic perception of the prevalence of the anti-dream (Hedrick 134). Steinbeck’s personification of the natural
world also reflects his humanistic perspective, and the high value he places on people and human potential. Steinbeck continually links the personified natural world to its inhabitants with a reoccurring image of heavy and permeating dust:

    In the roads where the teams moved, where the wheels milled the ground and the hooves of the horses beat the ground, the dirt crust broke and dust formed. Every moving thing lifted the dust into the air: a walking man lifted a thin layer as high as the waist, and a wagon lifted the dust as high as the fence tops, and an automobile boiled a cloud behind it. The dust was long in settling back again. (4)

The word “dust” occurs 24 times in the brief seven-page opening chapter, creating a sense of repetitiveness in the inhibiting struggles of these impoverished farmers. This experiential construction of the text creates artful meaning through the joint performances of function and form. In other words, the function of the basic textual fact (that the dust is ever-present in this community) is reflected and amplified in the construction of the text itself (the repetition of the word “dust”). This codependence between form and function distinguishes *Grapes* as a work of art, both in this passage and on the eventual larger-scale formation of the novel. By allowing form and function to work concurrently to create a meaning larger than the summation of its parts, the novel blurs the line between art and actuality, the personal and the political, the real and the imagined, thus challenging the very foundations upon which these binaries are formed. This unification of oppositions is what a true work of political art should accomplish.

    In the opening chapter, the as yet nameless characters’ “disruption” of the dust evokes a powerful theme of individual helplessness against larger organizational systems that nature represents:
The dust came in so thinly that it could not be seen in the air, and it settled like pollen on the chairs and tables, on the dishes. The people brushed it from their shoulders. Little lines of dust lay at the door sills. The dust-filled air muffled sound more completely than fog does. (5-6)

The persistence and permeation of the dust, as well as its established power through its ability to muffle sound, establishes this pervasive dust as a somewhat monolithic power. This insistent imagery and repetition constructs a paradigm in which individualism cannot triumph against a greater force—in this case, nature. The sense that this dust is able to sink deeply into the crevices of the farmers’ lives allows for dual readings of the dust as representative of the ever-present nature of poverty or of the encroaching force of capitalism that places the poor in a disempowered position. Additionally, the imagery of stagnant emptiness, wasted and overused land, provides a setting that carries with it the direction of the novel’s entire narrative arc. It contextualizes our understanding of the Joad family’s shared experience with other migrants and allows for the development of a spectrum of character motivations, many of which are linked by common factors that accompany extreme desolation. In beginning the novel this way, Steinbeck creates a platform onto which critics and readers can propel politicized themes of struggle, hope, regeneration, and survival with which he characterizes the plight of the impoverished populations of the depression era.

Steinbeck’s construction of a dually artful and political work aligns with Von der Muhll’s classification of a “successful” literary political work as one that incites empathy without being unrealistic, and hence breaches the private realm in order to create public understanding:
Fully empathetic engagement in a complex and distinctively delineated political context is what we should expect of a purportedly 'political' novel. Socialist Realist literature typically fail as political novels because these manipulatively contrived parables seldom offer insight into the hard choices confronting those who seek to act on behalf of complex constituencies. (Von der Muhll 32)

Von der Muhll is careful to note that *The Grapes of Wrath* and Sinclair’s *The Jungle* are excluded from his discussion of unsuccessful works of Socialist Realist literature and explains their success as political fiction only briefly. He writes, “[the two texts] are political inasmuch as the collaboration of interests emerges immanently in the works of art themselves and because their protagonists’ actions are pervasively conditioned by that fact” (32). Von der Muhll seems to imply that the political nature of these novels relies strongly in their character development and emotional truth (empathy), although his incomplete textual analysis and mention of both works implies a narrow understanding of their pervasive narrative differences. For one, Sinclair was a recent convert to Socialism during the time he wrote his novel, and admittedly “he had intended it *The Jungle* less as an expose of the meat industry than as an argument for socialism” (Dickstein vi). As a result, Sinclair’s characters—particularly Jurgis, the patriarch of his immigrant family—“can never quite bear the burden of all Sinclair wants their experiences to say . . . we feel the author behind them pulling the strings, giving Jurgis all his own understanding of the economic system” (Dickstein xii).

Sinclair’s lack of literary or “artful” execution can be seen in the heavy-handed manipulation and explanation of the plot he directs, rather than a creation of character-driven action. In response to the economic injustices suffered by the workers in the meat packing

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factories, Sinclair uses Jurgis as a political reference without validating his unique experiences: "Jurgis would find out these things for himself . . . he would soon find out his error—for nobody rose in Packingtown by doing good work" (Sinclair 59). Additionally, this creates a striking separation between the knowledge of the narrator, and that of the characters, as seen in the narrator's reflection that occurs while Jurgis is in jail: "So wrote a poet, to whom the world had dealt its justice—'I know not whether Laws be right . . . ' " (Sinclair 160). This knowledge of high literature is obviously a function of Sinclair's psyche rather than his character, Jurgis, who has not been developed to have either literary access or inclination. The final chapters of the novel also seem to transform into episodes of Sinclair's socio-political soap-boxing, and become strangely philosophical in attempts to define and defend Socialism, rather than enrich our final understandings of the Rudkis family and others in their position. In the final chapter, Sinclair writes: "a Socialist believes in the common ownership and democratic management of the means of producing the necessities of life; and, second that a Socialist believes that the means by which this is to be brought about is the class conscious political organization of the wage earners" (336). The story then becomes widely about the success of socialist hope, and we lose Jurgis and his family, who seem to have vanished into the mélange of politics without causing much empathetic disruption. This privileging of political message over character development is what sets The Jungle apart from The Grapes of Wrath, and is perhaps what lead critics to reinforce the idea that "The Jungle is considered agitation rather than art" (Dickstein "Introduction" v). Although politically influential, The Jungle lacks much of the narrative scope and artistry of Grapes, and can also be seen as propaganda, which—as Von der Muhll argues—violates the artful expectations of literary fiction. Von der Muhll's position reveals that the parameters of
successful political fiction are rife with contradiction, which forces the “successful” political author to strike a delicate, and often concealed balance between message, meaning, and literary aesthetics. While he addresses the simultaneous need for art and political intent in such literature, he does not further define and separate these terms (“art” and “politics”) in close readings of the texts he discusses, which would show the basic artistic and political differences between texts like The Jungle and Grapes. Unlike in The Jungle, Steinbeck’s use of free indirect discourse, as well as the empathy he creates through character development and imagery allows for his novel to function as a structured piece of literature, in which his message does not overtake the immediacy of his settings and characters.

