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“MODERN MONSTERS,” OLD HABITS: RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN NATURE,  
HUMANS, AND TECHNOLOGY IN JOHN STEINBECK’S  
*THE GRAPES OF WRATH*

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Dedico este trabalho, assim como tudo mais que produzo, para Juliana.  
*“and I can't remember life before her name”*  
*John Mayer*

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## ABSTRACT

“MODERN MONSTERS,” OLD HABITS: RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN NATURE,  
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This thesis analyzes the relationships between nature, humans, and technology; and analyzes the responsibility of each party in relation to the destruction of nature in John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*. The critique of technology is explicit. Technology is portrayed as possessive of monstrous qualities, as something uncanny that disrupts the familiar landscape. This critique is conveyed through the way the tractors perpetrate technological rape, in the way the men of science try to alter products’ natural properties, and in the recurrent image of the road killings. Implicitly, the novel also criticizes the tenants’ attitudes towards the land. By pointing out their contradictory behavior towards nature throughout the story, the novel lays bare the irony behind the tenants’ pastoral speech. The pastoral ideal preached by the tenants—of how they are attached to the land, how the happiness is in the closeness with that land—is flawed, for, despite all their love and respect, they regard the earth as something to be used and exploited, without serious concern for preservation. My discussion of technology and nature in *The Grapes of Wrath* suggests that the novel presents a critique of both technological *and* human interactions with the environment, differing only in the level of explicitness in which they are portrayed.

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*RESUMO*

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Esta dissertação analisa os relacionamentos entre natureza, seres humanos e tecnologia; e analisa a responsabilidade de cada um em relação à destruição da natureza em *As Vinhas da Ira*, de John Steinbeck. A crítica feita à tecnologia é explícita. Tecnologia é apresentada como possuidora de características monstruosas, como algo estranho que perturba a paisagem familiar. Esta crítica se concretiza na maneira como os tratores praticam estupro tecnológico, na maneira como os cientistas tentam alterar as propriedades naturais dos produtos, e na recorrência de cenas de atropelamento de animais na estrada. Implicitamente, o romance também critica as atitudes dos meeiros em relação à terra. Ao apontar as contradições em seus comportamentos para com a natureza ao longo da história, o romance revela a ironia oculta no discurso pastoral dos meeiros. O ideal pastoril professado pelos meeiros—isto é, seu discurso de amor à terra e de como sua felicidade está na proximidade com a terra—é falho pois, apesar de seu amor e respeito, eles vêem a terra como um recurso a ser utilizado e explorado, sem uma real preocupação com sua preservação. Minha discussão sobre natureza e tecnologia em *As vinhas da Ira* sugere que o romance critica tanto interações humanas quanto interações tecnológicas com o meio ambiente e que ambas diferem somente na clareza com que são retratadas.

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## INTRODUCTION

During the 1930s the whole population of the United States was suffering with the repercussions of the 1929 Stock Market Crash and the subsequent Great Depression. One class of people in particular however was the focus of several researchers, artists, and filmmakers: the mass of migrants that fled the area of the Great Plains and went to California, known as the ‘Okies.’ Their works include photographic essays like Dorothea Lange’s and Paul S. Taylor’s famous *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion* and short films produced with the help of the government, such as Clair Laning’s *Rain for the Earth* and Pale Lorentz’s *The River* and *The Plow That Broke the Plains*,<sup>1</sup> to name a few.<sup>2</sup> The general idea given by these productions is that the tenants were forced out of their farms due to environmental changes, caused mostly by themselves.

The latter, *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, is a perfect example of this logic of self inflicted environmental changes. The film presents the situation of the migrants as being a result of the misuse of the land, first in the form of the hand-plow utilized by the tenants and then in the form of modernization of agriculture, which accelerated the process of decay. The scene where machinery is introduced in the way of cultivating the earth is very revealing, since the editing suggests a connection between tractors and tanks used in the World War II. The film shows that the frequent turning of the weak soil combined with the lack of rains resulted in the desertification of

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<sup>1</sup> The digital files of *The Plow That Broke the Plains* and *Rain for the Earth* are present in the appendix of this thesis entitled “Multimedia”, along with several of Dorothea Lange’s photographs of the migrants, and other materials.

<sup>2</sup> Other works cited by Peter Lisca were Archibald MacLeish’s *Land of the Free*, Erskine Caldwell’s and Margaret Bourke-White’s *You Have Seen Their Faces*, and the WPA collection of case histories called *These Are Our Lives* (78).

several areas, which ultimately resulted in Dust Storms. Lorentz's affirmation is clear in the summarized transcript of the film, shown in the following lines:

This is a record of land . . .  
of soil, rather than people -  
a story of the Great Plains [. . .]  
A high, treeless continent,  
without rivers, without streams . . .  
A country of high winds, and sun . . .  
and of little rain . . .  
[. . .]  
Make way for the plowman!  
High winds and sun . . .  
High winds and sun . . .  
a country without rivers and with little rain.  
Settler, plow at your peril!  
[. . .]  
Many were disappointed, but the great day  
was coming . . . the day of new causes -  
new profits - new hopes.  
"Wheat will win the war!"  
[. . .]  
Then we reaped the golden harvest. . .  
then we really plowed the plains. . .  
we turned under millions of new acres for war.  
We had the man-power . . .  
we invented new machinery . . .  
the world was our market.  
By 1933 the old grass lands had become the new  
wheat lands . . . a hundred million acres . . .  
[. . .]  
Baked out-blown out-and broke!  
Year in, year out, uncomplaining they fought  
the worst drought in history  
their stock choked to death on the barren land. . .  
their homes were nightmares of swirling dust  
night and day.  
Many were ahead of it - but many stayed  
until stock, machinery, homes, credit, food,  
and even hope were gone.  
On to the West! <sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The complete script of *The Plow That Broke the Plains* was found at <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~1930s/FILM/lorentz/plowscript.html>

This atmosphere of denunciation of the abuse of the land, present in the film, is also strongly present in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, considered the most important and influential work on the migrants' situation.

*The Grapes of Wrath* had a huge impact on American society right from its official release on April 14, 1939, going to the top of the best-seller list for most of the year (DeMott x). From that date on, Steinbeck's novel has been both widely acclaimed and criticized, having managed to upset radicals from left and right and still be a success. According to Robert DeMott, for example, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his wife Eleanor themselves defended the novel —“I have never thought *The Grapes of Wrath* was exaggerated”, said the First Lady after visiting a migrant camp in California in 1940 (DeMott xxxvii). On the other hand, the novel also received extreme attacks such as those of Oklahoma Congressman Lyle Boren, who called the novel “a lie, a black, infernal creation of a twisted, distorted mind” (xxxvii). In his article on the reception of the novel in Oklahoma, Martin Shockley points out several attacks that referred to the book as being historically inaccurate, of having “vile language,” and of being “communist propaganda” (351). Even under attack, as Shockley argues, the novel “sold sensationally” in the state, a phenomenon that was reproduced throughout the country (351).

Some critics, from the time of release to this date, feel that the novel is overly sentimental at times, possessive of “flat characterizations, heavy-handed symbolism, [and] unconvincing dialogue” (DeMott x). Such critiques did not stop even when Steinbeck was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1962, as he continued to be the target of several attacks (Dickstein 112). One of the problems related to the so called sentimentality of the novel is that Steinbeck was supposedly too “didactic” (128). Despite praising the novel most of the time, Morris Dickstein, for example, states that

“[Steinbeck’s] anger gives the book unusual power [. . .] But he cannot resist preaching at us, driving a point home, sentimentalizing his material” (128).

Another so-called flaw mentioned by Steinbeck’s critics is the fact that he bluntly ignored the plight of the non-white migrant workers (DeMott xiv-xv). In his “Introduction” to *The Harvest Gypsies: On the Road to The Grapes of Wrath*, Charles Wollenberg comments:

In an editorial accompanying the series, the *News* agreed, arguing that the dust bowl migrants ‘are Americans of the old stock. . . , They cannot be handled as the Japanese, Mexicans and Filipinos.’ Neither Steinbeck nor the *News* stooped to the crude racist vocabulary so common to the era, but both in effect were contending that only white Americans could successfully resist conditions which had regularly been imposed on non-whites and immigrants. As Steinbeck put it, the new arrivals ‘will refuse to accept the role of field peon, with attendant terrorism, squalor and starvation.’ (Wollenberg 13)

Nonetheless, in the *Harvest Gypsies* articles, Steinbeck does mention that in the past most migrant labor in California was formed by non-white immigrants, though he fails to say that even while he was writing these articles, working right along the Okies, thousands of workers of other ethnicities had to endure the exact same conditions.

Charles Cunningham focuses on this issue while analyzing the leftist criticism of the novel. In his article, “Rethinking the Politics of *The Grapes of Wrath*,” Cunningham tries to explore an apparent contradiction in Steinbeck’s narrative: the fact that the work at the same time perpetuates white supremacist ideologies and “racial populism,” but still attacks capitalism and the notions of private property (2). These seemingly opposite views can be found in the comparison between recent criticism and the critical reception in 1939. If on the one hand critics of the late thirties ignored the implicit racial essentialism, and focused mainly on the novel’s attack against capitalist forces, on the other hand recent criticism has, in Cunningham’s view, concentrated too much on the novel’s racial features and have failed to address its implicit Marxist critique.

Keith Windschuttle criticizes the novel from a different perspective: the exaggeration of historical facts. He argues that

[u]nfortunately for the reputation of the author [. . .] there is now an accumulation of sufficient historical, demographic, and climatic data about the 1930s to show that almost everything about the elaborate picture created in the novel is either outright false or exaggerated beyond belief. (24)

Windschuttle supports his affirmation with data from the census of those years and with other research carried out on the subject, like that of James Gregory in his *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California*. Among his contentions Gregory affirms that the actual number of migrants was only a little more than a quarter of what Steinbeck stipulated, that the difficulties of crossing the country on Highway 66 were much less than what portrayed, and that the average family that made the cross was smaller and better informed of the labor conditions in California than depicted in the novel (qtd. in Windschuttle 26).

Despite these critiques—somewhat surprising when one considers that their disqualification of the novel relies on the conservative criteria of factual evidence and veracity—most critics go beyond such purported flaws and focus mainly on the qualities of its narrative effects. The majority of critics, whether favorable or not, describe the novel as the exemplary literary work of the 1930s. Quotations such as “literary portrait that defined an era” (Windschuttle 24) and “a metaphor for the Depression as a whole” (Dickstein 112) are common throughout the critical history of the novel. Dickstein, for example, regards the *Harvest Gypsies* articles as “one of the most effective pieces of Depression journalism” (123). For him, Steinbeck draws much of his strength from this documentary-like point of view: “As with so many thirties naturalists, his initial impulse was simply to tell us what he *saw*. The roots of this writing are journalistic, its effects cinematic” (125, original emphasis). DeMott also

uses these terms when discussing Steinbeck's narrator's unique point of view in *The Grapes of Wrath*:

It is not narrated from the first-person point of view, yet the language has a consistently catchy eyewitness quality about it, and its vivid biblical, empirical, poetical, cinematic, and folk styles demonstrate the remarkable tonal and visual acuity of Steinbeck's ear and eye. (xiii)

In addition to the critical history of the novel, the historical context in which it is inserted is particularly relevant in this study for a number of reasons, one of them being the fact that because *The Grapes of Wrath* is partly based on true accounts, and attempts to display a reality which, if not actually lived by the fictional Joads, certainly was experienced by hundreds of thousands of people. Steinbeck's statements show that he felt passionately about the migrants' situation ever since he first came in contact with it:

*Nos primeiros dias da migração, alguns grupos foram capturados por outros tipos de clima. Por exemplo, uns três mil, acampados em King's County, na Califórnia, foram pegos por uma enchente. Ficaram amontoados e com fome num ponto alto cercado de água e campos encharcados de lama.*

*Eu tinha um amigo, George West, do San Francisco News, que me pediu que fosse lá e fizesse uma reportagem—o primeiro emprego para uma empresa privada de que consigo me lembrar. O que encontrei me horrorizou. Tínhamos sido simplesmente pobres, mas aquela gente estava literalmente passando fome, e com isso quero dizer que estavam morrendo. Ilhados na lama, estavam molhados, famintos, desgraçados. Além disso eram gente boa e corajosa. Conquistaram-me completamente, de corpo e alma. Escrevi seis ou sete artigos e depois fiz o que pude para tentar lhes arranjar comida. A gente do local estava apavorada. Fizeram o possível, mas era natural que o medo e talvez a piedade os fizessem desagradar-se daquela horda suja e desamparada de gafanhotos.*

*O jornal me pagou algum dinheiro e naquela época recebi mais algum extra e, assim, fui viver com esses migrantes, viajei de volta à sua base natal para ver por que estavam partindo de lá. Não foi filantropia. Gostei daquela gente. Tinham qualidades de humor e coragem, criatividade e energia que me atraíram. Achei que, se tínhamos um caráter e gênio nacionais, eram os dessa gente, que começava a ser chamada de 'Okies'. Com tudo contra eles, sua bondade e força sobreviveram. E ainda sobrevivem. (América 46)*

In 1938, while working on *The Grapes of Wrath*, he wrote in one of his journals: "I'm trying to write history while it's happening, and I don't want to be wrong" (Dickstein



127). With this in mind he did a lot of journalistic fieldwork research, and interviewed hundreds of migrants.

The Dust Bowl Migration, as it is called, happened as a result of a conjunction of economic, political, and environmental factors combined, that forced the tenants out of their farms and into the highways. Artistic works of the time about the issue, such as the ones mentioned previously, mostly funded by the government's New Deal and its branch, the Resettlement Administration, focused mainly on the environmental side, namely severe drought and dust storms that literally swept the ground and crops away.

The economic and political factors can be traced back to the aftermath of the 1929 Crash. During the Depression, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected and implemented the New Deal, a series of interventionist policies that had the purpose of bringing the United States economic system back to its course. Unfortunately for the tenants and sharecroppers of the South and Midwest, that were already suffering from the natural disaster of drought and dust storms, the New Deal only aggravated their situation. The Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA), signed in 1933 and revoked only two years later, stipulated that landlords who cut down their acreage would in return receive a "benefit payment financed by a tax on agricultural processors" (Hamilton 18). The measure was taken in an attempt to stop the massive surplus and at the same time promote the development of the agricultural market that was heading towards total collapse in that stage of the Depression (18). Despite many criticisms, the measure was successful in the sense that pumped some blood into the economy, "allowed many farmers to survive the 1930s, and stabilized the farm economy in ways that encouraged new investment in tractors and technology later in the decade" (21).

On the other hand, “fortified by AAA subsidies, the landlords evicted their tenants and consolidated their holdings” (Windschuttle 26). To Windschuttle, “it was government handouts, not bank demands [as the novel suggests] that led these landlords to buy tractors and decrease their reliance on tenant families” (26). In other words, the owners, encouraged by the government, cut down their acreage to be benefited by the government subsidy and, in order to maintain their profit margin—a factor several times stressed in the novel—expelled the tenants and replaced them with tractors that were more cost-effective. Steinbeck’s novel does not criticize government policies;<sup>4</sup> it concentrates mostly on pointing out the damage that came from the implementation of machinery in agriculture, which was attributed solely to the greed of landlords.

Even though Steinbeck’s novel is not limited to the environmental causes of the migrants’ plight like some works of the period, the theme of the abuse of the earth and its relation to modernization of agriculture, driven by the need for profit, as damaging to nature and the people that depend on it, is explored throughout the novel. It is on the textual characterization of this process of abusing the environment that the present research will focus.

This thesis is divided in two parts. The first deals with the ways technology and progress are portrayed in the novel. Freud’s concept of the “uncanny” will be instrumental for my analysis in this section.<sup>5</sup> The second will discuss how nature is represented, its relationship to technology and to the characters. The following two passages, taken from chapter five of the novel, are examples of passages I intend to explore in detail:

The tractors came over the roads and into the fields, great crawlers moving like insects, having the incredible strength of insects. They crawled over the ground,

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<sup>4</sup> It is a well-known fact that the author himself was a New Deal enthusiast and supporter of FDR, and the novel does not get into the merits or demerits of the economic policies of his government.

<sup>5</sup> The concept will be thoroughly explored in the following chapters.

laying the track and rolling on it and picking it up. Diesel tractors, puttering while they stood idle; they thundered when they moved, and then settled down to a droning roar. Snub-nosed *monsters*, raising the dust and sticking their snouts into it, straight down the country, across the country, through fences, through dooryards, in and out of gullies in straight lines. They did not run on the ground, but on their own roadbeds. They ignored hills and gulches, watercourses, fences, houses.

The man in the iron seat did not look like a man; gloved, goggled, rubber mask over nose and mouth, he was a part of the monster, a *robot* in the seat. The thunder of the cylinders sounded through the country, became one with the air and the earth, so that earth and air muttered in sympathetic vibration. The driver could not control it—straight across country it went, cutting through a dozen farms and straight back. A twitch at the controls could swerve the cat', but the driver's hands could not twitch because the *monster* that build the tractor, the monster that sent the tractor out, had somehow got into the driver's hands, into his brain and muscle, had goggled him and muzzled him—goggled his mind, muzzled his speech, goggled his perception, muzzled his protest. He could not see the land as it was, he could not smell the land as it smelled; his feet did not stamp the clods or feel the warmth and power of the earth. He sat in an iron seat and stepped on iron pedals. He could not cheer or beat or curse or encourage the extension of his power, and because of this he could not cheer or whip or curse himself. He did not know or own or trust or beseech the land. If a seed dropped did not germinate, it was nothing. If the young thrusting plant withered in drought or drowned in a flood of rain, it was no more to the driver than to the tractor. (37-8, my italics)

This is an example of what Freud called the “uncanny”, here expressed in the characterization of machinery and modernization in agriculture in the novel. The German word “*Unheimlich*” literally means “unhomely” in English. Freud first utilized the concept of the “uncanny” in his 1919 homonymous essay, where he defines it as “that class of the *frightening* which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (620, my italics). From this brief introduction of the concept it is already possible to associate the novel's descriptions of machinery with the uncanny. The tractor transforms something familiar (“*Heimlich*”) such as a human being—a neighbor even, as is shown in two other passages<sup>6</sup> when the driver of the tractor turns out to be an old acquaintance—into a machine, something frightfully non-human and unfamiliar (“*Unheimlich*”). The uncanny refers, then, to the *traumatic* possibility that a human

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<sup>6</sup> ““Why, you're Joe Davis's boy!””; “There's one thing that got stumped, an' that's Willy Feeley—drivin' that cat', an' gonna be a straw boss on lan' his own folks used to farm. That worries me. I can see how a fella might come from some other place an' not know no better, but Willy belongs” (39, 58).

being might not be human at all. This transformation produces in the viewer, and the reader, the evocation of an uncanny feeling, a feeling of fear associated with the corruption of something once thought of as familiar. The uncanny feeling associated with the tractor is made even more evident by the use of the word “monster” when referring to the machines.<sup>7</sup>



The “monsters” seem to have “supernatural” powers, for they are able to transform the environment at their will. To pursue its purpose, the monster pays no attention to the natural obstacles of the land. The tractors do not follow or respect the paths on the ground: “[t]hey did not run on the ground, but on their own roadbeds. They ignored hills and gulches, watercourses, fences, houses” (33). No obstacle, be it manmade or natural, is enough to keep them from going their own way. The straight lines that cut across the land for miles and miles are the proof of this disrespect for the

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<sup>7</sup> Image 1: “Tractor plowing near abandoned and wrecked tenant house, Wagoner County, Oklahoma”

land's usual topography. In this context, the enforced homogenization of the landscape by the tractor is frightening, for it is unnatural. That is why the tractor is regarded as an uncanny presence in the novel, because it is a foreign force that has the frightening power to suddenly disrupt and corrupt the once familiar landscape the tenants were used to into something that is, in their eyes, unnatural.<sup>8</sup>



The power that the tractor exerts over its driver is also uncanny, since the man is not master of himself anymore, he is but a tool, a slave to the machine. The inversion of roles is cyclical, while the machine is alive, the driver who was supposed to be controlling it is now a “robot in the seat” (37). The feeling of uncanniness lies in the fact that the human being has lost its humanity and is now a mere extension of the tractor. Even further, the man who created the machine is also portrayed as someone

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<sup>8</sup> Image 2: “Cultivated fields and abandoned tenant house. Hall County, Texas.”

that is not human, that man is also described as a “monster,” much like the monster he gave birth to, completing the cycle of inversion of identities and roles (37). Thus, although the man in the driver’s seat appears to be a slave to the machine, he is actually a slave to another man, “the monster that built the tractor, the monster that sent the tractor out” (37). Freud describes in his essay that the feeling of uncanniness can be observed when a person who has evil intentions intends to carry them out with the “help of special powers,” which is exactly the situation described in the “supernatural” grip that the man/monster (creator of the machine) has over the man/driver (Freud 635). This grip works in an entity-like way, it does not simply control the driver’s actions, it changes the nature of what it touches, it “*somehow [goes] into the driver’s hands, into his brain and muscle*” (Steinbeck 37, my italics).

