“Pray God Some Day a Kid Can Eat:”
Hunger, Maturation, and the Near-Event in John Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath
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“Our people are good people; our people are kind people. Pray God some day kind people won’t all be poor. Pray God some day a kid can eat. And the associations of owners knew that some day the praying would stop. And there’s the end” (Steinbeck 239).

I

During the Great Depression, Americans moved: from the bustling East to the quieter West, from the decadence of the Roaring Twenties to the destitution of the 1930s, from the gluttony of post-World War I prosperity to the forced fasting brought on by the economic crash, and from lives as carefree children to existences as burdened adults, practically overnight. No work of American literature better describes this transition than John Steinbeck’s seminal work, The Grapes of Wrath, published in 1939, which details the Joad family’s journey from Oklahoma to California in search of work after suffering foreclosure, and, more importantly, their cyclical journey between satiation and hunger. Food lies at the heart of this novel, and scarcely a chapter goes by without the mention of eating or starving, planting or harvesting—even the work the family intends to do in California is food-centered. They do not plan to work in factories or gather cotton or tobacco—they plan to pick fruit. What is most interesting, though, is the correlation between the earning and possessing of food and the physical and emotional maturation of the characters. Indeed, one cannot mature, much less live, without food, and the desire not only to eat but also to be satiated influences every step that the characters make towards and away from adulthood—after all, hunger, in all its manifestations, becomes most important when food is scarce. Both hunger and the threat of hunger reduce proud and capable adults to discouraged, begging children, while satiation, and perhaps only autonomous /self satiation, mark the progression from dependent child to self-sufficient adult.

Childhood and adulthood indicate not only the literal stages of growth but also the allegorical representations of social and cultural readiness and wisdom. The Grapes of Wrath features characters from all age ranges and all levels of social and self awareness: Granma and Grampa are the fragile but
no-nonsense elders, Ma and Pa are the middle-aged heads of the family, Tom and Al are the virile young men, Rose of Sharon, or Rosasharn, is a married teenager pregnant with her first child, and twelve-year-old Ruthie and ten-year-old Winfield are on the cusp of adolescence, a term that proves critical in this examination of maturation.

The process of maturation, then, may have many definitions, but in The Grapes of Wrath, each main character follows one of five distinct paths to or away from physical and intellectual maturation: there is the progression from child to adult, the regression from adult to child, the movement from adulthood to an advanced state of adulthood, the movement from childhood to extended state of childhood, and the complicated existence within the liminal state rather recently named adolescence. Historically, children were expected to take on adult roles and responsibilities as soon as they were able, with little acceptance of extensions or regressions, but it was around the turn of the century that the idea of a delayed adulthood became possible. The economy was booming in the 1920s, so the traditional family unit began to become less of a reality, as young men and women favored living on their own and working to support only themselves in favor of settling down (Abelson 110). Thomas P. Gullotta agrees:

[On] the farm children and adolescents were needed to help tend the livestock and harvest the crops. During the early years of industrialization, young people were important as a source of cheap labor performing simple repetitive chores in mills. But with advancing technology […] and the arrival of millions of European immigrants […] young people were no longer needed in the labor pool and by 1914 every U.S. state save one had passed child labor laws. (7)

Depression-era America was a time of uncertainty, uncertainty that influenced the very process of growing up, not just for children but also for their parents, who, willingly or not, had to change in order to accept a changing world. Food insecurity lies at the core of this concept because not knowing if one’s hunger will be satiated is likely the greatest and most frightening sense of uncertainty existing among men. The Joads are no exception: children are allowed to behave as children, to have their hunger fed by others, for longer than they once were; adults who are expected to provide for these children either buckle under the pressure or find a way to feed everyone; and adolescents are unable to conclusively discover whether they are among the providers or those waiting to be fed. Through an examination of the ways in which the Joad family relates to food—the finding, cooking, sharing, and consuming of food—it will become clear that hunger is as much a physical ailment as it is an emotional struggle and a roadblock, or perhaps a stepping stone, on the path to maturity.
Historically, maturation was marked by puberty, marriage, and childbearing, usually in that order, but within the Joad family, the characters take many a detour from this path. Some characters, though, most notably Tom and Al, the Joad family’s middle sons, do remain fairly close to the traditional ideal of what it means to grow up, both physically and socially.

