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John Steinbeck: The Real(ist) Gothic?

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Abstract

There is a wealth of existing scholarship that firmly locates John Steinbeck's fiction in the school of Realism. Yet, the tenets of the Gothic mode can be applied to several motifs encased in Steinbeck's significant Depression-era texts *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *The Pastures of Heaven*. Notably, Steinbeck employs the Gothic when demonstrating monstrosity in the increasingly modernised world, and the tension amongst marginalised groups. The national mythology of the American Dream is steadily eroding in the Thirties and transforming into a Gothic nightmare, which is telegraphed in these novels by depictions of death, violence, hopelessness, and curses. Modernity is encroaching on the American pastoral, which Steinbeck illustrates by Gothicising agricultural processes and representing machines in monstrous terms. Steinbeck's fiction evokes the suspense and hostility of the Southern Gothic tradition with his portrayal of alienated individuals and intolerant communities.

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Introduction

A study of John Steinbeck's oeuvre confirms that his fiction can be ascribed to the Realist mode. Susan Shillinglaw and Kevin Hearle also align him with modernism, characterising him as a "modernist outside the traditional boundaries of modernism, his prose shaped by myth" (2). While encompassing mythology and classical archetypes, Steinbeck's narrative style is modern and sparse. Biographer Jay Parini posits that the "great Depression-era novels of Steinbeck reflect the debt to Hemingway, whose mastery of style and elliptical approach to narrative were crucial to his 'new method'" (114), adding that "Steinbeck evokes the landscape in language both poetic – in the best sense of that word – and frugal" (164).

Literary Realism is described by Mary Francis Slattery as "reference that gives an illusion of exact correspondence with reality in its limited aspects" (55), while Phillip Barrish elaborates that "Realist writers sought to understand and explain their changing society, as well as to resist it, celebrate it, influence it, and profit from it – but above all to depict it with what Henry James called 'the air of reality'" (3). Novels like *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and *East of Eden* (1952) retell recognisable myths in earnest, but are imbued with that which Scott Pugh terms a "sense of 'naturalness' that corresponds to the version of reality promoted by accepted myths and masterplots" (74).

Considering Steinbeck's reception as a Realist, it is perhaps understandable that critics have been hesitant to explore the Gothic in his work. An overview of Steinbeck scholarship reveals a scarcity of existing interventions that apply a Gothic lens to his fiction. Karen Roggenkamp insightfully locates the Gothic in Steinbeck's short story cycle *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932), and Mollie Godfrey and Renata Lucena Dalmaso articulate the monstrous

depictions of industrialised farming and the grotesque degradation of Dust Bowl migrants in *The Grapes of Wrath*. William Brevda discusses the haunting impact of Tom Joad in the essay “Specters of Joad,” and Robert Morsberger, Katherine Morsberger and Kathleen Hicks similarly characterise Steinbeck’s texts in “‘Steinbeck Country:’ Mythic Landscapes with Haunted Figures.” Yet, there is no explicit discussion of Steinbeck’s 1930s, Depression-era fiction and the Gothic mode. Though John Steinbeck is traditionally categorised as a Realist or Naturalist, literary styles that are diametrically opposed to Gothic fiction, this thesis will argue that there is scope to recognise Gothic elements within Steinbeck’s fiction. The tenets of Gothic fiction can be applied to several motifs or themes encased in Steinbeck’s plots, settings, and characters. While his writing inarguably aligns with the Realist mode, Steinbeck also employs the Gothic when demonstrating monstrosity in the modernised world, and the tension amongst marginalised groups. It is worth considering the effect his desolate settings, alienated groups, barren landscapes, and mercenary characters have in creating a Gothic environment. The lens of the Gothic has a powerful effect on the subject matter of the Depression-era texts this thesis will examine, amplifying Steinbeck’s key themes of man and nature in the increasingly modernised world, and the celebration of the collective.

The scope of this thesis is to carry out a close textual analysis of the Gothic motifs that accompany Steinbeck’s significant 1930s texts: *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *The Pastures of Heaven*. By applying the Gothic mode to these texts, the central themes are heightened. In *Grapes*, the Gothic can be located in the monstrosity of modernity and the greed of capitalism; in *Mice* the Gothic signifies the death of the American Dream and the importance of the fraternal bond; *Pastures* echoes the Gothic in the curses that destroy paradise on earth, highlighting human frailty and man’s increasing dissonance with the natural world in increasingly modern times. A Gothic reading of texts that are so grounded in

reality enhances the despair and the shock value that Steinbeck hoped to achieve, to spotlight the crisis in America.

With engaging plots and accessible characters, Steinbeck's work "wrestles with issues that resonate" (Shillinglaw and Hearle 4). These issues include the growth of capitalism, the demise of the American Dream, and the question of humility and how modernity is affecting the sanctity of the collective. Steinbeck, albeit a Realist, "often uses symbolic frameworks derived from archetypal sources" (Seelye 23). This is where fissures appear when comparing Realism to the Gothic, as the inclination of the latter is to revel in the imagination and entertain that which is unnervingly unreal. Traditional Gothic archetypes are monsters and heroes, both of which Steinbeck will complicate in his fiction by blurring the binaries of good and evil, dark and light, Heaven and Hell.

When presenting Steinbeck with the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1963, Anders Osterling announced that Steinbeck was recognised for his "realistic as well as imaginative writings, distinguished by a sympathetic humour and a keen social perception" (NobelPrize.org).

Osterling expanded on Steinbeck's deep compassion and empathy:

His sympathies always go out to the oppressed, to the misfits and the distressed; he likes to contrast the simple joy of life with the brutal and cynical craving for money. But in him we find the American temperament also in his great feeling for nature, for the tilled soil, the wasteland, the mountains, and the ocean coasts, all an inexhaustible source of inspiration to Steinbeck in the midst of, and beyond, the world of human beings. (NobelPrize.org)

When he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1964, President Johnson credited Steinbeck for helping “America to understand herself by finding universal themes in the experience of men and women everywhere” (Johnson 1065). Steinbeck’s novels continue to appear on curriculum reading lists, not simply because they are accessible but because there are significant lessons to be extracted from the pages. As Parini notes, his “didacticism would become an integral part of his profile as a man and a writer, and would infuse his best works with an edge of moral fervour that works brilliantly to create an aura one might call ‘Steinbeckian’” (35).

Kristine Yee postulates that Steinbeck “realised that the power of voice is a weapon each person carries” (255); Steinbeck chose to use his voice to publicise the oppression he witnessed. In 1952 he spoke to the radio network Voice of America about the ill-treatment of migrant workers, and how unprepared America was for the Depression:

People were starving and cold... they came in their thousands to California... They met a people who were terrified of Depression and were horrified at the idea that great numbers of indigent people were being poured on them to be taken care of... when there wasn't much money about. They reacted perfectly normally... they became angry at these newcomers. Gradually, through government agency and through the work of private citizens, agencies were set up to take care of these situations. Only then did the anger begin to decrease and when the anger decreased, these two sides got to know each other and they found they didn't dislike each other at all. (Voice of America)

This interview took place thirteen years after the release of *Grapes*, during which time Steinbeck had been able to reflect on the devastation he witnessed, lending a more sympathetic slant to the regions that became inundated with migrant families. The enduring power of *Grapes* lies in its empathy and the spotlight it shone on the social crisis during the Depression:

The plight and migration of the Joads... the loss of a family home, the trek in search of work, the awful conditions for migrant farm labor, the struggle to keep the family together, became a metaphor for the Depression as a whole. This portrayal aroused sympathy and indignation that transcended literature and became part of our social history, as if Steinbeck had been reporting on a real family, which in a sense he was. (Dickstein 112)

Dickstein locates incongruities within Steinbeck's fiction, identifying the sliding scale of representation for economic stability versus poverty, bohemian lifestyle versus conventional middle-class routines (116)—but expecting a writer to have one subjective theme throughout their career is limiting. Steinbeck biographer Jackson Benson shares that:

Steinbeck almost never followed our expectations for him. Like Mark Twain before him, Steinbeck wrote about what interested him... the critics were after Steinbeck during much of his career, shaking their heads, clucking their tongues, trying to convert him to a decent sense of artistic responsibility. But Steinbeck could not stand respectability; he always took off for new territory, sometimes tripping over his own feet, but always going his own way. (2)

One concept his novels consistently celebrate is the protection of communities and the freedom to let people live with dignity, in whichever way they choose to live. At no point does Steinbeck celebrate thoughtless conformity, and in works like *The Grapes of Wrath* or *Of Mice and Men* where work and owning land is something to strive for, the end goal still resonates with the ideal of self-sufficiency and protecting the fraternal bond. Life need not always be easy but it should be free from degradation and cruelty, and people should not feel powerless as they do in key works like *In Dubious Battle*, *Grapes*, and *Mice*. Steinbeck's fiction celebrates the group and instils the notion that humans need the support and protection of family, and friends of like-minded peers in order to survive, as evidenced by the paisanos in *Cannery Row* (1945) and *Tortilla Flat* (1935).

Steinbeck's Depression-era protest works find company amongst like-minded American artists who similarly used their medium to highlight the fall of the American Dream. Grant Wood's iconic painting *American Gothic* (1930) solemnly captures the profound struggle of rural life in the Thirties. The irony of *American Gothic* is the setting of the pastoral idyll juxtaposed by the grim countenance of the father and daughter, and the strained atmosphere of the scene. Professor Sarah Churchill explains that paintings like these were a commentary "on the state of the Jeffersonian agrarian idyll during the onset of the Great Depression, a moment when many American artists and critics were declaring, flatly, that the American experiment had failed" (Churchill). By experiment, Churchill is referring to the American Dream, which was first coined in 1931 by James Truslow Adams, who criticised the nation's preoccupation with material prosperity, arguing that the American Dream was a "dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with the opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement" (Adams 374).

American artist Edward Hopper famously produced eerily still photos, scenes of American highways, factories, and domestic tableaux that are unnervingly quiet and devoid of activity, a sense that Churchill terms “urban desolation” (Churchill). Hopper’s work captures the “disappointment and deflated hopes of ordinary Americans during the Depression. Hopper’s vision of urban realism is not one of shiny new skyscrapers of geometric modernist abstraction... but older, wearied, worn-out looking individuals and isolated buildings” (Churchill).

Art of the 1930s was taking on Gothic qualities, scenes of disquieting stillness and evocations of dreams and nightmares that were uncanny and surreal (Churchill). Art in its many forms was critiquing the loss of the American Dream in the Depression era and the tension of an increasingly commercial and commoditised cultural climate. Hopper filled his canvases with everyday scenes that were suffused with a sense of isolation and emptiness. Even in scenes where there were people, his characters emit an air of alienation. Steinbeck’s characters and settings can give off a similar effect. The hostility and lack of welcome that Okies were faced with both in and on the way to California mirrors the quiet loneliness that epitomises Hopper’s works.

The Depression was one of the most austere economic crises in the West. In 1933 US unemployment hit 25%, nearly half of the banks had failed, and “international trade declined during the period by half, while farmers were especially hard hit, as crop prices in America fell by as much as 60 per cent” (Churchill). During this period of financial hardship and social anxiety, “a sense emerged that art might be reparative, rather than consolatory, that it could take part in social protest, but also contribute to a democratic celebration of communities and bridge-building” (Churchill). Steinbeck’s art repeatedly celebrates the

power of the collective and of friendship, and highlights this against the backdrop of economic devastation.

The American Dream is being pursued in several of Steinbeck's novels. In *Grapes*, the Joads believe that they will be able to start a new life in California if they are prepared to work hard in the orchards. In *The Pastures of Heaven*, the residents of the valley believe that happiness lies in the attainment of their own plot of Eden. In *Mice* the farm hands are quick to join George and Lennie in their fantasies of owning their own modest piece of land. A place where they can simply earn a living and have something that is theirs. These are not grandiose dreams of excessive wealth and ownership, but humble desires for independence and self-respect. Chiefly, they want to be in control of their lives, free to make their own rules:

“S’pose they was a carnival or a circus come to town, or a ball game, or any damn thing.” Old Candy nodded in appreciation of the idea. “We’d just go to her,” George said. “We wouldn’t ask nobody if we could. Jus’ say, ‘We’ll go to her,’ an’ we would. Jus’ milk the cow and sling some grain to the chickens an’ go to her.” (61)

Steinbeck's Realist novels and protest literature have been studied extensively, and he is often cast as a sentimentalist or too accessible to be considered a literary heavyweight. Steinbeck firmly believed that literature should be not be “written by the few for the few... The goal of writer has always been to speak broadly, to a wide audience, on issues of deep concern” (Parini 8). Shillinglaw and Hearle defend that while Steinbeck's novels may be “readable and broadly appealing, his work is also highly complex and experimental” (2). Steinbeck's philosophy was to “try to understand man, if you understand each other you will be kind to each other” (Hearle and Shillinglaw 6). The tension in many of his novels,

particularly *The Grapes of Wrath*, stems from men not attempting to understand one another and rejecting the collective to serve the individual. Steinbeck had a great preoccupation with the phalanx and it was a thematic focus throughout his literary career. His “empathy knew no cultural boundaries” and working people were the “souls and guts of his fictional world” (Hearle and Shillinglaw 5). With the encouragement of his close friend, marine biologist Ed Ricketts, Steinbeck completed an early unpublished paper called the “Argument of Phalanx,” he writes,

We have tried to study men and movements of men by minute investigation of individual men-units. We might as reasonably try to understand the nature of a man by investigating the cells of his body. Perhaps if we observe the phalanx, knowing it is a new individual, not to be confused with the units which compose it, if we look back at the things it has done in an attempt to correlate and analyse its habits under various stimuli, we may in time come to know something of the phalanx. Of its nature, of its drive and its ends, we may even be able to direct its movements where now we have only great numbers of meaningless, unrelated and destructive phenomena. (Parini 134–135)

This theory would inform much of Steinbeck’s fiction; he viewed “all parts of nature as a united whole” and recognised that “the existence of any single part is intricately dependent on all other parts” (Parini 5). Notably, Steinbeck maintained an essential belief in the individual, which is why he never became a card carrying Communist as “Communism was deeply anti-individualist” (Parini 432). Steinbeck believed men and women were individuals, but they were also “part of a larger context, participating in the various forms of group behaviour which create the complex drama of history” (432).

Steinbeck was intent on reminding people that the collective was important, rather, imperative to our survival. His books reflect the power of community, and the devastation of self-interest. In *The Grapes of Wrath* the Joad family venture from Oklahoma concerned with their own affairs, their safety and security, and it is the lapsed Preacher Casy—combined with their experiences along the way—that help them realise that “their involvement in the larger group migration is essential to their survival and, ultimately, to the survival of the race” (Parini 137). The poignancy of *Grapes* is that it begins with every man looking out for himself, yet by the novel’s end the audience observes Rose of Sharon offering her breast milk to the starving stranger; as Parini neatly summarises, the “spiritual progress of the Joads moves from personal to collective consciousness as the sparks of human connection go off” (137). Steinbeck has masterfully crafted a novel in which the public and private domains interweave to produce a powerful meditation on the human condition: “If Tom learns political engagement, Rose of Sharon appreciates the value of human connection, humility, and generosity of spirit” (Hearle and Shillinglaw 6).