If we rely on Walter Benjamin’s discussion of political fiction, we can deduce that works that do not aspire to high literary art—which include, arguably, The Jungle—may also therefore threaten the validity of their political representations: “the political tendency of a work can only be politically correct if it is also literarily correct. That means that the correct political tendency includes a literary tendency...that, and nothing else constitutes the quality of a [literary political] work” (28). In light of this argument, Grapes can be analyzed as a successful work of political fiction on the basis of its dual accomplishment of political emphasis and high literary artistry. In contrast to Sinclair’s The Jungle, Steinbeck’s creation of a rhythmic, layered work, and his conscious shifting between singular and collective narrative voice allows for a dual accomplishment as a work that is both political in meaning and aesthetically participating in “high art.”

Steinbeck alternates in the subsequent chapters between the “general” and the “specific,” and in doing so connects the reader to the Joads while also contextualizing their plight by providing a wide-angle view on the social issues of the time. After introducing Tom
Joad on his journey homeward, Steinbeck writes “Joad took a quick drink from the flask. He dragged the last smoke from his raveling cigarette and then, with callused thumb and forefinger, crushed out the glowing end” (Grapes 17). Here, he has grounded his reader in an image of Tom—now only referred to as singularly as “Joad”—that captures the ways in which his body is hardened and mildly resilient to physical pain. In doing so, he avoids overgeneralizing the migrant experience, thus allowing for a more connected and empathetic reading. After demonstrating the importance of Tom Joad’s character, through a narrative privileging of Tom as protagonist in the opening of the novel, Steinbeck returns to a collective view of his character’s context in order to create deeper socioeconomic meaning in chapter five, which begins with the eviction of an unnamed tenant family. This effect of “zooming out” challenges the individualized view conveyed through Tom’s close-up chapters, thus shifting narrative privilege from the plight of the lone (male) protagonist to the shared experiences of the financially oppressed. Additionally, Steinbeck’s minimal use of dialogue in chapter five allows him to occasionally eliminate his own presence as narrator and inhabit the voice of his characters through free and indirect discourse. Steinbeck’s ability to vacillate between narrator-subject separation and a narrative voice strongly affected by the migrant experience, demonstrates his artistic attunement to perspective. In the opening of chapter five, Steinbeck describes interactions that occur between tenant families and their landowners in a time of financial strife. He grounds the reader in specific instances by noting sensory details such as “The tenant men stood beside the cars for a while, and then squatted on their hams and found sticks with which to mark the dust,” while also implying a more general sense of the frequency with which this event occurred for many families: “more often a spokesperson for the owners came... sometimes
they drove big earth augers into the ground for soil tests” (42). This combined use of
generality and specificity amplifies the overall effect of Steinbeck’s criticism of capitalism;
additionally, a shared voice between narrator and characters allows for a blurring of narrative
power:

If a bank or a finance company owned the land, the owner man said, The Bank—or the
Company—needs—wants—insists—must have—as though the Bank or the Company
were a monster, with thought and feeling, which had ensnared them. These last would
take no responsibility for the banks of the companies because they were men and
slaves, while the banks were machines and masters . . . (42-43)

In this passage, Steinbeck employs his own control over language to inform his readers who
speaks certain words; for example, “the owner man said” signifies the owner’s spoken
possession of the phrases “The Bank,” “needs,” “wants,” and “must have.” Capitalization of
“The Bank” functions to create an understanding of the “owner man’s” perspective on the
bank itself, and elicits a possible sensory (auditory) component to his speech stress-patterns.
Additionally, the grammatical construction of this passage does not resolve the “If” phrase of
the first line, implying that the naturally subsequent “then” phrase that does not occur is
unimportant; rather, what is important is the sense of possession, commodified desire, and
personification of “The Bank” that the words, “needs,” “wants,” etc., imply. The voice that
interjects after “must have” is once again the voice of the narrator, although it is deeply
infused with the perspectives of the tenants. The lack of quotation marks also opens the
possibility that this first sentence is meant to come through the voice of the tenants
themselves, particularly through phrases such as “the owner man,” which carries with it a
sense of colloquialism. Thus, Steinbeck has created three intertwined voices in a matter of
lines: the tenants, the landowners, and the narrator. As represented by his complex language, and free indirect discourse, these voices function together to enhance the experiential aspect of the text, as well as the fluidity with which character, scene, context, time, and narrator intersect.

Steinbeck’s reliance on Marxist thematic language in this chapter enhances his use of the “general” or communal voice, and serves to strengthen his argument for an awareness of labor and the lower classes. By describing the owners as “men and slaves, while the banks were machines and machines and masters,” the narrator (who I will refer to as Steinbeck) has placed the landowners in a position of subservience to the corporate system of banking under which they are forced to operate. In this way, Steinbeck creates a strong empathy for the landowners as humans (laborers and slaves in their own right) rather than villains; this shared focus on labor and profit, with regards to both the farmers and the landowners, demonstrates the monolithic power and larger systematic corruption of the American economic system that Steinbeck aims to critique. By separating the landowners from the negative connotation of “The Bank,” Steinbeck remains true to his humanistic interests and allowing for a more direct critique of the economy itself. The concept of “The Bank” that Steinbeck develops throughout the text emphasizes Marxist themes of ownership and production, and reflects tensions between the labor force and profit “monsters”:

Sure, cried the tenant men, but it’s our land. We measured it and broke it up . . . being born on it, working it, dying on it. That’s what makes ownership, not a paper with numbers on it.

We’re sorry. It’s not us. It’s the monster. The bank isn’t like a man.

Yes, but the bank is only made of men.