The novel begins with Tom Joad’s release from prison after having served four years for after accidentally killing a friend with a shovel during a drunken fight, and his prison time proves crucial in the understanding of his actual and perceived maturation because while in prison, Tom is guaranteed food, but on the outside, such food security is a luxury, if not a fantasy. He remarks that “they put me in, an’ keep me an’ feed me four years,” and his acknowledgement that someone else has provided his welfare for the past four years indicates that, though he is a convicted murderer and physically grown man, he is not yet mature. He merely finds surrogate parents within the prison system, and when he expresses while walking home, “I hope Ma’s cookin’ somepin. My belly’s caved,” he, once again, calls attention to his immaturity by acknowledging that he depends on his mother to feed him (Steinbeck 55, 67). He has not yet in his life experienced true, crippling hunger; therefore, he has not yet felt the desire or the need to feed himself. It is only after the journey begins, only after Ma Joad can no longer say, “We got a-plenty,” as she does upon his arrival home, that Tom begins to realize that he must begin to work for his food. But his maturation is slow-going: once they reach California, he does find occasional work, but he continues to be fed by others. He even sits down to breakfast with a family that has been “eatin’ good for twelve days now […] Workin’ an’ getting’ our pay an’ eatin’” (291). Though it is somewhat admirable that Tom chooses not to partake of what little food the Joad family has, it is still questionable that his unemployment is rewarded with a hearty meal. Tom’s misbehavior curries him no favor with the authorities or with his family, but it does often ensure that he will have food.

This theme of feeding the most undeserving members of society was a popular one during the Depression. In fact, Canadian author James Hinton penned “Meat!,” the story of a group of thieves plotting to steal sirloin steaks from a bear’s cage at the zoo. Published in the leftist journal New Frontier in 1937, this work explores the justness of feeding a bear when men are starving, and it explores this idea from many angles. The thieves reason that “Trotsky [the bear] eats good meat every day…With the help of a fish line or stick we may also eat meat. Every day. As much as we can eat,” but an elderly woman who catches them stealing the steaks shouts, “It’s cruel, it’s cruel, stealing—from an animal. Shame, shame!” (164,167). While Hinton portrays the thieves as everyday heroes of a sort, he also subtly suggests, through the old woman’s
rants, that there is indeed something shameful about what the men are doing, but not for the reasons he explicitly writes. The shame in their actions lies in the fact that they are common criminals, stealing food not to feed a house full of starving children or a sickly parent, but to feed themselves, to feed young, capable men. Yes, unemployment and the resultant hunger are true problems during the time in which this work is set, and the thieves even acknowledge that once the summer comes, there will be “jobs for all!—as I read in the papers,” but the question remains: When does misbehavior become moral? (164). That prisoners, zoo animals, and thieves are eating better and more often than good, honest, working people, sheds light on the ways in which hunger can lead to radical shifts in public outlook. Even though Hinton allows the possibility for the reader to see the thieves as criminals, not heroes, the reader still celebrates with them when they succeed, and their actions still seem distinctly noble, brave, and manly, just like those of Tom Joad.

The idea of misbehavior as a virtue, then, qualifies it as an assertion of independence and a step towards adulthood. The willingness to do whatever is necessary to eat and survive marks Tom’s maturation because, when he chooses to dine with the strangers at the camp, by default, he chooses not to wait for his parents to feed him. Though he does not feed himself, his parents do not feed him either, and that distinction classifies Tom as being well on his way to adulthood.

Nevertheless, his transformation is not complete. It is not until the end of the novel that Tom firmly positions himself within the sphere of adulthood by leaving the family in order to make his own way. He has violated probation by leaving Oklahoma, and he risks being caught, so, to save his family from potential legal trouble, he opts to leave. But before he does so, he explains that he will not truly leave the family because he will “be in the way kids laugh when they’re hungry an’ they know supper’s ready. An’ when our folks eat the stuff they raise an’ live in the houses they build” (419). He believes that his presence will be felt in the family’s self-sufficiency—he believes that he will gain his own self-sufficiency by allowing them to have theirs, and he believes that self-sufficiency comes through self-satiation. When he admits that the time has come for him to feed himself and for his family members to feed themselves, he becomes a man because he becomes independent and encourages his family to do the same.

It is only fitting that Tom’s departure causes the family to reshape: his arrival is what catapults the story into motion and shakes the characters loose from the lives they had known and accepted. His arrival is symbolic of the fact that the family is changing because he has been away for so long that no one is who he or she once was. By the time Tom is released from prison, his younger brother, Al, has grown up more than Tom had imagined but still
has a lot of maturing to do. He grows up relatively quietly and normally, and he seems the least affected by the family’s food-related struggle. It must be noted, however, that perhaps the reason for his masculine stoicism is that some time before the novel begins, he fully experiences his childhood and adolescence: “[H]e’s a-billygoatin’ aroun’ the country. Tom-cattin’ hisself to death […] He don’t think of nothin’ but girls and engines […] Ain’t been in nights for a week” (82). Here, he is the classic American teenager—he embraces the social and sexual freedom of being a young man, but he shirks his responsibilities at home in favor of staying out all night, something that only a young man still sure of his dinner can expect to do without repercussions. Al’s hunger, then, is not for food, but for life and sex and excitement. Just like Tom, Al knows that his parents will see to it that he has food to eat, so he is free to spend his time as he wishes. His much older uncle, John, feels the same desires but struggles to accept them:

He ate little, drank nothing, and was celibate. But underneath, his appetites swelled into pressures until they broke through. Then he would eat of some craved food until he was sick; or he would drink jake or whisky until he was a shaken paralytic with red wet eyes; or he would raven with lust for some whore in Sallisaw. (96)

Uncle John tries to suppress his appetites, but in the end, he must submit to them. The difference between him and Al is that Al is free to indulge, to taste of all that appeals to his palate, because he is young. Uncle John, though, must pretend to be satiated—mentally, physically, and sexually—in order to maintain the adult appearance that is expected of him. He struggles because he has not been allowed to be a child, because he has progressed too quickly from child to adult. But Al is fortunate: he binges during his youth, so that when the time comes to be an adult, he no longer feels John’s hunger: he has gorged himself on the trappings of youth and is ready to move on.

After Tom’s arrival, Al assumes a sense of adultness—it seems that his childishness and rakishness disappear, and he begins to behave like a man. Upon seeing Tom, Al’s “swaying strut like that of a rooster about to crow” becomes a quiet demeanor, and “admiration and veneration shone in his eyes, and his swagger fell away…Unconsciously he became like his brother […]” (84-5). Al, perhaps long-suspecting the obnoxiousness of his immaturity, suddenly embraces the more adult role of leader and protector, and when he exhibits his mechanical expertise in ensuring the running of the truck, “everyone respected him and his responsibility. Even Pa, who was the leader, would hold a wrench and take orders from Al” (97). During the trip to California and even once they arrive, Al does not make much trouble—he still philanders about town, but at the novel’s close, he finds a girl he wants to marry. In fact, Al is one of the only characters Steinbeck allows the reader to watch grow up—physically, emotionally, and chronologically. He goes from
being young and free, to being aware of his responsibility to his family, to being engaged and ready to start a family of his own. When Al plans to follow Aggie, his fiancée, and her family to another camp, Pa reminds him that the family needs him to be their driver-mechanic, to which Al responds, “I don’ care. Me an’ Aggie got to stick together” (437). And if we assume that the reason he has to stay with her is because he loves her, not because she is pregnant, it becomes clear that he has developed a new appetite for independence. He chooses to become a man during a time when being a man is much harder than it once was.

Another Canadian writer, Robert Hall, published “Breadline,” the story of a man who steals pork pies from a wagon in order to feed his children. This man, a criminal just like those from Hinton’s “Meat!,” is also presented as being heroic, but unlike Hinton’s thieves, Hall’s protagonist is broken. He is not content to wait in line and receive his ration because “he had a wife and three children on the verge of starvation…He could stand hunger himself, but would they give him anything to carry away for the children. He didn’t think so…[and] hungry children could not wait.” Al Joad, like Hinton’s hero, could simply seek to provide for himself and no one else, but he welcomes the responsibility of being a husband and father, even during a time in which basic necessities were hard to find. [Maybe some stats about Depression-era hunger?] Al marks his maturation through his willingness to abandon his well-fed childhood in order to take on the responsibility of feeding others.

Of course, Tom’s and Al’s desire to be independent mimics the common desire during the 1930s to be free from the government’s control of food distribution. The government doled out charity in the form of breadlines, soup kitchens, loans for sharecroppers, and the establishment of the minimum wage, but even after the Roosevelt’s New Deal, these entities rarely, if ever, met the people’s needs (Townson 215, 381). By choosing potential hunger over meager handouts, the brothers choose manhood over childhood: about to start picking peaches, Tom says, “Come on, Al…Bread an’ meat. We got to get ’em” (371). They choose to earn their bread instead of wait in line for the crumbs the government is willing to give.

III

For some of the Joads, namely Grampa, Granma, Pa, and Ma, the maturation from child to adult has already happened by the time the novel begins. They have not names but titles—they are so characteristically adult that they have traded their given names for the titles of markedly adult roles. The progression from child to adult, though, was often reversed and even halted during the Depression, as the lack of the ability to care for oneself and one’s family often left many adults feeling as helpless as children but with the emotional maturity and sense of responsibility of adults. For instance,
after Ma Joad thrusts Winfield’s pallor and Rosasharn’s growing belly into the unemployed Pa Joad's reality, he replies, “Seems like times is changed […] Time was when a man said what we’d do. Seems like women is tellin' now” and at this moment, Pa, who even calls his wife “Ma,” sounds and acts like he is a child being bossed by his mother (350). If he no longer carries the clout of a man, then, in his eyes, he is a child. Adulthood, then, is ephemeral and perpetual: once attained, it may come and go quickly, but it may never be fully erased from the human consciousness, and Grampa, Granma, and Pa Joad all experience temporary regression.