Steinbeck took an Emersonian approach to nature, which is why so many of his novels celebrate land that is protected from industrialisation: “Man is the broken giant,” wrote Emerson, “and in all his weakness both his body and his mind are invigorated by habits of conversation with nature” (Parini 7). Steinbeck’s smaller novels like *Tortilla Flat* (1935), *Cannery Row* (1945), and *Sweet Thursday* (1954) illuminate

small, misfit communities attempting to survive apart from the greater economic forces that surround them... While Steinbeck depicts rapidly encroaching threats of a modern world that are perhaps fated to overthrow such transient communal forms of life, he also presents simple communities and the renewal of life in the preservation of

natural settings. (Searway 176)

Steinbeck's critique of economic exploitation is comically delivered in the satirical *Tortilla Flat*, where the paisanos depict "a potential way to navigate the conflicting economic perspectives of a globalized world" (176); Danny is so overwhelmed at the prospect of owning two homes (both gifted to him), that he is relieved when his friends burn one of them down:

He had thought over the ruin of his status as a man with a house to rent; and, all this clutter of necessary and decent emotion having been satisfied and swept away, he finally slipped into his true emotion, one of relief that at least one of his burdens was removed. (Steinbeck 42)

Parini explains how Steinbeck was aware that "beneath the bright surface of middle-class respectability there is always a darkness to be found, and this darkness was to Steinbeck hypocritical and insufferable" (165); it is not surprising, therefore, that so much of Steinbeck's fiction complicates the myth of good and evil, light and darkness within people. The tension between such binaries lends itself to a Gothic reading, where heroes are not always good, and endings are not always happy. Novels like *The Pastures of Heaven*, *The Grapes of Wrath* and *To A God Unknown* (1933) demonstrate Steinbeck's "firm allegiance to ordinary people who are trying to make an honest living and raise their families" (Parini 168).

Steinbeck employs the land as a vital character in many of his works; land can either sustain a family, make a man prosperous, or it can destroy lives. In *Grapes* the land has a Gothic edge, for it is ostensibly ripe with opportunity and hope, but the reality for the Joads is an abject

barrenness. An almighty flood sweeps the land in *Grapes*, a biblical allegory that outwardly signals doom, though one could perceive a slant of new beginnings, as the novel ends before the flood does. In *Grapes* it is not the unpredictable work of nature that should be feared so much as the greedy and punitive actions of those few men in power. The Joads and other migrant workers deal with the flood as necessary, they're not shocked or disturbed by it, but over time they become distrusting and weary of the people of California, who pose a much greater threat to their livelihood than flood waters do.

The term Gothic has journeyed some distance to encapsulate the ubiquity it embodies today. Ancient writing records the Romans classifying anyone who was foreign, that is, non-Hellenic, as a barbarian, thus the “barbarians occupied all the lands beyond the borders of the empire” (Groom 1). It was not until the third century AD that the term “Goth” emerged in the literature; such people appeared as auxiliaries to the Roman army (2). Then, between the third and fifth centuries AD, the Goths were established as a Germanic tribe who settled much of Europe (Smith 2). Sean Silver explains in *The Gothic World* that during the century succeeding the 1660 Restoration of the Stuart dynasty, the common usage of “Gothic” was to summarise “a particular form of constitutional politics. It referred to a way of conceptualizing the present as the legacy of a mythologized past, a way, that is, of imagining history” (3). Silver contends that the English government would be “Gothic in origin, the Gothic influence on Anglo-Saxon political tradition accounting for England’s uniquely mixed mode of government” (5). In architectural terms, Gothic denotes a “revival (more accurately a cultural reconstruction) of a medieval aesthetic that was in vogue in Britain from the early eighteenth to the late nineteenth century” (Smith 2). It was this reimagining of “a somewhat fantasised version of the past (combined with a sense of ‘barbaric’ Germanic tribes)” that provides “a context for the emergence of Gothic as a literary mode” (2).

Gothic fiction came into popularity as an offshoot of the Romantic literature of the eighteenth century. Romantic literature, which celebrated “consciousness, freedom and imagination” (Botting *Gothic* 84) was formed as a reactionary movement following the Enlightenment, where “reason, science, commerce and bourgeois values [were] in the ascendancy and in the process of transforming patterns of knowledge (empiricism rather than religion)” (3). The British Romantics challenged the “virtues of rationality” (Smith 2), contending that the “complexity of human experience could not be explained by an inhuman rationalism... the inner worlds of the emotions and the imagination far outweighed the claims of... natural philosophy” (2). Key Romantic poets such as Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, and Byron “at various times used the Gothic to explore...the role that the apparently irrational could play in critiquing quasi-rationalistic accounts of experience” (Smith 2). Recently emerged philosophies on the sublime corroborated this argument, namely Edmund Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) and Immanuel Kant’s *The Critique of Judgement* (1790). Burke suggested that the sublime was “associated with feelings of Terror... Transgressive, frightening feelings (in Burke, relating to largely imagined imminent violent death) are the most powerful that people are subject to and therefore the most sublime” (Smith 2). Kant’s interpretation was that the sublime “indicated the limits of subjective experience, and this emphasis on introspection privileges thought and understanding above certain Enlightenment ideas” (Smith 2–3).

The origins of Gothic’s theoretical criticism can be found in David Punter’s *The Literature of Terror* (1980). This book suggests that Gothic fiction could be analysed through a “combination of Marxist and psychoanalytical perspectives” (Smith 5). Subsequently, Rosemary Jackson’s *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (1981) applied Freud’s concept

of the uncanny to examine the Gothic (5). The Freudian approach, which went on to become prolific in the field of Gothic scholarship, read Gothic narratives within the scope of dream interpretation. In his seminal study *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), Freud examined how dreams work on two levels of content:

The latent and the manifest. The manifest content of a dream refers to the story of the dream. Dreams, like some Gothic narratives, possess a peculiar surrealism and a rich symbolism. Such tales appear to be ‘fantastical,’ and require the work of an analyst, or literary critic to decode them so that they give up their latent content which is what the dream (or story) is really about. (Smith 6)

In his influential essay “The Uncanny,” Freud endeavours to understand feelings of unease, relating them “to anxieties about the return of the dead in which the dead are reanimated and the living become corpse-like” (Smith 6). The prevalence of such fears in humans can be evidenced by the mass appetite for zombie stories such as H. P. Lovecraft’s “Herbert West – Reanimator” (1921), or popular comic and television series *The Walking Dead* by Robert Kirkman and Tony Moore.

A historical analysis of Gothic was soon established as an equally helpful framework to assess the message of texts; Smith explains that reading the Gothic “historically enables us to see how writers respond to earlier Gothic texts; it also enables us to relate such texts to the historical contexts within which they were produced” (7). Gothic stories are confronting because they touch on the taboo, which changed and evolved as the context in which the fiction was written progressed. Victorian Gothic tackled fears of social transgression, sexual promiscuity, and the fear of foreigners invading British society and bringing with them

unfamiliar social behaviours. As time passed and social practices changed, the Gothic broached other issues of contention. Nina Auerbach claimed that “every age embraces the vampire it needs” (145); the “vampire” can be expanded to more broadly encompass the central threat in modern Gothic fiction, as vampires who represented Victorian fears of sexual promiscuity can be interchangeable with an outcast who threatens the moral fabric of a conservative community, such as Junius Maltby in *The Pastures of Heaven*. Andrew Smith supports such a notion in his book *Gothic Literature*, claiming that “Anti-Enlightenment ruins and irrationality can ultimately be decoded to reveal some historically specific political, social, and economic anxieties” (18). Smith further expounds that what a society “chooses to abject or jettison tells us a lot about how that society sees itself” (8).

Gothic fiction has historically wanted for legitimacy in the upper echelons of literary criticism. Not dissimilar to Steinbeck’s work, Gothic stories and novels were considered low-brow due to their popularity and exoteric accessibility. Fred Botting explains that the Enlightenment “privileged forms of cultural or artistic production that attended to classical rules... texts were designed to... instruct rather than entertain” (21). The age of Enlightenment sought to distinguish itself from the “Gothic” past, a “term for the Middle Ages which conjured up ideas of barbarous customs and practices, of superstition, ignorance, extravagant fancies and natural wildness” (Botting 21). While the Gothic was not able to unburden itself of such critiques and become fully inducted into the realm of important literature, it has evolved over centuries to become deeply embedded and abundant in popular culture. Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* marks the genesis of Gothic fiction, published 1764. The classic period of Gothic spanned 1764–1824 but in the contemporary landscape it has a broader provision and populates the modern consciousness in an assortment of texts and celluloid, ranging from Victorian penny dreadfuls and pioneering

works by Ann Radcliffe, to American haunts by Edgar Allen Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne, Southern studies of the grotesque by William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, and Carson McCullers, dire family dramas by Tennessee Williams, to modern day television shows and movies like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *True Detective*, and *Twilight*.

Alexandra Warwick's polemic essay "Feeling Gothicky" expounds the argument that the Gothic has become overexposed and is in danger of trading its marginal roots for ubiquity (Spooner 3). Warwick's argument is interesting, as she simultaneously disparages the strict framework that codifies Gothic and criticises the prevalence of the mode in contemporary literature, complaining that "all stories are more or less ghost stories" (8). This thesis is in agreement that "Gothic is a mode" and that the term "genre" should be cautiously applied, but Warwick's assertion that critics should avoid "looking for features that might define it" is reductive and could interfere with scholarship across all literary genres (6). However, this study of Steinbeck's Depression-era fiction is careful to avoid identifying the writer as an unacknowledged Gothic because his work comprises certain themes or motifs congruent to Gothic devices, but rather it argues that reading Steinbeck's work through the Gothic mode enriches and thematically strengthens his texts.

The Gothic style is "a return from the past, of the repressed and denied" (Lloyd-Smith 1). Classic Gothic fiction is identified by its settings and characters. Readers encounter castle settings, Victorian manors, abandoned monasteries, and encounter protagonists such as persecuted maidens, heroic knights, and wise elders contrasted against antagonists like mercenary princes and princesses, predatory vampires, disfigured servants, and monsters. Although the Gothic is homogenously summarised as dark, it is more often a close study of

morals and anxieties within society. It is the absence of light that underpins the moral codes and cautionary tales, theoretically underlining the path to alleviate social anxiety.

The Gothic mode is comprised of iconic signifiers, “Castles, ruins, chapels and tombs signal the Gothic tradition and its atmosphere of mystery and superstition” (Botting 137). *The Castle of Otranto* is equipped with all these trademarks. Set in the titular castle, the story opens with the impending marriage between a royal heir (Conrad) and a fair maiden (Isabella). Yet, a curse is upon the family and Conrad meets an untimely, gruesome death on the day of the wedding. His villainous father, Prince Manfred, now intends for Isabella to become his bride instead, despite her protestations. Manfred is concerned that his family’s claim to the throne is illegitimate due to the nefarious actions of his grandfather, so he hopes to expedite his ascendancy through marriage. The story draws to a close with a series of incidents that would come to form the trademarks of classic Gothic tales: ghosts, murder, decay, the emergence of a true heir, and a marriage of the heroes. *Otranto* introduced supernatural interventions to medieval romance, for example the giant helmet falling on Conrad, the portrait of Ricardo sighing, or the painting of Manfred’s grandfather as it “quit its panel to descend on the floor with a grave and melancholy air” (Walpole 25). The strength of a Gothic novel is to keep its reader in suspense, anxious to learn the fate of the protagonists.

Jeffrey Weinstock advocates that the American Gothic literary tradition began at the turn of the nineteenth century following the publication of Charles Brockden Brown’s four Gothic novels, *Wieland; Or, The Transformation. An American Tale* (1798); *Ormond; Or, The Secret Witness* (1799); *Arthur Mervyn; Or, Memoirs of the Year 1793* (1799 and 1800); and *Edgar Huntly; Or, Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker* (1799) (27). Brown befitted the conventions of European Gothic novels by Ann Radcliffe, Matthew Lewis and Friedrich von Schiller to his post-Revolutionary American backdrop; therefore, Weinstock argues, the origin of the

American Gothic “must be considered as Brown’s artistic transmogrification of a confluence of cultural forces in light of available literary templates” (27). The American cultural landscape offered a rich bounty of material to incorporate in the newly adapted Gothic, such as the “looming presence of the wilderness and the associated confrontation with the racial Other, [and] the legacy of New England Puritanism” (Weinstock 27). Yang and Healey agree that the American Gothic “attempts to grapple with the troubles of creating one nation out of many immigrants at the expense of identity and indigenous peoples” (109). Savoy affirms that the American Gothic expresses a “profound anxiety about historical crimes and perverse human desires that cast their shadow over what many would like to be the sunny American republic” (168).

The American Gothic is of acute interest in this thesis. This strain of Gothic is localised to the American experience, though there is a universality to concerns of modernity, the protection of the natural world, and the alienation of marginal groups. In American Gothic literature, the castles and monasteries are replaced with plantations, farmhouses, and provincial towns. The American Gothic was buttressed by historical events. The Salem witch trials in Massachusetts in 1692–1693 stirred interest in supernatural subjects, priming a future American Gothic audience. Even after the witch trials ended, puritanical fear and superstitions did not immediately subside, providing a market for ghost stories, haunted settings and maladjusted characters. By the early twentieth century, the Gothic had also entered Hollywood, with iconic terror tales like *Nosferatu* (1922), *Frankenstein* (1931) and *White Zombie* (1932) being projected on the silver screen.

Typically, American Gothic stories “explore chaos and wrongdoing in a movement toward the ultimate restitution of order and convention” (Lloyd-Smith 5). Steinbeck’s fiction

certainly explores the chaos of modernity and capitalist upset, yet his novels stop short of delivering a tidy resolution, just as Poe seldom adheres to such a pattern. *Grapes* ends on a note of grim promise of how an individual's actions can help the collective, *Pastures* leaves readers with a sense of foreboding about the fate of a beautiful valley, and *Mice*, *Tortilla Flat* and *In Dubious Battle* all conclude with the death of sympathetic, if problematic, characters in spectacularly grotesque fashion. True to form, Steinbeck's fiction is driven by characters' experiences rather than purely advancing plot. His Realist narratives do not enjoy fairy-tale endings that are associated with Romantic fiction, and even classic Gothic fiction, but that does not preclude the application of a Gothic lens to the texts. This lens allows readers to see monstrosity in familiar, everyday settings.

Modern Gothic fiction has diverged into a number of sub-genres, such as Horror, Psychological Thrillers, Fantasy, American Gothic, Southern Gothic, Western Gothic. The connecting thread in these sub-genres is that the Gothic asks its audience to consider possibilities outside the realm of the conventional, to suspend realism in an effort to think carefully about the human condition. It promotes the complexity of humans, obfuscating the notion that people are either good or bad, and suggesting that darkness can be found in everyone, as Flannery O'Connor notes: "Good and evil appear joined in every culture at the spine" (Botting 159).

Like Stoker's vampiric legend, *Dracula*, and its veiled articulation of England's fear of foreign invasion, Steinbeck's work, particularly his Depression-era fiction, addresses the anxiety surrounding migration to the west coast of America and strangers from the Dust Bowl entering new communities. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the Joad family is immediately assigned to the derogatory "Okie" collective and is conspicuously unwelcome in California.