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No, you’re wrong there—quite wrong there. The bank is something else than men... the bank is something more than men, I tell you. It’s the monster. Men made it, but they can’t control it. (45)

The lack of real-time, “marked” dialogue in this passage once again demonstrates Steinbeck’s control over his literary language. Additionally, his choice not to ground the discussion in one closed occurrence of dialogue further highlights the far-reaching reoccurrence of such interactions, both historically and within the text. Steinbeck’s humanistic awareness in the farmers’ consciousness (“but the bank is only made of men”) demonstrates a pragmatism and sense of reason that the landowners do not possess (“It’s a monster”), perhaps due to their own capitalistic enslavement. By demonstrating the absurd and anti-humanistic quality of the landowners’ statement that the bank is “something more than men,” Steinbeck also portrays a failure in American thought and rationality. The landowners justification of their actions, by granting higher power to the forces of capitalism, also requires an employment of their American individualist sense of competition and self-interest: “some of them [the landowners] were cold because they had long ago found that one could not be an owner unless one were cold” (42). Steinbeck’s created system, in which personal ownership can only be sustained by a suppression of others, is the text’s main criticism of the U.S. economy and the American tendency of blindness toward the suffering of other classes of Americans.

In their manifestation of American class-blindness, the landowners struggle to rationalize their characterization of the bank as an uncontrollable entity by projecting human qualities onto the banking system itself. This humanization allows the landowners to portray themselves as “compassionate” because they care for the survival of a living entity (“The
But—you see, a bank or a company can’t do that [borrow money in hardship], because those creatures don’t breathe air, don’t eat side-meat. They breathe profits; they eat the interest on money. If they don’t get it, they die the way you die without air, without side-meat. It is a sad thing, but it is so. It is just so.

The squatting men raised their eyes to understand. (43)

In their use of “survivalist” language, the landowners reappropriate the tenant’s language of struggle to humanize a lifeless, flawed, and man-made system of finance. This subversive use of language functions as an empowerment tactic on the part of the landowners, whose implications that the death of “The Bank” would be a “sad thing” constructs a false sense of their own morality. The process of tenant-landowner interaction, and displacement of culpability, removes the immediacy of human communication; Steinbeck writes that, although the landowners themselves sometimes came to speak with the tenants, “more often a spokesperson came” (42). This process of hierarchical communication accentuates the division between owners and non-owners, the powerful and the disempowered, and through this division, those in power are able to avoid seeing the repercussions of their repossession of the land. The landowners’ sentiment that “It just is so,” also demonstrates the extent to which this voice embodies dominant American ideologies of social blindness and aversion to socioeconomic change. The naturalization of these ideologies (the idea that they just are) not only removes blame from participants in systematic oppression, but also moral responsibility; this in turn prevents the possibility of awareness and reform. Steinbeck’s created refuge for the Joads in the migrant camps shows that Grapes is attuned to themes of communal survival and regeneration through interdependence, as required by the severity of external lower
working-class pressures. For example, the communal concern that Steinbeck facilitates in each of the migrant camps during meal times serves as a striking contrast to earlier intra-class attitudes towards starvation. This highlights Steinbeck’s perceived humanity, progressiveness, and perseverance of the lower classes, and demonstrates the power of collective thinking, as well as communal concern and action.

Steinbeck’s Cultural Capital and the Politics of Representation

This distinction of what constitutes what I have called “literary high artistry” encapsulates the complex dynamics of power at play in defining high art vs. “low” or mass art. While politics can be conveyed through artful characterization and composition in a fictional text, this need to achieve artful execution is driven by the assumption that the writer has had access to “high art” and knows how to perform it. This dilemma, again, invites a discussion of privilege, access, and cultural capital. In Steinbeck’s case, he had previously published several of his more successful works, *Tortilla Flat* (1935), *In Dubious Battle* (1936), and *Of Mice and Men* (1937), and thus through his moderate success he had been granted the power of authorship and voice. The act of becoming a valued author and literary “producer” requires an access to cultural capital; publication in itself can be seen as a testament to the writer’s ownership of a certain amount of cultural capital. As a result of publication, voices and texts deemed “artful” and “literary” are given power through circulation, as well as ideological power on the national level (see Kavanaugh 312).

In light of his own upbringing and later publications, we can see that Steinbeck did...
possess a certain degree of cultural capital, provided to him as a result of his own socioeconomic standing and class-cultivated reader-hood. From a socioeconomic standpoint, he was the son of “respectable middle-class parents: John Ernst Steinbeck, a businessman who would later become Monterey County treasurer, and Olive Hamilton Steinbeck, a former schoolteacher” (DeMott xxi). He acquired his conception of “literature” through his early access to books and education, notably encouraged by the women in his life: “At the age of ten, Steinbeck was introduced to Thomas Malory’s Arthurian legends by his aunt . . . By this time John was already an advanced reader thanks to his mother's diligent instruction and to the availability of reading material in the Steinbeck home” (Burkhead 2). Hence, not only was his family able to afford books, but they were also attuned to upper-class literary values through their social proximity to the power elite (creators of cultural value such as educational institutions, etc.). Steinbeck’s extensive access to books that were considered culturally valuable began his cultivation as a writer, and his mother, “Olive[,] was a confident woman whose interest in social justice made her an active member of the Salinas community,” who urged Steinbeck to “live up to the potential she saw in him” (Burkhead 2). The potential she recognized went relatively unnoticed until college. He attended high school in Salinas, and “he was an undistinguished student”; he enrolled sporadically at Stanford University from 1919 to 1925—during which time he supplemented his education with manual labor—although he never received an undergraduate degree (DeMott xxi). At Stanford, he persuaded the Dean to allow him to enroll in upper-level writing courses, where his professor Edith Ronald Mirrielees saw his potential and helped cultivate the writer we know today (T. Steinbeck 9). Had Steinbeck not been given access to books in his early life—more importantly, the “right” books—as well as to his education at Stanford, he may
well have never achieved his full potential as Pulitzer Prize-winning author.