The control over the driver is both literal and symbolical: he has to cover his



face and wear goggles, which turns him into an uncanny sight for those around that do not recognize him anymore, ostracizing him from his peers, but he is also metaphorically goggled and muzzled, for he cannot see or speak or be in possession of any of his senses.<sup>9</sup> He is incapable of protest and, for that matter, incapable of thinking by himself. He is for all purposes a slave. He is paradoxically powerful and vulnerable at the same time. On the one hand he has the power of the tractor in his hands and that is more power than can be found in anyone or anything around him. At the same time however, he is completely at the mercy of the power that dominates him, for he knows that without the tractor he is neither superior nor powerful.

The following passage is the sequel of the previous one, and is a good example of another concept used in this research: Eliana Ávila's "technological rape," that is found in the interactions between nature, technology, and the characters in the novel (forthcoming).

He loved the land no more than the bank loved the land. He could admire the tractor—its machined surfaces, its surge of power, the roar of its detonating cylinders, but it was not his tractor. Behind the tractor rolled the shining disks, cutting the earth with blades—not plowing but surgery, pushing the cut earth to the right where the second row of disks cut it and pushed to the left; slicing blades shining, polished by the cut earth. And pulled behind the disks, the harrows combing with iron teeth so that the little clods broke up and the earth lay smooth. Behind the harrows, the long seeders—twelve curved iron penes *erected* in the foundry, *orgasms* set by gears, *raping* methodically, *raping* without passion. The driver sat in his iron seat and he was proud of the straight lines he did not will, proud of the tractor he did not own or love, proud of the power he could not control. And when that crop grew, and was harvested, no man had crumbled a hot clod in his fingers and let the earth sift past his fingertips. No man had touched the seed, or *lusted* for the growth. Men ate what they had not raised, had no connection with the bread. The land bore under iron, and under iron gradually died; for it was not loved or hated, it had no prayers or curses (Steinbeck 37-8, my italics).

In this passage, the tractor is uncannily engaged in the act of raping the earth, or in "technological rape" (Ávila forthcoming). The novel characterizes technology as

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<sup>9</sup> Image 3: "Lauderdale County, Alabama. Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). Julien H. Chase driving a tractor and wearing a dust respirator while harrowing."

something marked by masculine features while the earth is characterized as marked by feminine ones. The very active and aggressive male technology, represented through tractors, takes advantage of the helpless and passive female earth, which not only essentializes these characteristics as belonging to those genders<sup>10</sup>, but also represents their conflicting relationship. Far from coexisting peacefully, the two elements engage in extreme mutual violence: the machine “rapes” the earth, and the earth in return dries up, which results in the dust storms<sup>11</sup>.



The passage seems to point to two kinds of men and their relationship with the land: the first is the driver, who is proud of everything related to the tractor he is driving, and despite the fact that he appears detached from the land, it is logical to assume that he is proud of raping the earth as much as of the other features of the machine. The second is the man that was previously in charge of this piece of land. This man, the tenant evicted by the tractor, worked the land with a hand-plow, which could also be considered a kind of sexual relationship with the earth. The novel however portrays this relationship as familiar and close, which could then be re-interpreted as an act of “making love” to the earth. The act of crumbling a “hot clod in his fingers and let the earth sift past his fingertips” can be seen as a gentle touch on the part of farmer, who connects with the land that feeds him and his family. The personal contact symbolizes

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<sup>10</sup> I shall use the term gender as follows: “[g]ender is often (though not exclusively) regarded as a ‘sociological’ category referring to the ways in which sexual behaviour is manifested by individuals in social circumstances” (Mottier and Carver 16).

<sup>11</sup> Image 4: “Seeding with Twin City ‘25’ tractor.”

Image 5: “Disknig with Big 4 tractor.”



his proximity to the land, opposed to the alienation of the tractor driver that farms but never touches the ground, only the iron pedals of the machine. They relate to the earth in different ways: while the tenant and sharecropper touch the land and lust for the growth, the machine and its driver do not care either way. This contrast, between a familiar and an alienated relationship to the land, be it through ownership or not, will be further discussed in the following chapters.

The two following Chapters are dedicated to a more thorough analysis of these questions. Chapter 1 focuses on the characterizations of machinery, banks, corporations, owners, and progress in relation to the environmental setting of the novel, and the implications of such characterizations in the light of Freud's concept of the "uncanny". Chapter 2 analyzes the characterization of nature in the novel, how it interacts with technology and the characters.

CHAPTER I: “TIMES ARE CHANGING, MISTER:” TECHNOLOGY IN *THE GRAPES OF WRATH*<sup>12</sup>



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<sup>12</sup> Image 6: “Tractor plowing in field. Grundy County, Iowa.”

### 1.1. The “Uncanny”

The most commonly used explanation of uncanniness is the one given by Freud in his 1919 essay entitled “The Uncanny”: “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (620). In the essay, Freud lists several examples of what may arouse the uncanny feeling, such as the phenomenon of the ‘double,’ coincidence “animism, sorcery, the omnipotence of thoughts, man’s attitude to death, involuntary repetition and the castration complex,” and even a person, if he or she has evil intentions and plans to carry them out “with the help of special powers” (620). But as much as Freud wants to settle the issue with lists of countless examples, he never seems completely satisfied with them. Freud dedicates more than twenty pages to various sets of examples, among several theories of his own on the subject of the uncanny, interweaving the text with his experiences, both personally and as a psychoanalyst. A number of critics agree that his text is confusing, to the reader and apparently to the author as well, for in the midst of his web of examples and explanations he contradicts himself several times in the essay and does not quite reach a conclusion.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps by looking at Freud’s motivations in relation to this particular essay, his confusing text may become clearer. One of Freud’s main objectives while writing the essay was to dismiss another psychologist’s theories on the subject of the uncanny. The *other* [his double, if you will] is Ernst Jentsch, who had written “On the Psychology of the Uncanny”<sup>14</sup> thirteen years earlier, in 1906. Jentsch’s contention is

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<sup>13</sup> For extensive examples of Freud’s contradictions see Rand and Torok, Royle, and Cixous.

<sup>14</sup> Roy Sellars wrote in the preface of the first English translation of this essay published in 1996 that “[r]eference is sometimes made to Jentsch’s essay, in the vast secondary literature on the Freudian uncanny, as if its content were known—familiar in advance, and therefore not requiring to be read,”

that the uncanniness is always related to the feeling of uncertainty, such as when something that is presumably familiar is removed from that circumstance and presented in an unfamiliar context. The author also establishes a correlation between the “new/foreign/hostile” and the “physical association of ‘old/known/familiar’”. [Jentsch concludes that] in the former case, the emergence of sensations of uncertainty is quite natural, and one’s lack of orientation [will easily take] on the shading of the uncanny” (9). It is possible to notice that, for Jentsch, the feeling of uncertainty is associated with disorientation or confusion, be it physical or psychological (9). He uses as examples of the physical feelings of uncertainty, children’s admiration towards magicians and the sensitiveness and fear of some people regarding masked balls (10). However,

[a]mong all the physical uncertainties that can become an original cause of the uncanny feeling, there is one in particular that is able to develop a fairly regular, powerful and very general effect: namely, *doubt as to whether an apparently living being is animate and, conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate* [ . . . ] The mood lasts until these doubts are resolved and then usually makes way for another kind of feeling. (Jentsch 11)<sup>15</sup>

Jentsch’s examples of this kind of uncertainty range from the accounts of men wandering in the jungle and sitting down in what they think is a tree branch and then are filled with an uncanny terror as the tree begins to move—and turns out to be a giant snake—to the uncomfortable feeling some people have regarding wax figures (11-2). His other examples, however, are more pertinent to this thesis, as they involve the uncanny feelings stirred by technology.

Jentsch relates that to the primitive man the sight of technology, in the figure of a train or a steamboat, invokes the feeling of uncanniness, for “as consequence of the enigmatic, autonomous movement and the regular noises of the machine, reminding him of human breath, the giant apparatus can easily impress the completely

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which is why I found it important, in order not to incur in the same mistake, to include Jentsch’s analysis, as well as Freud’s, on this chapter about the “uncanny” (1).

<sup>15</sup> Freud quotes the italicized lines in his essay while trying to dismiss Jentsch’s point.

ignorant person as a living mass” (11). He describes this reaction as belonging mostly to “childish souls,” or “beasts of burden” (11). On the other hand, the civilized man already accustomed to such technologies is not immune to the uncanny feeling evoked by the sight of technology embodied by automatons (12).<sup>16</sup> This occurs when the imitation of human form is life-size and appears to have both the bodily and mental functions of a normal person, thus causing the uncertainty in the viewer of whether the figure is in fact human or not (12). When encountered with the figure of an automaton, the theory is that it generates an uncanny feeling spawned due to the shock of perceiving humanity in an unexpected place, foreign to men. This perception, in turn, questions the nature of our humanity and the existence of our own humanity as separate from machines. Jentsch adds that “[t]he finer the mechanism and the truer to nature the formal reproduction, the more strongly will the special effect also make its appearance” (12). To illustrate his point, Jentsch, stating that literature is a form of art that frequently “invoke[s] the origin of the uncanny mood in the reader,” refers to the German author E.T.A. Hoffmann as a writer that “*repeatedly made use of this psychological artifice with success*” (12-3).<sup>17</sup>

Despite the fact that Jentsch does not cite any of Hoffmann’s works in particular, or ventures into any literary analysis beyond the previous quoted lines, Freud uses Jentsch’s essay as a “starting-point for [his] own investigation,” in which he analyzes “The Sandman,” a short-story by Hoffmann, through the light of the uncanny, as Freud sees it (625). The psychoanalyst promptly discards Jentsch’s argument that the uncanny is in the uncertainty of a figure being an automaton or not, affirming that “the main theme of [Hoffmann’s] story is, on the contrary, something different, something

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<sup>16</sup> For a thorough discussion of the issue of automatons and the fear they invoke, see Mazlish, Bruce. “Automata”. *The Fourth Discontinuity*. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1993. 31-58.

<sup>17</sup> Freud quotes the italicized lines in his essay.

which gives it its name, and which is always re-introduced at critical moments: it is the theme of the ‘Sand-Man’ who tears out children’s eyes” (625). Freud gives his own summary of Hoffman’s story, and then concludes that “Jentsch’s point of an intellectual uncertainty has nothing to do with the effect [. . .] [and] is quite irrelevant in connection with this other, more striking instance of uncanniness” (627). Freud’s theory is that the figure of the Sand-Man embodies the fear of castration, represented in the story by the fear of losing one’s eyes.

Freud’s quick dismissal of Jentsch’s argument is widely criticized. Hélène Cixous in “Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud’s *Das Unheimliche* (The “Uncanny”)” criticizes and deconstructs Freud’s argumentation and interpretation of “The Sand-Man.” She says that Freud considers Jentsch “both interesting and deceptive; as an insufficient yet respected precursor, Jentsch will represent, henceforth, the ‘layman’s’ attitude [. . .]” (Cixous 529). Cixous mentions in more than one occasion that Freud only alludes to “Jentsch’s opinion in order to outstrip it immediately” (531). While Freud seems to “appropriate Jentsch’s example,” he only does so in order to “declare himself the true master of the method since his predecessor did not know how to make proper use of it. The way in which he misappropriates betrays a stinging boldness and the ploy of a fox!” (532). Cixous seems in this passage to repeat Freud’s mistake of misquoting Jentsch when she states that “the latter links the *Unheimliche* to the psychological manipulation of Hoffmann, which consists in producing and preserving uncertainty with respect to the true nature of Olympia. Is she animate or inanimate?” (322). As previously stated, although Jentsch did propose for the link of uncanny with uncertainty, he never specifically refers to the character Olympia in his essay, only to Hoffmann’s work in general.

Freud also cites the automaton Olympia and quotes Jentsch's essay on the subject, but, as Cixous points out, in Freud's summary of "The Sand-Man"'s plot,

[the] whole story is recounted then by the Sand-Man who tears out children's eyes. [. . .] Freud intrudes in various ways: in one instance to bring the fantastic back to the rational (*Umheimliche* to the *Heimliche*); in another instance, he intrudes to establish explicit liaisons which are not conveyed as such in the text. [. . .] He minimizes the uncertainty revolving around Olympia, thus pushing Olympia toward the group of the *Heimliche* and clearly diminishing the texture of the story by trimming, in particular, the discontinuity of the exposition, the sequence, the succession of narrators, and points of view. (533)

Cixous' critique of Freud' summary is felt throughout her essay. She repeatedly points to his distorting of the story through his narration, which is entirely recounted only through the 'Sand-Man' figure's perspective. Other critics also point to this fault in Freud's text, such as Nicholas Rand and Maria Torok, authors of "The Sandman looks at 'The Uncanny': The return of the repressed or of the secret; Hoffman's question to Freud," for example. They state that "it seems to [them] at times that Freud created a fiction of his own in discussing 'The Sandman.' It appears that Freud in his attempt to "defend the symbolic equivalence between the eyes and the penis [pays for] the cost of losing sight of Hoffmann's tale" (198). Rand and Torok even list a number of discrepancies between Hoffmann's actual tale and the one retold by Freud.<sup>18</sup> They, like Cixous, feel that Freud tries too hard to fit his theory of the castration model into the short-story, for them "the effect is exactly the opposite; the inconsistencies serve to underscore the disparity between *The Sandman* and Freud's account of it" (200). Nicholas Royle, who dedicated a whole book to the subject of the uncanny, also advances a critique of Freud's retelling of Hoffmann's short-story (40). In the chapter Royle dedicates to "The Sandman," he states that

[w]hat is bizarre is that Freud seems completely oblivious to the fact that his 'short summary' is fundamentally *his own* 'short story': he recounts the story as if it were an objective, disinterested, merely 'factual' summing up. [. . .] [i]t reveals

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<sup>18</sup> For more details on these discrepancies see Rand and Torok (199).

what it is in or about the narrative that most affects, intrigues, haunts Freud. [. . .] Freud's reading of 'The Sandman' is a violent attempt to reduce or eliminate the significance of Jentsch's work on the uncanny, and in particular the importance of the figures of the doll and automaton for an understanding of the uncanny (40, 41, original emphasis).

Another source of criticism in Freud's essay is what seem to be his incoherent sets of examples. In a sarcastic moment in her essay, Cixous states: "[s]till another knot of examples: will the weaving or references never end?" (544). She later adds: "[t]he text does not want to take off; the argument becomes troubled, hardens, and doubles with thickness. Thus, quickly, another knot [. . .]" (544). Royle argues that what is most interesting in Freud's essay is not "[t]he assertions, arguments and beliefs that Freud articulates," but rather the fact that it argues with and works out "what is at stake in its variously problematic, confused, strangely paradoxical lines of argument and demonstration" (Royle 7). In the following passage, Royle clearly explains the problematic nature of Freud's writing:

After pages of discussing other aspects of the uncanny (above all, literature), Freud opens a fresh paragraph:

'We have now only a few remarks to add – for animism, magic and sorcery, the omnipotence of thoughts, man's attitude to death, involuntary repetition and the castration complex comprise practically all the factors which turn something frightening into something uncanny. [. . .]'

And then he goes on for another ten pages, continuing to add to this list that never was, and by definition cannot be, complete. (13)

For Royle, "the arguments and ideas are not necessarily what is most interesting on the essay. The text itself is problematic, not sticking to its own methodology" (7).

One of the major topics of discussion among the critics of Freud's essay is the problem of where exactly does the uncanny lie in "The Sandman" and which author, Freud or Jentsch—or both or neither—was correct in his affirmations. While Freud places it in the character of the Sandman and the fear of castration and Jentsch relates it with feelings of uncertainty as to whether an animated being is alive or not, other authors have widely different readings of the story. Rand and Torok, for example,



perceive the uncanny in the story as related to the “return of a family secret” (186). They challenge Freud’s thesis of the role of the eyes in the story as a substitute for the penis, and see the eyes as playing a major part in the story, as they symbolize the character’s “attempt to see, to inquire, to discover” (188). According to their analysis, the injury to the eyes should be understood “figuratively as a lack of insight followed by the loss of reason,” caused by the main character Nathanael’s inability to gain knowledge of the “murky affairs of his own family. [. . .] *The Sandman* deals with the lasting effects of secrecy in the family, a secrecy that [. . .] disrupts the intimacy and familiarity of the home” (188-9). The uncanny thus, for Rand and Torok, exists in the fact that the character’s own family, by keeping secrets from him, becomes unfamiliar.

But if for Rand and Torok the eyes should be understood “figuratively,” for Adam Bresnik they mean precisely the opposite (Rand and Torok 188). In “Prosopoeitic Compulsion: Reading the Uncanny in Freud and Hoffmann,” Bresnik argues that, at least partially, Jentsch is correct in affirming that the uncanny is related with intellectual uncertainty, and, at the same time, agrees with Freud’s contention of the return of the repressed. His argument is that “the uncanny affect of Hoffmann’s “Sandman” arises from the return of the literal sense of words and phrases, which the reader initially represses as a result of what [he] call[s] *prosopoeitic compulsion*, or the compulsion to enliven the dead letter of fiction by reading figuratively [. . .]” (114). So, for Bresnick, the feeling of the uncanny is related to intellectual uncertainty, however it arises not with the figure of Olympia but at the occasion of the reader’s attempt to reconstruct the text from the beginning in order to ascribe literal meaning to the words he or she had initially thought to be metaphors.

Royle, on the other hand, believes that “‘The Sandman’ is inexhaustible,” and therefore does not have one straightforward thesis about the uncanny in it. The list

of authors, criticisms, and theories about both the uncanny and “The Sandman,” and their relationship to each other, is far too great to be adequately explored in this rather short review of the theoretical history of the trope of the uncanny. But despite all the flaws and criticism, Freud’s essay on the uncanny is still “the most indispensable [. . .] of all the texts published in the subject of the uncanny” (Royle 6). Royle, for example, points to the essay as a

crucial text for an understanding of contemporary culture in general, as well as for the unfolding tale of psychoanalysis. It has become a key reference-point in discussions of art and literature, philosophy, film, cultural studies and sexual difference. (12-3)

As such, it will also be a “key reference-point” in this thesis, where it will be a useful tool for understanding the description of technology—embodied by tractors, their drivers, banks, and progress in general—and its relationship with nature.