Here, Steinbeck's writing is evocative of the classic Gothic mode, but it reveals a particularly strong correspondence to the prominent subgenre of the American Gothic mode, the deeply unsettling Southern Gothic. The Southern Gothic "arises from the area's often violent and traumatic history" (Street and Crow 2). Its fiction takes the suspenseful and uncanny elements of classic Gothic and applies them to the social and cultural issues of the deep South. Its effect is a more psychological terror than Victorian Gothic horror. Steinbeck's fiction is acutely American, and focuses on the extant tensions in America as the industrial boom continues to proliferate.

The Gothic mode uses hauntings and the supernatural as a means of exploring the uncanny and sublime; that which is extraordinary to human existence and appears frightening in its unfamiliarity. In *Grapes*, Steinbeck turns agricultural machinery into a monstrous blight on tenant farmers, evoking the uncanny. The word uncanny derives from the German word "unheimlich." Freud defined the uncanny as "that class of the terrifying that leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar... That which is *heimlich*—familiar, homely— becomes *unheimlich*—unhomely" (Brevda 197, italics in original). Tom Joad has grown up on Oklahoma soil, but he cannot reconcile the scene of the abandoned family homestead and thundering tractors assaulting the fields. Neighbour Muley Graves' family have left for California, but he remains on the land, unable to leave what was once his home:

Somepin went an' happened to me when they tol' me I had to get off the place. Fust I was gonna go in an' kill a whole flock a people. Then all my folks all went away out west. An' I got wanderin' aroun'. Jus' walkin' aroun'. Never went far. Slep' where I was. I was gonna sleep here tonight. That's why I come. I'd tell myself, 'I'm lookin' after things so when all the folks come back it'll be all right.' But I knowed that wan't

true. There ain't nothin' to look after. The folks ain't never comin' back. I'm jus' wanderin' aroun' like a damn ol' graveyard ghos.' (Steinbeck *Grapes* 63)

This Southern Gothic is concerned with the lingering spectre of America's historical civil rights stain: the enslavement of African Americans. Allan Lloyd-Smith proposes that America clutches to a belief in the possibilities of a bountiful present in an attempt to amend the horrors of its past. Of Southern Gothic he writes,

The legacy of the South reaches up into the North in such fictions, but in the South there was a sense of history turning in upon itself as writers evoked a string of distorted figures trapped in structures that had lost their authority but not their power... the most powerful of them is Flannery O'Connor, who created grotesque people and situations born of – but in excess of – their southern context. (121–122)

Novels like Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Carson McCullers' *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, and William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* are classics of the genre and are steeped in suspense. Small towns are the favoured settings for Southern Gothic novels, where the racial and class divide is acutely felt. A sense of danger pervades the stories; readers anxiously await the climax to see what atrocities humans will commit. The Southern Gothic does not depend on the dark to create a fearsome atmosphere; instead the characters must battle the oppressive heat and sun of the Southern states. It evokes a feeling of cloying, stifling, suffocating heat that can be as awful as bitter cold.

In Southern Gothic, characters have dreams about a beautiful life in America, but they are rejected by their communities for failing to fit in. Botting explains that “the disjointed perspectives of William Faulkner’s, Flannery O’Connor’s and Carson McCullers’ fiction disclose a grotesque and absurd world seen through the eyes of misfits, freaks and malcontents, a world of quiet yet desperate haunting” (157). They are pushed to the fringes of society because of their social stigma as “monsters” though the type of monster has shifted from traditional Gothic tales to their modern counterparts. The monsters in Southern Gothic stories are not supernatural. They are still grotesque, but they are human. McCullers and O’Connor crafted real, human characters that had monstrous traits, either physically like the gluttonous Spiros Antonopolous in the *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* or Hulga in “Good Country People,” or they had offensive or immoral personalities, like Jake Blount in *Hunter*, with his repetitive drunken disorder, or Mr Shiftlet in “The Life You Save May Be Your Own,” who dupes an old woman and leaves her mentally impaired daughter with a stranger along the highway.

In the Victorian Gothic canon, physical disfiguration was intended to hint at moral deficiency in iconic Gothic characters, like Count Dracula, or Frankenstein’s monster. In Southern Gothic fiction, the grotesque is cast upon damaged, enigmatic but mortal anti-heroes. Steinbeck similarly crafts characters that display moral ambiguity; they may lean towards crime, or anti-social behaviour, but from these disenchanting characters emerges strong themes of family duty and helping the downtrodden to fight the monstrous banks and various branches of capitalism. Characters like Tom Joad, Jim Casy, Bert Monroe, or Danny are typified by their ability to care for family and friends, and they try to survive an inhospitable world, but they are flawed people and their actions can lead to violence, injury, even death. In *Of Mice and Men*, Lennie and George share a relationship akin to that of brothers, but also of

monster (Lennie's fantastically enormous size and underdeveloped mentality), and creator (George, who parents Lennie with despair at times, but also cares for and protects him until the poignant climax where he destroys him).

There is a violence just beneath the surface in Southern Gothic stories. Violence is spoken of or alluded to but might never reach the forefront of a story, but it is impossible not to fear that it could erupt at any moment, given the tension that often pervades small Southern towns. This is illustrated in McCullers' *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* when a conversation between Dr Copeland (who is black) and the local policeman (who is white) escalates unnecessarily quickly. Characters in Southern Gothic are disempowered, either by racial prejudice or the capitalist system. This injustice is articulated by one of McCullers' characters, Jake Blount:

We live in the richest country in the world. There's plenty and to spare for no man, woman, or child to be in want. And in addition to this our country was founded on what should have been a great, true principle – the freedom, equality, and rights of each individual. Huh! And what has come of that start? There are corporations worth billions of dollars – and hundreds of thousands of people who don't get to eat.

(McCullers 260–261)

Feelings of discontent and suspense can be felt in Southern Gothic classics, such as Carson McCullers' *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, or amongst Flannery O'Connor's short stories, where readers feel a sense of foreboding that characters may be about to commit something awful, like Jake Blount with his ambiguous religious affiliation and volatile temper in *Hunter*, or the dispossessed boys who set fire to Mrs Cope's forest in "A Circle in the Fire." It is a fear that is much more sinister in Southern Gothic fiction because these are humans

capable of hurting other humans. One expects gruesomeness from Stoker's *Dracula* or Le Fanu's *Carmilla* because vampires are not held to the same moral standards as humans, but "civilisation" is capable of true atrocities; this is particularly poignant in Southern Gothic as it is bookended between the ghosts of slavery and the tension of the Civil Rights Movement. Abject atmospheres are captured deftly in iconic Southern tales such as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, or films like *Mississippi Burning* (1988).

Though *The Grapes of Wrath* is firmly located in reality, the Gothic mode lends a tangible atmosphere of suspense to the novel. Compassionate readers genuinely fear what is to become of the Joads and the families accompanying them in the camps. The county deputies imbue their scenes with a foreboding sense of entitlement and sadism: "We ain't gonna have no goddamn Okies in this town" (Steinbeck 358). They are in positions of power and they appear to take a perverse pleasure in intimidating migrant families:

But them deputies – Did you ever see a deputy that didn' have a fat ass? An' they waggle their ass an' flop their gun aroun'. Ma,' he said, 'if it was the law they was workin' with, why, we could take it. But it *ain't* the law. They're a-workin' away at our spirits. They're a-tryin' to break us. Why, Jesus Christ, Ma, they comes a time when the on'y way a fella can keep his decency is by takin' a sock at a cop. They're workin' on our decency. (357)

The Joads sense this power play repeatedly on their journey. At one point the family encounters a blockade along the highway and when they slow the car they are immediately swarmed by a group of men armed "with pick handles and shotguns" (357). In response, Tom surreptitiously reaches down to the floor of the wagon to arm himself with a jack

handle, but “Ma caught his arm and held it powerfully” (548). The fact that they are not illegal immigrants, nor wanted persons, simply Americans from another state seeking work to make a living and they are met with the threat of arrest, police brutality, or destitution is grotesque in and of itself. Yet, amidst the grotesque are moments of hope for perseverance:

‘Why, Tom, we’re the people that live. They ain’t gonna wipe us out. Why, we’re the people – we go on.’

‘We take a beatin’ all the time.’

‘I know.” Ma chuckled. “Maybe that makes us tough. Rich fellas come up an’ they die, an’ their kids ain’t no good, an’ they die out. But, Tom, we keep a-comin.’ Don’ you fret none, Tom. A different time’s comin’.’ (359)

Chapter 1

The Grapes of Wrath – Monstrosity in the Industrial World

The Grapes of Wrath remains Steinbeck's most commercially successful work of fiction. It is a rich, powerful novel with epic-like qualities. The book sees the Joad family set off to traverse the American highway in search of a new beginning after they are evicted from their tenant farm in Oklahoma. This novel is an influential exposé on the devastation of the Great Depression on Americans, demonstrating the encroaching industrialisation as a Gothic monstrosity. It grapples with the direct impact of this crisis on the migrants from the Dust Bowl region, spotlighting the marginalisation they faced in California. In his introduction to the novel, author Brad Leithauser summarised that *The Grapes of Wrath* contains “in profusion the strengths commonly associated with Steinbeck: sympathy for the disenfranchised, moral urgency and narrative propulsion” (Steinbeck v). Steinbeck invokes the Gothic in his descriptions of monstrous machinery, alienation of minority groups, and the decay of the American pastoral; by viewing the novel through the dark Gothic lens, the sinister underbelly of human nature comes into sharp relief.

The Joad family originate from the Dust Bowl of the United States, which covers a section of the Great Plains of North America, encompassing Colorado, Kansas, Texas, Oklahoma and New Mexico. The region was christened the Dust Bowl following horrific droughts and winds that periodically assaulted the Great Plains during the 1930s; the context of an environmental disaster illustrates a Gothic aesthetic of barren and desolate landscapes. The droughts were the reason so many farming families like the Joads would need to leave their tenant farms and find a way to earn a living, the magnitude of this outcome is emphasised in the novel as these families have been farming for generations: “Grampa took up the land, and

he had to kill the Indians and drive them away” (*Grapes* 45). It is worth noting here that the novel does not explicitly critique the possession of land from Native Americans, despite the act against families like the Joads being imbued with reprehension. Perhaps this is owing to the fact that Steinbeck is representing the perspective of his characters, who are experiencing a reversal of “the sacrifices and hard work of their pioneer ancestors. It is the ultimate destruction of the frontier promise, in which Americans’ democratic and enterprising spirit was reified in the inherent equality and opportunity of the West” (Hall 36).

Labelled a classic of protest literature, *The Grapes of Wrath* is notable because it “did not look like proletarian literature: [it was] not propagandistic but ‘human’” (Godfrey 107). Steinbeck’s novels have a pulse, a beating heart, which is what makes them compelling in the protest literature vein. He created characters with a great sense of authenticity, eliciting compassion and emotion from the reader. Walter Allen asserts that ‘Steinbeck is at his best as a novelist when he is dealing with human beings living at something approaching the animal level’ (163). Godfrey expands on this notion, describing the dehumanisation faced by migrant workers, explaining that the white American workers “inherited the racial prejudice that Californians had hitherto applied to the minority groups” (112). Slurs such as “Okies,” “Arkies,” “Texies” superseded “Chinks” or “Dagos” in rural terminology (Godfrey 112). McWilliams noted that the feeling that “the Okies were ‘aliens... was so pronounced that in the summer of 1939 a sign appeared in the foyer of a motion picture theatre in San Joaquin Valley town reading: ‘Negroes and Okies upstairs’” (“California Pastoral” 116). Letters can be traced to newspaper articles of the time that articulated the concerns from Californians; one resident argued that “these ‘share croppers’ are not a noble people looking for a home and seeking an education for their children. They are unprincipled degenerates looking for something for nothing” (Godfrey 112). Others called for inexplicably draconian measures

such as segregation and sterilisation (112). In fact, Steinbeck makes a point to starkly contrast the desires of the two groups. In Chapter 19, one of the interchapters, the narrator highlights the dichotomy of desires of the opposing groups:

And while the Californians wanted many things, accumulation, social success, amusement, luxury, and a curious banking security, the new barbarians wanted only two things – land and food... And whereas the wants of the Californians were nebulous and undefined, the wants of the Okies were beside the roads, lying there to be seen and coveted... A man might look at a fallow field and know, and see in his mind that his own bending back and his own straining arms would bring the cabbages into the light, and the golden eating corn, the turnips and carrots. (Steinbeck 299)

While it may appear hyperbolic, Steinbeck is attempting to emphasise, and admittedly simplify, the contrast between a capitalist mode that prioritises individual wealth and the accumulation of possessions, and the approach of early settlers who created the framework of the American Dream, that is building a life from the ground up, physically cultivating land that could sustain a family. The migrant workers are the remaining strains of a community that respected the land and did not celebrate frivolous luxuries, yet they experience gross othering as they attempt to scrape together a living in California. The humanity that Steinbeck has imbued the migrants with is at stark odds with the grotesque consumerism of the Californians who appear zombie-like in their quest for material consumption. The act of “othering” outsiders and minorities pervades Southern Gothic fiction. It has led to a canon crowded with characters who are isolated from their communities, such as McCullers’ John Singer, Lee’s Boo Radley, or Faulkner’s Benjy Compson. Alienation leads to a questioning of one’s identity and how they fit in, or not, with their surroundings. The Gothic imagination

mines the psychological decay of those who are isolated from normal settings, whether that is societal, familial, emotional or physical. Okies experience such a phenomenon in *Grapes*, enduring derogatory assumptions and insults, and being talked about as if they were “other,” like a foreign species who were not worthy of assimilation within local Californian communities: “How’d you like to have your sister go out with one of ’em?” (Steinbeck 362). This abject display of antipathy and intolerance elicits an emotional response from readers who are quickly invested in the plight of migrant families.

It is well-documented that Steinbeck spent time working alongside Mexican immigrants in the agricultural industry, which was heavily populated with migrant and immigrant labourers (Spencer 314). This experience afforded Steinbeck a direct understanding of the impact capitalism was having on the working-class who struggled to earn the bare minimum for living; later Steinbeck “would live and work alongside the migrant workers who were collectively termed ‘Okies,’ and used that experience as a defence against those who attacked *The Grapes of Wrath* as mere propaganda” (Spencer 314). In an interview Steinbeck explained, “I know what I was talking about. I lived, off and on, with those Okies for the last three years. Anyone who tries to refute me will just become ridiculous” (Spencer 314). In fact, many did refute the narrative of *Grapes*. Steinbeck was publicly accused of being a Red. He became a person of interest to J. Edgar Hoover and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, owing to his sympathetic view of workers and unionists, and his scathing critique of the treatment of migrant workers. In a letter to his agents Steinbeck reported that a bookshop owner in Monterey had been asked a series of questions by Hoover’s investigative team: “Mr Hoover considered me the most dangerous subversive influence in the West and was going into my past thoroughly” (Benson 394). The Associated Farmers, an anti-unionisation group created in 1934, launched a smear campaign against Steinbeck, printing pamphlets that

labelled him a communist to discourage popularity (Benson 394). Further uproar followed the publication of the *Grapes*; representative Lyle Boren made a statement in Congress claiming that the “painting Steinbeck made in his book is a lie, a black, infernal creation of a twisted, distorted mind” (418–419). Others were affronted by the “obscenity” of the novel, to the extent that a “large luncheon was held at the Palace Hotel in San Francisco to protest the novel and denounce its author” (419). As a result, *The Grapes of Wrath* was subject to book burnings and remains among the list of frequently banned books (418). Ultimately, these tactics could not dissuade the positive reviews of *Grapes*, and it has continued to be one of the best-selling American novels of all time, with approximately 14 million copies sold globally (Leithauser in Steinbeck vi). Furthermore, the controversy that surrounded the novel in its early circulation underscores how affecting the novel really was. Steinbeck’s storytelling was provocative and compelling, the obscenity that it was derided for supports the Gothic interpretation, for the grotesque oppression and monstrous modernity strengthened the power of the story and the emotions it elicited from its readers.