Granma and Grampa, feisty though they may be—Grampa describes himself as being “full a piss an’ vinegar,” to which Granma says “proudly, ‘A wicketer, cussin’er man never lived. He’s goin’ to hell on a poker, praise Gawd!’”—have an excuse for not being expected to provide for themselves: they are simply too frail to work, just as small children would be (79). And like small children, they express little shame about their weaker bodies and inability to earn their keep. Grampa does mention that he wants to drive the truck, but he speaks mostly in jest, and he understands and embraces the potential power of his limitations. He and his wife do not behave as children in the sense that they wait to be fed but in the sense that they act as loving, albeit slightly spoiled, children who delight in so often getting their way. As Grampa sits down for breakfast before the family leaves for California, he says, “Get outa my way, I’m hungry,” then “crowded past, sat down, loaded his plate… and before the others could get in, Grampa’s mouth was full” (79). Perhaps the reason for Granma and Grampa’s brashness is that over the years, they have earned the right to behave this way. In essence, their years of plowing, harvesting, and cooking are being repaid to them through a second shot at childhood: they have earned the right to be satiated, so their regression to childhood is not shameful as is that of their son, Pa Joad, who still has small children to raise.

Pa Joad is much emasculated and subsequently infantilized by his inability to find work and provide food for his family. He becomes like the children in that he waits for Ma Joad to scrounge up dinner, even though he knows that he has contributed little for her to able to do so. [Quote] Also, even though family values and expectations are shifting, he still insists that the entire family, including young Ruthie and Winfield, work gathering peaches at an orchard in California. Sensing his children’s exhaustion, he says to them, “You go to work…You got to put the peaches careful in the box. Here, now, one at a time” (372). One can almost hear the tenderness and sadness in Pa’s voice as he instructs the children. He knows that they are tired, but he attempts to appear as though he wishes to instill a strong work ethic in them. However, he cannot look past the fact that they are still “little fellas” (370).

Tom, well on his way to adulthood by this point, is the first to gather
enough to earn one dollar’s worth of store credit, enough to buy meat, potatoes, bread, and coffee, enough for one meal for the family of seven. The Joads work among thousands of fresh, delectable fruits, only to return to the camp to eat gray hamburger and stale bread. Candida Rifkind, in “The Hungry Thirties, Writing Food and Gender during the Depression,” quotes Leo Kennedy: “Breadlines in a wheat country are illogical and criminal,” and perhaps this is what frustrates Pa Joad (178). Supply exceeds demand, so much so that the orchard owners can afford to discard bruised peaches, but the very people picking the fruit cannot afford to feed their families.

So adamant in his desire to reassert his adulthood, he clings to any hope that he will find work. In fact, they came to pick peaches after a man had already warned them of the unfair conditions in the orchards:

- Takes three thousand men for two weeks when them peaches is ripe.
- Got to have ’em or them peaches’ll rot. So what do they do? They send out han’bills all over hell. They need three thousand’, an’ they get six thousand’. They get them men for what they wanta pay. If ya don’ wanta take what they pay, goddamn it, they’v a thousand’ men waitin’ for your job. (246)

Pa finds work, but at what cost? The work simply reminds him of his poverty because it reminds him that food is indeed plentiful. But this is not Pa’s only misguided attempt to earn his family’s supper, as his actions lead the family to California in the first place.

Before they leave Oklahoma, Tom mentions to his mother that he once met a man from California who told him that there, workers outnumber work, to which Ma replies, “Oh, that ain’t so […] Your father got a han’bill on yella paper, tellin’ how they need folks to work […] What’d they want ta lie for, an’ costin’ ’em money to lie?” (92). Pa Joad feels the burden of responsibility because, undoubtedly, the family would not have gone to California without his approval and encouragement. He plants the seed of white houses and orange groves and full dinner tables in everyone’s minds, including his own, but he cannot make his crop come to fruition.

He regresses to childhood for two reasons: because, like adolescent Al, he cannot be satiated, and because, unlike adult Al, who has yet to prove his abilities, he cannot feed his family. Jason Spangler writes in “We’re on a Road to Nowhere: Steinbeck, Kerouac, and the Legacy of the Great Depression” that “a turn toward mass over individual welfare […] inform[s] the dominant sociopolitical philosophy of [the era],” and this understanding of the Depression makes sense vis à vis Pa Joad’s insecurity because he will not think himself a man, i.e., an independent person, until he is able to feed his flock. His independence, his very adulthood, hinges upon his ability to provide the welfare of others; meanwhile, his welfare hinges on the levelheadedness, frugality, and strength of his wife.
Pa Joad is afraid. He exists only nominally as head of the family, as Ma Joad has usurped his power, and he risks losing the family due to starvation. Such worries were not uncommon, as one such account is reported in a 1931 article from the Wyandotte Echo, “Stone Sheriff on Errand of Mercy: Starving Idaho Family Puts Up Bitter Fight.” Government authorities arrive at a home to take the children to foster care because their parents cannot feed them, and it is the children’s mother, not their father, who fights for them to stay:

In Boise the mother objected to authorities taking the children to the home. The officers responding to Sheriff Stevens’ call for help, also were rained with blows. Finally the woman was overpowered and taken away. Her husband may not be able to feed the children, but the mother decides that she will try to protect them, which is precisely what Ma Joad does throughout The Grapes of Wrath. Pa Joad’s worry, then, is that, like the Idahoan woman, Ma Joad will one day be overcome by the pressure. That is his true fear: that Ma Joad will not be able to sustain the family any longer and the responsibility will once again return to him. At the novel’s end, he is still taking orders from his wife, and he has even adopted a childlike petulance. A storm comes as Rosasharn goes into labor, and Ma Joad urges her husband to find a dry place for their daughter to rest. Pa Joad replies sarcastically, “You ain’t said where-at we’re a-hurryin’ to,” then continues to sigh and complain that any place they find will probably be owned by someone else.

Pa Joad comes close to giving up—he resigns himself to allowing Ma to take charge, and though it is unknown when or if he will regain his manhood, what is known is the reason behind his acceptance of her control. Rifkind explains that “the unemployed man knows that charity food relief will not help to save his family without first exposing their domestic life to public scrutiny in a humiliating investigation of his failure to provide basic necessities,” so it is Pa’s reasoning that as long as family takes care of family, his adulthood can be waived for the moment (180). It all goes back to Kennedy’s assertion that for those living during the Depression, the mass becomes more important than the individual: as long as the family is taken care of, Pa does not mourn the loss of his maturity, and due to his sarcasm and joking, he appears to be a least somewhat accepting and aware of his lesser role in the family.

Though physical maturity eventually finds its end, emotional and social maturity may continue to blossom throughout life, as is the case with Ma Joad, who has taken on more responsibility in a few months than she ever has in a lifetime. The trip to California allows Ma Joad to come into her manhood, so to speak—Pa describes her as having gotten “so goddamn sassy…An’ she ain’t young, neither” (169). She is becoming more of an adult: she has perfected womanhood—the cooking, sewing, mothering, and loving—so now,
she tackles manhood by taking on her husband’s role as the family’s guide and protector.

Her role in the family’s food consumption changes as the novel progresses: at the beginning, she is the cook and little else, but towards the end, she becomes shopper, cook, mathematician, and volunteer. Because the men are out of work, it becomes her job to make sure that what little food they have is divided equally among the family, as well as sometimes shared with strangers.

The evolution of her role becomes clear through the examination of two critical scenes before the journey and at the end of the journey, respectively: the slaughtering of the family hogs and the spending of the earnings from peach picking. The day before they set out for the coast, the men of the family slaughter the hogs and salt the meat to preserve it to be eaten in the days to come—the women help in minor ways, such as boiling water and gathering supplies, but mostly, the preparing of the food for the long journey is men’s work (Steinbeck 104-7). Here, the men are working to feed their women and children—Reverend Casy, a family friend, even stops Ma Joad from doing the salting, even though she says it is women’s work: “It’s all work […] They’s too much of it to split up to men’s or women’s work. You got stuff to do. Leave me salt the meat” (107). Before the trip begins, the men are still men, and Ma Joad does not yet have to compensate for their shortcomings.

This is not the case once they reach California: Ma Joad finds herself earning, cooking, and rationing the family’s food. There is no longer “a-plenty,” and she must try to feed everyone’s hunger. She becomes wise and bold without becoming gruff and hot-tempered—she remains ladylike in her manliness, even while standing up to quasi-authority figures like the flippant clerk in the overpriced peach orchard grocery store: “‘Doin’ a dirty thing like this. Shames ya, don’t it? Got to act flip, huh?’ Her voice was gentle” (375). Whether she’s wielding a tire iron at Pa or comforting Rosasharn or setting straight a smart aleck, Ma Joad is completely in control, and everyone listens when she has something to say.

What is significant about the comparison of these pig slaughter and grocery store scenes, though, is that they mark the difference in the way the Joads come to find their food: whereas they once raised their own hogs and ate of their fresh meat, in California, they buy near-spoiled and outrageously overpriced food, food that does not come close to being enough for everyone, especially after a hard day’s work. Rifkind writes of “the surreality of this world of prepared food to a woman desperate to buy the basic commodities of flour and milk that her farm no longer makes,” and for Ma Joad, that surreality is sobered by the realization that her men can no longer provide for her or even themselves (183).