## 1.2. Technology

Before analyzing how technology is described as uncanny in *The Grapes of Wrath*, I would like to dwell, however briefly, into the idea of technology itself, and its relationship to literature. Two important interrelated concepts must be clarified regarding the discussion about technology within this thesis: technological determinism and the pastoral ideal.

Technological determinism refers to the common belief that the advent of a technology is the main force behind historical changes in a given civilization, as in the case of the navigational technology used by Columbus being taken as the cause of the discovery of the Americas; or of the printing press as the cause of the Reformation; or of the cotton gin, which presumably led to the increased profitability of slaves and, eventually, to the civil war (Marx and Smith x). The sort of narrative that portrays this type of technological determinism shows the following sequence of events: “a technical

innovation suddenly appears and causes important things to happen [. . .] direct[ing] attention to the consequences rather than the genesis of inventions” (x). Placing tangible technological inventions at the epicenter of historical changes seems plausible because it is easily perceived, and because of its tangibility in relation to other more abstract causes, such as “socio-economic, political, cultural and ideological formations,” that, unlike the innovations, cannot actually be seen or sensed in the physical way (xi).

The discussion around technological determinism has many nuances, and it is generally divided between “hard” and “soft” determinisms (xii).<sup>19</sup> The ‘hard’ determinists place technology itself with agency, whereas the ‘soft’ determinists try to restore agency to humans,

reminding us that the history of technology is a history of human actions [thus] [t]o understand the origin of a particular kind of technological power, we must first learn about the actors. Instead of treating ‘technology’ per se as the locus of historical agency, the soft determinists locate it in a far more various and complex social, economic, political, and cultural matrix. (xiii)

Regardless of the different points of view referring to where is the origin of agency in this equation, the fact is that, once originated, technology is “sufficient to direct the course of events” (xiv). Therefore, Leo Marx and Merritt Roe Smith state, in the introduction to a book dedicated to the subject, that “‘technological determinism’ has been redefined; it now refers to the human tendency to create the kind of society that invests technologies with enough power to drive history” (xiv).

In terms of narrative structure, it is much easier and palpable to build a “before-and-after” story than to establish numerous complex factors with, often, non-homogenous results, as is frequently the case with history. Marx and Smith affirm that “these before-an-after narratives give credence to the idea of ‘technology’ as an independent entity, a virtually autonomous agent of change” (xi). In *The Grapes of*

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<sup>19</sup> For a more thorough discussion of these different nuances and criticisms see the other articles on *Does Technology Drive History?* edited by Leo Marx and Merritt Roe Smith.

*Wrath*, we see this kind of before-and-after narrative very clearly with the advent of mechanical farming and its direct consequences for the tenants and sharecroppers. It appears at times that the tractor is the sole cause and executioner of the tenant's fate, turning the narrative into a before-and-after mechanical farming. The novel however does not follow that structure throughout the narrative, as it will be shown in the following chapter.

The idea of technology as an autonomous agent is seen in popular discourse “typified by sentences in which ‘technology’ or a surrogate like ‘the machine,’ is made the subject of an active predicate”, of which we have several examples in *The Grapes of Wrath* (xi). Some examples are, “Cars limping along 66 like wounded things, panting and struggling;” “But this tractor does two things—it turns the land and turns us off the land;” “Behind them new tractors were going on the land and the tenants were being forced off;” “The tractors which throw men out of work, the belt lines which carry loads, the machines which produce [ . . . ]” (127, 157, 244, 249).<sup>20</sup>

The intellectuals of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment already placed agency in technology and science, attributing to them the deterministic powers to change the course of history, through their “faith in technology as a liberating force,” and their ideas about progress (Smith 2).<sup>21</sup> In the United States, since the early years of the new found independence, the idea of progress was also tightly bound to that of technology (3). By the end of the eighteenth-century, the great political advocate of self-sufficiency regarding factories in the United States was a bureaucrat named Tench

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<sup>20</sup> I do not intend to state here that Steinbeck is not aware of other forces regarding the autonomy of technology, it is clear however that the author makes frequent use of this literary device required by the thematic concerns of the novel.

<sup>21</sup> See John Gray's *Heresies: Against Progress and Other Illusions* for a more detailed discussion of the Enlightenment thinkers and their ideas of progress, and how it affected our own views of it.

Coxe, who used to say in his speeches<sup>22</sup> that all the problems associated with technology in Europe would be solved once they were associated with the American soil, due to the abundant richness of the land (Marx 154,8). Coxe was a pioneer in terms of envisioning the benefits of technology in the nation's development (151). The introduction of factories, particularly the steam-mill, in the American landscape, changed the perspective of many people on the subject, both in positive and negative ways.

Steinbeck however belongs to an old agrarian tradition which was unsympathetic to technology and the machine. In contrast with the popular enthusiasm with technology and progress propagated by eighteenth century Enlightenment intellectuals, the pastoral ideal was being renewed with all its force in America. Pastoralism is, in fact, associated with America since the first reports of Columbus and other navigators when discovering the new continent, but the idea of rural landscape, linked with simplicity and peace, contrasting with urban power, sophistication and civilization is an ancient literary device as old as Virgil's *Eclodes* (Marx 19). The first part of Virgil's poem, for example, has as background the fact that the Roman government has "expropriat[ed] a number of small landholders (including the poet himself) so that the military veterans might be rewarded with the seized land" (19-20).

The similarities between the poem and Steinbeck's novel are clear:

[b]eyond the green hollow the countryside is in a state of chaos. The very principle of natural fecundity is threatened [. . .] What is out there, from the reader's point of view, is a world like the one he inhabits; it contains great cities like Rome, organized power, authority, restraint, suffering, and disorder." (Marx 21)

In England, the Romantic Movement revived the pastoral ideal during the beginnings of industrialization, as evinced, for example, in the works of poets such as

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<sup>22</sup> Given at the Constitutional Convention of 1787, that assembled the delegates that wrote the Constitution of the United States of America.

Wordsworth and Blake (18). In America, the desire for the equilibrium between nature and civilization—somewhere from the big city but not so far as the wild spaces—embodying the best of both worlds, “the sophisticated order of art and the simple spontaneity of nature,” spurred in literature right along the implementation of factories, railroads, mills, etc (22). A number of artists criticized the sudden change in American landscape and challenged the new “technocratic thought,” personified by Coxe. As Smith points out, this is the case in

Thomas Jefferson’s warnings about the introduction of the factory system; in Thomas Carlyle’s attack on the ‘mechanical philosophy’; in the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Henry David Thoreau; in the landscape art of Thomas Cole, George Innes, Andrew Melrose, and Thomas Rossiter; and in such dystopian novels as Mark Twain’s *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* and Ignatius Donnelly’s *Caesar’s Column*. (26)

Thomas Jefferson embodies the conflicts between the enthusiasm for the benefits of technology and the pastoral ideal. Leo Marx claims that despite the fact that the term “agrarian” is most commonly used to describe Jefferson’s ideas, “to call it *pastoral* would be more accurate and illuminating” (125, original emphasis). Marx justifies his affirmation by stating that to use the term “agrarian” implies the commitment to an agricultural economy, whereas it is clear in Jefferson’s writings that he believes in the “small, family-sized farm,” and that he imagines “agriculture largely as a means of preserving rural manners, that is, ‘rural virtue,’” even though the agrarians of his time believed and had demonstrated the true efficiency of large-scale agriculture (126). In sum, he advocated that the preservation of rural America and its core values were more important than fast economic growth. At first, as Marx observes, Jefferson vows for the continuation of the established commercial balance between America and Europe, with the first shipping raw items and the latter providing manufactures goods, as he writes in Query XIX of his *Notes on Virginia*, published on 1785 (124). This would ensure the colonial and rural status of the country. However,

later in life, during his eight years in the presidency (from 1801 to 1809), Jefferson would reject his earlier principles and, in a very pragmatic way, defend the manufactures of America and the country's independence from Europe in the matter, by establishing policies that "had the effect of creating precisely the kind of society he did not want" (138-40). He abdicated his pastoral ideas for the pursuit of progress, which by then meant the pursuit of science and technology, but with the excuse that it was in "the interest of human betterment (intellectual, moral, spiritual) and material prosperity" (Smith 3).

From the late eighteenth century to the early 1900s, many people suffered from the same shift of opinion as Jefferson, and progressively embraced the, (at first timid) enthusiasm for technology. Some examples of the books published at the time may give an idea of the growing passion for technology and the progress it generated: "*Eighty Years of Progress, Men of Progress, Triumphs and Wonders of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, The Progressive Ages or Triumphs of Science, The Marvels of Modern Mechanism, Our Wonderful Progress, The Wonder Book of Knowledge, and Modern Wonder Workers*" (7). If the pastoral ideal gained force from the late eighteenth century on, so did the pro-technology movements and literature. Good examples are the "technological utopian literature," which enjoyed success in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the "Technocracy movement," which was popular for a short time during the 1930s, and later appeared sporadically after the Second World War (23). Ideas and movements such as those helped strengthen in people's minds the notion of the country's successful industrial development tied with the idea of technology, while omitting its darker sides (23).

The writers that viewed technology as the great force behind the country's prosperity

often purposely endowed steamboats, railway locomotives, machinery, and other inanimate objects with *life-like qualities* in order to cultivate emotions of wonderment, awe, magic, and, at times, even dread in their audiences. The discovery of what cultural historians would later call the ‘technological sublime’ added yet another dimension to the growing popular belief in technology’s power to shape the course of human history. (8, my italics).

Ironically, that is precisely the same literary device that authors such as Steinbeck utilize to question the idea of technology. In Steinbeck’s novel, technology and progress do appear endowed with life-like qualities and do have the agency to shape the course of events in the story, but the narrative does not appear to cultivate emotions of wonderment. On the contrary, instead of being characterized by sublime qualities, technological devices are more often than not presented with uncanny characteristics, and associated with feelings of unrest and fear. I shall focus on the attributes of those uncanny qualities of technology and progress on the pages that follow.

### 1.3. Technology as uncanny in *The Grapes of Wrath*

The most prominent example of technology portrayed as uncanny in *The Grapes of Wrath* is the characterization of machinery in agriculture. The image of a new technology disturbing the peaceful landscape, such as the tractors cutting through the Great Plains, is recurrent in American literature, and a common aspect of pastoralism. As Leo Marx states, “it is difficult to think of a major American writer upon whom the image of the machine’s sudden appearance in the landscape has not exercised its fascination” (16). He mentions several great works<sup>23</sup> as examples of this type of fascination, and, of course, includes *The Grapes of Wrath* among them (16). The novel

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<sup>23</sup> Such as *The Octopus*, *The Education of Henry Adams*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Moby Dick*, *Huck Finn*, *Walden*, etc. (16).



makes that image of technology disturbing nature clear in passages such as the one cited on the first introductory chapter of this thesis:

The tractors came over the roads and into the fields, great crawlers moving like insects, having the incredible strength of insects. [. . .] Snub-nosed *monsters*, raising the dust and sticking their snouts into it, straight down the country, across the country, through fences, through dooryards, in and out of gullies in straight lines. They did not run on the ground, but on their own roadbeds. They ignored hills and gulches, watercourses, fences, houses. (37, my italics)

This passage is taken out of chapter five of the novel, an “interchapter” as is commonly referred to.<sup>24</sup> This interchapter is particularly relevant because it is the first time that the image of tractors, banks, owners, and corporations is shown to the reader in the novel. In the previous chapters, the atmosphere is peaceful—even with the description of the dust storms, which occurs right in chapter one of the novel. The pastoral setting is present with all its noticeable features: idyllic scenery, focus on landscapes, nature, weather (“the rains came gently,” “the sky grew pale”), plants (“The weeds grew darker green to protect themselves”), animal life (“Gophers and ant lions started small avalanches”), and man trying to exist in their midst (“Men stood by their fences and looked at the ruined corn [. . .]”) (3-5).<sup>25</sup> Chapter five comes uncannily as a violent disruption of this pastoral scenario by bringing something foreign to the familiar landscape.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The interchapters were used to present to the reader the context of the situation that drove the tenants out of their homes (DeMott xii). The interchapters functioned as a device to alternate between the more “factual” chapters about the Joads, and these general chapters about the background of the migrant life, which had a more lyrical tone (xii). Most of the examples used in this thesis come out of the interchapters.

<sup>25</sup> I shall focus more on the characterization of Nature in the following chapter.

<sup>26</sup> Since I have already analyzed the highlights of this chapter in the Introduction of this thesis, I shall proceed to other examples of the uncanny and of technology found in the novel.

Chapter 11—another interchapter and the closing chapter of the first part of the novel<sup>27</sup>—describes the atmosphere of the abandoned country after the departure of the tenant families.<sup>28</sup> The whole chapter is uncanny<sup>29</sup> in the sense that the only thing



alive on the land, that used to be populated with families like the Joads, are the tractors. When the tenants and sharecroppers first became migrants, and later Okies, their homes—the land—were left behind. Although Ma refuses to look back when they depart from Uncle John's, this interchapter gives the reader an image of what she was trying to avoid seeing:

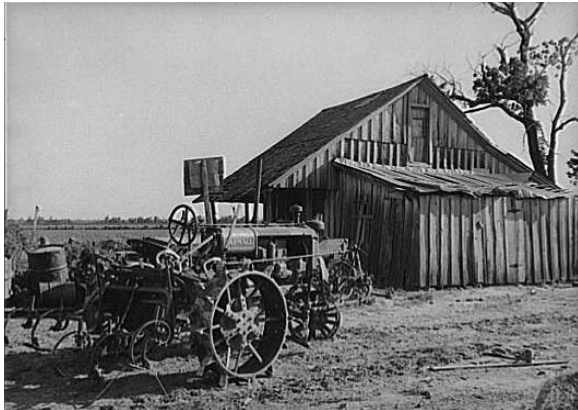
The houses were left vacant on the land, and the land was vacant because of this. Only the tractor sheds of corrugated iron, silver and gleaming were alive; and they were alive with metal and gasoline and oil, the disks of plows shining. The tractors had lights shining, for there is no day and night for a tractor and the disks turn the earth in the darkness and they glitter in the daylight. And when a horse

<sup>27</sup> The novel is informally divided in three parts: Home or Oklahoma, the road, and California.

<sup>28</sup> Image 7: "Former tenant farmer on a large cotton farm now a tractor driver for one dollar a day on same farm. Bell County, Texas."

<sup>29</sup> From this point on in my thesis I shall use the term "uncanny" mostly to describe the feeling of dread when something is perceived that does not quite belong, something unfamiliar in a familiar setting or vice-versa, such as seeing life where it should not exist.

stops work and goes into the barn there is a life and vitality left, there is a breathing and a warmth, and the feet shift on the straw, and the jaws champ on the hay, and the ears and the eyes are alive. There is a warmth of life in the barn, and the heat and smell of life. But when the motor of a tractor stops, it is as dead as the ore it came from. The heat goes out of it like the living heat that leaves a corpse. Then the corrugated iron doors are closed and the tractor man drives home to town, perhaps twenty miles away, and he need not come back for weeks or months, for the tractor is dead. And this is easy and efficient. (120)



The uncanny metaphor of the live tractors is again present in this passage that shows what was once a fertile land that is now only alive thanks to the presence of the machine.<sup>30</sup> Technology has the frightening power to vacate the land of its people and its regular life. Royle writes that the uncanny “is a *crisis of the natural*, touching upon everything that one might have thought was ‘*part of nature*’: one’s own nature, human nature, the nature of reality and the world,” which is a perfect explanation for the example of uncanny shown in the previously cited passage (1, my italics). In the quoted lines of the novel, the tractors represent precisely an *unnatural*—thus uncanny—life, one that is kept “alive” through metal and gasoline instead of food and water. The conflict here is between mechanical life and organic life—technology and nature—the former becoming uncanny while presenting itself as alive, as assuming the qualities of the latter.

<sup>30</sup> Image 8: “The tractor and home of a man who at one time was a tenant farmer but who is now a day laborer. Wagoner County, Oklahoma.”

Image 9: “Tractor garage at the Aldridge Plantation near Leland, Mississippi.”

The real “nature of reality and the world” is felt in the way the horse is described as having “life,” “vitality,” breath, “warmth,” and “smell” (Royle 1). This perception of nature is corrupted when “the feet [that] shift on the straw, and the jaws [that] champ on the hay, and the ears and the eyes [that] are alive” are replaced with inanimate body parts that “were alive with metal and gasoline and oil,” arousing in the reader the feeling of uncanniness.<sup>31</sup>

The tractor does have life, it breathes, has heat, moves, and needs nourishment, just like any other living being. However, it is not organic, it is an artificial life in the same way as *Frankenstein’s*



creature was, because the body parts were given the spark of life by electricity. In this case, Jentsch’s definition of uncanny as related to the feeling of uncertainty of whether something was really alive or not is befitting, for the uneasiness related to the tractor depends on the observer’s inability to ascertain what kind of life he or she is dealing with.

In the matter of the life of the machine, still another paradox arises: the fact that it is both dead and alive at the same time, or living-dead. This type of uncanny feeling is usually aroused by common horror stories or movies that deal with the undead, but, despite the different genre, the uncanniness of the creature described in chapter 11 is pretty similar to those. The tractor, despite looking alive sometimes, can stay “dead” for a long period of time, with the narrator even literally comparing it to a “corpse” (120). This is relevant because the machine is not hibernating or resting, when

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<sup>31</sup> Image 10: “Pouring gasoline into tractor, large farm near Falls, Texas. Man is day laborer.”

is not being used it just ceases to live, but [unnaturally] continues to exist. On the other hand, when a need for its work arises, so does the tractor: it can work [also unnaturally] night and day for as long as it takes until the job at hand is done. Thus, the uncanny feeling exists on both ends of the scale, at the sight of the un-dead machine and at its normal working condition.

Another uncanny aspect of the machine is that it is created and assembled by human beings. However—like the creature in *Frankenstein*—the power of the creature far surpasses that of its creator. It is not however the case of an invention that got out of the control of its inventor. The fact is that, in this case particularly, it was precisely created with that purpose: to be better than its creator, to substitute a man’s job, i.e. that of plowing the earth. Therefore, the uncanniness about this fact lies in the cold human search for efficiency [as the last line of the quoted passage shows: “[a]nd this is easy and efficient”]. For, in this search, man loses a quality that differentiates him from the machine: humanity, or empathy for other human beings. The uncanny feeling here is related first of all to the fact that the machines were built by men, to replace men, and secondly, that they were built by men who have lost their humanity in their rational search for efficiency, which is something intensely emphasized in the novel. As such, these efficiency-driven men resemble more the machines they create than their peers.<sup>32</sup>



Nevertheless, tractors and new technologies are not the only ones responsible for the tenants’ fate. The metaphor of an executioner is befitting here, for the machines do indeed expel the families from their homes, but they only do so at the

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<sup>32</sup> Image 11: “Tractors. Farm equipment warehouse, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.”

command of an even higher power: progress and its subsequent need for profit, the other, less visible, intruders of the pastoral ideal in *The Grapes of Wrath*. In the novel, three major subjects personify progress, namely banks, owners, and corporations. The subjugation of machines to these subjects is visible in several passages of the novel. Expressions such as “[. . .] when the *bank* come to tractorin’ off the place” suggest that the action of controlling the tractor is not actually made by its driver, but by the bank (48, my italics).