In addition to criticisms about *Grapes* being filled with inflated socialist rhetoric, critics also scorned the sentimental vein in which they believed the novel to have been written. Leslie Fiedler called Steinbeck “maudlin, sentimental and overblown” (55), and bitterly dismissed the passage where Tom tells Ma Joad that he must leave the family and fight the world’s injustices for the everyman as “fashionable left-wing soapbox rhetoric” (63). Alan Brinkley argues that this sentimentality “or Steinbeck’s ‘folkish unthreatening... Faith in the simple decency of common men and women’ – may have contributed to the novel’s appeal” (qtd in Godfrey 108). Arguably, there is a sharp absence of sentimentalism in “denying the Joads their happy, agrarian lifestyle conclusion” (Seelye 19–20), in fact, one could hardly describe

the end of *Grapes* as conclusive as it literally ends enigmatically, with Rose of Sharon nursing the starving man as she “smiled mysteriously” (Steinbeck 578).

Though Steinbeck is advocating for the common man, critics have argued that this commonality does not extend to the Mexican, Filipino, Chinese and Japanese migrants who preceded the Okies. Godfrey reports that Steinbeck’s detractors believed that the “sentimental populism” in *Grapes* “thinly disguises its underlying white nationalism” (108), but Godfrey argues that Steinbeck’s “humanism... was a pragmatic tool designed not to mask but to address and oppose conservative and racist ideologies and reading practices” (108–109).

Godfrey elaborates that in Steinbeck’s case, the

whiteness of his ‘common men and women’ seems calculated to resonate with a white, middle-class audience, this is not because his humanism was a covertly racist and bourgeois project, but because he deliberately coopted the slippages within humanist terminology and techniques to correct readers’ sympathies with racist and bourgeois ideologies. (109)

In fact, Steinbeck’s representation was simply a reflection of the changing face of the farm labour force during the Depression. Carey McWilliams describes how, by 1937, the “bulk of the state’s migratory workers were white Americans and that the foreign racial groups were no longer a dominant factor” (305). Charles Cunningham adroitly challenges the criticisms of Steinbeck’s cast by pointing out that fixating on the lack of diversity undermines its critique of capitalism, “which encourages the middle-class reader to move beyond sympathy for those more exploited and to a solidarity based on experiences within the same system” (par. 49).

Marilyn Wyman reports that despite being white, “Dust Bowl refugees are stripped of the

normative privilege and power of ‘whiteness’ to assume... the animalistic trope that separated them from the definition of civilisation” (44). Essentially, the Anglo-Saxon heritage of the Okies will not exclude them from marginalisation and exploitation. It is only through “collective action that they can prevail” (Godfrey 109).

While traditional Gothic literature is often furnished with florid prose, modern Gothic fiction has been pared back to a bare bones narrative style that allows the local language to shine through. The strong colloquial voice is a feature of American Gothic writers like Flannery O’Connor, Carson McCullers, and Harper Lee, and such localism can be found in Steinbeck’s work. A strong sense of local vernacular affixes the focus on to the characters of the story, more so than the plot itself. The raw language augments the humanist slant that Steinbeck builds in his stories. The Joads’ dialogue is colloquial and colourful, and it feels authentic. It is devoid of pretence, which reinforces the humble simplicity of the Joads, and how naïve and vulnerable they are in the commercial world.

A journey or quest is often undertaken in Gothic tales, typically as a means to defeat evil. The adventure that the Joads embark on in *Grapes* recalls the epic in this sense, and Steinbeck utilises the endless American highways as a motif for the culture of setting out to secure a fortune or start a new life. The road to freedom is a ubiquitous symbol in American fiction, beginning with immigrant journeys to the West to find gold, to Mark Twain’s 1872 fictionalised memoir *Roughing It*, or Beat poet Jack Kerouac’s 1957 cult classic *On the Road*, and on the silver screen favourites like *Easy Riders* (1969) and *Thelma and Louise* (1991). The road is a means to find an allusive truth, to discover the “real” America. Route 66 almost acts as secondary character in *Grapes*; for the majority of the novel the Joads are travelling along this highway with thousands of other migrant families, and significant events happen

on this road that reinforce the themes of the novel and foretell the fate of the Joads. Tom Joad is first introduced as he trails along the road that will take him home to his family and farm. Tom's interaction with a trucker he hitches a ride with offers a glimpse into the thematic crux of the novel; the truck has a "No Riders" sticker on it, which the driver references as a half-hearted attempt to dissuade Tom; Tom replies "Sure—I seen it. But sometimes a guy'll be a good guy even if some rich bastard makes him carry a sticker" (Steinbeck 9). Such a notion will come into sharp relief when the Joads encounter abrasive supervisors on the orchards in California, who prove they are loyal to the "rich bastards" alone.

Highway 66 is dubbed "the mother road, the road of flight" (150); to the Joad family this route is literally the road to success, hope, a new life. It is described as "the path of a people in flight, refuges from dust and shrinking land, from the thunder of tractors and shrinking ownership" (150). Quickly, the Joads will learn of the harsh reality of the road as it takes them towards new corporate America, and the family will be forever altered because of it:

Steinbeck's characters are shaped both by the place they seek and by the place they have left behind. Places of past and present are simultaneously rendered with intense realism yet often also have a mythic dimension, either from history and heritage, or from hopes and dreams not yet or never to be fulfilled. (Morsberger, Morsberger and Hicks 148)

An omen of despair occurs early on in the journey along Route 66: the family dog is ruthlessly run over and dies a gruesome death; the driver does not even stop. The dog's life is quickly snuffed out as if it means nothing, which telegraphs the decreasing value of human life as will be observed in the dreadful migrant camps or by the system that barely pays a

worker enough money to survive, as if these migrant workers are mere animals who do not deserve basic human necessities, let alone luxuries or comforts. Grampa and Granma Joad both perish during the journey, and Noah decides to part with the family and stay at Colorado River, illustrating the extent to which the Depression would fracture families.

Steinbeck applies the Gothic motif of decay to illustrate the demise of family-run farming. The agricultural devastation in the novel underpinning the irony of the death of an industry traditionally associated with growth and renewal. By the 1930s, advances in science and technology had reached a point where it was more effective and efficient to run farms with machines: “One man on 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” (40). Steinbeck grimly underscores this transition in early chapters, portraying new tractors as monstrous tools of corruption: “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” (43). The Gothic feeds off the monstrosity that has infiltrated rural America as a supposed beacon of success.

Farmers are still trying to resist the changes that they are seeing in their industries, arguing that land needs human touch: “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, not 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” (147–148). This comment applies more broadly to the “quality over quantity” argument that has permeated the commercial world since industrialisation and the dawn of mass production. The Southern Gothic is particularly concerned with decay; writers attempted to capture the decline of the Southern economy that accompanied the abolition of slavery, while simultaneously exploring the moral corruption that permeated the racially divisive history in

the South, “the sheen on the dollar is not from gold but from blood” (Davison 61). In Faulkner’s short story “A Rose for Emily,” the family homestead is in disrepair, “only Miss Emily’s house was left, lifting its stubborn and coquettish decay above the cotton wagons and the gasoline pumps – an eyesore among eyesores” (3). Emily had hoped this would be a house full of freedom and family, but in reality it was a haunted symbol of Emily’s loss, isolation and demise. The mechanical monsters in Steinbeck story similarly destroy the future of rural family homes.

Steinbeck extends the metaphor of the monster beyond the machines razing farmhouses by sharpening the focus on the greed of banks. In his study of Dust Bowl migration throughout the 1930s and 40s, James Gregory posits that tenant farmers were equally beset by drought as they were by the New Deal’s Agricultural Adjustment Administration, “which rewarded landowners for taking acreage out of production” (Lothrop 1313). Thus, these families were also adversely impacted by the government. The landowners attributed the eviction of tenant farmers to hungry banks, “We’re sorry. It’s not us. It’s the monster. The bank isn’t like a man” (41). The banks are described as an elusive, oppressive power, one that cannot be reached by mere tenant farmers for explanation, “I don’t know,” the driver replies. “Maybe there’s nobody to shoot. Maybe the thing isn’t men at all” (47). A tractor driver explains: “Fellow was telling me the bank gets orders from the East. The orders were, ‘Make the land show profit or we’ll close you up’” (47). Banks are only known by their ruthless actions; they are a faceless monster and the Okies have no recourse to challenge their acts. Steinbeck anthropomorphises the oppressive banking corporations with the evil greed of a Gothic monster that is incapable of empathy, highlighting the helplessness of migrant families.

The Grapes of Wrath reinforces an ideology that has long been associated with America,

which is that any man can make something of himself, that hard work will be rewarded, and that all people are entitled to liberty and equality: The American Dream. Steinbeck effectively turns the dream into a Gothic nightmare by subverting this mythology and colouring the Californian landscape with prejudice, corruption, and hostility. The American West is an iconic symbol of this ideology and has historically been the location of choice for fortune-seekers, most notably during the Gold Rush. Accordingly, *Grapes* portrays farming families from the Dust Bowl embarking on a west-ward journey to the warmer climes of California, where opportunity notionally abounds. Alas, there is no fortune to be found by migrant workers. The shifting landscape of agriculture in the 1930s reflects the modern advancement towards capital, ownership, and bureaucratic processes, which heralds the demise of traditional claims to possession that farmers have previously understood, as they protest,

... but it's our land. We were born on it, and we got killed on it, died on it. Even if it's no good, it's still ours. That's what makes it ours – being born on it, working it, dying on it. That makes ownership, not a paper with numbers on it. (41)

The macabre element of the Edenic West in *Grapes* is that landowners are intentionally perpetuating the erroneous promise of prosperity and opportunity. The Joads fall victim to the powerful system of advertising in America. They become both “consumers and commodities” in their journey towards a better life in California (Spencer 313). The Joads are “uneducated and unfamiliar with the oftentimes exploitative techniques incorporated into early twentieth-century advertising” which leads them into the challenging situations they face in the novel. (Spencer 313). In *The Grapes of Wrath*, greed is the Gothic monster. Greed is presented via the capitalist system in America, the nation's obsession with wealth, ownership and material possessions and how that equates to status. The machine is the

villain, from new farming equipment that renders farmers obsolete, to machines that pump out mass-produced products at a cheaper price, which forecast the devastating effects on independent retailers that would continue throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Advertising played a critical role in the growth of consumerism in twentieth century America. Spencer argues:

Advertising is the catalyst that fuels the nation's economy, encouraging consumers to purchase goods and services so that they, in turn, can produce more goods. Because it serves as a visual, tangible manifestation of capitalism and the system's systematic enslavement of those operating under its purview, advertising becomes a central target in Steinbeck's critique of the economic system as a whole, as he illustrates the ways in which people are manipulated, exploited, and enslaved by the system that advertising creates and perpetuates. (314–315)

The promise of a “richer and fuller” life under the American Dream was twisted by advertising companies to suggest that people needed to accumulate material possessions and goods to illustrate this full life; such things were marketed to them through visual advertising. At a more fundamental level, Scott and Leonhardt hypothesise that

Mobility is the promise that lies at the heart of the American Dream. [...] there are poor and rich in the United States, of course, the argument goes; but as long as there is something close to equality of opportunity, the differences between them do not add up to class barriers. (2–3)

Effectively, the dream was for individuals to have the ability to rise above their current financial and social ranking. This is the mindset with which the Joad family packs up and traverses Route 66, but their optimistic outlook is augmented by advertising scams. The advertising circulating the Dust Bowl is so misleading as to be sinister. Workers are promised a bounty of job opportunities and fair pay, and though Tom has his reservations, the majority of migrant workers are represented by the Joad family, who earnestly believe in human decency,

Your father got a han'bill on yella paper, tellin' how they need folks to work. They wouldn' go to that trouble if they was't plenty work. Cost 'em good money to get then han'bills out. What'd they want ta lie for, an' costin' 'em money to lie? (116)

A family such as the Joads who are not educated and have lived rurally for generations are particularly susceptible to the tricks of the advertising trade. Mail order companies capitalised on the market of remote farming families who would find the delivery of a catalogue an exciting event (Spencer 316). Steinbeck incorporated a Sears catalogue into his story to contextualise the prevalence of catalogue advertising to rural families: "Pa could write, but wouldn' ... he could work out a catalogue order as good as the nex' fella, but he wouldn' write no letters just for ducks" (52). This passage illustrates that consumerism was not just for city-dwellers and suburbanites; it had reached rural communities who were perhaps more susceptible to the manipulations of advertising as they generally were less educated and more cut off from populated communities. Spencer reads this passage as evidence that Pa Joad "looks at writing as a means to an end, and that end is manifested in the acquisition of material goods from a catalogue. He is a willing participant in his own exploitation at the hands of the capitalist machine" (316). While it may be reaching somewhat to equate

shopping from a catalogue to “participation in exploitation,” as catalogue items could simply be household necessities that are not available in rural Oklahoma, Spencer’s summation can be applied to the vulnerable position the Joads are in when it comes to the advertising of jobs in California. By buying into advertising for catalogue goods, the family are less inclined to have reservations about the handbills citing an abundance of opportunity in the fruit orchards out West. They are familiar with commercial culture and “advertisements that promise to improve their lives” (Spencer 317), so why should they believe any differently when it comes to the job market?

There is a sinister edge to the advertising campaign that catalysed the mass exodus of Dust Bowl families:

Those who sought to bring cheap labor... to California saw their audience as culturally stunted and, worse still, easily manipulated by the most basic of advertising ploys. So desperate were the farmers that they were influenced by block letters on a piece of paper, an ad lacking any visual qualities that one would expect to accompany any advertisement of the 1930s. (Laird 39)

The exploitation of this group of people has a subtle Gothic quality; given the outcome of the Joads’ story, this marketing technique evokes a sense of leading lambs to slaughter.

Advertising is effectively another branch of the greedy, monstrous machine of capitalism. It represents the future, technology, and modernity and in this novel it is juxtaposed against the Joads who represent the older generation; manual farmers and analogue households that are trying to achieve the American Dream the only way they know how: hard, physical labour.

