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**THE ROLE OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN THE NOVEL “THE
GRAPES OF WRATH” BY JOHN STEINBECK**

Annotation: In the article the role of female characters in the novel “The Grapes of Wrath” is analyzed. John Steinbeck’s peculiar literary style is investigated in the paper.

Key words: character, novel, social structure, writer, familial system, gender.

Steinbeck’s “The Grapes of Wrath” naturally mirrors the social structure and culture of its time. In 1939 the roles of women across the nation were evolving as feminism grew in popularity. In the following article the role of female characters in the novel is going to be discussed. In the preexisting societal roles, Ma is very limited in how and when she can assume the role of leader. She only exhibits strong leadership qualities when she is dealing with inherent feminine issues (i.e. the family, children, and nurturing). While assertions made by Ma may give the illusion that women in the novel are rising to more prominent and respected positions, it is the content of Ma’s assertions that shows that women only appear to become more powerful when they are in fact preserving their own oppression. In the traditionally structured family of

Steinbeck's time, the women maintain the role of nurturer and homemaker while the men are the strength and providers. At the beginning of the novel these roles are not challenged or questioned.

However, as the novel progresses, Ma in particular becomes more vocal about her decisions and the way she wants things to be done. In chapter 16 the Joad family truck breaks down. Tom suggests that he, Al and Casy stay behind to fix it while the rest of the family moves ahead toward California. It is at this suggestion of fracturing the family that mother's first outburst occurs. Her voice becomes commanding, and her stature threatening as she wields a jack handle and refuses to break up the family. During the dustbowl, it was the women's role to maintain and protect the family while the men looked for work. So when Ma violently asserted her intention to keep the family together, she was simply fulfilling her role as the archetypal matron character. Throughout the novel Ma maintains her traditional role in nontraditional ways. She becomes violent with police that threaten her family, and she conceals Granma's death to ensure safe passage through the dessert. In each of these scenarios Ma takes a commanding role, but when the content is examined it becomes clear that Ma's newfound power is only an illusion, and in fact she still existing in her traditional female role but simply in a more vocal and obvious way.

In "The Grapes of Wrath" John Steinbeck introduces a familial system which initially relies on patriarchy. As the plot develops, however, such form of control disintegrates, as Pa fails to fulfill his responsibilities as a patriarch to provide for the Joads. It is the female characters, who, amidst adversities, begin to take a more significant and active role. Ma advances as the backbone of the family, trying to keep the family together; similarly, Rose of Sharon develops into a paragon of life's continuity as she chooses to act beyond personal welfare and feeds a starving man with her life-filled milk. Ultimately, the switch in gender roles presents different forms of leaderships that men and women display within the society; while men are responsible for providing the family

materialistically, women strives to provide spiritual unity and stability. Earlier on in the novel, the female characters appear much reserved than the male characters. The lyrical vignettes in the first few chapters reveal the Oklahoman farmers of the Dust Bowl era. The bleak landscape marked by droughts and hardship provides a circumstance that drives the migration of Oklahoman farmers. In contrast to the “dust-filled” setting characterized by uncertainty, the men appear extremely calm and authoritative; they are “silent and [do] not move often”, and are described as “hard and resistant”. On the other hand, the women, taking a more passive role, secretly “studies the men’s faces” to make sure things are alright. They wait for their husbands to make decisions, and believe that “no misfortune [is] too great to bear if their men [are] whole”, illustrating their dependency towards men. At this point, the men are the primary decision makers of the house as they are the ones who “sit still –thinking– figuring”, trying to decide for the future of the family amidst the inclement weather and starvation. By introducing the Joads after the description of the general setting, Steinbeck suggests that the Joads family parallels with the society at large, including the distinct gender roles established by the characters. Just as in the first chapter, the female characters of the Joads family appear reserved and dependent at first. Upon the decision to migrate westward, Ma conveys a sense of uncertainty and apprehension. “I’m scared of stuff so nice, she admits, as she claims that she has no faith in the journey the Joads are about to embark. Rose of Sharon, another female character, is also undeveloped at this point. Constantly reminding herself that she is pregnant, she complain[s] about things that [don’t] really matter”. Her selfish view of the surroundings seems unchangeable, as she is preoccupied with the baby’s health and is reluctant to help her family pack for the journey. She shows dependency on Connie, who she believes would bring her out of poverty and hardship. It is evident that Rose of Sharon, like most women of the era, considers her man as the materialistic provider of the family at this point.

Thus, despite the breakup of the Joad's family, the novel ends with some sort of a rekindled hope, underscoring the importance of cooperation and unity amongst people. The change of gender roles in "The Grapes of Wrath" conveys Steinbeck's important messages to readers. The advancement of female characters highlights the latent yet important role of women within the family, who strive to keep the family intact and emotionally stable. Moreover, such a transformation reveals the duality of mankind; that leaders can be followers, and followers can be leaders, depending on the area of responsibility and obligations.

The list of used literature:

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2. Outline of American Literature. (2002). Toronto: Toronto Editorial House,
3. http://www.gradesaver.com/classicnotes/titles/grapes_wrath/fullsumm.html