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the key word in discussing the subjects of progress is “profit.” The following passage taken out of chapter five is a good example of relationships between men, tenants, banks, owners, companies, and, finally, profit:

Some of the owner men were kind because they hated what they had to do, and some of them were angry because they hated to be cruel, and some of them were cold because they had long ago found out that one could not be an owner unless one were cold. And all of them were *caught* in something larger than themselves. Some of them hated the *mathematics* that drove them, and some were afraid, and some worshiped the mathematics because it provided a refuge from thought and from feeling. 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 at least would take no responsibility for the banks or the companies because they were *men and slaves*, while the banks were *machines and masters* all at the same time. Some of the owner men were little *proud* to be slaves to such cold and powerful masters. The owner men sat in the cars and explained. You know the land is poor.

[. . .] The squatters nodded—they knew, God knew. If they could only rotate the crops [. . .]

Well, it’s too late. And the owner men explained the workings and the thinkings of the monster that was *stronger* than they were. A man can hold land if he can just eat and pay taxes; he can do that.

Yes, he can do that until his crops fail one day and he has to *borrow* money from the bank.

But—you see, a bank or a company can’t do that, 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 sidemeat. [. . .]

Maybe next year will be a good year. [. . .]

We can’t depend on it. The bank—the monster has to have profits all the time. It can’t wait. It’ll die. No, taxes go on. When the monster stops growing, it dies. It *can’t stay one size*.

[. . .]

And at last the owner men came to the point. The tenant system won't work any more. One man and a tractor can take the place of twelve or fourteen families. Pay him a wage and take all the crop. We *have* to do it. We *don't like* to do it. But the monster's *sick*. *Something* happened to the monster. [. . .]

You'll have to get off the land. The plows'll go through the dooryard. [. . .] A bank isn't like a man. Or an *owner with fifty thousand acres*, he isn't like a man either. That's the monster. [. . .]

Yes, but the bank is only made of men.

No, you're wrong there—quite wrong there. The bank is *something else* than men. It happens that every man in a bank *hates* what the bank does, and yet the bank does it. The bank is something *more* than the men, I tell you. It's the monster. Men made it, but they *can't control* it. [. . .]

Maybe we got to fight to keep our land, like Pa and Grampa did. [. . .] What then?

Well—first the sheriff, and then the troops. You'll be stealing if you try to stay, you'll be murderers if you kill to stay. The monster isn't men, *but it can make men do what it wants*. [. . .] Why don't you go on west to California? [. . .] And the owner men started their cars and rolled away. [. . .]

After a time the women asked, What did he want? And the men looked up for a second, and the smolder of pain was in their eyes. We got to get off. *A tractor and a superintendent. Like factories.* (33-36, my italics)

I quote this long passage in full because it is highly significant for my concerns in this thesis, as it presents, in a condensed form, various sets of examples that, elsewhere in the novel, are shown separately.

First of all, one must not overlook the analogy of Bank/Company/monster itself as uncanny. It is interesting to notice how a dramatic work such as *The Grapes of Wrath* draws on characteristics normally found in other genres such as horror, science fiction, or fantasy. If these characteristics were to be taken literally the “monster” of the novel would be a match for some great villains of popular science fiction and fantasy stories such as *Matrix*, *Star Wars*, and *The Lord of the Rings*.<sup>33</sup> Let us take a brief look at the powers of the Bank/Company/monster as they are described in the novel. Besides capturing and enslaving men, the bank-monster even makes some of them feel “proud to be slaves”—like the mind grip of the force in *Star Wars* (33). Men created the

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<sup>33</sup> I chose to draw on science fiction and fantasy here first because they are genres that, along with the horror, came from gothic fiction, which has a historical association with the concept of the uncanny; and second, because I am myself a fan of the genre.

monster, but it got out of control, gaining independence from its creators—like the machines in the *Matrix*—and now, in reverse, the monster controls men, “it can make men do what it wants” (36). The monster is alive, but is not organic [“it breathe[s] profits; [it] eat[s] the interest on money” (34)]; it exists and is everywhere, but not physically—it is omnipresent like Sauron in *The Lord of the Rings*. In sum, everything about the monster described in the novel is uncanny and worthy of a place in the horror genre: its creation, its existence, and its powers. But its description in chapter five is perhaps the most uncanny thing of all. Almost the entire chapter is dedicated to the presentation of this *modern monster* to the reader, and it works in a way that its effects continue to be felt throughout the rest of the novel whenever the author evokes its image, and he does so quite often.

Another important issue to be considered about the monster as Bank is that it represents capital endowed with a life of its own. This displaced form of life is uncanny in more than one way. This generates the frightening thought that money not only is the driving force of our society, but it has a mind of its own, it is alive and performs actions, despite being ethereal. Besides that, the uncanniness of the idea of men being subjected to something larger than themselves, something immaterial, is also presented clearly. Of course this idea of subjugation had already been portrayed in the incapacity of the tractor driver to control the machine, but, in this other example, another *class* of men are represented as symbolically imprisoned by the means of progress: the owners. I emphasize “class” because it is important to stress that not only the working class falls under the uncanny grip of technology and progress in *The Grapes of Wrath*. The “owner men” in this passage are not actually the men who own the land, they belong to a struggling, more educated, upper middle class, and work for the real owners of the land, i.e. banks, companies, and big owners. The difference



between the classes lies in the different levels of entrapment that affects them. The working class is more physically bound to the power of technology, as the example of the muzzled and goggled tractor driver shows, whereas the forces of progress seize the upper class mentally.

Although the majority seems to dislike the demands of their position as owner men,<sup>34</sup> they have different attitudes towards the reason behind their actions. Their reactions range from “kind” to “cold,” from hating to worshipping “the mathematics” of the economic system that drives their actions (33). This points to the fact that, differently from the tractor driver, who does not spend much time worrying about his job, just accepts the fact that he has bills to pay, and kids to feed, the owner men are forced to reflect more critically about their actions (33). This analysis on the owner men’s part, and their capacity for self-criticism, could indicate that their class has indeed more power of intervention than the working class. For the owner men are enslaved by the banks and companies in the same way that the driver is enslaved by the tractor, but with the difference that the former *knows* about his position as slave whereas the latter does not. Agency manifests itself, then, in the awareness of the actors.

While the tractor driver seems to respond to his environment almost as mechanically as the machine he drives, the owner men, being aware of their situation, chose to create rationalizations to escape from their responsibility or to justify their actions. These rationalizations are exemplified in the way the owners place the “Bank” or the “Company” as subjects of their sentences instead of themselves. Also, passages such as “provided a refuge from thought and from feeling;” and even in explicit apologies such as “We have to do it. We don’t like it,” and “It happens that every man

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<sup>34</sup> Having established the fact that the “owner men” do not actually own the land, that they in fact are employees of banks, corporations, and big owners, I shall, nevertheless, continue to refer to them as “owner men” in this thesis, for that is the terminology adopted by the author when referring to them (33).

in a bank hates what the bank does, and yet the bank does it,” seem to show the kind of excuse used to exempt them from their actions (33-36). It is possible then to perceive in this scenario two types of responses to the power of technology and progress over man: the first was seen in the example of the tractor driver, in how he is ignorant of his own entrapment by the machine he allegedly controls; and second, in the situation lived by the middle class employees, in the manner in which they are aware of their dependence on “Banks” and “Compan[ies]” and their hunger for profit, but still chose to remain slaves, some being indeed “proud to be slaves” (33).

These two responses relate to the people that are *affected* by the forces of technology and progress. Nevertheless, another side involves the powers behind it: the enslavers—namely banks, companies, and big owners. Focusing first in the case of the latter, the description of the big owner is itself uncanny: “an owner with fifty thousand acres [. . .] isn’t like a man [. . .]” (35). This is uncanny because the latifundium owner is dehumanized, equaled to inorganic institutions like banks and companies, for he does not seem capable of having human emotions, of connecting with the land, of sympathizing with other humans.

On the issue of owning property and profiting from the land, *The Grapes of Wrath* establishes a radical distinction between the small farmer and the large estate farmer. In September 1936, a few months after the publication of *The Harvest Gypsies*, and three years before the publication of the novel, Steinbeck wrote an article to the *Nation*, a liberal journal, entitled “Dubious Battle in California” where he already established this distinction:

There are in California [. . .] two distinct classes of farmers widely separated in standard of living, desires, needs, and sympathies: the very small farmer who more often than not takes the side of the workers in disputes, and the speculative farmer, like A. J. Chandler, publisher of the *Los Angeles Times*, or like Herbert Hoover and William Randolph Hearst, absentee owners who possess huge sections of land. Allied with these large individual growers have been the big

incorporated farms, owned by their stockholders and farmed by instructed managers, and a large number of bank farms, acquired by foreclosure and operated by superintendents whose labor policy is dictated by the bank. For example, the Bank of America is very nearly the largest farm owner and operator in the state of California. (online)

One might even ascribe a Jeffersonian ring to the kind of romantic notion of the small sized farm found in the article and the novel. In fact, the narrative of the novel also explicitly differentiates the two kinds of farming in several moments, as represented, for example, in the different characteristics assigned to Mr. Thomas and Mr. Hines, a small and large farm owner respectively.

The first is a sixty-five acres owner, and fair enough to offer a job paying more than the usual for Timothy and Wilkie Wallace, who live at Weedpatch and invite Tom to join them in the work. Nevertheless, the fact that Mr. Thomas is a property owner does not mean that he is himself free from the grip of the “monster” (33). He has to abide by the large owners’ rules through the “Farmers’ Association” as the following passage shows:

‘Well, I belong to it. We had a meeting last night. Now, do you know who runs the *Farmers’ Association*? I’ll tell you. The *Bank of the West*. That bank owns most of this valley, and it’s got *paper* on everything it don’t own. So last night the member from the bank told me, he said, ‘You’re paying thirty cents an hour. You’d better cut it down to twenty-five.’ I said, ‘I’ve got good men. They’re are worth thirty.’ And he says, ‘It isn’t that, ‘ he says. ‘The wage is twenty-five now. If you pay thirty, it’ll only cause unrest. And by the way,’ he says, ‘you going to need the usual amount for a crop *loan* next year?’” Thomas stopped. His breath was panting through his lips. “You see? [. . .] Ain’t you got it yet? Mr. Bank hires two thousand men an’ I hire three. I’ve got paper to meet. Now if you can figure some way out, by Christ, I’ll take it! *They got me.*’ (308, my italics)

The passage shows that the nature of the small farmer is very similar to that of the tenants before they were expelled from their lands. Mr. Thomas does own a property, and yet he has to cope with the pressures of being vulnerable, and he struggles to survive amongst the large estate owners that form the “Farmers’ Association” (308). He is subjected to their wills due to his dependency on bank loans, which also makes him a

crop failure away from entering the highways along with the migrants. His attitude towards them is that of someone who is compassionate to other human beings, who can relate to their situation.<sup>35</sup>

In their turn, the migrants see in men like Mr. Thomas at the same time a picture of the past and a hope for the future. For, despite everything, they are still managing to make a living as small farmers in California. The hope for the future can be felt in the description of Mr. Thomas' farm: "a small white farm house, a few shade trees, and a barn; behind the barn a vineyard and a field of cotton," which looks exactly like the kind of place Ma envisions for her family (307). His good nature is evident also when he warns the migrants of the conspiracy devised by the members of the Farmers' Association to cause a riot in the Weedpatch dance, giving an excuse for the police to invade and clear out the camp: "Well, the Association don't like the government camps. Can't get a deputy in there. [. . .] Now if there was a big fight and maybe shooting—a bunch of deputies could go in and clean out the camp [. . .] Jesus, I hope I haven't talked myself out of my farm. But I like you people" (309-10). The act of warning them about the plot goes against his own interests in the Association and could jeopardize even further his future as a farmer, but he follows his principles and does so anyway.

The large estate owner, Mr. Hines, on the other hand, shows completely different characteristics. Owning over thirty thousand acres, filled with peaches and grapes, a winery and a cannery, he represents the interests the Associated Farmers seek to protect, and falls perfectly into the category of an owner who is not a man anymore, who is a "monster" (35). The fact that he, besides the farms, also owns a winery and a cannery is very revealing of his nature of monster in the novel, as the following passage taken out of interchapter 26 illustrates:

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<sup>35</sup> This type of attitude is also present in the respectful way the twenty acre cotton farmer talks to Ma in the search for pickers at the end of the novel (440).

The great owners were glad and they sent out more handbills to bring more people in. And wages went down and prices stayed up. And pretty soon now we'll have serfs again.

And now the great owners and companies invented a new method. A great owner bought a cannery. And when the peaches and the pears were ripe he cut the price of fruit below the cost of raising it. And as cannery owner he paid himself a low price for the fruit and kept the price of canned goods up and took his profit. And the little farmers who owned no canneries lost their farms, and they were taken by the great owners, the banks, and the companies who also owned the canneries. As time went on, there were fewer farms. The little farmers moved into town for a while and exhausted their credit, exhausted their friends, their relatives. And then they too went on the highways. (296-7)

The reason why the “great owners” are called “monsters” in the novel is clear in this passage. It is also possible to see in the excerpt why the small farmers feel so cornered by the other members of the Association, like the small cotton farmer who says “Little fella like me can't do anything. The Association sets the rate, and we got to mind. If we don't—we ain't got a farm. Little fella gets crowded all the time” (440).

The characters of the two, small and great owners, are portrayed in the novel as being as distant as possible from each other. Mr. Hines, for example, is described as always “talkin' about ‘them goddamn reds,’” and how they were “drivin' the country to ruin,” and how they had to “drive these here red bastards out” (311). One of the first differences that stand out when comparing Mr. Hines and Mr. Thomas is the language they use. Both Mr. Thomas and the small cotton farmer—the two examples of small farmers in California—address the migrants personally, respectfully, calmly, and even explicitly show compassion towards their situation, whereas the owners such as Mr. Hines use foul language, seem aggressive and altered, have a distorted logic about anything related with profit, and only think of other people as a means or obstacle in the path towards earnings. An example of this twisted logic is that when asked about what exactly a “red” is, Mr. Hines' answer is: “a red is any son-of-a-bitch that wants thirty cents an hour when we're payin' twenty-five!” (312).

Another description of a great owner that stands out in the novel is the one made by the man who joins the Joad men as they bathe in the river in Needles. The man is going east, returning to starve home after having found no work in California, and tells the Joads about a great owner, a “newspaper fella near the coast [that has] a million acres”—another reference to William Randolph Hearst, the news magnate who inspired Orson Welles’ *Citizen Kane* and was the owner of the biggest media conglomerate of his time (215). When they ask what a single man could possibly want with so much land, the man answers: “I dunno. He jus’ got it. Runs a few cattle. Got guards ever’place to keep folks out. Rides aroun’ in a bullet-proof car. I seen pitchers of him. Fat sof’ fella with little mean eyes an’ a mouth like a ass-hole. Scairt he’s gonna die. Got a million acres an’ scairt of dyin’” (215). The most interesting part of this passage is the debate on why a man who has so much land could be scared of dying:

‘Say he’s scairt to die?’ Casy asked. [. . .]

‘What’s he care?’ Pa said. ‘Don’t seem like he’s havin’ no fun.’

‘Grampa wasn’t scairt,’ Tom said. ‘When Grampa was havin’ the most fun, he com closest to gettin’ kil’t’ [. . .]

Casy said, ‘Seems like that’s the way. Fella havin’ fun, he don’t give a damn; but a fella mean an’ lonely an’ old an’ disappointed—he’s scared of dyin’!’

Pa asked, ‘What’s he disappointed about if he got a million acres?’

The preacher smiled, and he looked puzzled. [. . .] ‘If he needs a million acres to make him feel rich, seems to me he needs it ’cause he feels awful poor inside hisself, and if he’s poor in hisself, there ain’t no million acres gonna make him feel rich—not rich like Mis’ Wilson was when she give her tent when Grampa died. I ain’t trying to preach on sermon, but I never seen nobody that’s busy as a prairie dog collectin’ stuff that wasn’t disappointed.’ (216)

The great owner in this passage is also dehumanized, but in a very particular way. The fact that he has no “fun” and does not enjoy the fullness of his million acres, added to the knowledge that he is scared of dying, presents a kind of pathetic fragility that is not suitable for a ‘real’ man in the eyes of the characters—which is precisely the description of great owners made in chapter five, “Or an owner with fifty thousand acres, he isn’t like a man either. That’s the monster” (35). The real people they refer to in the passage

are represented by Grampa and Sairy Wilson, who, in their simplicity, seem to manage to live a full life in the characters' points of view.

But perhaps the main difference between both kinds of owners is not how they treat the migrants, but how they feel about each other. The small farmers struggle to maintain their businesses, doing what little they can for the migrants, but they mostly keep their heads low, in the submissive position of accepting their place in the business scale as inevitable and unchangeable. The great owners appear not to see such attitudes and actively seek out methods to destroy, not only the existence, but the possibility of existence of all other kinds of agribusiness that are not their own. This is done despite the fact that the small farmers pose no threat at all to the large estate owners. The great owners are so caught up in their idea of profit, business, and competition that they—bordering on the ridicule—go through great lengths to strike out their minuscule alleged enemies—be they small owners or migrant workers—as is the case with the cannery scheme, the conspiracy to cause a riot at the camp, the “reds” paranoia, and so many other examples found in the novel. The feeling that comes to mind when describing such mental state as that of Mr. Hines' and those of the other great owners is that of uncanniness, when we recall for example Freud's definition of an evil person who has evil intentions and intends to “carry them out with the help of special powers” (620). The big owners are indeed described as ‘evil,’ and the special powers in this case are the means of financial speculation used against the small farmers, entrapped by mortgages and interest rates. In sum, Mr. Hines is uncanny because, being still presumably a human being, he has the special power and the will to destroy all on his way.

However, despite the emphasis on profit, the issue of *why* the owners are led to such manipulative tactics to drop labor costs [and ensure an even greater profit] is addressed very timidly and only in a few passages of *The Grapes of Wrath*, such as

when the owner men, on chapter five, say: “the monster is sick. Something happened to the monster” (35). What is indicated through that statement is that the consequences of the Depression have deeply affected corporate America. “Something” is the Depression, and this economic context led many people, companies, and banks to bankruptcy, and the ones that managed somehow to survive were more than ever desperate in the attempt to secure their profit margins in all enterprises at all costs. Although the novel does not deal with the issue of Depression explicitly, its consequence of unnatural desperation for profit and financial security can be sensed throughout the text. The idea that if something is not profitable it is not worth it becomes the model for the corporations—as exemplified by the fact that no one is safe from the profit logic. Not even banks themselves, such as seen in the orders sent by the Bank headquarters in the East Coast to its subsidiaries in the Midwest to “[m]ake the land show profit or we’ll close you up” (40). Thus, one of the major factors that led to the expulsion of the tenants was the profit paranoia that followed the Depression. In the effort to at least maintain and hopefully enhance their revenues, helped by subsidies from the New Deal, the owners had to cut their losses and increase their profit margin as much as possible, which meant the end of the tenant system and the implementation of the better cost-effective modern machinery in agriculture.