The Gothic enjoys exploring the tension between the old and new, modernity against tradition, machine against man; advertising can thus be interpreted as a form of Gothic monster, luring hardworking families to the jaws of the villain of capitalism:

Maybe he needs two hundred men, so he talks to five hundred, an' they tell other folks, an' when you get to the place, they's a thousan' men. This here fella says, I'm payin' twenty cents an hour.' An' maybe half a the men walk off. But they's stil five hundred that's so goddam hungry they'll work for nothin' but biscuits... You see now? The more fellas he can get, an' the hungrier, less he's gonna pay. (243)

The landowners and orchard supervisors have grasped the paradigm of supply and demand, and unabashedly capitalise on the desperation of families to feed their children. *The Grapes of Wrath* articulates the question of capitalism being un-American (Godfrey 110). At a fundamental level, Steinbeck questions whether people are capable of protecting the collective once ownership enters the picture, "For the quality of owning freezes you forever into 'I,' and cuts you off forever from the 'we'" (Steinbeck 193).

Steinbeck draws on religious allegory to dramatize the text. The conflict between traditional religious values and the advancing modern world is a typically Gothic tension and has the effect of questioning the human condition and society's role in the world. Jim Casy embodies a Christ-like role in *Grapes*. While he has turned away from preaching in the clerical sense, he becomes a philosophical leader for the Joad family. As the novel progresses, Casy's worldview takes on an Emersonian slant. The lapsed preacher asks Tom, "maybe it's all men an' all women we love; maybe that's the Holy Sperit... Maybe all men got one big soul ever'body's a part of" (Steinbeck 29). Casy dies fighting for justice for migrant workers,

which makes him a martyr-like figure. After his death, Tom vows to take the helm of the fight for people, effectively embodying the resurrection of Casy:

Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Whenever they's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there. If Casy knowed, why, I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad an' — I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry an' they know supper's ready.... God, I'm talkin' like Casy. Comes of thinkin' about him so much. Seems like I can see him sometimes." (534)

The flood at the end of the novel concludes *Grapes* in apocalyptic fashion. This powerful act of nature is at odds with the calculating order of business directed by banks and landowners, "In contrast to the clear-cut patterns of technology, nature's destructive power and unrecognizable patterns are familiar to the tenants and migrants" (Dalmaso 30). When the flood comes, the migrant families take a methodical approach to attempting to protect themselves because they know how to deal with the elements; it is the monstrosity of advancing technology and the sophistication of the commercial world that leaves them feeling victimised.

Gothic writers traditionally created an atmosphere of mystery and suspense in their stories. This is acutely felt in *Grapes*, as the hostility that the Joads encounter the further they progress along Route 66 carries a sinister undertone; the Great Depression has caused a fragmentation in society that has led to an "us versus them" mindset. The corruption of local authorities and vigilante crews is an equally insidious and repugnant force in the division of society. A poignant, human moment occurs in the novel when Rose of Sharon's baby is stillborn. This painful event seems to suggest at first that new life is not possible in the dire

straits of the migrant labour camps, yet Steinbeck leaves the novel with the small flicker of hope with the kindness of Rose's gesture to the starved man at the end of the novel. This pointedly exemplifies human compassion and reinforces the Joad family practice of sheer survival; the important distinction Steinbeck has made is that despite the inhuman conditions these migrant families are forced to endure, they themselves are not inhuman; as Parini frames it, "Misfortune has both united and ennobled them" (271). They are heroes of this modern Gothic terror tale; despite losing the life that had defined them for generations, and suffering indecent blows to their dignity, they refused to act at the subhuman level that is expected of them by the oppressive forces in California.

The trauma of modernity affected select groups in Depression-era America. Those who were used to hard work and a moderate income that kept their families alive suffered tremendously, while those rising up the financial ladder increasingly lost interest in the collective or the community, becoming interested only in their own wealth. Such a preoccupation is conveyed through the exploitative wages in California, and in the general treatment of migrant workers. Land owners and supervisors viewed these people not as employees but as sub-human riff-raff who did not deserve the same compassion as people of their own status. Steinbeck's audience witnesses this gross display of classism and frightening inquiry into the impact of status, observing how it can divide people into silos, rejecting the notion of community or even human decency. Here, Steinbeck invokes the Gothic mode, though instead of employing vampires or witches to embody the destruction of social morality, Steinbeck leaves it to the human race, who is evidently more than capable of committing horrors upon their fellow man. This recalls the work of Gothic pioneer Ann Radcliffe, who preferred, particularly in her earlier work, the narrative technique of the "explained supernatural" (Kroger and Anderson 23). Radcliffe tended to give the horror

elements of her stories a realistic explanation, such as a corpse actually being a melted wax figure in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, because “the true threat was one she saw in the real world: men who were willing to abuse women in order to gain wealth” (Kroger and Anderson 24). Steinbeck similarly moved the monstrosity inside people, rather than capturing it in a supernatural threat. His narratives ask uncomfortable questions about how we react to the changing world around us, how much of an impact modernity has on our sense of loyalty and self-interest.

Steinbeck’s argument is clear: modern technology in and of itself is not responsible for the decay of social compassion, but accompanying this rise in consumerism under an increasing capitalist system was the dissolution of the community spirit. With greater earning potential, and opportunities to own “things,” the self has become the key concern with certain groups. As Botting describes, “capitalist modes of organisation produced a society in which individuals were parasitic upon each other” (129), whereas primitive cultures were more resilient “because their members were not separated along class lines” (129). Technology is used not simply to improve methods but to make individuals rich, the more riches they have, the more they want, and the more they buy into the commodification of the world, to the horrifying extent that humans themselves can become commodities. Ironically, technology is supposed to represent modernity and a departure from the past, yet the Southern Gothic is imbued with the “spectres [that] register historical traumas caused by antiquated and abusive institutions of power guilty of commodifying human beings” (Davison 56). Thus, humanity is not as progressive as it would like to tell itself, as practices of exploitation remain in place.

Steinbeck Gothicises machinery and commodities as a metaphor for the lack of empathy and humility that is displayed by Californians. Machines are the monsters that are a threat to the fabric of society. Tractors tear apart family homesteads and cars brutally kill family pets.

Steinbeck has distilled the advancing technological landscape down to two symbols: human commodities and frightening machinery. He depicts tractors like zombies who have been possessed by the hunger of the banks:

The tractors driving the tenants away from their homes do so not at the control of the drivers but at the command of these other monsters – banks and big owners – who are, perhaps, even more vile than the tractors: they are monsters of a difference, subhuman breed. (Dalmaso 29)

Steinbeck describes banks in uncanny, monstrous terms to the effect that they feel dangerous and sinister. The land appears to be under attack,

as though the Bank or the Company were a monster... those creatures don't breathe air, don't eat side-meat. They breathe profits; they eat the interest on money. If they don't get it, they die the way you die without air, without side-meat. (Steinbeck 39)

Such a gormless, greedy monster recalls fantastical creatures that live in Gothic settings, therefore Steinbeck's employment of such a motif in the realist setting of the Dust Bowl encourages shock and compassion from readers. As their journey progresses, the Joads must suffer the indignity of moving from a farm and home that they took pride in, to settling in migrant camps out west:

There was no order in the camp; little gray tents, shacks, cars were scattered about at random... The south wall was made of three sheets of rusty corrugated iron, the east wall a square of moldy carpet tacked between two boards, the north wall a strip of roofing paper and a strip of tattered canvas, and the west wall six pieces of gunny sacking. (Steinbeck 308)

The cultivation of this abject setting reinforces the psychological tension inflicted on migrant

families.

Chapter 2

Of Mice and Men – The Death of the American Dream

Steinbeck's novella *Of Mice and Men* was met with complimentary reviews following its release in February 1937. Ralph Thompson, reviewer for *The New York Times*, called it "completely disarming" (Parini 228). While some critics labelled the story a sentimental "fairy tale" (228), scores of readers identified with the themes of dreams, innocence, and friendship, which are explored in a heartfelt and compassionate manner by Steinbeck.

Friendship is at the emotional core of *Mice*, as exemplified by Lennie and George. Fraternal bonds, particularly between the working class, are celebrated as the antidote to loneliness and human suffering. George observes, "I seen the guys that go around on the ranches alone. That ain't no good. They don't have no fun. After a long time they get mean" (Steinbeck *Mice* 41). A darkness will envelope the story soon enough, as the friendship comes to a grotesque end. The narrative revisits a common Steinbeck concern, which is the attainment of the American Dream in Depression-era America. The central protagonists yearn for self-sufficiency and view their itinerant work on ranches as a key transaction in their goal of owning their own land. The novel's Gothic elements subvert the American Dream and show how unattainable such a dream is for the working class, who are trapped in a system that privileges those with existing wealth.

Readers meet the protagonists, George and Lennie, as they make their way along the Salinas River to a new ranch in search of work. George is described as "defined: small, strong hands, slender arms, a thin and bony nose," while Lennie is a "huge man, shapeless of face" (Steinbeck 4). Steinbeck's descriptions link Lennie more closely to an animal than a human, which instils a sense of the uncanny: his feet drag "the way a bear drags his paws" and he snorts water from the river like a horse (4). Immediately, it is evident that Lennie has a

mental disability, and the lack of sharpness in his features telegraphs the dullness in his intelligence. He displays childlike mirth when making splashes in the water, and copies George's actions like a young sibling:

Lennie, who had been watching, imitated George exactly. He pushed himself back, drew up his knees, embraced them, looked over to George to see if he had it just right. He pulled his hat down a little more over his eyes, the way George's hat was (5).

George displays contemporaneous frustration and protectiveness over Lennie. The pair have had to leave Weed, where they had previously secured work, and it is revealed that Lennie was responsible for the necessarily abrupt departure; George laments "I could get along so easy and so nice if I didn't have you on my tail" (9). Yet, he has remained with Lennie and is sensitive to his friend's quirks and shortcomings, such as Lennie's predilection for small, soft, furry things. When George discovers that Lennie has been patting a dead mouse hidden in his pocket, he tosses it into the brush eliciting a flood of tears from Lennie. George softens when he sees how upset his friend is: "I ain't takin' it away jus' for meanness... You get another mouse that's fresh and I'll let you keep it a little while" (11). The Gothic manifests itself in the morbid action of Lennie keeping a corpse as a pet. Yet, this scene also conveys the compassion that George shows Lennie, as he attempts to put his friend at ease without casting judgment.

Typically, monsters are represented in Steinbeck's fiction by way of avaricious land owners, modern age machinery, hungry banks, or an intolerant, dispassionate society. It is only in *Mice* that a sympathetic character draws likeness to a Gothic creature. Lennie is an oversized man with severe developmental delays. While Lennie's hulking size is not intentionally used

as a weapon, it invariably gets him into trouble as he does not have the mental faculties to control his might. Furthermore, it highlights him as an “other,” someone who must reside on the fringes of society because they do not fit in, which encourages further psychological decline. *Mice* is one of Steinbeck’s darkest and most tragic stories, as George is ultimately the one who ends Lennie’s life. It shares the theme of outsiders that is evident in other works like *The Grapes of Wrath*. Lennie and George are poor workers who cannot hope to build their own life for themselves as Americans once could. They will forever be at the mercy of farm owners, and with Lennie’s idiosyncrasies, they are at constant risk.

Steinbeck takes care to establish the fraternal relationship and honour it above the mundane realities of the bindlestiff lifecycle; he creates an ideal before he dismantles it in macabre fashion. Regardless of George’s exasperation for Lennie at times, he values the friendship as a vital component of survival, especially in the cold, dispassionate world they occupy: “Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don’t belong no place... With us it ain’t like that. We got a future. We got somebody to talk to that gives a damn about us” (15). Once George and Lennie arrive at the ranch and secure work, they meet the other ranch hands. Like them, these farmhands are long-suffering proles who are relegated to menial labour due to ailments, class, or the colour of their skin. This group provides stark evidence against the existence of an American Dream that promises a rich and full life to any person of any class.

Of Mice and Men is populated with characters who live on the fringes of society, creating a sense of isolation and alienation that pervades communities in Southern Gothic fiction. They are outcasts, men who do not fit neatly into the mould of the commercially successful American. Candy is ageing and only has one hand; he is aware that his worth on the farm is

waning and that he could be easily discarded by management: “They’ll can me purty soon. Jus’ as soon as I can’t swamp out no bunk house they’ll put me on the county” (60). Candy’s decrepit dog mirrors his frailty: “at his heels walked a drag-footed sheepdog, gray of muzzle, and with pale, blind old eyes. The dog struggled lamely to the side of the room” (25). One of the ranch hands shoots the dog early in the story, telling Candy he can take one of Slim’s puppies as a replacement; this underscores the Gothic tension of old versus new, showing that the modernised world is no place for the aged or unfit. As mass production of commodities accelerated, the mentality of replacing the old with the new and shiny became much more acceptable. The action of putting the dog down forecasts the death of Lennie, which carries morally ambiguous undertones of euthanasia.

As Lennie and George take up work on the ranch, Lennie’s child-like obsession with petting soft things predicts the tragedy that will conclude the story. During a conversation between George and Slim, it is revealed that there was an incident back in Weed:

Well, he seen this girl in a red dress. Dumb bastard like he is, he wants to touch ever’thing he likes. Just wants to feel it. So he reaches out to feel this dress an’ the girl lets out a squawk, and that gets Lennie all mixed up, and he holds on ‘cause that’s the only thing he can think to do. (Steinbeck 42)

The girl tells the police that she’s been raped, so a lynch mob is sent out to track down Lennie. He and George narrowly escape by hiding in an irrigation ditch all day until they can runaway under the cover of night. This event offers a key insight into the dangerous imbalance of Lennie’s strength and smarts. Unfortunately, the move to a new farm would see a series of new transgressions play out.

These bindlestiffs are at the mercy of the cruel, pugnacious Curley, whose father runs the ranch. Lennie's first indiscretion involves Curley, who is itching to get into a fight, "Come on, ya big bastard. Get up on your feet" (62). Of course, Curley has vastly underestimated Lennie and ends up with a pulverised hand as a result of his provocation. Lennie is miserable after the altercation, repeating the mantra "I didn't wanta" (64), as he worries that George will rescind the promise of rabbits on their farm. The next transgression is the accidental killing of his new, beloved puppy, which reveals an interesting dynamic within Lennie. Whilst he is portrayed as childlike and non-malicious, this scene highlights his temper; he is so mad at the puppy for dying that he hurls him across the barn (84). The most gruesome offense follows shortly after when Lennie murders Curley's wife. Though he does not intentionally kill her, Lennie's temper flares during their encounter: "Don't you go yellin'," he said, and he shook her; and her body flopped like a fish. And then she was still, for Lennie had broken her neck" (90). Lennie's mind appears to register wrongdoings, and while his reaction is to feel shock and remorse, his primary concern is that he will not be allowed to tend to rabbits on his farm with George, and not that he has caused injury or death. He lacks empathy, like a monster who is not endowed with the full spectrum of human emotions. The ambiguity of Lennie's character creates conflict for the audience, who observe this child-like man commit numerous murders.