Steinbeck’s access to cultural capital and a university education not only exposed him to the dialect and conception of “value” upon which literary institutions are founded, but also in return opened possibilities for his first publication. Ted Miller, a friend from Stanford, had been forwarding Steinbeck’s manuscript for *Cup of Gold* to publishers after its completion in January 1928, and in 1929 he announced to Steinbeck that the novel (Steinbeck’s first published work) had been taken on by Robert M. McBride and company (Li 11-12). In this way, Steinbeck’s subversive writing can be seen as a manner of “passing for Author” in order to expose a deeper class injustice, which he first witnessed as an undergraduate during the time he spent working alongside migrant farmers and labor crews at various locations, including the Spreckels Sugar Company ranch near Salinas. As Gregory S. Jay writes, “Language is a primary vehicle for passing, and literary critics should study the manner in which the formal development of genres and movements participates in its rituals and contradictions” (268). Even political working-class novels must aspire to, and be measured against, culturally dominant concepts of art and literature, and even political writers must acquire a certain degree of cultural power in order to be successful. This attainment of power may require them to be, to a certain degree, admitted into upper class institutions (selective schools and other literary training facilities, publishers, etc). Steinbeck’s authorship of *The Grapes of Wrath*, and his non-fictional works on the migrant condition, compiled in *The Harvest Gypsies* (1936) and reprinted in *Their Blood is Strong* (1938), create the effect of subversion from the inside out; through his political critique of the treatment of lower-class migrant workers, his work draws attention to the very socio-political power structure through which he was deemed a valuable author. The existence of the novel itself highlights the

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arbitrariness of societal class construction; the textual contrast between Steinbeck’s learned artistic execution and his socially deemed “lower-class” subjects illuminates the dynamics of power in both our twentieth-century cultural production and labor systems.

This divisive author-subject dynamic provides an added challenge for the author in his assumed authority as writer and “voice” of proletarian fiction, literature which is essentially concerned with unequal power structures. A text like *The Grapes of Wrath* raises fundamental questions of representation, in which the author (Steinbeck) must approach the “represented” subject in a way that both reflects the subject or group accurately, and does not fall victim to essentializing or patronizing this group. This is perhaps the eternal struggle of political, if not social realist fiction. Particularly in representing financially and politically disempowered groups, the achievement of the political writer remains both a privilege and a curse. At the apex of creation, the writing of the novel consumed Steinbeck and he labored for months to accomplish the artful work he intended. The story of the migrant condition had been dear to him and as a result, *Grapes* is “a very personal book, invested with biographical import” (DeMott 14). Despite the novel’s timeless success, its production and cultural reception nearly ruined his drive for artistry, and as a result *Grapes* arguably represents the pinnacle of his career. It seems fitting that Steinbeck—along with many other “successful” political writers who are artists first and foremost—should be inclined to resist the danger of combining art with politics, despite that *Grapes* inevitably carried meaning independent of Steinbeck’s inaccessible intentions. As DeMott states, “by putting his pen to service of a political cause, he [Steinbeck] was stepping as close to being a firebrand as he ever would” (DeMott xxxviii–xxxix).
In contrast, Steinbeck’s first wife—Carol Henning Steinbeck—found herself involved in the more radical of the labor movement, and “actively supported members of the fugitive agricultural labor movement before he [John] did” (DeMott xxv). They had married in 1930, and throughout the laborious writing of *Grapes*, she often became a source of strength and support for John, which can be observed by Steinbeck’s dedication: “to CAROL, who willed it” (*Grapes of Wrath*). She quickly typed the final manuscript in a matter of months and was also responsible for the naming of the book, “in a brilliant stroke” after a line in Julia Ward Howe’s 1862 “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” which reads, “Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord / He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored” (DeMott xxvi; Howe 10). This distinctly feminine contribution to Steinbeck’s *Grapes*—both from the literary perspective (“Battle Hymn”) and in his personal life—would indicate that the novel prospered from the union of feminist and proletarian causes that had converged upon the social consciousness of the 1930s, a cause which Carol herself championed.

Regardless of his stated aversion to political self-classification, Steinbeck still encountered accusations that criticized the “truthfulness” of his representations, due mainly to the high level of socio-economic tensions at play during this era, and surrounding the topic of the migrant working-class condition. The novel faced negative reactions from the general public—mainly western parents and school boards—and also negative responses from the scholarly community:

*The Grapes of Wrath* has also been attacked by academic scholars as sentimental, unconvincing, and inartistic . . . denounced by right-wing ministers, corporate farmers, and politicians as immoral, degrading, and untruthful . . . Oklahoma
Congressman Lyle Boren... called it 'a lie, a black infernal creation of a twisted, distorted mind'. (DeMott xxiv)

In both instances, a certain degree of criticism is centered around the "truthfulness" of the text, which is a complicated expectation to have of a fictional work. In light of the fact that Grapes arose from an extensive period of Steinbeck's research on the social conditions of migrants during this era—which had emotionally affected him in powerful ways—the claims against the text as dishonest (both emotionally and factually) demonstrate the extent to which regionalism and class difference affects reception. From the scholarly perspective, the reflexive nature with which critics dismissed the novel as inartistic and even "sentimental/unconvincing" demonstrates a High Cultural resistance to so subversive a political text, particularly in that such a work threatens the system of class and power that has created the very foundations of High Culture. With regards to popular western opinion, those who were blinded from the experiences of the migrants, or those in positions of socioeconomic and cultural power (congressmen, corporate farmers, ministers, etc.) would criticize a "truth" that they refused to, or could not, see. While writing and researching, Steinbeck himself foresaw this complication in the reception of his text, which is perhaps why he was so methodical in its execution and documentation. In reference to the informative reports on contemporary migrant conditions that Steinbeck received from his friend Tim Collins, the manager of a Kern County Farm Security Administration camp, Steinbeck wrote clearly: "I need this stuff, it is exact and just the thing that will be used against me if I am wrong" (J. Steinbeck, Journals 33). Hence, the facts of such documents and Steinbeck's own experiences allow for the dismissal of such accusations that the text was composed of "lies." In this sense, the foresight with which he began Journals allowed
Steinbeck to at once defend the realism of the novel, and also the artistic execution and vision for the text. The scholarly criticism that argues against *Grapes* as a work of art can be refuted by an investigation of the distinctly artful process of Steinbeck’s composition, particularly when read in contrast to his non-fiction articles on the migrant condition. As Warren French writes quite astutely: “Those who have complained that Steinbeck provides no ‘solutions’ for the problems he depicts in the novel should read these [his non-fiction] articles carefully,” particularly as these articles aim to provide more practical solutions to the social problems he has researched and exposed” (French 53). As a result of the noted contrast between the function of his fiction and the function of non-fiction, his nonfiction body of works “offer[s] evidence, by contrast, that the novel [*Grapes of Wrath*] is art rather than propaganda” (French 53).