Another issue directly related to the Depression was the fear and distrust of the people of California towards the migrants. In the first article of *The Harvest Gypsies*, Steinbeck addresses this feeling:

The migrants are hated for the following reasons, that they are ignorant and dirty people, that they are carriers of disease, that they increase the necessity for police and the tax bill for schooling in a community, and that if they are allowed to organize they can, simply by refusing to work, wipe out the season's crops. (*Harvest* 4)



One of the main reasons behind the Californians' behavior was their fear of the migrant population going into relief in their state. Their fear was sounded, as the 1940 Census indicates that even at the end of the Depression over ten per cent of the household heads were unemployed, and more than half of that number were on relief jobs (DeLong). The Californians' terror is somewhat understandable, since there would be a huge fluctuation in the numbers of people on relief in the state should all the migrants apply at once for the government aid, and most of the long-term unemployed that went on relief found it difficult, and had no immediate advantage, to return to the private sector market, thus remaining on relief for long periods of time (DeLong). Consequently, their biggest dread was that the migrants, once in the state, would settle down in the Hooverilles, living poorly but steadily with the government money, which would in turn increase taxes within the state. This situation would also create health, education, and violence problems to the counties. To prevent such grim scenario, the townspeople organized and made sure the migrants were always moving—as seen in the mob that burns down the first Hooverville the Joads stay. By turning the migrants into nomads who moved from crop to crop—"harvest gypsies," as Steinbeck calls them in the articles—they became ineligible to apply for government relief. The policies of the government for granting help are shown in the last interchapter of the novel, chapter 29, that describes the misery caused by the floods: "Then some went to the relief offices, and they came sadly back to their own people. They's rules—you got to be here a year before you can git relief" (453).

The situation of the problems the migrants encountered when trying to apply for relief is more explicitly shown in *The Harvest Gypsies* articles than in the novel. The fifth article is entirely dedicated to that issue:

Migrant families in California find that unemployment relief, which is available to settled unemployed, has little to offer them. In the first place there has grown up a

regular technique for getting relief; one who knows the ropes can find aid from the various state and Federal disbursement agencies, while a man ignorant of the methods will be turned away.

The migrant is always partially unemployed. The nature of his occupation makes his work seasonal. At the same time the nature of his work makes him ineligible for relief. The basis for receiving most of the relief is residence.

But it is impossible for the migrant to accomplish the residence. He must move about the country. He could not stop long enough to establish residence or he would starve to death. He finds, then, on application, that he cannot be put on the relief rolls. And being ignorant, he gives up at that point.

For the same reason he finds that he cannot receive any of the local benefits reserved for residents of a county. The county hospital was built not for the transient, but for residents of the county. (*Harvest* 1-4)



In this article, besides denouncing the inefficacy of the relief programs for the migrants, the author also criticizes the profit logic that runs the country, which he calls “insular stupidity” (19)<sup>36</sup>. When describing a situation in a county where the mud near a

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<sup>36</sup> Image 12: “Okies.”

squatters' camp is infected with hookworms, he says that the attitudes taken by the authorities to handle the issue never seem to actually face the problem, but simply push it away:

There was no thought of isolating the victims and stopping the hookworm.

The affected people were, according to these men, to be run out of the county to spread the disease in other fields. It is this refusal of the counties to consider anything but *the immediate economy and profit* of the locality that is the cause of a great deal of the unsolvable quality of the migrants' problem. The counties seem terrified that they may be required to give some aid to the labor they require for their harvests. (19-20, my italics)

The editorial tone of criticism found in *The Harvest Gypsies* articles is much more explicit than that of *The Grapes of Wrath*, and actively confronts some issues only implied by the novel, such as the problems of relief regulations discussed.

But putting aside causes, problems, and consequences of the Depression that are all relevant to any study of that period, the Depression in itself was monstrously uncanny, for the situation it provoked had an almost dream-like quality to it, resembling something out of the fiction world, disturbing people's sense of reality. The novel was published in 1939, ten years after the stock market Crash, when the country was just recuperating, but its representation of the Depression is only to be found between the lines. In 1960 however, Steinbeck wrote a chronicle for *Esquire* magazine entitled "A Primer on the Thirties" that best exemplifies the uncanniness of the decade in which *The Grapes of Wrath* is set. The author explicitly compares the thirties with a theatre play, with all its acts, and even a prologue: 1929.

*Lembro muito bem de 29. [. . .] Lembro o rosto estupefato e feliz de gente que construiu fortunas de papel em ações que não teriam possibilidade de pagar. 'Ganhei dez mil em dez minutos hoje. Vamos ver—são oitenta mil esta semana.'*

*Em nossa cidadezinha, presidentes de bancos e operários da ferrovia corriam para os telefones públicos para falar com corretores. Todo mundo era mais ou menos corretor. Na hora do almoço, balconistas e estenógrafos mastigavam sanduíches enquanto observavam as cotações das ações e calculavam suas fortunas sempre crescentes. Os olhos tinham a expressão que a gente vê em torno de uma roleta. (América 37)*

Steinbeck's descriptions of the stock market frenzy that took hold of the nation in those times clearly mark the uncanniness of it all. People were mesmerized by the possibility of making money and getting rich without having to actually work for it. And then, after the "Black Tuesday" of October 29, as it was later called, "o mundo caiu" (37). What followed the Crash, was, if possible, even more uncanny:

*Aí veio o pânico, e o pânico virou um choque surdo. Quando o mercado caiu, as fábricas, minas e siderúrgicas fecharam e aí ninguém podia comprar nada, nem mesmo comida. As pessoas andavam como se tivessem levado uma surra. Os jornais falavam de homens arruinados pulando de prédios. Quando caíam na calçada, ficavam mesmo arruinados. O tio de um de meus amigos era um milionário riquíssimo. De sete milhões caiu para dois milhões em poucas semanas, mas dois milhões em dinheiro. Queixava-se de que não sabia como ia comer, teve de se limitar a um ovo no café da manhã. As faces ficaram murchas e os olhos febris. Finalmente, matou-se com um tiro. Achou que ia passar fome com dois milhões. Eram assim os valores. (38, my emphasis)*

The uncanny feeling of the decade is that of people not believing that what was happening was real, of walking around stunned, of people going insane, of a complete meltdown of a long working system, in sum, of a crisis of what was presumably natural. In face of this reality is not so difficult to imagine why the owners, companies, and banks were so eager to secure their profit margin: it meant their survival in a context where others were getting ruined. The Crash proved that the great corporations were not immune to bankruptcy. Institutions such as banks that controlled the capital of the country were proven to be just as vulnerable as any other company. The Depression lay bare the fragility of the system:

*Então as pessoas lembraram seus pequenos saldos bancários, a única certeza num mundo traiçoeiro. Correram para tirar o dinheiro. Houve brigas e quebra-quebras e cordões policiais. Alguns bancos faliram; os boatos começaram a correr. Então gente assustada e raivosa atacou os bancos até as portas se fecharem. (38)*

In a way, it is possible to compare the great owners like Mr. Hines with the millionaire uncle of Steinbeck's friend, for both are blinded by their need for profit, both are utterly terrified of poverty, and both share the same values.

CHAPTER II: “NEVER SHOULD A BROKE HER UP. AN’ NOW SHE’S  
COTTONED DAMN NEAR TO DEATH:” NATURE IN  
*THE GRAPES OF WRATH*<sup>37</sup>



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<sup>37</sup> Image 13: “A black blizzard over Prowers Co., Colorado, 1937.”

Image 14: “Eroded Land, Alabama.”

## 2.1. Nature and Steinbeck

Throughout this chapter, I shall explore the part played by Nature in *The Grapes of Wrath* in its multiple forms. Nature here can be understood as ranging from environmental and climatic manifestations to all living things and their harmony, in a wider sense. Further in this chapter I will investigate the interactions between nature and technology, and between nature and the characters. First, however, I shall review some of the literature about nature in Steinbeck's work.

The interest of scholars in the relation between Steinbeck and nature has been steadily growing since the publication of the author's novels. In 1975, for example, at the John Steinbeck Society Meeting at the MLA Convention, Richard Astro, Martha Heasley Cox, and Jackson Benson read papers on the issue of Steinbeck and the environment. Cox said that Steinbeck "[. . .] anticipated the concern with ecology and the 'greening of America,' the emphasis on environment and human values, which were to become national preoccupations more than thirty years later" (5). Astro, on his turn, said that "three full decades before Earth Day – [Steinbeck] pointed the way toward what we now call 'the ecological ideal,' the maintenance of a dynamic equilibrium, between man and his environment" (6-7). Now, more than thirty years later, Steinbeck's work on the environment seems more contemporary than ever, as the international community turns its eyes on the subject of ecology due to the pressing issues of global warming and ecological disasters that affect residents in all the continents.

Ironically, despite the fact that Steinbeck advocated for the preservation of the environment and the search for equilibrium with nature in a number of his novels, he is accused by some critics of not being enough of an environmental activist. He is

accused, in other words, of staying too much in the realm of fiction and words, and not taking action to prevent the types of behavior he denounced. Warren French, for example, says in the article “How Green Was John Steinbeck?” that the environmental activism in Steinbeck is to be taken more inspirationally than practically. John Timmerman agrees with French when he states that “[i]t must be admitted that [in] [. . .] *America and Americans* Steinbeck does a better job of delineating problems than of offering practical solutions” (312). The views of both authors were published in a collection of essays entitled *Steinbeck and the Environment: Interdisciplinary Approaches*. Several essays in the collection, such as those of Joel Hedgpeth, and Eric and Mimi Gladstein, connect Steinbeck with closeness to the environment but at the same time raise the problem of his lack of actual environmental activism.

Lloyd Willis wrote an article in response to this collection of essays and the discussion it arose about Steinbeck’s commitment to ecology and environmentalism. Willis states that the critics have “long recognized Steinbeck’s interest in ecology” and seem to embrace his environmentalist perspectives even if “they fall short of true activism” (30). Willis affirms that the reason for the author’s non-activism is found within Steinbeck’s work itself, and in his understanding and views of the American culture. Willis’s theory is that Steinbeck was familiarized with the concept of “monstrosity,” its historicity, how cultures can generate monstrosity, and how closely it is related to politics (2). For Willis, Steinbeck was too aware of “monstrosity as a tool for cultural manipulation” to venture in an activism that would surely condemn him. Steinbeck, Willis affirms, knew that the hegemonies have

ready-made rubrics of monstrosity to cast over such radicals, and that they can effectively summon the ‘lumpen’ masses to crucify beasts of potential change” [. . .] If Steinbeck did not become enough of an environmental activist, it may mean [. . .] [that he] understood that very culture as one that would have recognized environmentalism—if he presented it as vehemently as twenty-first-century readers and scholars would have liked him to—as a monstrosity and would have

attempted to kill it in the name of preserving the consumptive, exploitative status quo. (29)

Lorelei Cederstrom associates nature with the Great Mother archetype in Steinbeck's work. The article "The 'Great Mother' in *The Grapes of Wrath*" is present in the collection *Steinbeck and the Environment* as well, but it does not dwell in the discussion of Steinbeck's dedication to environmental activism. Instead, the author focuses more on how "*The Grapes of Wrath* presents a visionary foreshadowing of the universal ecological disaster that looms so prominently on the horizon today" through the archetype of the "Great Mother" which represents, for Cederstrom, a "personification of the Earth itself" (76, 78). As such, the raping of the earth becomes an important issue to be analyzed:

It is apparent from the beginning of *The Grapes of Wrath* that man has lost awareness that the earth is both sacred and living. Mother Earth is still fertile, but the crops are covered with dust. The *land has been raped* and growing the same crop year after year under these conditions has destroyed the ability of the earth to nurture those who treat her this way. The Joad family suffers because they too have been *guilty* of this kind of neglect [. . .] (79, my italics)

The most important contribution of Cederstrom's ideas to this thesis is that she places the tenants as participants in the violent acts committed against nature. Though they do not rape the earth mechanically, as the tractor does, their frequent plowing of the soil has made it fragile. In her article, however, Cederstrom focuses more on the attitudes of the characters of the novel as returning to a more primitive matriarchal consciousness, than of an equilibrium with the earth, represented by the shift in the Joad family structure, with Ma, the epitome of that consciousness, gaining more influence over the course of the journey to California. Ma Joad understands the cycles of life, about death and birth, the rituals that are inherent to them, burial and birthing, in sum, she "reflects the many aspects of the nurturing force of the Great Mother" (81).<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> As the analysis of this chapter shall show, I do not necessarily agree with Cederstrom's conclusion about the Joads' return to an equilibrium and balance with the earth.



## 2.2. Nature in *The Grapes of Wrath*

The theme of climate change as a manifestation of nature's power is a recurrent one in Steinbeck's work. In *The Grapes of Wrath* it plays an essential role, as is perceived by the fact that two major climatic crisis open and close the novel, the dust storms and flood respectively. Unlike technology, which is run by numbers, order, and efficiency, nature is chaotic, and can just as much give life as take it, without any specific pattern. This lack of pattern and power to destroy, however, does not materialize into something disturbingly unfamiliar for the tenants or migrants. For them, even in a climatic disaster, things, though terrible, are still comprehensible, familiar, whereas it is when the order is enforced in the land that the uncanny feeling emerges, as is seen in the unnatural straight lines of the tractors. The tenant and sharecropper can deal with drought, dust storm, and flood, for these are, despite extreme, still a part of nature, of their habitat. What they cannot handle is the unfamiliar complexity of banks, owners, tractors, and car dealers. Nature, with all its chaos, is their *heimlich*, while the sight of technology and the effects of progress is their *unheimlich*.

The dust storms are the first demonstration of the power of nature in the novel. Steinbeck dedicates only the first chapter of the novel to the climatic event of the dust storms, an event of great importance and that serves as a starting point for the narrative. On the other hand, the author dedicates several chapters of the first part of the book to the description of the advances of technology into the fields and the role played by banks, corporations, and owners in the tenants' lives. The difference in the treatment of the two realms, those of nature and technology, can also be felt in the feelings they arouse, whether they are uncanny or not. While technology is described as clearly possessing uncanny characteristics, such as seen in the former chapter of this thesis, the

extreme manifestations of nature are not described in that same manner. The tenants do not view the dust storms as uncanny. For them, the frightening thing about the dust storms is that the corn should die, not the storms themselves. The description of the storm, however, does seem terrifying:

The dawn came, but no day. In the gray sky a red sun appeared, a dim red circle that gave little light, like dusk; and as that day advanced, the dusk slipped back toward darkness, and the wind cried and whimpered over the fallen corn. [. . .] and the sun was as ripe as new blood. (4-5)



Far from responding to the storm as uncanny, however, the tenants react as though they knew what to expect from that situation:<sup>39</sup>

Men and women huddled in their houses, and they tied handkerchiefs over their noses when they went out, and wore goggles to protect their eyes. [. . .] the dust came in so thinly that it could not be seen in the air [. . .] The people brushed it from their shoulders. [. . .] The people, lying in their beds, heard the wind stop. They awakened when the rushing wind was gone. They lay quietly and listened deep into the stillness. Then the roosters crowed, and their voices were muffled, and the people stirred restlessly in their beds and wanted the morning. They knew it would take a long time for the dust to settle out of the air. [. . .] Men stood by their fences and looked at the ruined corn, drying fast now, only a little green

<sup>39</sup> Image 15: "Fleeing a dust storm."

showing through the film of dust. The men were silent and they did not move often. (4-5)

It is clear in this passage that the frightened reaction is not at all associated with the impressive magnitude of the dust storm, but rather with the possibility of crop failure. The simple act of brushing the dust off their shoulders indicates a certain familiarity with the phenomenon. Also, the knowledge they possessed of how to react to all the stages of a dust storm, how to protect themselves, what to expect next, indicates as well that they were not awed by the might of the storm, just desolate to the fact that they would certainly lose another year of hard work on the corn field.

On chapter 29, the last interchapter of the novel, the image of a flood overwhelms the migrants. The flood is the climatic moment of the novel, and strikes the final blow to the already shattered Joad family, depriving them of their most prized possession, their car. The description of the flood, despite the fact that the flood is of great proportions and is described as something terrifying, suggests reactions of fear on the part of the migrants that is not related to the flood per se, but to the possibility of starving to death without work in the rainy season. The scale of the flood is enormous though:

Over the high coast mountains and over the valleys the gray clouds marched in from the ocean. The wind blew fiercely and silently, high in the air, and it swished in the brush, and it roared in the forests. [. . .] The rain began with gusty showers, pauses and downpours; and then gradually it settled to a single tempo, small drops and a steady beat, rain that was gray to see through, rain that cut midday light to evening. [. . .] For two days the earth drank the rain, until the earth was full. [. . .] The muddy water whirled along the bank sides and crept up the banks until at last it spilled over, into the fields, into the orchards, into the cotton patches where the black stems stood. Level fields became lakes, broad and gray, and the rain whipped up the surfaces. (452)

The reaction is here similar to the one presented when the dust storms were blowing: “[w]hen the first rain started, the migrant people huddled in their tents, saying, It’ll soon be over, and asking, How long’s it likely to go on?” (452-3). Another indication of

familiarity with the situation is their next move: “[a]nd when the puddles formed, the men went out in the rain with shovels and built little dikes around the tents” (453). This action describes a group of men who are not perplexed with feelings of strangeness or unfamiliarity towards the flood, but are aware of the procedures to be followed in such cases. However, when it comes to something unfamiliar to them, such as technology, they do not know what to do. The cars, for example, get ruined. For the complexity of an automobile, which is the result of technological knowledge possessed by only a few, is not a familiar subject to the migrants.



The migrants’ feelings towards the flood are related to despair and helplessness, with the possibility of starving to death in a foreign place without any assistance.<sup>40</sup>

And gradually the greatest terror of all came along.

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<sup>40</sup> Image 16: “California Migrant Camp.”

They ain't gonna be no kinda work for three months.  
 In the barns, the people sat huddled together; and the terror came over them, and their faces were gray with terror. The children cried with hunger, and there was no food. [. . .]  
 Huddled under sheds, lying in wet hay, the hunger and the fear bred anger. [. . .]  
 No work till spring. No work.  
 And if no work—no money, no food. (453-4)

This fear felt by the migrants does fall into the category of uncanny, for it relates to a primitive sense of survival, something old and familiar, but once again it is not associated with nature's manifestations but rather with the fear of death by starvation. Nature is here terrible and fearsome in its power, but not uncanny. There is natural fear but accepted as inevitable, not as something strange and disturbing.

Nature's climatic manifestations are, thus, not regarded as uncanny; the uncanniness lies rather in the portrayal of technology, literally described as monstrous throughout the novel. I shall turn now to how this "monster" interacts with nature. The most visible way of the monster's interference with nature has already been discussed briefly in the introductory chapter: the raping of the earth by the tractor, or "technological rape" (Ávila). The gender implications in this idea are very significant, for by connecting technological rape with uncanniness, the novel questions the aggressiveness of the relationship between technology and nature.