If *Mice* was a traditional Gothic story, Lennie would personify the grotesque monster that endangers society, like Mr Hyde. However, reading this text through a modern Gothic lens, Lennie embodies the outsider, someone marginalised from society because they are not "normal;" he is freakishly strong, yet his mind is weak. It is this stunted intelligence that affords Lennie a simplistic worldview; he wants to play with soft things and share his life with his best friend. Lennie is a human with monstrous traits: immense strength and fatal lack

of cognizance. An interesting dynamic exists between Lennie and George. Their relationship recalls the ill-fated co-dependency of monster and creator, like Dr Frankenstein and his creation; though outward appearances would suggest Lennie is constantly in need of George's common sense and protection, it is obvious that Lennie's company is important to George, and it was his naïve enthusiasm that gave George hope that they may have their own farm one day: "He usta like to hear about it so much I got to thinking maybe we would" (93). The acute tragedy of the novel is the fact that George ultimately must destroy Lennie, the very person he has spent his life protecting. Admittedly, Lennie is not without sin, for his actions appear barbaric, but his demise is devastating to readers because George's actions feel like a grave betrayal. Yet, there is an element of inevitability to this ending. Tension mounts as the story progresses and while it is clear Lennie is not cold-blooded, there is dark, Gothic slant to his seemingly unavoidable tendency towards violence; he does not lure his prey through duplicity or seduction, such as Stoker's Dracula or Le Fanu's Carmilla, but he commits monstrous acts regardless. Lennie is not capable of assimilating to societal conventions and thus he will always be a liability in an unforgiving world. This dynamic questions the way in which society takes care of one another, and Steinbeck appears to suggest throughout his fiction that people are increasingly putting the individual ahead of the community.

As has been stated, Steinbeck derided the treatment of farm hands and migrant workers who were at the mercy of an increasing system of supply and demand in America. In keeping with national ideology, George and Lennie dream of owning their own small plot of land. A place that they can cultivate and maintain, while they live "*off the fatta the lan*" (Steinbeck 16, italics in original). This is a modest dream and speaks more to the desire for independence, to progress beyond the state of perpetual job seeking and poor working conditions. Sadly, the

world in which George and Lennie live is cold and inhospitable, and it offers very little opportunity for men like them to become owners of their own Eden, a plight that is commonly endured throughout Steinbeck's fiction. The mantra they repeat about their own plot of land with their own vegetables, and rabbits that Lennie can look after is an ominous foretelling of the tragedy to come, as it becomes obvious as the story progresses that their dream is just that, a nebulous imagining that will never manifest in reality. What is salient about this dream is that it establishes a common ground between these downtrodden workers. All who hear about the goal wish to add a contribution and join in—Candy and Crooks are both eager to step out and have something of their own. They are attracted to the notion of living together and protecting one another, putting in equal effort for gains that they will share evenly. Such a concept is in stark opposition to the capitalist scheme of working for another man for a woefully low yield. It speaks to the idealisation of the fraternal bond; they are used to harsh conditions and feel alienated from society, so the dream of working together and living as equals is tantalisingly idyllic. Lennie and George embody the millions of Americans who will be at the mercy of the corporation for their entire lives.

Disempowered characters litter Steinbeck's fiction. The characters reflect social outcasts, who are lonely and often desolate. They exemplify the changing landscape of the nation, where the community ranks second to the individual. This exposes the underbelly of human greed and self-interest. It is not simply ownership that has eroded the compassion of farm owners, business owners etc., but the urge to keep the working class downtrodden and locked in the ranks below them. The simple desire of characters like Crooks, Candy, George and Lennie is to have friends, to feel as though the people around them will look out for them. This most basic function of human kindness is shown to be disappearing, as is shockingly displayed in *Grapes* and the open hostility of the burghers of California.

The key to the success of this story is that Steinbeck has avoided one dimensional characters. Clery posits that moral messaging “would be useless if not joined to compelling narratives that stirred the emotion of the reader” (23). Crucially, Steinbeck never used his authorial voice to “declare his superiority” (Benson 3). His true gift is that his writing resonates with people; his stories are inarguably compelling because they are fundamentally human and flawed. The isolation and weakness of the characters in *Mice* leads them to feel helpless. Human nature dictates that when one feels powerless, one must assert dominance over anyone or anything below them. Crooks and Lennie have an encounter during which Lennie shares his dream of owning a small plot of land with George, while Crooks divulges that he is lonely and hurt by the segregation he faces due to the colour of his skin: “Guys don’t come into a colored man’s room very much” (75). Despite sharing their vulnerabilities, Crooks feels the need to assert power over Lennie by belittling his and George’s dreams of ownership:

You’re nuts. Crook was scornful, “I seen hundreds of men come by on the road an’ on the ranches, with their bindles on their back an’ that same damn thing in their heads. Hundreds of them... an’ every damn one of ‘em’s got a little piece of land in his head. An’ never a God damn one of ‘em ever gets it. Just like heaven. Ever’body wants a little piece of lan’ (73).

Curley’s wife is similarly downtrodden, married to a nasty husband and stuck on a ranch with men who openly antagonise her and make her feel unwelcome. When she visits the barn and starts talking to the ranch hands, Candy angrily tells her that she “ain’t wanted here” (78). She reacts to her position of weakness by asserting power over those who are weaker than her, namely Crooks. She needs to threaten Crooks to gain some semblance of power in her

life: “Well, you keep your place then, Nigger. I could get you strung up on a tree so easy it ain’t even funny” (80). She exhibits hopeless discontent along with the others. She once had dreams of being a movie star in the “pitchers” (78), and now she finds herself in a marriage with a belligerent and controlling man. The American Dream has turned into a bleak nightmare for her, and her life appears to be decaying before her. Steinbeck’s texts are famously male-centric, and many female characters are not given significant fleshing out; Claude-Edmonde Magny, Robert Morsberger and Joseph Fontenrose have determined that Steinbeck writes only two types of women: the Virgin Whore, the sexual object, or the maternal figure “who is nearly sexless” (Cederstrom 189). In *Mice*, Curley’s wife is the only woman who is granted any dialogue, yet she is not even given a name of her own. This absence of dimension does serve to affirm her role in the story, as she embodies the classic femme fatale. Though there are hints that she is simply miserable, she is acutely aware of her physicality and the effect this has on men, which echoes the explicit sexuality of the vampirellas in *Dracula*, or Oscar Wilde’s *Salomé*.

Steinbeck’s Gothicism is subtle and pervasive. Gothic settings are often wretched places, where the natural world has fallen into a state of decay; in the 2012 film *Snow White and the Huntsman*, based on the Grimm Brothers’ nineteenth century fairy tale, the rotting flora of the Dark Forest reflects the pernicious influence of the Evil Queen. In Poe’s “House of Usher,” the narrator describes a melancholy scene:

I looked upon... the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain – upon the bleak walls – upon the vacant eye-like windows – upon a few rank sedges – and upon a few with trunks of decayed trees – with an utter depression of soul. (109)

Steinbeck effectively sets the Gothic mode against modern day, realist settings; the juxtaposition of these Gothic influences functioning on the lush, fertile lands of California emphasises the darkness that lurks beneath the surface in societies that privilege the individual over the collective. Gothic elements in *Mice* are the disenfranchisement of those who sit outside social normality by an encroaching capitalist system that demarcates who can feasibly expect to own property, and those for whom it will always be an attainable dream. Lennie and George's greatest desire is to be left alone, running their own farm and leading a life where "nobody gonna hurt nobody nor steal from 'em" (Steinbeck 104).

Of Mice and Men illustrates Steinbeck's interest in subverting the sentimental and in doing so he generates such a darkness in the story that lends itself to a Gothic interpretation. For example, Lennie's destruction of pretty, furry things is decidedly unsentimental behaviour (Seelye 26). Indeed, Seelye points out that Steinbeck's "use of the sentimental mode is to hold up a promising picture and then destroy it" (26), while Burton Rascoe asserts that "Steinbeck has compassion without maudlinity, sentiment without sentimentality, a stern, realistic, very observant and deductive sense about the realities and about the consequences in a chain of causes" (212). The story takes a particularly Gothic turn when George must kill his friend, which is predicted from the early pages of the novel. After the accident with Curley's wife, Lennie has hidden in the brush by the river that was designated in the first chapter as the safe space that Lennie could run to if he got in trouble. Thus, shooting Lennie in this place symbolises a terrible violation of their friendship. It shatters the dream of their own farm and their brotherhood in a cruelly finite manner. Parallels can be drawn between Lennie and the character Bubber, from Carson McCullers' Southern Gothic novel *The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter*. Similar to Lennie's fixation with Curley's wife and soft textiles, Bubber is dazzled by neighbour Baby Wilson's perfect pink outfit and pocketbook: "Please, Baby—"

Bubber said when she started to pass them. “Lemme see your little pink pocket-book and touch your pink costume” (McCullers 148). In both stories the fixation leads to tragedy: Lennie kills Curley’s wife and Bubber shoots Baby in the head. While Baby survives the incident, Bubber is irrevocably changed; he no longer answers to the affectionate family nickname, he withdraws from his family and friends, his childhood was over: “After he shot Baby the kid was not ever like little Bubber again” (McCullers 159). He does not die as Lennie does, but part of him is certainly lost forever after the shooting. Losing one’s childhood means they must confront the frailty of the human condition.

Peter Kafer suggests that the “Gothic formula requires hero/villains, innocent victims, places of haunting, historical pasts weighing upon the present, and an author’s willingness to write excess” (xv). Steinbeck has combined many of these elements in *Of Mice and Men*; death is in excess for such a diminutive story and claims many innocent victims, and complicates the constitution of heroes and villains. Death looms above *Mice*, punctuating the story at regular intervals and putting a spotlight on the fragility of living creatures. As Carol Davison describes, death is “the quintessential emblem of the Freudian uncanny in the Gothic; while being ‘of the home’ and familiar, it also remains...unfamiliar” (*The Gothic and Death* 2). The commonality between the deaths in the story—the mice, the puppy, Candy’s dog, Curley’s wife, and finally Lennie, is that they are all murders. By applying a Gothic lens to the reading of this novella, these murders, which oscillate between accidental and intentional, reveal a darkness within humans. They also create a suspenseful atmosphere which evokes classic Gothic tales; this fear and tension complicates an otherwise quaint, pastoral story about America. The narrative raises the questions of euthanasia, or humans playing god. Readers are first introduced to the concept via familiar means: Candy’s dog is old, lame, and unfit for purpose, so like many farm dogs before him who reach their expiration date, he is

put down by another farmhand. The next instance of such an action is much more macabre, when George concludes that he must “put down” Lennie. Lennie’s uncanny size and strength cannot be controlled so he is sacrificed to restore order to the farm, and to let George live independently, without the hefty responsibility of managing Lennie. As explored in *Frankenstein*, the question of humans playing god and deciding to create and destroy life was a Gothic concern. It addressed the tension between God and science and whether humans had the right to make decisions that were hitherto the divine right of the Lord.

Chapter 3

The Pastures of Heaven – Curses in Eden

Written in 1932, *The Pastures of Heaven* explores a luscious valley in Corral de Tierra, Monterey, California that has been christened the “Pastures of Heaven” by a Spanish corporal. Upon discovering the luscious fields of the valley, the corporal whispered “Holy Mother! ... here are the green pastures of Heaven to which our Lord leadeth us” (Steinbeck *Pastures* 4). This region is home to generations of families who have cultivated the land to make a life for themselves in the valley. *The Pastures of Heaven (Pastures)* is a collection of vignettes that offers a view into the lives of the families inhabiting the valley. These short stories are both independent and interrelated; the Munroe family acts as the connective tissue, while the rest of the characters’ experiences with curses, misfortune, and isolation thematically unify the short stories. Outwardly, the pastures evoke feelings of a quaint Eden in the American West; peaceful and idyllic, it appears to be a prime setting for a Romantic, pastoral tale. Steinbeck will complicate this vision, as this valley cannot elude the encroachment of modernity and the decay of the American Dream. Harbour Winn asserts that Steinbeck arranges an intricate tapestry of “themes and motifs” throughout the cycle of *The Pastures of Heaven* (qtd in Roggenkamp 22). Steinbeck enriches the links between stories by providing a Gothic frame for the cycle and implying that the valley may be cursed, an implication that runs through the cycle with “incremental effects.” The story opens and closes with the exposition of characters gazing upon the bucolic valley and marvelling at its splendour, but “within this narrative framework, each story examines the effect of one supposedly cursed family on the other residents of the valley. A morbid fog hangs over the Pastures of Heaven” (Roggenkamp 22).

Steinbeck's short story cycle grapples with the dichotomy of good and evil, and examines the dissonance of man living in the natural world. Alesya Petty applies the Bakhtinian concept of polyphony to Steinbeck's short story cycle, that is "a multiplicity of independent and often antithetic narrative voices, none of which is given predominance" (175). Steinbeck described the framework of *Pastures* in a letter to his agent, Mavis McIntosh:

The manuscript is made up of stories, each one complete in itself, having its rise, climax and ending. Each story deals with a family or an individual. They are tied together only by the common locality and by the contact with the Morans. Some of the stories are very short and some as long as fifteen thousand words. (Steinbeck, Elaine and Wallsten 42)

Petty explains that within the figurative meaning of polyphony there is an inherent notion of harmony, and within *Pastures* the "theme of harmony lurks in silent but unavoidable juxtaposition to the notion of dissonance" (175). Petty suggests that harmony assumes accordance with general norms, an idea that is conveyed through the examination of individual ambitions clashing with societal obligations (176), whereas dissonance, in one strain, represents the disruption of social cohesion and disillusion, and in another connotes the fragmentary structure of the short story cycle that is at odds with the rounded symphony of a traditional novel form (175).

Steinbeck uses the Gothic mode by representing the Munroe farm as cursed. This curse is thought to have been passed down the generations of the Battle family. George Battle dies as a result of his relentless toiling of the land, and he bequeaths the farm to his son, John. John cares not for the land for he is a religious zealot whose mental clarity is in steady decline

until he is killed by a rattlesnake bite. These deaths crystallise the lore of the curse in the valley, and when Bert Munroe arrives on the farm, the townsfolk wonder if he will meet a similarly dire fate. Bert is already of the belief that he carries with him a curse, as his business ventures have failed time after time:

“He had engaged in many enterprises and every one had failed, not through any shortcomings on Bert’s part, but through mishaps, which, if taken alone, were accidents. Bert saw all the accidents together and they seemed to him the acts of a Fate malignant to his success... he was half convinced that a curse rested upon him.”

(Steinbeck *Pastures* 16)

This trope of family curses or prophecies is a hallmark of classic Gothic fiction, seen in the likes of Horace Walpole’s *Castle of Otranto*, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *House of Seven Gables*, or Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Black Cat.” Steinbeck was inspired by a real-life family who manifest in *Pastures* as the Munroes. He termed the curse of the Moran family a “flavour of evil,” despite their being as “honest and as kindly as any” (Life in Letters 39–40). He recalls that every place the Morans went, discord would soon follow, and every person they came into contact with would suffer injury, which is captured in the pages of *Pastures* following the arrival of the Munroes. The Pastures represented a new opportunity for Bert and his family, and he hoped to circumvent the bad fortune that had stymied his business endeavours thus far. To an extent, his hopes are realised, for the Battle farm is rejuvenated under Munroe’s tending and becomes successful. It appears that Bert acts as a sort of conduit or vehicle for the curse, as the townsfolk he comes into contact with tend to suffer from the curse instead. His actions, though lacking malicious intent, indirectly lead to the institutionalisation of Tularecito, the macabre maternal filicide in the Van Deventer family,

the dissolution of Lopez sisters' business, Raymond Banks confronting his habit of attending executions, and the fire that destroys the Whiteside home.