This is not to say that Steinbeck did not posses a particular intent with the novel, although it seems that his viewpoints were more universally humanistic than overtly affected by political motives. In *Journals*, he writes: “My whole work drive has been aimed at making people understand each other,” which reflects mainly upon his perceived class tensions of the era from which he writes (French on Steinbeck 117). His position as a writer demonstrates a certain tendency towards social realism, and thus he has worked his novel in a way that he sees best replicates the injustices with which he was most familiar. As Wyndham Lewis once wrote, “If I write about a hill that’s rotting, it’s because I despise rot” (O’Connor 31). In this sense, we can read Steinbeck’s characters as the hill onto which he perceives the “rot” of human suffering to have been imposed through systemic economic oppression. His ability to recreate the socioeconomic injustices he witnessed during the 1930s through a multifaceted narrative structure makes the text both a work of art and—given the economic
turbulence during the time of its publication—a work of highly politicized import. The framework and execution of the text, however, is what has allowed the novel to remain a focus of literary studies and therefore has allowed for a multi-generational circulation of Steinbeck's humanist ideology.

Grapes and Gender: The Continuing Threat of Anachronism

As a result of an underdevelopment of class study in the academic realm, much of the modern criticism of *Grapes* revolves around Steinbeck's construction and use of gender. These readings, although demonstrative of the complexity and pertinence of the work with regards to current critical trends, also function within the realm of critical fallacy. In other words, modern feminist readings such as Joan Hedrick's "Mother Earth" and McKay's "Happy [?] - Wife-and-Motherdom" suffers from anachronistic weaknesses in their modern retrospective reading of a text so deeply ground unique historico-political context. Steinbeck cannot be expected to reflect a society in which women do not fulfill gender-typical roles, as his position as social-realist author requires that he replicate the complexities of the social structures he aims to critique. For example, the need for Ma to remain in the home to manage childcare and food preparation is more reflective of the fact that the depression-era migrant economy was tailored more strongly toward male labor, rather than the unfounded assumption that Steinbeck idealized female domesticity. A feminist reading that privileges gender over class succumbs to a certain degree of "class blindness," in which a focus on class identity—which is Steinbeck's main subject—is submerged beneath other forms of accepted
modern literary methods of criticism. Because the largest injustices perceived at the time of Steinbeck's writing the novel were class-based, his position as social realist requires that he approach the issue of class first and foremost to enrich his criticism of the capitalist structure. Within the text, the argument can be made that the female "subverted" position is an example of Steinbeck's perceived societal "rot," created perhaps by the suppressive nature of male-driven capitalism. Regardless, Steinbeck creates a suppressive force (poverty) that affects men and women equally, and forces their codependence for the sake of survival and regeneration. This codependency is reflected in the division of labors, in which men and children work for meager pay while Ma and Rose of Sharon must struggle to find affordable food and creative ways to save and ration.

When McKay criticizes *Grapes* on the basis of Steinbeck's supposed lack of development and empowerment of his female characters, she suffers anachronistically from her overly insistent feminist reading of the text. Her reading is based on her perception that in the text:

men perform in the public sphere, while women's place is in the home, where they loom large and powerful, although, in the larger world, they remain under the control of husbands and fathers. Nor are women innocent in the development of these systems . . . [they] willingly give up intellectual, economic, and political power in exchange for private power. (McKay 48)

This perspective is problematic in that McKay does not address larger issues of group-class identities and frameworks of economic suppression that frame the female position in *Grapes*. Her reading of Steinbeck's women as being "willingly" financially suppressed at the hands of men demonstrates a McKay's disregard for the inherently masculinized capitalist system.
that oppresses both women and men in the text, as well as a disregard for the historical aspect of the novel, which reflects a time of forced migrancy and social oppression of the masses. Additionally, McKay’s assertion that the women are under control of their husbands and fathers is inapplicable to Ma (who threatens physical abuse to Pa in chapter sixteen and in doing so takes a dominant position) and Rose of Sharon (whose husband runs away and is absent for the remainder of the novel). Lastly, although the women’s labor centers mainly around domestic action, this representation is true to the community and times from which Steinbeck—as Realist—writes, and his employment of individual strengths within the women allows for their suppression to be seen as a condition of their social setting, joined inseparably to the suppression of their male counterparts. For example, when Pa tries to talk Ma out of staying at the camps, she says he would have to beat her first, and that “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” (230). This assertion of shared physical dominance shows the extent to which she is not threatened or suppressed by her husband, as much as she is by their shared economic status and fear of starvation. Therefore, to say that the women have chosen their “subservient” roles in the text is to employ a negligent reading of Steinbeck’s attunement to social context, which McKay does when she states that “Steinbeck’s women seldom need seek the right to work outside of their homes, or to choose careers equal to those of men” (McKay 50). McKay’s application of modern feminism onto a text that is meant to highlight systematic economic flaws shows a blindness to the “privilege” inherent in the ability to pursue a “career,” which neither the Joad women nor men are able. Despite the well-crafted nature of her argument, McKay’s imposing of modern critical expectations onto a text that was published nearly 70 years ago—before the sexual revolution—demonstrates a neglect of
holistic textual analysis and critical perspective. In this sense, McKay's feminist reading can appear elitist in its class-blindness and aversion to unifying femininity with class; her expectations of Steinbeck's characters are thus highly unrealistic, particularly for his working-class female characters that are oppressed not by choice or domestic power dynamics, but rather by the larger forces of capitalism that suppress the masses regardless of gender.