Eliana Ávila's concept of "technological rape" is found in "*Além do guerrismo entre 'duas culturas': o espectro de gênero em CTS*," where she defines it as "o 'estupro' da tecnologia masculinizada sobre a sociedade e o meio-ambiente feminizados [que] gera um ecocídio mascarado discursivamente como um fato inexorável da realidade, euforicamente glamorizado sob o alibi da globalização ou do progresso" (forthcoming). *The Grapes of Wrath* however does not glamorize globalization and progress. On the contrary, it portrays them as uncanny throughout the novel, as something unnatural that causes fear. Thus, while "technological rape" in the

novel does generate an ecocide, it does not present progress as a viable alibi. Ávila also states that “*a ideologia naturalizadora do estupro tecnológico não só transforma em gênero feminino todos a quem ele é imposto, como também homogeneiza o gênero masculino em torno da violência*” (forthcoming). This ideology is clearly visible in the novel as a whole. Ávila is here using the concept very much in the sense advanced by Leo Marx, for whom the conflict between technology and nature in a pastoral setting involves gender attributions:

Most important is the sense of the machine as a sudden, shocking intruder upon a fantasy of idyllic satisfaction. It invariably is associated with crude, *masculine aggressiveness* in contrast with tender, *feminine, and submissive attitudes traditionally attached to the landscape*. (Marx 29, my italics)

Technology as aggressive can be seen in the most revealing passage of the novel concerning the theme of technological rape, taken out of chapter 5: “Behind the harrows, the long seeders—twelve curved iron penes *erected* in the foundry, *orgasms* set by gears, *raping* methodically, *raping* without passion” (38, my italics). It can also be seen in the brutality of the vehicles running over small animals, and in the manipulation of the plants by the men of science, which is analyzed further in this chapter. Nature, on its turn, is always associated with the female gender, in a tender but not altogether in a submissive position. What happens in the novel is that nature is constantly being abused, and while that abuse is being committed it could be argued that nature is described as assuming a passive state. Nature however cannot be called submissive per se. As seen in the examples shown previously in this chapter, nature does have a destructive power, and it does put that power to use in a rather violent manner.

This power is present both in the beginning and in the end of the novel, as dust storms and flood. Even in the deaths of characters, nature is actively present through the so-called cycle of life. But they do not die as consequences of natural

disasters, they do so as direct consequences of the impact of technology and progress on their lives, such as Granma and Grampa, who were in great health in their homeland, close to nature, and die because of the stresses of the road. Another example is Rose of Sharon's baby, who dies of malnutrition during the pregnancy, a situation in which there was not enough nourishment due to the difficulties of survival imposed by the companies, banks, and great owners of farms on the harvest gypsies. Nature's portrayal in the novel thus escapes this tradition of submission thoroughly documented by Marx, but it does remain associated with the female gender throughout *The Grapes of Wrath*, as seen in the following example:

The spring is beautiful in California. Valleys in which the fruit blossoms are fragrant pink and white waters in a shallow sea. Then the first tendrils of grapes, swelling from the old gnarled vines, cascade down to cover the trunks. The full green hills are *round and soft as breasts*. And on the level vegetable lands are the mile-long rows of pale green lettuce and the spindly little cauliflowers, the gray-green unearthly artichoke plants.

And then the leaves break out on the trees, and the petals drop from the fruit trees and carpet the earth with pink and white. *The centers of the blossoms swell and grow and color*: cherries and apples, peaches and pears, figs which close the flower in the fruit. All California quickens with produce, and the fruit grows heavy, and the limbs bend gradually under the fruit so that little crutches must be placed under them to support the weight. (362, my italics)

Nature is related to femininity through the idea of fertility, as seen in the description of the spring, as the end of a gestation period, when the fruits blossom and grow heavy. But nature is also associated with the female gender in a more literal way: when ascribed female organs such as breasts and when is described as being victim of rape by the tractors. If the tractors are explicitly depicted as having masculine sexual organs, such as the harrows that carry the "phalli of the seeder," "erected in the foundry," the victim of this supposedly heterosexual rape,<sup>41</sup> i.e. the earth, is implied to have female

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<sup>41</sup> Ávila states that "[q]uanto ao estupro não ser, obviamente, exclusivamente heterossexual, ele é persistentemente construído culturalmente, perpetuado como componente natural da dominação sexual sobre um outro ideologizado enquanto gênero feminino, quer seja do sexo feminino ou não" (forthcoming).

sexual organs as well (38, 41). The idea of female sexuality associated with the earth is expressed in several passages where the migrants are described as *lusting* for the land, such as “the stomach-tearing lust for a rich acre and a shining blade to plow it”; “the wants of the Okies were beside the roads, lying there to be seen and coveted: the good fields with water to be dug for, the good green fields, earth to crumble experimentally in the hand, grass to smell, [. . .]” (242, 245). The migrants lust for the earth described as a female, and they lust for plowing as well, for the phallic “shining blade” (242)<sup>42</sup>. The act of plowing the land is analogous to sexual intercourse, be it mechanical or not—the difference lies in the manner in which this relationship is conducted. While the tractors perform it in a violent manner, “raping methodically, raping without passion” with their seeders and harrows, the migrants do it passionately, with lust, through the hand-plow (38). This characteristic of the relationship between migrants and land is evident in the scene where Tom is digging a ditch in Mr. Thomas farm:



His father opened the barn and passed out two picks and three shovels. And he said to Tom, ‘Here’s your beauty.’

Tom hefted the pick. ‘Jumping Jesus! If she don’t feel good!’

‘Wait till about ‘leven o’clock,’ Wilkie suggested. ‘See how good she feels then.’

They walked to the end of the ditch. Tom took off his coat and dropped it on the dirt pile. He pushed up his cap and stepped into the ditch. Then he spat on his hands. The pick arose into the air and flashed down. Tom grunted softly. The pick

<sup>42</sup> Image 17: .“Plowing, Irwin County, Georgia.”



rose and fell, and the grunt came at the moment it sank into the ground and loosened the soil.

Wilkie said, ‘Yes, sir, Pa, we got here a first-grade muckstick man. This here boy been married to that there little digger.’

Tom said, ‘I put in time (*umph*). Yes, sir, I sure did (*umph*). Put in my years (*umph!*). Kinda like the feel (*umph!*).’ The soil loosened ahead of him. The sun cleared the fruit trees now and the grape leaves were golden green on the vines. Six feet along and Tom stepped aside and wiped his forehead. Wilkie came behind him. The shovel rose and fell and the dirt flew out to the pile beside the lengthening ditch. [. . .]

Timothy drove his shovel along the ditch bottom, and the solid earth shone where the shovel cut it.

Tom laughed. ‘Me too, I guess.’ His pick arced up and drove down, and the earth cracked under it. The sweat rolled down his forehead and down the sides of his nose, and it glistened on his neck. ‘Damn it,’ he said, ‘pick is a nice tool (*umph*), if you don’t fight it (*umph*). You an’ the pick (*umph*) workin’ together (*umph*).’ (310-2, original emphasis)

In this passage, the nature of the relationship between Tom and the land is clear from the start. As soon as he takes the pick in his hand he expresses his excitement. The narrative also makes the sexuality of the scene evident, when it describes Tom grunting “softly,” at the moment the pick *penetrates* the ground. The emphasis on the movement of rising and falling, of the picks and shovels going up and down, is also visible of the sexual nature of the passage. The phallic shape of the pick is indicative of the sexuality of the scene as well, especially by the fact that Tom is obviously proud of his skills with it and repeatedly praises the tool and how good it feels in his hand, and how good they work together. An additional factor that stands out in the passage is the onomatopoeic sounds made by him, “*umph*,” that are nowhere else seen in the novel, which makes this passage stand out, and indicate the pleasure taken from each time the pick touches the earth.

Another evidence of the earth as feminine could be interpreted from the first conversation between Tom and Casy in the novel. While they were talking about sex and how Casy felt guilty of sleeping with girls after preaching to them, Tom “carefully drew the torso of a woman in the dirt, breasts, hips, pelvis” (24). He unconsciously

associates earth with the female figure and externalizes that through his drawing on the soil. Muley Graves does the same thing when using a feminine pronoun while referring to the land: “[n]ever should a broke *her* up. An’ now *she*’s cottoned damn near to death” (50, my italics). Throughout the novel the feminine pronoun is used repeatedly when referring to the land:

“[f]ella says to me, gov’ment fella, an’ he says, *she*’s gullied up on ya. Gov’ment fella. He says, if ya plowed’ cross the contour, *she* won’t gully. Never did have no chance to try *her*”;

“[a]n’ if they don’t want ta work *her*, *she* ain’t gonna git worked”;

“I want ta look at *her*.’ The grain fields golden in the morning, and the willow lines, the eucalyptus trees in rows. Pa sighed, ‘I never knowed they was anything like *her*.’”;

“Spoil the lan’ pretty soon. Like a fella wants to buy some cotton lan’—Don’ buy *her*, rent *her*. Then when *she*’s cottoned on down, move someplace new.” (207, 214, 238, 426, my italics)

Muley’s lines are an indication of the kind of damage made to the land by the tenants: the constant plowing, and failure to rotate the crops, caused the soil of the grass lands to gradually become fragile enough to be broken and taken away by the dust storms.

However, the relationship between nature and technology does not always appear as overtly violent, like in the example of the act of raping the earth through plowing. It has several, more subtle, nuances. One of those involves the taming and subjugation of nature by science. A team of researchers, engineers, and chemists are used to take as much from the land as possible, to manipulate it, to tame it. This interference with nature is seen throughout the novel, but it stands out in the fields of California:

Behind the fruitfulness are *men of understanding and knowledge and skill*, men who experiment with seed, endlessly developing the techniques for greater crops of plants whose roots will resist the million enemies of the earth: the molds, the insects, the rusts, the blights. These men work carefully and endlessly to *perfect* the seed, the roots. And there are the men of *chemistry* who spray the trees against pests, who sulfur the grapes, who cut out disease and rots, mildews and sicknesses. *Doctors of preventive medicine*, men at the borders who look for fruit flies, for Japanese beetle, men who quarantine the sick trees and root them out and burn them, *men of knowledge*. The men who graft the young trees, the little vines,

are the cleverest of all, for theirs is a *surgeons' hands and surgeons' hearts* to slit the bark, to place the grafts, to bind the wounds and cover them from the air. *These are great men.*

Along the rows, the cultivators move, tearing the spring grass and turning it under to make a fertile earth, breaking the ground to hold the water up near the surface, ridging the ground in little pools for the irrigation, destroying the weed roots that may drink the water away from the trees. [. . .]

The *men who work in the fields*, the owners of the little orchards, watch and calculate. The year is heavy with produce. And men are *proud*, for of their knowledge they can make the year heavy. *They have transformed the world with their knowledge.* The short, lean wheat has been made big and productive. Little sour apples have grown large and sweet, and that old grape that grew among the trees and fed the birds its tiny fruit has mothered a thousand varieties, red and black, green and pale pink, purple and yellow; and each variety with its own flavor. The men who work in the experimental farms have *made new fruits*: nectarines and forty kinds of plums, walnuts with paper shells. And always they work, selecting, grafting, changing, driving themselves, *driving the earth to produce.* [. . .] (362-4, my italics)



The gender connotations of this relationship are evident, as the ones responsible for manipulating the land are referred to as “*men* of understanding [. . .] *men* who experiment with seed, [. . .] *These men* work carefully [. . .] *men* of chemistry” (362, my

italics)<sup>43</sup>. The land is, in this scenario, passive enough to be driven by these men, to be controlled and manipulated. These “men of understanding” try to “perfect” nature, to enhance its productivity to the maximum, which implies that the female earth could only achieve its highest potential with the help of these special *men* (362). Their manipulation of nature is not as aggressive as the raping of the earth by the tractors, but it is nonetheless a very invasive interference. Despite the fact that the men of science work more closely with the land than tractor drivers, their job involves testing and probing of the soil, which though not as violent as the tractor actions, is still a violent interaction. For, in the same ways that the harrows of the tractor rape the land, an invasive act is committed when the “big earth augers” penetrate the land for soil tests (33). Through their knowledge, they unnaturally drive the earth to produce more and better, perfecting flaws, preventing plagues, even inventing new products. The feeling of disturbance provoked by their interference in nature can be sensed in the description of “the gray-green *unearthly* artichoke plants” (362, my italics).

The men of science also relate to the land in a particular way, different from all other characters in the novel. They work directly on the earth and feel proud of what comes out of their labor, differently from the tractor driver who is detached. The sense of pride and love for the land these men have, however, is somewhat similar to that of the owner of a dog who is proud of his animal’s good behavior, for through their science they feel that they have tamed the earth into working for them. Their relation to the land is thus different from that seen in the tractor driver and in the men who work for the banks, for they are connected to the earth, in their manner. At the same time, their relation to the land is also different from that of the tenants’. Their pride is different. The tenants love, lust, and at the same time respect the land in a humble

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<sup>43</sup> Image 18: Near Westmorland. Filipinos cutting lettuce. California.”

manner, for that land shall define the terms of their survival. The pride they feel of a crop is associated with hard work and reverence, a communion with nature in their point of view. The men of science only admire the results of their own work in nature, in a feeling of pride more related to vanity. The following passage shows some of the shades between how migrants, tractor drivers, and the men of science are related to the earth:

So easy that the wonder goes out of work, so efficient that the wonder goes out of land and the working of it, and with the wonder the deep understanding and the relation. And in the tractor man there grows the contempt that comes only to a stranger who has little understanding and no relation. For nitrates are not the land, nor phosphates; and the length of fiber in the cotton is not the land. Carbon is not a man, nor salt nor water nor calcium. He is all these, but he is much more, much more; and the land is so much more than its analysis. The man who is more than his chemistry, walking on the earth, turning his plow point for a stone, dropping his handles to slide over an outcropping, kneeling in the earth to eat his lunch; that man who is more than his elements knows the land that is more than its analysis. But the machine man, driving a dead tractor on land he does not know and love, understands only chemistry; and he is contemptuous of the land and of himself. When the corrugated iron doors are shut, he goes home, and his home is not the land. (120-1)

This passage illustrates the difference between how the men of science, the tractor driver, and the tenants feel about their work. The tenants are once more portrayed as having a passionate relationship to the land. And while the men of science are proud of their work, of their analysis on the land, the tractor driver who only follows orders is not. The differences in the chain of command are apparent in this and in other passages such as the following two:

The owners of the land came onto the land, or more often a spokesman for the owners came. They came in closed cars, and they felt the dry earth with their fingers, and *sometimes they drove big earth augers into the ground for soil tests.* [. . .]

And it came about that owners no longer worked on their farms. They farmed on paper; and they forgot the land, the smell, the feel of it, and remembered only that they owned it, remembered only what they gained and lost by it. And some of the farms grew so large that one man could not even conceive of them any more, so large that it took batteries of bookkeepers to keep track of interest and gain and loss; *chemists to test the soil, to replenish*; straw bosses to see that the stooping men were moving along the rows as swiftly as the material of their bodies could stand. (33, 243, my italics)

These two passages point to the fact that the men of science are also part of a hierarchy in the farms, they guide the tractor drivers about how to proceed, but they are not owners themselves, they are rather at the service of more powerful forces.

The presence of nature is also felt in the novel, through little details such as the descriptions of small animals in the landscape, which are abundant in the narrative from beginning to end. One good example of the importance of the presence of animals in the novel is chapter 3, which is entirely dedicated to the story of a land turtle crossing the highway. The chapter begins with the description of “sleeping life,” how the “grass heads were heavy with oat beards to catch on a dog’s coat, and foxtails to tangle in a horse’s fetlocks, and clover burrs to fasten in sheep’s wool; [. . .] waiting to be spread and dispersed [. . .] *all passive but armed with appliances of activity* [. . .]” (16, my italics). The last italicized line could be understood as symbolic of the role of nature as a whole throughout the novel. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, nature is presented in a passive way in the sense that is repeatedly explored, and abused, both by man and machine. Nevertheless, its “appliances of activity” are visible in the climate manifestations and in the way that it can give life, but also take it away.

The first half of the short chapter describes the natural life of the side of the road, with its insects and weeds, and the effort the land turtle has to make to climb the highway embankment. Slowly but steadily the turtle makes its way to the road, and in the process crushes a red ant inside its shell, but at the same time a head of wild oats gets caught around its legs, demonstrating the harmonic balance of forces. When crossing the highway, the turtle has two encounters with mankind and the technology associated with it:

A sedan driven by a forty-year old woman approached. *She saw the turtle and swung to the right*, off the highway, the wheels screamed and a cloud of dust

boiled up. Two wheels lifted for a moment and then settled. The car skidded back onto the road, and went on, but more slowly. The turtle had jerked into its shell, but now hurried on, for the highway was burning hot.

And now a light truck approached, and as it came near, the driver saw the turtle and *swerved to hit it*. His front wheel struck the edge of the shell, flipped the turtle like a tiddly-wink, spun it like a coin, and rolled it off the highway. The truck went back to its course along the right side. Lying on its back, the turtle was tight in its shell for a long time. But at last its legs waved in the air, reaching for something to pull it over. Its front foot caught a piece of quartz and little by little the shell pulled over and flopped upright. The *wild oat fell out and three of the spearhead seeds struck in the ground*. And as the turtle crawled on down the embankment, *its shell dragged dirt over the seeds*. (17-8, my italics)

The two encounters are revealing of people's reactions to nature in the novel: on the one hand the woman almost gets in an accident by performing a dangerous maneuver to avoid hitting the turtle. The same maneuver, however, is used by the truck driver with the opposite purpose, translating the desire of killing something just for pleasure. Again the story associates the male gender around violence, for while technology is being used by both drivers, male and female, only the man uses it as a means to express aggressive behavior. Nevertheless, apparently oblivious to all this, the turtle simply lifts itself up and continues its journey, and, in the course of it, drops and covers the seeds from the other side of the road, which also symbolizes nature's way of continuing its cycle of life in spite of the difficulties encountered.

The theme of animals being killed on the road is a frequent one, and is symbolic of the characteristics of the violent relationship between technology and nature in the novel. Not unlike the way that tractors rape the earth, the road kill is also an aggressive interaction between technology and nature. One example of this aggressiveness is the scene where the Joads' dog is hit by a car, that happens when they reach the first gas station after they leave their home:

On top of the truck, the suffering hound dog crawled timidly to the edge of the load and looked over, whimpering, toward the water. Uncle John climbed up and lifted him down by the scruff of the neck. [. . .] He sniffed his way among the dusty weeds beside the road, to the edge of the pavement. He raised his head and looked across, and then started over. Rose of Sharon screamed shrilly. A *big swift*

*car whisked near, tires squealed. The dog dodged helplessly, and with a shriek, cut off in the middle, went under the wheels.* The big car slowed for a moment and faces looked back, and then it gathered greater speed and disappeared. And the dog, a blot of blood and tangled, burst intestines, kicked slowly in the road. (131-2, 135, my italics)

The violence is evident, not only in the fact that the dog is killed, but by the brutality of the details, of being divided in two, and its intestines burst out into the road. Through this passage it is again possible to see two kinds of interaction with animals: the first is Uncle John's sympathetic attitude towards the thirsty dog; and the second is the careless reaction of driver and passengers of the car. The death of the dog affects directly the bystanders. Uncle John, who released it from the truck, feels guilty of doing so, "I ought ta tied him up," and the gas station owner also feels guilty and apologizes for something that it is not his fault, "a dog jus' don' last no time near a highway"—words that are suggestive of the relation between nature and technology in the novel. Uncle John and Tom pull the dog out of the road, the owner of the gas station takes responsibility for the burial of the animal, while the people who actually killed it paid no attention at all to the consequences of their actions, not caring for the creature nor its owners, just kept on driving even faster than before.