Therefore, while the Ma Joad of Oklahoma may have held her tongue
about the fact that the men were having trouble finding work, the acquired maturity of the Ma Joad of California will not allow her to remain silent:

Fried dough. [...] One month we been here. An’ Tom had five days’ work. An’ the rest of you scrabblin’ out ever’ day, an’ no work. An’ scairt to talk. An’ the money gone. You’re scairt to talk it out. Ever’ night you jus’ eat, an’ then you get wanderin’ away. Can’t bear to talk it out. Well, you got to. [...] One day’ more grease an’ two days’ flour, an’ ten potatoes. You set here an’ get busy! (350)

The men—as long as they have something to eat, regardless of how filling it is—allow themselves to believe that everything is all right, but Ma Joad, the keeper of the food, refuses to close her eyes to the reality of their impending starvation. Ma Joad seems to be the only one in the family who forces herself to acknowledge that even though food does indeed grow on trees, it still takes money to buy it.

Furthermore, Ma Joad’s genuine kindness coupled with her strong commitment to her family works to fortify her maturity. Without blatantly stating it, Ma Joad makes it known that one day, she and her family may need food from others, so she makes certain that she helps others in need. But she regrets doing so the expense of her family, and she refuses to give more to the world than she gives to her family. For example, when a group of children eye the Joad family stew pot at a camp one night, Ma allows them to have the scanty leftovers, then says to her family, “We can’t do that no more. [...] We got to eat alone. [...] Didn’ none of you get nowhere near enough” (258). Returning to Kennedy’s claim, Ma Joad’s commitment to the mass extends only to her family—she is advanced in her adulthood because she is a grand power, capable of doling out food, just as the government is capable of doing the same. But while the government must be just and democratic, Ma Joad’s sense of justice is wrapped up in the well-being of her family, and what is right for them is what is just. Since she controls the food, she is all-powerful, for the rest of the family cannot work, grow, or live without her carefully rationed meals.

V

Just as Ma Joad morphs into a more mature, more adult, version of herself, the chronological children of the family, Ruthie, Winfield, and Rosasharn’s unborn baby, become more childlike as the novel progresses. By attempting to ignore parental suggestions and physical changes that suggest that they are indeed growing up, these children succeed at remaining children for a little longer than is necessary. For instance, at the start of the novel, by the time Tom returns home from prison, even young Ruthie has become “a little serious in her young-ladiness,” feeling “the might, the responsibility, and the dignity of her developing breasts,” and little Winfield is now only “a trifle
of a snot-nose,” but still, “the edges of their mouths [are] black and sticky from licorice whips, whined out of their father in town” (Steinbeck 95). These children have not grown up, but they are growing up: they are, undoubtedly, the first in the Joad family to have the chance—or perhaps the misfortune—to be experience an extended childhood, and that chance is due to the unsteadiness of the time. As part of a family of migrants, they cannot be expected to follow the natural path from childhood to adulthood, from little girl to mother or from little boy to father. [I need a quote here.] Furthermore, the fact that Ruthie and Winfield play, bicker, and most importantly, rely on others for their sustenance, fortifies their standing as children. They have reached the last moments of their physical childhood, but they have yet to attain the mental maturity of adults.

But this inconsistency is not entirely akin to true adolescence—according to Erik H. Erikson’s eight major dilemmas that are experienced throughout one’s lifespan, Ruthie and Winfield straddle toddlerhood, childhood, and early adolescence. They seek a sense of autonomy, and their parents support them as they learn about new things, but their parents also encourage them “to strive toward competence, mastery, and achievement and to develop a sense of industry” (Gullotta 27). They exhibit all three of these stages at one of the campgrounds where the family stops: they are free to explore the grounds, but they know so little of the world that think they have broken a toilet by flushing it—when Ma Joad explains, “the shame of their ignorance [is] too great for [them]” and they retreat from her mocking presence (301). Here, they are autonomous, and Ma Joad supports them and helps them understand their mistake.

By remaining as children, and by becoming more childlike than they were, Ruthie and Winfield escape much of the hard labor and worrying that the other characters face. Too, they escape the labor that they would likely have faced had they stayed in Oklahoma because after all, if the family farm had survived, they would have undoubtedly worked as unofficial farmhands.

Another indicator of their extreme childhood is that, like Al and his once-insatiable appetite, Ruthie and Winfield are at the stage in their lives when they simply cannot get enough to eat. They want to consume, and they expect to consume, regardless of what the others have to do to make that possible. They are treated to Cracker Jack, licorice, and adult-sized portions of every meal, though they do even less work than the men. Janet M. Fitchen offers one possible justification for this obsession with eating:

Food may also occupy people’s attention more when obtaining enough of it is problematic. Some young children I observed during my studies of rural poverty-stricken families seemed preoccupied with food: when not actually eating or begging a parent for something to eat, they would stand for whole minutes at a time just
looking at whatever foods were still in the cupboard or refrigerator. One such child seemed simply to be reassuring himself that there was something left to eat. (393)