A key, recurring motif in Steinbeck's fiction is the discovery of heaven on earth in the American West, or perhaps more importantly, the plight of those desperate to attain it, such as the throngs of migrant families in *The Grapes of Wrath*. With *Pastures*, Steinbeck has envisioned "a landscape burdened by the mark of evil; the place of beautiful dreams becomes instead a locus on nightmares" (Roggenkamp 22). Indeed, the discovery of the pastures, something beautiful and peaceful, is tainted by the aforementioned Spanish corporal's connection to the "enslavement and exploitation of native American peoples" (22–23). His death by syphilis is easily interpreted as karmic retribution. The stain of slavery on American history populates Southern Gothic fiction as the spectre that will not abate; perhaps the founding of the pastures by a man who practiced the exploitation of human beings contributes to the misfortune that befalls the residents of the valley.

John Battle embodies the role of the Christ figure, which is a returning symbol in Steinbeck's work. From his institutionalised mother John inherits "the epilepsy and the mad knowledge of God" (Steinbeck 8). John roams the valley "hurling his hands about, invoking devils and then confounding them, exorcising and flaying incarnate evil" (Steinbeck 8); a concern with good and evil is a defining trait of Gothic literature. John sewing protective crosses into his clothes is reminiscent of the rosaries that abound in *Dracula* to ward off vampires.

Roggenkamp reasonably compares John Battle's frenzied attack on a lilac bush to Hawthorne's Young Goodman Brown's "haunted" venture into the forest and his ensuing religious crisis (24). John is convinced that the rattlesnake he comes upon is the devil incarnate, and is too engrossed with exorcising the devil to evade the snake's fatal strikes. John does not question his faith like Brown, but his religious mania is his ultimate undoing.

Already suspicious of the spectres looming over the Battle farm, the residents of the pastures become convinced that this particular plot of land is haunted when the subsequent occupants, the Mistrovics, vanish without a trace. Following the disappearance, the local sheriff visits the property in search of answers, and in true Gothic fashion, the scene awaiting inspection is suffused with mystery and a shimmer of the supernatural: “the kitchen was immaculately clean, and the table set; there were dishes on the tables, saucers of porridge, and fried eggs and sliced bread. On the food a little mould was forming” (Steinbeck 11). The fate of the Mistrovics is never uncovered, and the house becomes frightening and deteriorates as if possessed by spirits: “There was something fearsome about the gaunt old house with its staring vacant windows. The white paint fell off in long scales; the shingles curled up shaggily. The farm itself went completely wild” (Steinbeck 9).

Ironically, Bert Munroe felt immediately liberated when he purchased the Battle farm, since “He knew he was safe from his curse” (17). His introduction to the townsfolk alerts him to the mysterious past of the farm:

“We always thought that place was cursed. Lots of funny things have happened there
Seen any ghosts yet?” Bert laughed. “If you take away all the food from a place the
rates will leave,” he said. “I took all the oldness and darkness away from that place.
That’s what ghosts live on.” (18)

The first story ends on a portentous note as the men joke that perhaps Bert’s prior bad fortune and the haunting of the farm may have “mated... Maybe there’ll be a lot of baby curses crawling around the Pastures the first thing we know” (19). The intriguing quality of this short story cycle is that indeed each subsequent chapter presents its own baby curse, giving this conversation between Bert and T. B. Allen a prophetic spin, suffusing the stories with a Gothic tension from the outset.

True to Steinbeckian form, this Edenic community will see its members fall as a result of the frailty inherent in the human condition. Lloyd-Smith explains that “Hallmarks of the Gothic include a pushing toward extremeness and excess, and that, of course, implies an investigation of limits” (5). Through this exploration of extremes “whether of cruelty, rapacity and fear, or passion and sexual degradation, the Gothic tends to reinforce, if only in a novel’s final pages, culturally prescribed doctrines of morality and propriety” (5). In *Pastures*, many characters demonstrate some measure of disconcerting and extreme behaviour, such as John Battle’s religious mania, or Shark Wicks and his perverse obsession with his daughter’s purity and therefore the regularity of her menstrual cycles, or Raymond Banks’ compulsion to attend executions at San Quentin Prison during which he feeds off the emotional excess of other spectators. Extreme behaviours reveal the human desire to attain perfection and happiness, but the experiences of these characters confirm that perfection is an unrealistic construct that is not compatible with the fallibility of the human condition; John Battle will kill himself in his religious quest, Wicks’ daughter is lured by the swagger of newcomer Jimmy Munroe, and Banks will eventually come to question his macabre indifference to the deaths he has hitherto regarded as entertainment.

Pat Humbert is another member of the community who feels weighed down by a supernatural phenomenon. Since the death of his parents, Pat cannot bear to be by himself, and he begins to fear being inside his own house for the spectre of his late parents hangs so heavily in the homestead. The haunting Pat describes is acute and overwhelms him:

Pat discovered that his body was tense and cold. He was listening for sounds from the sitting room, for the creak of the rocking chairs and for the loud breathing of the old

people... Pat started violently. His head and legs became damp with perspiration.”

(Steinbeck 154)

This haunting is such that Pat has to lock up the sitting room, where the ghostly presence of his parents is particularly pronounced. Ten years after the death of his parents, the Munroes have moved to the Pastures, and one day Pat overhears the daughter, Mae, exclaiming over the beautiful rose that has grown along the outside of his house and speculating on what the interior might look like. This ignites an excitement in Pat and he decides to redecorate in the image of “pretty” Vermont houses (Steinbeck 160). This project leads to a quasi-exorcism of the spectral sitting room, which has been locked for the past decade:

The air was foggy with cobwebs; a musty odor flowed through the door, there were the two rocking chairs on either side of the rusty stove. Even through the dust he could see the little hollows in their cushions. But these were not the terrible things. Pat knew where lay the center of his fears... he knew exactly where it was. Hadn't it haunted him for ten years? He picked up the table and the bible together, ran out of through the kitchen and hurled them into the yard. Now he could go more slowly. The fear was gone. (Steinbeck 162)

During the transformation, Pat entertains fantasies of inviting Mae Munroe to visit the house to show off his carefully selected furniture and gleaming ornaments, and how he might nonchalantly explain “I always kind of liked it” (Steinbeck 167). When Pat finally musters the courage to visit the Munroes and proffer the invitation, he is met with the news that Mae is engaged to Bill Whiteside. Misery descends upon Pat, and after the ephemeral pleasure of transforming his sitting room, he now cannot bear to enter the house. He was “afraid he might lock up the door again. And then, in all the years to come, two puzzled spirits would

live in the beautiful room” (168). This signals that Pat’s haunting is deep-set within him and material distractions will not alleviate his inner turmoil. This particular vignette shares an eerie quality similar to that felt in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short story “The Yellow Wallpaper,” where the interior trappings of homes, which are ostensibly designed to instil feelings of homeliness and comfort, can have the adverse effect of psychologically tormenting the inhabitants.

The story of the Whiteside family is imbued with Gothic overtones. Richard Whiteside headed West to find gold in 1850, but he soon decides that gold prospecting was “bad husbandry” (169). He tours the hills of Monterey and when he espies the green valley of the Pastures, he feels a great sense of “consummation” (169). He says to himself, “Now if there could be a sign, it would be perfect. I know this is the place, but if only there could be an omen to remember and to tell the children” (169); he is immediately awarded such a sign in the form of a breeze and a whirlwind of leaves. Though omens may work in the Whiteside favour insofar as establishing a life in the Pastures, there will come a sense that the family labours under a curse, as three generations fail to foster the large families they so desire. Richard has dreams of building a grand homestead on the two hundred and fifty acres’ worth of land he purchased in the valley. He is building a legacy: “I’ve come to stay. My children and their children and theirs will live in this house. There will be a great many Whitesides born here... Properly cared for, the house will last five hundred years” (171). Richard tells his bride, Alicia, of the curse upon his family, that the past two generations have only produced two children, and the family home burned to the ground suddenly. He believes his migration to the West acted as a cleansing ritual akin to those practiced in ancient times when people believed they had fallen out of favour with their god. Alas, such a curse had not been

lifted, for Richard and Alicia only had one son, John. Richard spent the last days of his life in a state of delirium during which he talked of nothing but children.

John grew up to love the Whiteside house even more than his father, and he shared a similar “hunger” for children (186). Yet, he and his wife would only conceive once. Bill Whiteside represents the next generation of Americans. John notices that he is not interested in farming, nor the traditions that he himself had enjoyed as a child, such as listening to his father read Greek philosophy aloud. Bill was “sharp in a business sense” (188), and when he becomes engaged to Mae Munroe the pair decide to move to Monterey where Bill has bought into a Ford dealership, effectively extinguishing Richard and John’s aspirations of generations growing up on the farm and tending to the land. Bill and Mae illustrate the intrusion of modernity on the farming industry, suggesting that the future is located in towns and cities that have advanced beyond remote rural towns where “there’s nothing doing” (191). In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Connie and Rose of Sharon, the younger generation, have planned for a similar departure, understanding that they will not be able to prosper in rural America:

‘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.’ (Steinbeck 210)

The denouement of the Whiteside chapter is a symbolic blaze that demolishes the homestead. A “little autumn whirlwind” (195), reminiscent of the one that convinces Richard to build a life in the valley, is the cause of a devastating fire that destroys that life and legacy. This accident could plausibly be attributed to Bert Munroe’s “baby curses,” as he is the one who

instigates burning the brush, but the fire also feels symbolic of the trials the Whiteside family has faced; John told Bill that the “place is in your blood” (192) and he feels such a connection to it that when it burns he claims “I think I know how a soul feels when it sees its body buried in the ground and lost” (197). As Melanie Mortlock shrewdly summarises:

Steinbeck demonstrates in his novel that man’s continual attempt to create heaven on earth must always result in failure, and that both his characters and his readers, unwilling to acknowledge this inherent limitation in themselves, insist on assigning blame to an imagined external force, a “curse.” (qtd in Petty 177)

Themes of bloodlines, curses, and ties to family citadels are core elements of Gothic fiction, and Steinbeck employs them here to convey man’s struggle to maintain the American pastoral ideal in the modern age.

Running concurrent to the theme of a decaying Eden haunted by dark curses is the tension of adhering to social norms, and the marginalisation that occurs when one fails to do so. Junius Maltby is content to live life on his own terms and eschew social conventions, such as personal grooming, taking pride in the upkeep of one’s home, and contributing to the agricultural commerce of the valley. Junius finds his way to the Pastures to improve his health and over the course of his recovery he grows “superbly lazy” (Steinbeck 74). His materialistic inclinations are non-existent: “He had five hundred dollars, not that he ever saved any money; he had simply forgotten to spend it” (Steinbeck 73). Controversially, Junius does not focus his energies on husbandry once his health is restored, in fact, the pastoral setting of the Pastures sparks a love of idleness in Junius,

He liked the valley and the farm, but he liked them as they were; he didn't want to plant new things, nor to tear out the old. When Mrs Maltby put a hoe in his hand and set him to work in the vegetable garden, she found him, likely enough, hours later, dangling his feet in the meadow stream and reading his pocket copy of *Kidnapped*.
(Steinbeck 75)

Junius' aversion to labour is so extreme that the family plunges into poverty, and still he will not surrender his leisure time for the sake of prosperity. His wife and two of his sons ultimately succumb to influenza, leaving Junius with a newborn son in his sole charge. Junius makes the rest of the community uncomfortable with his nonconformist behaviour. His neighbours resent the fact that Junius possesses fertile land and refuses to cultivate it, and after attempting to manipulate his behaviour by their example, they "come to think of Junius as an outcast... They outlawed him from decent society and resolved never to receive him should he visit them" (Steinbeck 81).

Junius is rejected by the community because he does not adhere to social conventions observed by the rest of the valley's population, causing a sense of loathing that "busy people have for lazy ones" (Steinbeck 77). The tension between a traditional farming lifestyle and a loose, unorthodox one compels the community to disassociate with Junius, but they worry about the wellbeing of the young son, Robbie. Out of deference for his departed mother, Mamie Quaker, who was respected within the valley, the local women vow to get the county involved once Robbie reaches school age. Their meddling facilitates Robbie's entrance to the local school, which leads to a tight camaraderie with the school kids who come to revere the unconventional Maltby lifestyle to such an extent that they started "tearing holes in the knees of their overalls" to match Robbie's ragged clothes (Steinbeck 83). The schoolteacher, Miss

Morgan, takes great interest in Robbie's surprising intellect and popularity, and develops a keen interest in meeting Junius, despite the rumours that circulated the valley. Ultimately, Miss Morgan will become an advocate for Junius when the school board intervenes by offering Robbie a package of new clothes. Robbie, upon opening the parcel, flushes red and runs away. The board are flummoxed and ask Miss Morgan to explain the boy's behaviour, and her response is a reprimand: "I think, you see – why, I don't think he ever knew he was poor until a moment ago" (Steinbeck 95).

Junius consequently decides to take Robbie back to San Francisco and resume working as an accountant, effectively dashing the pastoral idyll they had enjoyed in the Pastures of Heaven. In this chapter, the Maltbys represent the "good"—they have established a life where they are independent, content, and not motivated by materialistic greed, but their lifestyle is an affront to the members of the community. They decide to intervene, becoming the "evil" in this dichotomy. Miss Morgan encounters Junius and Robbie at the bus stop as they prepare to leave the valley; they are almost unrecognisable in their new clothes with shorn hair. Following the intervention from the school board, Junius becomes ashamed of his simple lifestyle and feels that he has gravely underserved his son: "I didn't know I was doing an injury to the boy, here... I suppose I should have thought about it. You can see that he shouldn't be brought up in poverty... I didn't know what people were saying about us" (Steinbeck 96). Miss Morgan attempts to counter Junius' despondency, crying "You don't believe everything silly people tell you, do you?" (Steinbeck 97). Yet Junius is resolute, and the teacher watches sadly as the father and son climb on to the bus and make their departure from the Pastures of Heaven.

The story of Junius and Robbie is an acute illustration of Steinbeck's perception of good and evil. Richard Peterson explains that the "good" is the peaceful coexistence of man and nature within a system that advocates for personal contentment that is not contingent upon submission to societal demands, whereas the "evil" is portrayed via characters like Mrs. Munroe, who prize above all a "public morality based upon appearance and a social order based upon ownership and upkeep [that] works against the natural community that exists between people and the natural harmony that exists between the people and the land" (97). This reading gives significant weight to the ending of *Pastures*, as Junius' defeat telegraphs a much greater blow to the human condition in an increasingly modern, material world. Petty suggests that Steinbeck uses this defeat to communicate the unattainability of happiness for dreamers who operate outside the boundaries of societal norms and who struggle with the "cruelty of the contemporary world. Steinbeck's attitude towards modernity corresponds to the underlying motif of unattainable harmony in earthly life due to the disrupting dissonance of conflicted human nature" (177).