Ma's characterization in the novel can in fact stand up against McKay's specific anti-feminist accusations on her own, as a result of her independent political thinking, her ability to manage family finances, and her collective societal awareness. Steinbeck himself wrote in *Journals* that "[I] want to show how valuable Ma is to society—what a waste there is" (70). Once again, McKay's reading that "The husband/father assumes the socially approved masculine responsibility to make important decisions and provide monetarily for his family" disregards the complexity of Ma's characteristics as family manager and holder of the household finances (McKay 49). The critical scene in which Ma financially facilitates Tom's escape and survival demonstrates Ma's ability to provide monetarily for her offspring as a result of her responsible money managing skills. Ma says, "'I been squirrelin' money away. Hol' out you're your ban', Tom. I got seven dollars'" (J. Steinbeck, *Grapes* 569). Tom at first refuses the money out of honor, and realizes he must take it only after Ma exhibits a rational reasoning for giving him the money. Ma begins by pointing out the practical need of having money: "'Maybe you gotta take a bus'" (J. Steinbeck, *Grapes* 569-570), and the question Tom with regards to his plan of action:

'Tom,' Ma repeated, 'what you gonna do?'

'What Casy done,' he said.
‘But they killed him.’ (571)

By pointing out that Casy’s aggressive individual attempt to protest low wages resulted in his murder, Ma forces Tom to see the need for his own calculated political awareness and tact. Tom’s response that “He [Casy] didn’ duck quick enough. He wasn’ doing nothin’ against the law’,” shows that Tom may not yet fully have begun to understand the political of social power and revolt (J. Steinbeck, *Grapes* 571). His transition into a larger consciousness of political organizing begins to develop shortly thereafter, however, this awareness of collective political power arises out of Ma’s earlier modeling of societal consciousness.

Ma first demonstrates political awareness that precedes a masculine collective awareness, in her reasoning for “the possibility of political action” (Hedrick 140).

‘Tommy, don’t you go fightin’ ‘em alone . . . They say there’s a hun’erd thousand of us shoved out. If we was all mad the same way, Tommy—they wouldn’t hunt nobody down . . . ‘Many folks feel that way?’ he demanded. (104)

Ma’s awareness of the collective power of people against the unequal frameworks of larger sociological issues refutes the claim that Ma is portrayed as unaware of pointless as a character. Steinbeck has given Ma political power in her ability to organize the people in her life, both with regards to their survival and ideologies, in a way that creates the possibility for organized power of the labor forces against their suppressors. In the same way that Ma encourages Tom to use his body to work collectively for the survival of others, she also encourages Rose of Sharon to use her breast milk to save a starving old man in the final scene of the novel. Again, this scene is problematic only by restrictively modern, feminist standards of objectification, which disregards the cross-gendered thematics of personal bodily sacrifice for the greater communal survival upon which *Grapes* is centered. McKay Stokes 45
undercuts her anti-feminist portrayal of Steinbeck by conceding, “the values sensibilities demonstrate a point of view that supports the idea of humanitarian, large-scale changes that would make America, as a nation, more responsive to larger social needs” (58). This creation of Ma as socially aware of the larger realm of humanity demonstrates the possibility of class empowerment for Steinbeck’s men and women, thus granting Ma a certain degree of political intellect and optimism, as well as elicits the possibility for future change.

It is in this way—as well as through Ma’s initiation of collective awareness—that Steinbeck challenges the American concept of competitive consumer identity, and enforces the concept that “Real strength of character emanates . . . from the work roles of the men and women Steinbeck portrays. A corollary to this is that individual strength is not individually created; it arises out of the social relationships from which people derive both their identity and their reason to be” (Hedrick 139). The dominant textual themes of class collectivity can also be applied to the interdependence of gender, as required by the socioeconomic settings of the characters in Grapes. This gendered interdependence allows for equality of shared gendered power within the microcosmic realm of the family, even when the individual members of the family are economically suppressed in varying but equally oppressive ways.

Conclusion

When Steinbeck wrote The Grapes of Wrath (1939), he was writing the Joads into our national consciousness and challenging the dominant American aversion to poverty that began in the early 1900s with the cultivation of “the Dream,” and continued after the...
Depression era when WWII war efforts increased nationalist sentiments and boosted the economy. Because the construction of an “American” literary canon is inevitably linked to national ideologies, class blindness has become a part of our literary culture as well as our social strata. The myth of upward mobility and push of capitalist competition allows for the perpetuation of a narrowly individualistic national psyche. This individualism is problematically linked to an idealistic concept of “democracy,” which can, in turn, falsely justify the exclusion of the lower- and working-class experience. With the possibility of success returned to the forefront of the American experience after the 1940s, the proletariat writers’ movement and Steinbeck’s cultivated legacy of the anti-Dream became viewed solely as a testament to American history, rather than a critique of the continuing problems within the U.S. socioeconomic structure. Steinbeck’s examination of class conflict and individualistic thinking in *Grapes* is as applicable to contemporary American society today as it was seventy years ago:

This is the beginning—from ‘I’ to ‘we.’ If you who own the things people must have could understand this, you might preserve yourself. If you could separate causes from results, if you could know that Paine, Marx, Jefferson, Lenin were results, not causes, you might survive. But that you cannot know. (J. Steinbeck, *Grapes* 206)

Steinbeck’s attunement to the underdevelopment of class and privilege awareness (“that you cannot know”) also pinpoints this underdevelopment as the perpetuating force of disproportional ownership and labor. In 1938 Steinbeck wrote to the San Francisco *News*:

“Every effort that I can bring to bear is and has been at the call of the common working people to the end that they may eat what they raise, wear what they weave, [and] use what they produce” (DeMott xxxii). His understanding of needed collectivity in a society plagued
with unequal class access to economic and literary power prompts an investigation of the ways in which knowledge and art continue to be restricted from the lower- and working-classes. In this way, Steinbeck’s humanistic perspective on class and survival, as well as the readability of his text (through structure and circulation) demonstrates a retrospective integrity towards the original intentions of Johnson’s canon and the “common reader.”