The brutality of that purposeless death is evidenced first by Rose of Sharon's scream, and later by the reaction of Ruthie and Winfield. As both kids come from playing in the cornfield next to the gas station and face the bloody mess on the road they are shocked. Ruthie voices her bewilderment first, "[h]is eyes was still open," she says, and Winfield has a physical reaction to it:

'his guts was just strowed all over—all over'—he was silent for a moment—'strowed—all—over,' he said, and then he rolled over quickly and vomited down the side of the truck. When he sat up again his eyes were watery and his nose running. 'It ain't like killin' pigs,' he said in explanation. (137)

Winfield is the youngest of the Joad family, and shows the most visceral reaction to the cruelty of the death. He is used to the killing of pigs as something natural, and does not



have any feelings of disgust towards it, even rejoices at it, as seen in the beginning of the novel, but when it comes to the death of a helpless animal he is attached to, for no reason whatsoever, he is not equipped to digest that type of crude and graphic brutality and gets sick.

Later on the story, we see the scene of the Joad's dog being hit by a car echoed in the tale told by the two truck drivers at the diner, on chapter 15. In the story a Cadillac gets into an accident with a migrants' jalopy destroying both vehicles. In this tale, the migrants' jalopy is just as fragile as the Joads' dog in the face of the other car and, as such, suffers the same fate. The different descriptions given by the truck drivers about the Cadillac and the jalopy are revealing of the environment in which they live, for they focus more on the automobiles than on the people driving them. When describing the destruction of the Cadillac, the truck driver fills it with exclamations of its beauty and pity of it being ruined, even to the point of repeating himself: "*Big car. Big Cad', a special job and a honey, low, cream-color, special job. [ . . . ] Peach of a car. A honey*" (164, my italics). The truck drivers act through their fascination with the Cadillac's beauty as if they were talking of a woman's beauty. Throughout most of the novel the female gender is constantly associated with nature, as seen previously in this chapter, but the truck drivers, who have no contact at all with nature, experience this differently. Instead of a lust for land such as that of the tenants, the drivers show a lust for technology. Since they are detached in their relationship with the land, their desire is transferred into something familiar to them, which translates into the lust for a car as a symbol of status and power.

The description of the death and state of the Cadillac driver is very graphic: "[f]olded the radiator right back into the driver. Must a been doin' ninety. Steerin' wheel went right on through the guy an' lef' him a-wigglin' like a frog on a hook"

(164). In contrast, the truck driver describes the death of a migrant child and the reaction of the father in an almost journalistic way, straightforwardly and without much emotion: “the air was full a bed clothes an’ chickens an’ kids. Killed one kid [. . .] Ol’ man that’s drivin’ the truck, he jus’ stan’s there lookin’ at that dead kid.” (164). And the jalopy is described in a pejorative way, with the focus rather on the contents of its load, than on its characteristics per se—“Wasn’t a truck. One of them cut-down cars full a stoves an’ pans an’ mattresses an’ kids an’ chickens. Goin’ west, you know” (164). Through the emotions expressed by the narrator of the story, it seems that the tragedy of the accident is more in the destruction of the beautiful Cadillac than in the death of the migrants’ kid.

It is also interesting to look at the attitude of the Cadillac driver on the road, and how this theme is recurrent in the novel as well. Not only is the highway described throughout the novel as deadly to animals and humans, the act of dangerous driving is also present on many occasions. The Cadillac driver, for example, was going over ninety miles an hour. Even on an open highway that would be considered dangerous, for the car loses stability after a certain speed, such as evidenced in the novel by the fact that the car got on two wheels just to pass the truck and as it had to make a defensive maneuver the vehicle completely lost control. The fact that he was trying this type of maneuver in a busy road is revealing of the recklessness of the driver, endangering not only himself but all others in its way

Speeding like this is seen in several passages of the novel, like the one in the previously cited chapter 3 when the woman in the Sedan was driving so fast that in her attempt to swerve away from the land turtle she almost loses control of the car: “the wheels screamed and a cloud of dust boiled up. Two wheels lifted for a moment and then settled. The car skidded back onto the road, and went on, but more slowly” (17).

This type of speeding contrasts significantly with the slow movement of the turtle, but also with its resilience and resistance. On the one hand the vehicles have great power and push their motors as much as they can, but on the other the slightest mistake can prove itself fatal, while the turtle, despite its diminished size and speed, survives even an encounter with a truck.

Speeding is also seen when the Joads' dog is hit by a "swift car," and afterwards instead of slowing down like the woman in the Sedan, it gathers even more speed (131). These are some specific cases, but in the same way that the novel is populated with small references to animals, in contrast, it is also filled with allusions to the fast cars and trucks running in the highways, as in the following examples:

"[c]ars whisking by on 66"; "transport trucks thundered by at intervals and put little earthquakes in the ground"; "[t]hree cars raced by"; "[t]he oncoming car swished by"; "[t]he forenoon traffic on the highway increased, salesmen in shiny coupes with the insignia of their companies painted on the doors, red and white gasoline trucks dragging clinking chains behind them, great square-doored vans from wholesale grocery houses, delivering produce" (155, 160, 172, 193, 382).

Nonetheless, the attitude of disregard towards other forms of life on the road is not found exclusively in the fine car and truck drivers, despite the parallel between the fragility of the dog and the jalopy crushed by the Cadillac. Al, for example, also incurs in the same behavior. In chapter 16, Al is driving the truck, with Tom by his side, and purposely tries to hit a cat:

Al peered into the dusk. The lights made no impression on the gloom; but ahead, the eyes of a hunting cat flashed green in the reflection of the lights [. . .] He looked straight ahead. The truck rattled and banged over the road. A cat whipped out from the side of the road and *Al swerved to hit it*, but the wheels missed and the cat leaped into the grass.

'*Nearly got him,*' said Al. (190, my italics)

Al's behavior in this scene is exactly the same of the truck driver who tries to run over the land turtle at the beginning of the novel in the sense that it purposely tries to hit the cat, and it is similar to the Cadillac driver in the dangerousness of his maneuver. His

line explicitly indicates his intent, and the fact that he would have felt pleasure in killing the hunting cat. In another passage, his attitude towards animals on the road is again clear:

A snake wriggled across the warm highway. Al zipped over and ran it down and came back to his own lane.

‘Gopher snake,’ said Tom. ‘You oughtn’t to done that,’

‘I hate ‘em,’ said Al gaily. ‘Hate all kinds. Give me the stomackquake.’ (382, my italics)

Al goes to the trouble of changing lanes to hit the snake, a maneuver that could be considered dangerous given the conditions of the Joads’ jalopy and the weight of its load. In the passage quoted earlier, the detail of the “truck [that] rattled and banged over the road” is an indication of the fragile stability of the vehicle (190). Still, he is pretty happy for having killed the animal. Al’s excuse of hating all kinds of snakes is feeble, for he does not feel the same way about cats and he tried to hit one nonetheless, as discussed before. The fact that Al says it “gaily” corroborates the assumption that he only said it in response to his brother’s critical attitude.

Tom’s attitude towards animals is different, as seen by his reprimand. Despite the fact that he does run over animals (“A rattlesnake crawled across the road and Tom hit it and broke it and left it squirming”), unlike his brother, that swerves to hit the animals, Tom does not make an active effort to kill the snake, just as he does not make an active effort to avoid killing the animal, he simply continues on his path (241). Besides that, Tom’s feelings towards the thoughtlessness of road killing are clearly stated in a conversation with Casy, which occurs a little after Al tries to hit the cat, when Tom is driving back the Wilsons’ car:

A jackrabbit got caught in the lights and he bounced along ahead, cruising easily, his great ears flopping with every jump. Now and then he tried to break off the road, but the wall of darkness thrust him back. Far ahead bright headlights appeared and bore down on them. The rabbit hesitated, faltered, then turned and bolted toward the lesser lights of the Dodge. There was a small soft jolt as he went under the wheels. The oncoming car swished by.

‘We sure squashed him,’ said Casy.  
Tom said, ‘*Some fellas like to hit ‘em. Gives me a little shake ever’ time.*’ (193,  
my italics)

Again Tom is accountable for the death of an animal, but as in the other example, the tone is that of a fatality of the road, not of the responsibility of the driver. Unlike Al’s dangerous maneuver of changing lanes to hit the snake, in this scene the irresponsible thing would be to try to avoid hitting the rabbit, since there was another car coming in the opposite direction. It is evident that Tom does not feel any pleasure in the death of the animal in any of these times. In fact, Tom’s line is a clear reference to his brother’s behavior towards animals on the road and how he strongly disapproves of that. An example of Tom’s attitude towards animals is found in another passage in the beginning of the novel concerning a snake: “[a] snake wriggled slowly from the cotton rows into the road. Tom stopped short of it and peered. ‘Gopher snake,’ he said. ‘Let him go.’ They walked around the snake and went on their way” (72). In this example, where it is not a problem to go around the animal, like the other example of the road, Tom simply avoids it.

Ultimately the road is portrayed in the novel as a symbol of progress that cuts through all territories and changes the environment and its surroundings in a rather invasive and sometimes violent fashion. The changes in the environment are represented through the death of animals that try to cross the road, and the changes in its surroundings are evidenced by the number of commercial establishments that base their businesses on the traffic of the highway, such as gas stations and diners. But the implications of the aggressive relationship of nature and technology also affect the lives of the people that drive on these highways. Truck drivers have adjusted to these implications, as did diner employees such as Al and Mae. The migrants however are badly affected by the conflicts of the road. Throughout the novel we see several

examples of people dying or falling ill, like Sairy Wilson, of marriages that begin and end, such as Rose of Sharon and Connie's, and of lives that change because of the road. Grampa and Granma, for example, are killed on the road. Not literally of course, for they were not run over by any vehicles, but, metaphorically speaking, they are killed by the road, for both are unable to stand the difficulties of the journey and die due to this inability. The deaths—human or otherwise—related to the road are symbolic, in the novel, of the consequences derived from advent from the relationship between nature and progress, and from the violence involved in that relationship.

Earlier in the chapter I mentioned Richard Astro's article presented at the 1975 MLA Convention, "From the Tidepool to the Stars: Steinbeck's Sense of Place." In addition to presenting Steinbeck's ideas about environment as ahead of its time, Astor makes an interesting reference to "the pastoral impulse," which was already discussed in the previous chapter of this thesis, as "a symbolic representation which embodies values, attitudes, and ways of feeling alternative to those which characterize what Steinbeck felt was the sterile, even destructive life-style of modern America" (9). This destructive life-style, which for Astro "has created a society which alienates and disinherits and to a great extent has rendered people incapable of dealing with the complex world around them," is frequently mentioned in Steinbeck's later works such as *Travels with Charley in Search of America*, *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, *America and Americans*, and *Sweet Thursday* (10). In *The Grapes of Wrath*, several characters fit that description of alienation, as is the case of the couple driving an expensive car that stops at the diner on highway 66 on their way to California. The waitress calls these characters "shitheels" (162). Astro affirms also that even though some of the characters in Steinbeck's fiction

strive to attain harmony in an Arcadian garden, their dreams are threatened and too often destroyed by their own fallibility as mortals (too often, they bring ‘their baggage’ with them to the garden) or by the inevitable incursion of time and history. In nearly all of his fiction, Steinbeck asserts the inherent superiority of the simple human virtues, of pastoral economy, to the accumulation of wealth and power, of life-asserting to life-denying. But almost without exception, his tribute to the pastoral design is decidedly *ironic*. (10, my italics)

I emphasize the “irony” in Astro’s statement because it indicates that, in Steinbeck’s work, even though the motivation of the characters of returning to nature may be pure, they are nonetheless bound up with what Astro calls the “baggage” of a society that takes for granted the environment and what it has to offer. Leo Marx, in *Machine in the Garden*, also mentions irony as a literary device to question the idea of happiness in the pastoral setting: “these works manage to qualify, or call into question, or bring *irony* to bear against the illusion of peace and harmony in a green pasture” (25, my italics).

This irony used to show the fragility of the pastoral dream of harmony with the landscape is found in the discrepancies of the migrants’ behavior towards nature, how they embrace the pastoral ideal but at the same time cannot escape their cultural backgrounds based on the “Judeo-Christian ethic in which everything in nature exists solely to serve man” (Astro 8). The tenants have a lust for land, they respect the land—in their way—they are the epitome of the pastoral idealism, for they can only envision happiness if close to nature. When they leave their home in Oklahoma for California, they do not give up their ideal of closeness with the land, their ultimate dream is to buy some land in that state as soon as possible, as Ma’s and Pa’s lines show respectively:

‘An’ fruit in ever’place, an’ people just bein’ in the nicest places, little white houses in among the orange trees. I wonder—that is, if we all get jobs an’ all work—maybe we can get one of them little white houses. An’ the little fellas go out an’ pick oranges right off the tree;’

‘We’ll get out west an’ we’ll get work an’ we’ll get a piece a growin’ land with water.’ (95, 196)

Their reliance on the pastoral ideal is strong, and they hope to re-create the feeling of proximity to the land in California. Granma and Grampa are in this sense too old and

too dependent on the closeness to the land, so much that they cannot stand the fact of being forced out. Instead of transferring their hopes to California they only suffer with the departure. Noah, on his turn, feels the same need as Granma and Grampa but can stand the sorrow of being forced out. He goes off on his own to live in complete and true harmony with nature. Some of the younger characters such as Al, Rose of Sharon, and Connie, on the other hand, are detached from the pastoral dream. They have a desire to live in the city. Al wants to work as a mechanic in an auto repair shop, and eat lunch at diners everyday. He does not share the pastoral ideal of harmony with nature, which could be the basis for why he purposely tries to kill the animals on the road. Rose of Sharon and Connie do not share Ma and Pa' dream of living in the country as well, they desire to live in the city, with all the comforts, like electricity, hospitals, and the possibility of going to movie theatres whenever they feel like it:

‘Well, we talked about it, me an’ Connie. Ma, we wanna live in a town.’ She went on excitedly. ‘Connie gonna get a job in a store or maybe a fact’ry. An’ he’s gonna study at home, maybe radio, so he can git to be a expert an’ maybe later have his own store. An’ we’ll go to pitchers whenever. An’ Connie says I’m gonna have a *doctor* when the baby’s born; an’ he says we’ll see how times is, an’ maybe I’ll go to a hospiddle. An’ we’ll have a car, little car. An’ after he studies at night why—it’ll be nice, an’ he tore a page outa *Western Love Stories*, an’ he’s gonna send off for a course, ‘cause it don’t cost nothin’ to send off. Says right on that clipping. I seen it. An’, why—they even get you a job when you take that course—radios, it is—nice clean work, and a future. An’ we’ll live in town an’ go to pitchers whenever, an’—well, I’m gonna have a ‘letric iron, an’ the baby’ll have all new stuff. Connie says all new stuff—white an’—Well, you seen in the catalogue all the stuff they got for a baby.’ (171-2, original emphasis)

Within the family, it seems that only the older members still share the pastoral ideal of closeness and harmony with the land.

In the context of the pastoral ideals presented in the novel, their idea of harmony is ironic. The migrants preach about this closeness to the earth, but their actions contradict their ideals. The tenants speak of a closeness to the land, of the visceral feeling of a necessity of that proximity, as seen in Muley Graves’s words:



“Place where folks live is them folks. They ain’t whole, out lonely on the road in a piled-up car. They ain’t alive no more” (54). The feeling that it was the land that kept people alive and happy is well expressed through Ma’s famous speech:

They was the time when we was on the lan’. They was a boundary to us then. Ol’ folks died off, an’ little fellas come, an’ we was always one thing—we was the fambly—kinda whole and clear. An’ now we ain’t clear no more. I can’t get straight. They ain’t nothin’ keeps us clear. Al—he’s a-hankerin’ an’ a-jibbitin’ to go off on his own. An’ Uncle John is jus’ a-draggin’ along. Pa’s lost his place. He ain’t the head no more. We’re crackin’ up, Tom. There ain’t no fambly now. An’ Rosasharn—’. (411)

The pastoral ideal is present in their discourse throughout the novel, but at the same time that they show this instinctive and powerful need for closeness with nature, they show attitudes of complete disregard for it. Leo Marx argues that in the ideal pastoral scene, there is a harmony between man and nature, a partnership based mainly on reciprocity, and though the tenants seek that harmony, they do not practice it in their daily lives (22-3). Disregarding the characters of Al, Rose of Sharon, and Connie that, as we have seen, do not assume the pastoral ideals of their ancestors, the other characters that do preach in favor of closeness to nature have attitudes that betray their principles. I do not intend to say that the characters intentionally violate nature, as Al does for example, but that they regard it as something that exists to be used and exploited, not really respected.

For generations, the tenants and sharecroppers of Oklahoma have plowed the earth without preserving it. Even when they realized the harm that was being done by the constant plowing and growing of damaging cultures such as cotton, they continued with their practices. Muley’s lines, for example, show that he was well aware of the damage being made by the constant plowing on the land [“[n]ever should a broke her up. An’ now she’s cottoned damn near to death”] (50). He is one of the characters that feel the attachment to land in the most expressive way. In a similar way as that of

Grampa and Granma, Muley refuses to transfer his dream of closeness to the land to somewhere else, to California as Ma and Pa do, and rebels against the system that is trying to force him out of his place.

I tell ya, men, I'm stayin'. They ain't gettin' rid a me. If they throw me off, I'll come back, an' if they figger I'll be quiet underground, why, I'll take couple-three of the sons-of-bitches along for company. [. . .] I ain't a-goin'. My pa come here fifty years ago. An' I ain't a-goin'. (49)

His attachment to the land is almost literal. But despite all of his love for the land, he was still responsible, as his own words indicate, for the near death of the soil under his care. His dedication to the land does not exempt him from the responsibility of damaging the soil, perpetuated in the belief that it was his right to do so. The idea of the ground belonging to him is expressed by the fact that he mentions that his father had owned the place before him and, therefore, it is his birthright to make use of that land.

This notion of the right to own property derives from the historical fact that the first tenants and sharecroppers originally took the land of Oklahoma from the Native Americans. The migrants tell tales about how they expelled the Indians from the land, how that made the land theirs, corroborating the feeling of property toward the earth. In a way, their sense of possession of the land is similar to that of the banks, companies, and great owners, for they too feel that, as it belongs to them, they can make use of it in the manner they see fit, disregarding the consequences for the land in the future.

In Chapter 23, a storyteller recounts the tale of an Indian that was shot by soldiers:

I ain't never been so sad in my life. An' I laid my sights on his belly, 'cause you can't stop a Injun no other place—an'—then. Well, he jest plunked down an' rolled. An' we went up. An' he wasn' big—he'd looked so grand—up there. All tore to pieces an' little. Ever see a cock pheasant, stiff and beautiful, ever' feather drawn an' painted, an' even his eyes drawn in pretty? An' bang! You pick him up—bloody an' twisted, an' you spoiled somepin better'n you; an' eatin' him don't never make it up to you, 'cause you spoiled somepin in yaself, an' you can't never fix it up. (341)

The killing of the Indian by the soldiers is symbolical of the killing of the harmony with the environment. The Native Americans represent here the true harmony with the land, for their relationship with nature was, in fact, one of non-exploitation and reciprocity. They lived for centuries in an equilibrium with their environment, and the families that took their places afterwards managed to destroy the soil in just a few generations. The Indian in the story accepts his fate, he just stands on a ridge, naked, against the sun, with his arms spread out, waiting for his death, while the soldiers are hesitant in face of his sublime beauty. The fact that they were committing murder with the purpose of conquering the West, the very lands the tenants would inherit, is also a representation of the violence used to achieve their goals. The comparison the storyteller makes between killing the Indian and killing a beautiful animal indicates the familiarity of the listeners with that situation as well.