Such marginalisation and fear of the unorthodox recalls the Gothic tradition of the isolation of "others" and their rejection from communities, which applies to numerous characters in *Pastures*. In Chapter IV, Tularecito is described as a grotesque child, "one of those whom God has not quite finished" (46). He is frequently compared to an animal, and his appearance has earned him the sobriquet "Little Frog." While he "can do marvellous things with his hands... he cannot learn to do the simple little things of the school" (46), and he is prone to uncontrollable rages. His final altercation with Bert Munroe leads to his incarceration in an asylum. The Lopez sisters (Chapter VII) are another unorthodox pair, who run a restaurant out of their kitchen. In an attempt to boost profits, they establish a routine of sleeping with their customers; they never charge for these activities and they pray profusely to the Virgin

Mary afterwards, whose statue was now “conveniently placed in the hall to be accessible from both bedrooms” (101). Inevitably, news of such impropriety reached the sheriff (it is implied that Bert Munroe is the gossip), and their practice is shut down. The sisters have to leave their home and resort to traditional prostitution to earn a living.

In Chapter V, readers encounter Helen Van Deventer and her daughter, Hilda. Helen has been besieged by misfortune her whole life, from the death of her Persian kitten, then her father, and later her husband; yet the author suggests she may take a maudlin pleasure in such things: “Seemingly she hungered for tragedy and life had lavishly heaped it upon her” (55). Helen moved to the Pastures with her daughter, who is “not completely well in her mind” (56). To demonstrate her long-suffering endurance, Helen disregards repeated advice from her doctor to institutionalise Hilda and tries to keep matters under control by herself. When Bert Munroe calls upon the house to discuss the young girl whom he had heard shrieking from a barred window; Helen panics at the inquiry and realises that so long as Hilda was here, she could never enjoy the tranquillity of the Pastures. This leads to the macabre actions of a mother so concerned with appearances that she would choose to kill her daughter rather than send her to an asylum. These interchapters emphasise, via Gothic trends of violence and alienation, that when people do not fit the prescribed societal mould, their fate becomes very precarious indeed.

The Pastures of Heaven reads like a lament to the American pastoral and studies the good and evil inherent in the human condition. The great pastoral West is succumbing to industrialisation and by the 1930s the idyllic, remote agricultural communities were becoming endangered as machine-run farms threatened to make farmers obsolete. In addition to challenges with industrialised husbandry, the spectre of materialism and social constructs

will cause tension in these communities. The townsfolk of the valley are so concerned with outward appearances and symbols of material success:

The people of the Pastures of Heaven recoiled from Junius Maltby... Here in the fertile valley he lived in fearful poverty. While other families built small fortunes, bought Fords and radios, put in electricity and went twice a week to the moving pictures in Monterey or Salinas, Junius degenerated and became a ragged savage. (Steinbeck 80–81)

Such a preoccupation with the visibility of success causes the townsfolk to struggle to reach inner peace and contentment; the irony is that characters who can achieve this peace, like Junius Maltby, are run out of town due to the discomfort his sparse lifestyle caused the community.

Regarding the Edenic quality of *Pastures*, critics viewed these stories as “as an attack on humanity’s illusive desire to create heaven on earth” (Roggenkamp 19). Roggenkamp proposes that *Pastures* can actually be read as “an experiment in genre in which Steinbeck grafts Gothic conventions onto the landscape of the American West, using the hybridized form of the short story cycle” (19). The West characterises an “imaginative border between the known and the unknown,” acting as a “bridge to gothic domains” (Mögen, Sanders, and Karpinski 13). Gothic conventions that can be seen in *Pastures* include “supernatural forces, family curses, physical and psychological haunting, murder, violence, imprisonment” (Roggenkamp 19); in *Pastures*, imprisonment commonly comes in the form of commitment to asylums, and for such a small community, there is an uncanny number of characters suffering with mental illness, like Hilda Van Deventer, Myrtle Battle, the Little Frog, and

even Junius Maltby's perpetual laziness is so unfathomable to the locals that it is comparable to a deficiency.

Roggenkamp posits that Steinbeck "reworks the romantic tradition of the gothic within the bounds of a modernistic narrative form" (20), effectively generating an atmosphere of tension and monstrosity using sparse, modern language and recognisable settings. Steinbeck transplants the Gothic onto the American landscape, mirroring the works of Southern writers such as William Faulkner and Erskine Caldwell (20). The resulting fiction positions an "apparent Promised Land against a darker, possibly cursed, version of Eden and sharply contrasts the peaceful valley with the disrupted lives played out within it" (20). Louis Owens credits the valley setting of *Pastures* as symbolising that Steinbeck's characters inhabit "a fallen world and that the quest for the illusive and illusory Eden will be of central thematic significance" (100).

The form of *Pastures* was a departure for Steinbeck, who was likely influenced by Sherwood Anderson's short story cycle. Parini expounds that the lack of critical reception to *Pastures* could have been because it was a piece of work that was difficult to label: "it cannot be called 'a novel' and it doesn't really fit the category of 'a story collection.' It is difficult to categorize: as a form, it has much in common with *Winesburg, Ohio*, which remained one of Steinbeck's favourite books" (161). Bert Munroe evokes Anderson's George Willard as the unifying character that weaves in and out of the cycle stories. Similarities can also be drawn between Steinbeck's chapters in *Pastures* and Flannery O'Connor's *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, although O'Connor's short stories are not interconnected, they engender a comparable tension and foreboding as themes of good and evil within humans are explored.

Steinbeck combines his economic narrative form with thematic fancy from the Gothic canon, creating a setting that is outwardly idyllic but psychologically unnerving; the *Pastures*,

though exceptionally beautiful, are not outside of the realm of the familiar in the American landscape, proving that Gothic terror can thrive outside of European castles or monasteries. Southern Gothic writers championed this shift, illuminating Gothic horrors in regular American settings. Roggenkamp explains that Steinbeck

merges modernist narrative form with thematic uncertainty, weaving into his tales a quality of Gothicism reminiscent of American romantic literature and echoing Hawthorne's dark psychological fictions, in which our very ability to know what is and is not 'real' is called into question, along with America's own dark history. (26)

This combination produces a series of Gothic snapshots that are intriguingly positioned against a rural American backdrop, blurring the lines between what is real and imagined. Steinbeck's efforts in *Pastures* evoke the Western Gothic or Frontier Gothic mode, in which narratives undermine the paradigm of "freedom, frontier heroism" and the "triumph of Anglo 'civilisation'" (Kollin 676).

The frontier is the locus of the ubiquitous American Dream, but it also symbolises a "violent, consuming...encounter with the wilderness" (Mögen, Sanders, and Karpinski, qtd in Roggenkamp 27). "Wilderness" in this case encompasses both the physical landscape and the human psyche, and this Gothicism "provides a symbolic structure which historically dramatizes a great debate about American values, about the true meanings of the American Dream" (27). Roggenkamp acutely surmises that Steinbeck "contrasts the idyllic landscape of California—the Promised Land—with a fantastical realm of gothic legend," managing to "translate myth and legend into twentieth-century realism" (27). Steinbeck's narrative can be located along the scale of the "real" and the "unreal," or between the "cursed land" and the "promised land" of the American West (27). A core tenet of the Gothic is the past permeating the present and the tension this causes; often this haunting is incorporated into the narrative

via a family curse or prophecy. This Gothic element is employed in *The Pastures of Heaven* to subvert the idealised American bucolic setting; what appears to be a peaceful, prosperous valley is actually home to madness, death and discord. Wagner-Martin summarises that this short story cycle reinforces “the sense of the grotesque in all humanity” (6).

The Pastures of Heaven is bookended by the historical discovery of the valley, and the contemporary reflection of the landscape, with an ominous note of land’s vulnerability to development. The cycle opens with the Spanish corporal marvelling at the sublime beauty of the valley and predicating the legacy he will establish upon the land. The epilogue of *Pastures* sees a sightseeing bus winding through the Salinas Valley to reach the same vantage point upon which the Spanish corporal had stood centuries earlier. The tourists gaze at the valley, viewing it as a place full of promise; the successful man predicts that there will be great houses in the valley, “stone house and gardens, golf links and big gates and iron work. Rich men will live there” (Steinbeck 199). The young married couple view it as a sanctuary from the pressures and responsibilities of life; the priest anticipates a most wholesome life in the valley, “No poverty there, no smells, no trouble... It would be quiet there; nothing dirty nor violent would ever happen there” (200). The old man becomes emotional as he takes in the valley, believing that if he lived there he could “think over all the things that ever happened to me, and maybe I could make something out of them, something all in one piece that had a meaning” (200). Finally, the bus driver describes how “quiet and easy a man could live on a little place” (201). The perception these tourists have of the Pastures of Heaven are ironically misguided, for though this valley may appear tranquil and idyllic on the outside, readers know the history of curses, misfortune, and loss that the residents have endured. Steinbeck has masterfully weaved Gothic elements in this short story cycle to create an ambiguity as to whether the pastures are really the Promised Land, or a darkly cursed land.

Conclusion

Applying the Gothic mode to Steinbeck's key Depression-era texts provides an opportunity to broaden our understanding of the social and moral decay that consumed America during the Thirties. Steinbeck's gift was his brutal honesty, his work was intentionally provocative and a call to action. His fiction dismantled the mythology of the American Dream and the prosperous west. Gothic writers utilise the grotesque to "operate on political, social, and philosophical planes as well as on the psychological" (Brown 6). Although Steinbeck is not part of the Gothic literary canon, nor has this thesis proposed that he should be, there is textual evidence to support the conclusion that he has employed Gothic elements in his dark meditations on American life during the Great Depression.

Steinbeck created a Gothic California, affixing a microscope to the prejudice and intolerance that pervaded the local communities. Pioneering Gothic writer Ann Radcliffe believed that terror could be "morally uplifting" and that the suggestion of horror in Gothic texts expands the soul of readers and "helps them to be more alert to the possibility of things beyond their everyday life and understanding" (Bowen). Steinbeck felt a responsibility to report on the true state of America, to illuminate the terror and hardships that vulnerable groups were facing. There were people who were not prepared to listen to his reportage, and those who attempted to undermine Steinbeck's integrity in order to preserve a false image of the country's prosperity. In order to really convey the extraordinary circumstances in which migrant families found themselves, Steinbeck Gothicised the modern landscape and littered it with monstrous technology, for, as Groom contends, "Gothic machinery is far more effective at producing sublime effects" (68). Tractors are depicted as monstrous instruments that devastate the farms and homes that have been in families for generations; the cold, hard machinery acts as a metaphor for the uncaring, hungry banks. The implication is that the

greed of large corporations has turned people into machines that are driven by profit, rather than humans driven by empathy and compassion.

Eric Savoy points out that the Gothic “embodies and gives voice to the dark nightmare that is the underside of the American Dream” (167). This apt description applies to Steinbeck’s work, as he writes characters whose families have been brought up on the American Dream, only to be living through the breakdown of a national mythology. His fiction illustrates, rather bleakly, that the American Dream is dead. It is no longer possible to be a self-made man in the growing capitalist society. Steinbeck’s Depression-era texts contextualise the changing landscape in a time of national disruption. By employing Gothic motifs of monstrosity he effectively underscores the tension around these changes that are touted as shortcuts to prosperity. Botting notes that “Gothic representations... are a product of cultural anxieties about the nature of human identity, the stability of cultural formations, and processes of change (*Aftergothic* 280).

The Grapes of Wrath remains a compelling protest novel that “continues to be read for its powerful evocation of America’s struggle in the 1930s as well as for its enduring humanist message” (Spangler 311). The Joad family are the eyes through which readers observe the changing landscape; they bear the indignity of the migrant camps, the aggression of local sheriffs and vigilantes, the hostility of the local Californian communities, and the exploitation of the capitalist model. Despite this adversity, the Joad family are still capable of thinking beyond their own needs by the novel’s end, as evidenced by Ma Joad and Rose of Sharon’s compassion for the starving man, and Tom’s rousing allegiance to fight inequality. *Grapes* is a compelling example of how Steinbeck seeks to work “against the alienating forces of modernity...to restore human interconnectivity” (Spangler 309).

Of Mice and Men is saturated with death and despair. The Gothic manifests itself in the demise of the central friendship between George and Lennie. The tragic murder of Lennie is a symbol of the alienation that was pervading society during the increasingly modern era. Lennie, with his monstrous, uncanny size and strength and mental impairment, was not capable of conforming to societal norms and therefore he had to be destroyed by his best friend. The American Dream, which is supposed to make life richer and fuller for all, regardless of class, seemingly only applies to a select portion of society. For those residing on the fringes, the dream was steadily eroding. Industrialised farming under corporations has made it near-impossible for men like George, Lennie, Candy, and Crooks to claim their own piece of land and live self-sufficiently; they will forever be enslaved by the greed of the capitalist system, which is the Gothic monster in many of Steinbeck's Depression-era texts.

In American Gothic fiction, the fantastical monsters tend to be absent, but this serves only to produce more terrifying revelations; indeed "the Gothic form has enabled writers to explore the shadow cast by the uncanny haunting presence of the nation's others" (Street and Crow 2). It is one thing for a scientific experiment gone wrong to inflict horrors on the community, like Frankenstein's monster, but for humans to commit crimes of hate and hostility to their fellow countrymen it's far more confronting because it asks viewers to examine their own capacity for greed and wickedness. In the South, supernatural villains are less common, but "ghosts and men in white sheets are real, as are shackles and clanking chains" (Street and Crow 2), which suffuses narratives with spectres of historical trauma. The hostile, inhospitable characterisation of Californians, landowners, ranch supervisors, and ultra-conservative communities elicits readers' fears of the human ability to discard the dispossessed. The power of the Gothic is its intention to:

give us the experience of the sublime, to shock us out of the limits of our everyday lives with the possibility of things beyond reason and explanation, in the shape of awesome and terrifying characters, and inexplicable and profound events. (Bowen)

The Pastures of Heaven confronts the myth of the Edenic American West, turning a beautiful, bucolic setting into a volatile environment labouring under curses. Steinbeck has effectively transformed a quaint rural tale into a haunted, Gothic narrative wherein characters are plagued by hauntings, misfortune and injury. Pat Humbert declines into psychological terror due to the spectre of his deceased parents, proving that material consumerism will not alleviate tensions buried deep inside one's self. The experiences of the Maltbys, Tularecito, the Lopez sisters, and Hilda Van Deventer speak to the alienation of marginalised people, which is a core element of the Southern Gothic tradition and provokes questions about how society treats minority groups. The curse that plagues the valley telegraphs the fragility of the human condition, and comments on the relationship between man and nature. Anyone who casts their eyes upon the Pastures of Heaven believes that the land will solve their problems, and provide them with a peaceful, prosperous life, but Steinbeck Gothicises this Promised Land by weaving the terror of burning family homesteads, violence, and isolation into the narrative.

The challenge of this thesis was exploring a critical approach to Steinbeck that has not been heavily mined in existing scholarship. The goal was not to argue Steinbeck that belongs in the Gothic literary canon, but that there is scope to apply the Gothic mode to his Depression-era texts *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *The Pastures of Heaven*. The value of reading Steinbeck with Gothic inflection is that it illuminates his critique of the treatment of

vulnerable groups during the Thirties in America, and confronts the devastating impact that industrialisation had on the American Dream. Steinbeck's Realist discourse invokes familiar, rural scenes with relatable, common characters, which he then subverts by employing Gothic elements such as death, decay, haunting, suspense, and alienation. Despite such commonplace settings, a darkness lurks within Steinbeck's characters and communities, which creates an uncomfortable atmosphere of suspense. In the absence of Victorian villains and supernatural monsters, Steinbeck forces his audience to question tradition paradigms of good and evil—and to consider the human capacity for wickedness.

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