This collective and more distinctly democratic selection of canonical works would allow both lower class writers and subjects to breach the current class-biased boundaries of “High Art” in exchange for a more inclusive focus on the ultimate qualities of art itself. That *Grapes* elicits such a timeless, revealing, and multi-faceted analysis of American sociology and class identity not only makes it revolutionary, but also strikes a compelling argument for a stronger development of class studies within the Academy today.

Although progressive in nature, Steinbeck’s *Grapes* still straddles the inherently imbalanced power dynamic of the upper-middle class author representing the lower class. His focus on the lower class migrant experience is revolutionary amongst a body of twentieth century works that are tailored to dominant ideologies of success; however, his class standing and access to cultural power does not demonstrate a contemporary plausibility of the working-class writer’s literary inclusion. In other words, Olsen’s perceived “silences” of the working-class writer may not be resolved in the near future, despite that Steinbeck’s careful attention to factuality, detail, and personal experience, represents the most fully formed depiction of the working class experience in American twentieth century literature.

Although current U.S. socioeconomic and literary culture idealizes—rather than enables—a reliable form of class permeability, this is not to say that American literature has not progressed towards multi-class inclusion. The anthologies of *American Working-Class*...
Literature (Coles and Zandy), Literature, Class, and Culture, and Growing Up Poor: A Literary Anthology, demonstrate progressiveness toward the inclusion of both working-class writers and working-class characters. Additionally, in an informal dialogue during his visit to Dickinson College, Pulitzer Prize-winner Richard Russo recognized: “In graduate school, I realized that the kinds of people I knew and wanted to write about were desperately out of step. Literature on the ‘common people’ was not a terribly crowded arena, though it’s gotten a little better over the years” (14 Apr 2011).xxxvi When asked if he had ever felt compelled to write about “literary” characters for the sake of canonical inclusion, Russo expressed his simple desire to write—as Steinbeck did—about the people he knew and respected most. On the part of both writers, this separation of one’s personal art from the influences of class-biased nationalism demonstrates the extent to which writers can control the visibility of the lower classes through their own balancing of artful narrative and sociopolitical undertones. By constructing an artful narrative that is conducive of reader empathy, both Russo and Steinbeck have not only qualified themselves as talented fiction writers, but have also used their admission into literary culture to increase visibility of the working-class experience. This subversion of cultural structures that encourage class-blindness is perhaps the only way to represent the working class under current socio-literary frameworks of cultural power. By opening possibility for increased interclass understanding, writers like Steinbeck and Russo will continue to challenge class-based imbalances of access to education and power. In turn, critics and scholars will be forced to examine American aversions to the study of the impoverished populations that continue to exist and subsist within the boundaries of the United States. To say this new American legacy began with Steinbeck is to disregard the working-class writers that remained “silenced” during the Depression era and into today;
regardless, Steinbeck’s uniquely humanistic perspective continues to cut across the boundaries of class and gender, and represents one of the most revolutionary uses of authorial power in the twentieth century socio-political realm.

NOTES

i For further details, see pages 180-192 in *Banned Books: Literature Suppressed on Politic Grounds*, ed. Ken Wachsberger.

ii An example of such a fallacy originates in Joseph Warren Beach’s conception that the novel’s “tremendous vogue is founded partly on what we call an accident—the fact that it concerns itself with one of the major economic problems of our day. . . . It is, we might say, an accident that so great a talent as John Steinbeck’s should have come upon so great an topical a theme” (*American Fiction* 309).

iii For a clearer analysis of current class populations and misconceptions, see *Field Guide to the U.S. Economy* by Johnathan Teller-Elsberg, Nancy Folbre, James Heintz, and The Center for Popular Economics.

iv Although this wording may seem redundant, my dual usage of the terms “lower” and “working” classes is meant to include experiences of both the employed and unemployed (i.e. unable to find work) impoverished populations.

v The area of the Great Plains extends vertically through the Midwest from Montana to Texas; a majority of the damage during the Dust Bowl was centered around the Texas-Oklahoma panhandle.

vi Before publication, the book had circulated only in oral form through several speeches given by Olsen in 1965.

vii For example, Olsen’s proletarian-feminist perspective can be read as a response to the patriarchal nature of American capitalism, which in itself requires that both categories of gender and class become interdependent and complimentary.

viii Like Olsen, John Guillory draws attention to the politics of exclusion in the debate over the literary canon, although his position as a current-day literary critic (and thus his definition as a valuable voice of High Culture) sets him apart from Olsen with regards to how each writer was received. It is difficult to argue that Olsen is not considered the pioneer of the concept of class-based literary exclusion simply because she was a woman and Guillory was not. However, Olsen’s ideas on exclusion of the working-class voice have been widely overlooked in exchange for an emphasis on her feminist investigation of the silenced female voice. Herein lies the problematic position of the working-class female voice: that the union of both identity categories (“working-class” and “female”) does not always remain intact when examined within the already under-developed body of working-class literature.
Southern literature also must reconcile with the risk of being considered overly regionalist, which can construct "lower class" identity as something that happens only in these socially peripheral places. This assumption alienates members of the lower class populations from one another, based on a privileging of local identity over national (class) identity.

Race is, unfortunately, one of the oversights of this paper. Due in part to the migrant focus of *Grapes*, as well as my own focus on class reception, issues of race with regards to dominant American ideology could not be fit concisely into this argument with regards to regionalism and class identity. However, if we are to privilege class identity as a unifying category regardless of locality, the possibility arises for a shared interracial class identity that highlights shared experiences of the rural and inner city impoverished populations regardless of their race(s).

In her book *Postcolonialism*, Anya Loomba cites the opposite problem in Postcolonial studies, in which identity of class is privileged over gender and race as a lens for critical interpretation (107-145). This American consciousness of poverty as being a strongly "third-world" problem demonstrates an aversion to investigating poverty and class identity issues within the U.S.; in this way, Postcolonial class criticism is frequently privileged in literary institutions over American class criticism.