The act of being aggressive to nature is also seen in Timothy Wallace's behavior, the man from Weedpatch that offers Tom a job with him and his son in Mr. Thomas' farm:

Timothy leaned down and picked up a green walnut. He tested it with his thumb and then shied it at a blackbird sitting on a fence wire. The bird flew up, let the nut sail under it, and then settled back on the wire and smoothed its shining black feathers with its beak. (306)

Again the scene shows the familiarity with the situation of a violent behavior towards an animal. It almost seems like an automatic conduct on Timothy's part. The sense of nature as being something that can be disposed of, despite the attachment and love they feel for the land, is seen frequently in the tenants' behavior.

Tom, for example, despite his respectful attitude towards the animals on the road, picks up a land turtle on his way home to give it as a present for the kids. This action takes place on chapter 4, right after the description of the effort made by a land turtle to cross the road, on the previous chapter. It is symbolic of the relationship

between tenants and nature, how, right after describing the case of a turtle surviving two cars on the highway, it is still helpless against a barefoot man who is supposed to have a deep connection with the land, as the tenants are presumed to have. Tom only sets the turtle loose when he feels discouraged to carry it with him for too long, not out of sympathy for the animal.

Another example of this type of attitude is again found within the Joad family. While their dog is being hit by a car, Ruthie and Winfield are playing in the corn field by the gas station and return with a handful of reptile eggs that she has found out in the field. When they realize what has happened to the dog, Ruthie loses curiosity in the eggs, and simply throws them away, effectively destroying them. Two contradictory actions and emotions are present in her conduct: first, she is shocked and feels sympathetic towards the dog, his death touches her; at the same time, she has no remorse in destroying a nest and killing the reptile eggs. This contradictory conduct on her part is a perfect example of the irony conveyed by the novel regarding the pastoral ideal of the tenants. The killing of a peacock pheasant, the throwing of a walnut on the blackbird, the destruction of the reptile's nest, the use of a turtle as a gift are all examples of the type of disregard for nature found in the tenants' behavior.

The irony in the novel lies in the fact that had the tenants remained in their homes in Oklahoma they would have continued to abuse the earth, as they had been doing for years before the dust storms. The pastoral ideal preached by the tenants in the novel, of how they are attached to the land, how the happiness is in the closeness with that land, is flawed, for, despite all their love and respect, they regard the earth as something to be used and exploited, without serious concern for preservation. The harmony and reciprocity is missing from the relationship between tenants and the earth, despite what they feel and say in the novel. Their relationship to nature is selfish, build

on the principle of one-sidedness, of favoring one part over the other. Thus, the idea perpetuated throughout the novel of blissful happiness back home in Oklahoma, where they are close to the same land their ancestors were—and the dream that if they could only get a little piece of land in California they would be just as happy—is ultimately a fraud. Therein lies the irony, in the fact that the pastoral dream preached throughout the novel by the migrants, of a harmony with the land—though appealing—does not exist. Through this irony the novel questions the migrants’ notion of harmony, it defies the behavior of taking it all from the land but not giving anything back; it questions the lack of reciprocity. The irony is in the fact that although the tractors and technology do corrupt the pastoral ideal, that ideal was already tainted by the long-running practices towards nature of the tenants.<sup>44</sup>



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<sup>44</sup> Image 18: “Plowing field of wheat on Mr. Story’s farm northeast Kearney, Buffalo County, Nebraska.”

## CONCLUSION

My discussion of technology and nature in *The Grapes of Wrath* suggests that the novel presents a critique of both technological *and* human interactions with the environment. The novel denounces technology and the “alibi of progress”—by ascribing uncanny characteristics to them—but it also criticizes severely people’s responsibilities in their attitudes towards nature and their consequences—by putting into question the ideal of harmony with the land perpetuated by the migrants’ speech (Ávila, forthcoming).

The more evident criticism is made through the description of indiscriminate use of technology. The critique of technology is conveyed in the novel through the way the tractors perpetrate technological rape, in the way the men of science try to alter products’ natural properties, and in the recurrent image of the road killings. As shown in the previous chapters, by ascribing uncanny qualities to technology, the novel gives emphasis to this critique; by portraying technology as something frightful, possessed of a monstrous quality, that violently disturbs what was once a familiar setting, the practice of technology is called into question. In other words, the uncanny quality of technology in the novel is an explicit reminder to the reader of the evil motivations behind its use. By defining it as uncanny, the novel literally turns technology into a monster.

Ultimately, the uncanny monster functions as an allegory of the misuse of technology in the novel, and of how it can become monstrous if it is not used properly. It is not technology per se that is criticized, but how and why it is utilized in American society, as shown, for example, in the following passage, taken out of interchapter 14:

[i]s a tractor bad? Is the power that turns the long furrows wrong? If this tractor were ours it would be good—not mine, but ours. If our tractor turned the long furrows of our land, it would be good. Not my land, but ours. We could love that tractor then as we have loved this land when it was ours. But this tractor does two things—it turns the land and turns us off the land. There is little difference between this tractor and a tank. The people are driven, intimidated, hurt by both. (157)

The passage points to the fact that if technology were used for the benefit of the tenants it would not be considered uncanny, and would not be made monstrous. As the passage shows, the allegory of the monster tractor criticizes the machine used as a tool for profit by banks, corporations, and big owners. In this case the monster manages to get a hold of the man who is driving it, it controls him, getting into “the driver’s hands, into his brain and muscle, [. . .] goggl[ing] him and muzzl[ing] him” (37) . If, on the other hand, the tractor were being used by a tenant, not only it would not be considered a monster, but it would be in total control of its driver. Why is technology seen as uncanny throughout most of the novel then? Mostly, because technology, when ‘monsterized,’ represents the capitalist drive stripped of any signs of compassion; it represents the cutthroat corporate mentality exacerbated after the 1929 crisis. The idea that technology can be responsible for the ruining of the land, and of so many lives with it, hidden behind an “alibi of progress” of banks, corporations, and big owners who must earn their profit at whatever cost, is one of the main criticisms in the characterization of technology and nature in the novel (Ávila forthcoming).

According to the passage as well, technological rape only exists when it is performed by the monster tractor, for only then the plowing is described as violent. Neither the possibility of the tenants using the tractor to plow the land, nor the turning of the land with the hand-plow is described as something uncanny—worthy of any monster-like imagery—or characterized as a violent practice, despite the fact that it also inflicts damage in the same way. The novel thus creates a double standard; the plowing

made by uncanny monster tractors is condemnable whereas plowing made by the tenants, with or without tractors, is not. This double standard apparently exempts the tenants of responsibility for their actions against the environment, for they are supposedly the *victims* of the ruthless advancing of mechanized farming propelled by banks and corporations—the condemnable kind of plowing. This exemption is however only superficial, for the novel does condemn the tenants' actions towards nature, though it does so in a different manner. The difference between the critique made against the technological and human abuse of the earth lies in the level of explicitness in which they appear in the novel.

The denunciation made against technology and progress in the novel is quite explicit, but beneath the superficial level, the novel implicitly denounces the tenants as well, by pointing out their contradictory attitudes towards nature throughout the story. The tenants preach in favor of a harmony with the land, they search throughout the novel for the retrieval of their pastoral ideal of a close relationship with the environment, of a happiness that can only be achieved when in contact with nature. That very happiness is idealized to the point of self-deception, for in their search for the lost pastoral dream they seem to fail to remember that even when they were close to *their* land, working and living in it, their lives were not at all easy or harmonious, and nature was not complacent with them. Despite all their talk of harmony and closeness, throughout the novel several of their actions betray that ideal. The tenants are indeed guilty of the same sins as the tractors: relentlessly plowing the earth till it is broken and barren. In addition, through several small actions performed by the characters throughout the novel, we witness a kind of inherent unconscious disregard towards natural life, such as seen when Ruthie destroys a reptile's nest and then throws the eggs



away, a simple act that shows how the idea of respect and reciprocity is lacking in their behavior.<sup>45</sup>



Warren French claims that the journey of the Joads is a tale about their education, about how they begin as a self-centered family and end as a conscious part of the “one big soul,” a change that is symbolized by Rose of Sharon’s final gesture in the novel (*Education* 101). For French, her act is a sign that “marks the end of the story Steinbeck had to tell about the Joads. Their education is complete” (107). Lorelai Cederstrom has a similar view when she states that the shift of roles within the family is a return to a primitive matriarchal consciousness of equilibrium with the earth. However despite the fact that the Joads do change through the course of the story in the matter of their relationship to other human beings and embrace the “vast human family,” in regards to their relationship to nature, their education is not at all complete and they seem very distant from an equilibrium (French *Education* 101). In their relationship to

<sup>45</sup> Image 19: “Mr. W.H. Holmes, a renter on the Wray place, plowing sweet potatoes, Greene County, Georgia.”

Image 20: “Farm scenes. Three horses with hand plow and man I.”

nature, they remain the selfish family they were in the beginning of the journey. By the end of the novel, just when the Joads were supposed to be almost fully educated, according to French's theory, they go cotton picking. Throughout the novel we see evidence of the knowledge of the tenants to the fact that cotton is a culture that virtually ruins the land, as the following lines show: "An' now she's *cottoned* damn near to death;" "*Spoil* the lan' pretty soon. Like a fella wants to buy some *cotton* lan'—Don' buy her, rent her. Then when she's cottoned on down, move someplace new." (50, 426, my italics). Nevertheless, when Pa finds out that a farm needs cotton pickers, he says: "By God, I'd like to get my hands on some cotton! There's work, I un'erstan'" (423).<sup>46</sup>



The reaction of the Joads indicates that they have not embraced the lesson of the "one big soul" in their relationship to nature; they did however embrace the idea of the "vast *human* family" (101, my italics). In this situation, the entire family is focused solely on how much money they are going to earn in cotton picking, and what could they buy with that money, which resembles the counterpart of the capitalist enterpriser, that is, the consumer. If one is condemned, as indeed the enterpriser is throughout the

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<sup>46</sup> Image 21: "Sign on US 99."

novel, so is the other, as they are the two sides of the same coin. Of course it is naïve to imply that had the Joads acquired a better understanding of the concept of reciprocity and respect in their ideal of harmony with the land they would have turned the job down. In their situation they did not have much of a choice. Pa's response however betrays him: he is not just happy with finally finding work, but is excited precisely with the idea of going cotton picking. They are just as happy to return to their old habits, as they are excited about the idea of making money.

After a few days of work, as soon as they begin to gain some money with the picking, and of having eaten meat every day for the first time since they left Oklahoma, they get caught in a shopping spree: they go into town and buy a tin stove, new overalls for Al, Pa, Winfield, and Uncle John, and a dress for Ma. They soon acquire a taste for consumerism. Uncle John confesses this feeling to Pa:

'Funny thing. I wanta buy stuff. Stuff I don't need. Like to git one a them safety razors. Thought I'd like to have some a them gloves over there. Awful cheap.'

'Can't pick no cotton with gloves,' said Pa.

'I know that. An' I don't need no safety razor, neither. Stuff settin' out there, you jus' feel like buyin' it whether you need it or not.' (430)

Uncle John's feeling of pleasure for buying unnecessary things is actually another evidence of the criticism to the tenants made in the novel. In their own scales, the Joads' pleasure with having money and buying things is not that far off from the man that drives the tractor in order to support his family, or the men that work for the banks and corporations, or the rich people that drive along the highways in their fast expensive cars, or, finally, the big owner men who never see their own properties. In one way or another, they are all driven by a self-protective capitalist instinct that can, in some ways more than others, become exacerbated.

Nonetheless, it is not necessarily the idea of taking profit from the land that is criticized in the novel—though this criticism does play an important role—but mainly

the supposition that in order to do so a technique of abuse must be employed. This technique implies the destruction of the original fragile ecosystem and its replacement with whatever product is valued at the moment, be it wheat, corn, and cotton in the case of the Great Plains, or fruits and vegetables in California. The preservation of the fertility of that soil is not considered, and neither are the consequences to its destruction, the only factor measured is the means or devices to be used to make more profit out of the land. The management of the land by all characters in the novel—be it banks, companies, great owners, or tenants—is closer to an extractive technique, such as mining, than to agriculture. The concept of agriculture is tied to that of growing and nurturing life, whereas the violence and destruction caused by the technologies described in the novel are mostly associated with extracting, damaging, and modifying of the land, until it is left barren—which is precisely what is expected of an extractive activity. The desolation that resulted from those techniques is visible in the photographs of the period, that show the desert-like scenarios, the abandoned houses, the dead animals, and, eventually, the fleeing tenants, expelled from their own—now sterile—land, as the author comments on the article about the 1930s for *Esquire*: “*Fotografias tiradas na época mostram nossas regiões mais ricas parecendo paisagens lunares, desoladas e assustadoras*” (*América* 45).<sup>47</sup>




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<sup>47</sup> Image 22: “Severely Blown Field. Boise City, Oklahoma.”  
Image 23: Sand Dunes in orchard. Oklahoma.”

In this sense, *The Grapes of Wrath* echoes Lorentz's 1936 film *The Plow that Broke the Plains* in its denouncement of not only the abuse of the earth by exaggerated use of machinery to increase profits, but mostly in the display of the responsibility of people involved in the practice of damaging the ecosystem. The damage to the environment occurs due to the misuse of the land, something that had been occurring for many years before the advent of the tractors in the fields. Evidently, the two works differ in the way they explore this issue, the latter, for instance, is much more explicit in its critique of human responsibility in the abuse of the land with the intent of making a profit. The lines of the prologue of the film already mark the tone of the documentary: "By 1880 we had cleared the Indian, and with him, the buffalo, from the Great Plains [. . .] This is a picturization of what *we* did with it" (my italics). The confessional tone present in the first person is evident throughout the film, as the documentary shows how the tenants worked the land irresponsibly since then. The scenes evidence the responsibility of the people in the destruction of the land: as the plowman turns the earth, the voice over narration says "high winds and sun, high winds and sun [. . .] settler, plow at your peril;" eventually the plowman is shown turning nothing but sand.

When the First World War is declared, the tractor comes to the Great Plains, with the image of its shining disks turning the land instead of the hand plow, to help extract as much wheat as possible to supply the troops abroad, as the voice over narrator explains. In Lorentz's documentary, the tenants are shown to be directly responsible for the destruction of the fragile ecosystem of the Great Plains, and, consequently, for their own eviction from the land. The emphasis on the violence inflicted on the earth is accomplished with a juxtaposition of images of tractors and tanks. The comparison between the tractors and war tanks made in the documentary is powerfully unsettling,

and is the equivalent of what Steinbeck would do three years later with the literary transformation of tractors into monsters.

Charles Cunningham, in the article “Rethinking the Politics of *The Grapes of Wrath*,” has another view on the critique made by the documentary. Cunningham argues that this version fits into his definition of “the ‘dust’ explanation”:

According to this narrative, the soil literally blew away during the great drought of the mid-thirties because the plains should never have been cultivated in the first place. The resulting dust storms of topsoil left some areas buried and others denuded, generally rendering farming impossible and causing the agrarian inhabitants to have to migrate. (5)

According to Cunningham, this story was convenient to the media because it had no implication of “power relations” (5-6). In the film, Cunningham states, technology and drive for profits are appointed as part of the cause, but they remain “disembodied; technology is without human agents, as is the profit drive” (7). This leaves the impression that the migrants are in fact simply “victims of humanity in general”, and most of all “helpless victims of natural forces,” completely leaving out the class interests (7). The documentary does present a one-way view of the problem, focusing solely on the self-inflicted environmental disaster that led to the Okie migration westward, as Cunningham points out, and leaving out other social, political, and economic factors. But the documentary establishes at the same time a kind of environmental awareness that was many decades ahead of its time.

*The Grapes of Wrath* in its turn shows a more thorough—but not complete—presentation of the history that led to the environmental and human disaster of the Okie migration. The novel tackles the economic issue of profit and class struggle much more overtly, placing responsibility for the migrants’ situation not just on the migrants’ themselves but on the capitalist impulses of banks, corporations, and great owners. While the documentary shows the story of the land and the dust storms, rather

than its people,<sup>48</sup> the novel focuses much more on the story of the migrants as a whole, not only showing the dust storms, their causes and effects, but also their journey west and their struggle for work in California. One example of the distinction between the two on the issue is that the documentary places the tenants as responsible for the misuse of the land, including the advent of machinery to generate more profit, whereas the novel does not make that connection. In the novel, the use of tractors is totally detached from the tenants—in fact, it is portrayed as a means to expel them.

As for the matter of the destruction of the land, the novel manages to implicate side-by-side tenants, corporations, banks, and owners. All of them share a responsibility in the ruining of the soil, in the desertification of the land, and in the subsequent dust storms. The tractors commanded by the banks in the East are simply continuing the damage already inflicted by the tenants on the land, and the passage cited in the beginning of this chapter clearly shows that had the tenants managed to remain on their farms they would have continued to employ the same abusive techniques of farming. One of the great achievements of the novel on the subject is the denunciation of the abuse of the environment by people in general, not just banks and corporations. In *The Grapes of Wrath* not only monster tractors damage the earth, but also—and perhaps most importantly—the ‘heroes’ of the novel as well.

Today the public concern with the environment is stronger than ever, and the issue is being brought to light in a worldwide scale, with campaigns seen in all continents to raise consciousness and awareness to people. It is an effort to try to get individuals to understand that nobody is an innocent bystander when it comes to the preservation of the environment. Daily campaigns show that everyone should do their part to help recycling, to stop pollution, to clean water resources, to stop global

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<sup>48</sup> As the first lines of the voice over narration clearly says: “This is a record of land, of soil, rather than people—a story of the Great Plains [. . .].”

warming, etc. Of course the bigger polluters, such as factories, are also widely attacked, along with governments who refuse to take action on the issue, but these are the faceless enemies that Cunningham talks about. The big corporations are led by the capitalist drive for profit of their shareholders, and governments are led by the interests of lobbyists and campaign sponsors. Nowadays, *they* would be the ones with uncanny characteristics attributed to them.

However, the awareness to the fact that the individual is responsible for the environment is steadily growing. People are beginning to realize that the amount of waste every person produces also causes an impact, and the type of car, or even the type of gas they use, does make a difference. Steinbeck knew this to be true, and he also knew that for humans to have compassion towards each other they must first show compassion to other forms of life, such as the animals on the road for example. Steinbeck approached the issue of ecology in *The Grapes of Wrath* through the several forms discussed in this thesis, some of them more explicit than others.

Later in his life, the author began to approach the issue of individual responsibility towards the environment much more openly, as seen in his later works such as *Travels with Charley in Search of America*, *Sweet Thursday*, *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, and *America and Americans*. Perhaps that is why, when comparing it to his other novels, so many critics do not consider *The Grapes of Wrath* to be an ecologically oriented work, such as Joel Hedgpeth, that claimed the novel “was in no sense an environmental story,” for example, and advocated that Steinbeck was a late-blooming environmentalist (296). Such critics fail to see the implicit condemnation of the tenants’ attitude towards nature in the novel and the rather explicit denunciation of the irresponsible use of machinery in agriculture, conveyed by the technological rape committed by the tractors on the land.



I see the novel as a particularly powerful environmental piece of literature; one that, precisely because of that ecological feature, has a very contemporary feel to today's reader. We are in the midst of a worldwide discussion about climate changes and the extent of people's responsibility in those changes, and *The Grapes of Wrath* tackles this issue with verve and passion. While on the one hand a lot of the problems presented in the novel are now dated, the concern with nature is something that most people in the twenty-first century can relate to. In fact, it is only due to the problems caused by global warming that the twenty-first century saw the rise of the discussion of the consciousness of individual responsibility towards nature in recent years, whereas, as early as the 1930s, the topic was already on the agenda of artists like Parentz and Steinbeck.

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