This is understandable: Ruthie and Winfield have undoubtedly heard their parents speaking about how little food they have, so they feel the simple need to know if they will be all right. To them, food is comfort. It is their mother’s love, and it is the trust that they will survive. They choose not to mature, or perhaps, they cannot mature, because they fear hunger. When they express that they are hungry, often, they merely want reassurance: when Ruthie says she is hungry and Ma Joad reminds her that she just ate, Ruthie replies, “Wisht I had a box a Cracker Jack. There ain’t nothin’ to do. Ain’t no fun” (438). Ruthie is bored and maybe a little worried but certainly not hungry—she just needs to be reminded of that. “Feeding the Children,” published in 1930 in Plaindealer, expresses a similar sentiment, only in relation to the benefit of giving children snacks: “Let it be just a bite or two to relieve hunger, stop begging on the child’s part, and send him out to play with a feeling that everything in his ‘tummy’ is working properly.” This is all Ruthie and Winfield want: to know that everything is okay, at least at the present moment.

What is striking about Ruthie and Winfield, though, is that they are willing to admit to hunger, unlike many of the other children in the novel. There are the children who follow a tractor driver’s sandwich as it travels from his hand to his mouth; the little boys who stare at peppermints in a diner; and, of course, the children who surround the Joad’s stew at the campsite (36, 160, 258). These children stand speechless and watch because emotionally, they are much less childlike than Ruthie and Winfield: they have felt hunger, so they do not fear it, but the absence of fear does not stop them from hoping. For Ruthie and Winfield, their immaturity lies in their ignorance—they have not yet felt enough hunger to be able to understand it, they have not felt enough hunger to be able to appreciate satiation.

Rosasharn’s unborn baby, however, has indeed felt hunger—so much, in fact, that he cannot endure. This child is denied the most basic value of food: nourishment for a growing body. Insufficiently fed, he has no option but to accept a perpetual childhood in death: he is stillborn, and his inability to mature propels the novel’s conclusion and decides his mother’s fate.

Rosasharn exists as the one of the few near-chronological adolescents in the novel but as the most clinically adolescent character. Rosasharn is pregnant and married, so she is therefore an adult woman in the practical sense of the phrase, but mentally, just like Ruthie and Winfield, she is underdeveloped. Her adultness seems like play-acting, what Ma Joad calls “whinin’ aroun’ an’ candyin’ yaself”—it is contrived, annoying, and
immature (268). Steinbeck describes her: “She was pleased with herself, and she complained about things that didn’t really matter. And she demanded services of Connie [her husband] that were silly, and both of them knew they were silly” (129). She and Connie devise lofty, naïve plans for their future, including the idea of delivering the baby in the “hospiddle,” but when they arrive in California, Connie bails, leaving Rosasharn to rely, once again, on her parents for her survival. Connie exists at the cornerstone of Rosasharn’s adult existence, and his departure leaves Rosasharn in a situation fairly common during this time:

Private charities and social service agencies were organized to aid families and keep them together...the breakup of families not only amounted to failure but also threatened social breakdown. The independent working woman...was supposed to ‘return home.’ Men in shelters frequently acknowledged that when they lost their homes they had sent their wives and children ‘back to her parents.’ (“Abelson 113)

Rosasharn’s desertion leads to more than hurt feelings: single-handedly, Connie has caused her to fall from the edge of adulthood on which she perched back to the very core of childhood, i.e., the time during which one's primary caregivers are her parents. For instance, at the beginning of the trip, when Rosasharn is sure of her husband’s devotion, the family stops at a gas station for water, and as Connie fills a cup for her, Rosasharn says, “I ain’t very thirsty...But maybe I ought to drink,” and Connie “nodded, for he knew well what she meant” (129). But weeks after Connie has left, Rosasharn makes several desperate pleas for milk, and finally, after a sickly Winfield has had some, “Ma poured the rest of the canned milk in a cup and sneaked it to Rose of Sharon to drink secretly in a corner” (398). Connie starts off as the protector of her health, but in the end, Ma Joad must see to it that her daughter gets fed—as in infancy, Rosasharn depends on milk from her mother.

The novel ends with Rosasharn delivering her baby stillborn, and she barely has a moment to grieve before hope appears: an indigent man is starving to death, and with no money for food, Rosasharn begins to breastfeed him. This scene can be read in many ways, especially considering that “her fingers moved gently in his hair [...] and her lips came together and smiled mysteriously” (455). That smile can mean so much: it can be an acknowledgement of her maturation because now, she has earned the title “Mother,” but also, it can be a semi-erotic encounter that draws attention to her fertility.