Ehrenreich does this successfully (a systematic class-based analysis of gender identities) in *Nickel and Dimed* (2001). Ehrenreich’s book serves to further illuminate what Olsen proposed in the 1930’s by investigating the financially unsustainable position of the single working-class woman in America after 1996. Her close attention to the increased financial strain placed on working-class women in an age of increased poverty, crippling “bargain culture” (see Shell), and disparate school systems (see Kozol) invokes the proletariat writings of Depression-era women, and reveals the tragically cyclical nature of our economic system as perpetuated by a distinctly “American” inclination towards class-blindness.

In *The Canon and the Common Reader*, Kaplan and Rose reflect on this problematic power structure: “To alter the canon might alter power relations; to acknowledge pluralism might disperse authority; to accept the consequences of true democracy might topple oligarchy” (3).

In his book, *American Literature and The Dream*, Carpenter notes that much of American literature from 1820 to the early 1900s rested on the ideologies of romanticism—a movement that encouraged the possibility for pure democracy in a new world—and transcendentalism, which honored an absolute form of individual freedom (199-207).

The framework of inaccessible authorial intention can complicate and even amplify fears of “communist texts,” in that readers cannot accurately use the text to access the author’s original political inclinations (see Wimsatt and Beardsley). We do know, however, that Steinbeck did not much like communism, and remained unswayed by the communist sympathies of his good friend Charlie Chaplin (DeMott 159).

For an explanation of the Protestant work ethic, see Max Weber’s *Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism* (originally printed in 1905).

Steinbeck himself had some involvement with Roosevelt during the summer of 1940, when they met “in the interest of nation security,” after which Steinbeck became a speechwriter for the president in 1944. When *Grapes* underwent scrutiny for its adherence to truth, Eleanor vouched for the novel’s accuracy: “I have never thought that the *Grapes of Wrath* was exaggerated” (Reef 92). In her column

Stokes 51
"My Day," published on Jun 28th, 1939, she also wrote, "The book is coarse in spots, but life is coarse in spots... Even from life's sorrows some good must come. What could be a better illustration than the closing chapter of this book?" (French on E. Roosevelt 131).

xviii Of our current economics, John Berger writes: "The poverty of our century is unlike that of any other. It is not, as poverty was before, the result of natural scarcity, but of a set of priorities imposed upon the rest of the world by the rich. Consequently, the modern poor are not pitied but written off as trash. The twentieth-century consumer economy has produced the first culture for which a beggar is a reminder of nothing" (234).

xix The works of Richard Wright, Arthur Miller, Stephen Crane, and Scott F. Fitzgerald can also be said to reflect strong themes of American class structure.

xx In this analysis I have excluded a consideration of the Bible as the first work of literary canonization. This is in part to maintain a certain coherency and focus to the argument at hand, but also to avoid creating an unnecessary temporal distance between the reader and my primary text.

xxi This predisposition seems fitting, as Johnson had grown up impoverished on Grub Street as the "barely lower-middle class" son of a struggling bookseller, and often was too embarrassed to attend lectures during his brief time at university, due to his lack of clean or appropriate clothing (Kaplan and Rose 18).

xxii While writing *Grapes*, Steinbeck was contacted with requests from the Congress of Industrial Organizations to head their committee for farm worker organization; additionally, he was asked to speak on a radio show with John Franklin Carter about F.S.A. migrant camps. Steinbeck refused both of these, and similar requests, in which he would become politicized as a public speaker for the migrant condition (DeMott 149-150).

xxiii Raymond Williams wrote, "the simplest descriptive novel about working-class life is already, by being written, a significant and positive cultural intervention. For it is not, even yet, what a novel is supposed to be, even as one kind among others. And changing this takes time" (Hitchcock on Williams 111).

xxiv Throughout *Journals*, Steinbeck categorizes the "general" and the "particular" in reference to the two different narrative scopes he executed across chapters.

xxvi See Whalen-Bridge, *Political Fiction and the American Self* 23.

xxvii I am assuming here that the voice of the "narrator" is also the voice of Sinclair, the writer.

xxviii For a discussion of free and indirect discourse, see Wood's *How Fiction Works*.

xxix While writing *Grapes*, Steinbeck was often flooded with requests and updates on movie scripts for his previous publications, and news on the progress of the play version of *Mice and Men*, which had gone national (J. Steinbeck *Journals* 38, 48).

xxx Please note that I have framed this analysis within the twentieth century body of American works. Unfortunately this excludes writers such as Tolstoy, Dickens, Fielding, Bronte, etc. who also wrote about the impoverish populations in revolutionary ways. Mark Twain's contribution to American
literature is significant as well, although the period in which he wrote precludes the main era on which I’ve focused my argument (1920s-1950).

xxxii In a 1939 letter to Elizabeth Otis, Steinbeck noted that “The Associated Farmers have begun an hysterical personal attack on me both in papers and a whispering campaign,” and that “the Okies hate [me] and and have threatened to kill [me] for lying about them” (Shaskey, Riggs and Otis; J. Steinbeck and E. Steinbeck 188). In October of that same year, he wrote “I have made powerful enemies with the Grapes. They will not kill me I think, but they will destroy me when and if they can” (Journals 106). This destruction came in the form of an incredible writer’s block, which Steinbeck called “the longest time I’ve been in many years without writing” (Journals 105).

xxxiii In a letter to Elizabeth Otis dated September 10th 1938, Steinbeck writes about the title: “I like it because it is a march and this book is a kind of march—because it is our own revolutionary tradition. . . .” (J. Steinbeck and E. Steinbeck 171).

xxxiii His portrayal of these class tensions can be noted on page 163: “The whole United States ain’t that big. It ain’t big enough. There ain’t room enough for you an’ me, for your kind an’ my kind, for rich and poor together all in one country . . .” (J. Steinbeck Grapes).

xxxv In Journals, Steinbeck pinpoints the importance of this end scene as a moment of individual strength for communal good: “I went over the whole of the book in my head—fixed on the last scene, huge and symbolic, toward which the whole story moves. . . . it was a reunderstanding of the dignity of the effort and mightyness of the theme. . . . I grew again to love the story which is so much greater than I am. To love and admire the people who are so much stronger and purer and braver than I am” (J. Steinbeck 36).

xxxvi Reproduced as accurately as possible from notes taken during small-group discussion.
Works Cited