In fact, Steinbeck himself struggled with his publisher, Pascal Covici, for this last scene to appear as it does in the published text:

I am sorry but I cannot change that ending. It is casual—there is no fruity climax, it is not more important than any other part of the
book—if there is a symbol, it is a survival symbol, not a love symbol, it must be an accident, it must be a stranger, and it must be quick [...] The fact that the Joads don’t know him, don’t care about him, have no ties to him—that is the emphasis. The giving of the breast has no more sentiment than the giving of a piece of bread [...] I tried to write this book the way lives are being lived not the way books are written.” (Steinbeck 178)

Such an evaluation of a text from the author himself is a rare and critical find—after all, who better understands the nature of a work’s themes than the creator of that work? Here, Steinbeck makes it clear that he believes that growing up, surviving, is the ultimate goal of these characters and the ultimate goal of all men, and he chooses food to illustrate that concept through breastfeeding because food is of paramount importance to all people, regardless of station in life. Indeed, the will to live exists as its own indicator of maturity, and though the indigent man must suckle at Rosasharn’s breast like a child, his adult sensibilities allow him to overcome his pride in order to survive. However, Steinbeck’s reading of his own work may be faulty because of his intense familiarity with the novel. In fact, in an earlier letter to Covici, Steinbeck writes, “I as me had no right in [my novels],” which suggests that even he doubts his ability to find meaning in his own work (176).

VII

In The Grapes of Wrath, though the characters are of various chronological ages, maturity within these age brackets exists in many mutations, and there is often a tendency to revert to a hunger-driven childhood or adolescence, a liminal state existing somewhere between infancy and old age. That is, hunger, like adulthood, exists as a near-event: a situation that may or may not occur at any given time. It is the threat of these near-events that cripples the characters—it causes them to maintain a symbolic youth, either in order to avoid the responsibilities of adulthood or in order to save face at the realization that they are not capable of being responsible adults. Moreover, it is the threat of hunger—the faces of others’ hungry children, the grumbling of a belly—that drives the characters to become workers in the fruit fields of California. They become migrant workers, workers without a steady job or a steady home, people existing between the normalcy of work and the strangeness of work not guaranteed.

Too, in the novel, the chronologically adult characters place a special emphasis on feeding the children because, as adults, they have embraced the perceived safety of adulthood. In such tough times, though, they come to realize that even adulthood is not dependable or steady—they learn that the notion of adulthood can be snatched away by hunger’s claws. According to Barrett A. Lee and Meredith J. Greif, , “single homeless individuals...are
known to eat less often and from fewer food groups and to fast more frequently than do those homeless with children or partners present” (Lee and Greif 7). Having a child who depends on being fed by his parents propels adults to action, and the child’s satiation becomes of paramount importance. Steinbeck portrays eating as a Darwinian issue concerning morality and survival of the fittest that extends beyond the more carnal implications of appetite and hunger that are exhibited within Al and Uncle John’s characters. As is quoted from Charles Jung in the September 1936 issue of The Science News-Letter, “the lives of primitives are more affected by [hunger] and more powerfully, than by sexuality. At this level of existence, hunger means the alpha and omega—existence itself” (167). For adults, their own satiation and the satiation of those who have yet to mature is success—for the individual, the family, and the propagation of mankind. In The Grapes of Wrath, fear—of hunger, shame, irresponsibility, and starvation—is the embodiment of the near-event: the threat is more powerful than the reality.

The fact that Steinbeck himself never experienced true Depression-era hunger colors this reading of the text because it reveals Steinbeck’s fears and dependencies. Spangler quotes Charles Shindo: “though his early days of writing saw many lean years and empty kitchen pantries, he never lived in life-threatening poverty...he and his wife lived rent-free in Pacific Grove, supported by a monthly allowance from his father” (311). Consciously or not, Steinbeck identifies with the dependency of his childlike characters. He realizes and writes about the power of the threat of hunger because, without his father’s allowance, that possibility may have ultimately become his reality.

Steinbeck’s mostly unnecessary worry about food instability is not the only documented occasion of such concern, and the eating habits developed during that time have greatly influenced our modern society. Spangler explains: The mid-century decade’s obsession with the nuclear family, the appliance-laden kitchen, and the frozen dinner is a representative strategy for repressing cultural memories of how the Great Depression (and of course, WWII) disoriented the family unit” (317). Once again, the near-event, the fear of hunger, changes the family order and makes a full table the best indicator of a healthy and stable family.

There is hope in fear, for to fear one event is to hope for another. In The Grapes of Wrath, John Steinbeck uses hunger, in all its manifestations, as a means of exhibiting man’s ability to learn, if not necessarily to grow physically or emotionally, from his struggles. If nothing else, hunger acts as a means of uniting people against a common threat: the Joads equally divide even the smallest amounts of food, and such instances of sharing humble the characters and allow them to cultivate a common sense of responsibility. As
is evidenced in the novel, accepting the responsibility associated with food and its procurement causes people to mature, and one can only imagine that one day, the Joads’ dream of white houses and picket fences will one day be realized because of their willingness to work and to sacrifice for the common good.

Works Cited


“Stone Sheriff On Errand of Mercy: Starving Idaho Family Puts Up Bitter