
The Theme of Finding Meaning Through Adversity in *Black Boy* by Richard Wright and *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck

America: It's Always Darkest before the Dawn's Early Light

"Anything seemed possible, likely, feasible, because I wanted everything to be possible" (Wright 72). Richard, the protagonist in Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, always thinks optimistically. Likewise, an air of faith and hope drives John Steinbeck's Joad family through their problems on the way to California in his renowned novel titled *The Grapes of Wrath*. Both the Wrights and the Joads endeavor to find meaning through adversity while struggling to find economic stability, surviving, and searching for hope in a hopeless situation.

In both books, difficulty arises when attempting to obtain a consistent income. Because of this extended length of time without money, poverty devastates many lives. To temporarily escape the monster of destitution, Richard "decided to try to sell [his] dog Betsy and buy some food" (Wright 69). The fact that he was willing to sell "a man's best friend" for only a dollar shows his desperation for cash. When the dog dies only a week later, Richard's mother, unhappy that her son had passed up an opportunity to gain some money, reminds him, "You could have had a dollar. But you can't eat a dead dog, can you?" (Wright 71). Richard is notorious among his friends for his inability to keep a job, as his friend Griggs tells him, "You've been trying to hold a job all summer, and you can't" (Wright 183). Similarly, poverty affects the Joads, along with all migrants journeying west. They too are anxious, but any job opportunity has "five pairs of arms extended" (Steinbeck 238). The poverty found in California occurs simply because few jobs exist for the newcomers, "for wages went down and prices went up. The great owners were glad and they sent out more handbills" (Steinbeck 283). Because the wealthy farmers attract more potential workers than they can employ, the migrants face the possibilities of reduced wages or no work at all. In desperation, they turn to religion, as they "pray God some day kind people won't all be poor. Pray God some day a kid can eat" (Steinbeck 239). In both the works of Steinbeck and Wright, characters are willing to take drastic measures to ensure the gain of land and money. Through the struggle required to meet these goals, they learn to be diligent workers that depend on each other in times of adversity.

The economic quest for jobs plays a key role in *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Black Boy*. As a young man Richard constantly searches for work, "[inquiring] among the students about jobs" (White 145). Along with food supply, work is one of the most common uncertainties in Richard's

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life. Granny had already thrown out hints that it was time for me to be on my own. But what had I learned so far that would help me to make a living? Nothing" (Wright 164). Richard's grandma slowly pushes him out of the house; however, he still does not grasp the concept of living as a black man in the south. Even when he obtains work, the southern whites place him in lose-lose situations: "If I had said: No, sir, Mr. Pease, I never called you Pease, I would by inference have been calling Reynolds a liar; and if I had said: Yes, sir, Mr. Pease, I called you Pease, I would have been pleading guilty to the worst insult that a Negro can offer..." (Wright 189). Likewise, the Joads focus solely on employment upon arriving in California because the family needs food. Luckily, Tom Joad meets people in a government camp the first morning, and they invite him to work with them: "We're layin' some pipe. 'F you want to walk over with us, maybe we could get you on" (Steinbeck 291). When the Joads first arrive in California, they have "'Bout forty dollars" (Steinbeck 230). For this reason, they begin searching for work as soon as possible to replenish their funds. However, "the laboring people hated Okies because a hungry man must work, and if he must work...the wage payer automatically gives him less...and then no one can get more" (Steinbeck 233). The natives fear the migrants because they work for less money, as they are determined to buy food. Richard and the Joad family are like planets orbiting around the sun of job opportunities. Their unending search for work rewards them with vigilance, observance, and the poise to snatch a job at a moment's notice.

Both Steinbeck and Wright place their characters in a harsh environment that requires grit and determination to survive. The Joads and the Wrights endure heartbreaking deaths and prolonged illnesses along their journeys. During a prayer, Richard hears his grandma state that her "poor old husband lies sick this beautiful morning" (Wright 138). Richard "[is] mortally afraid" of his grandfather (Wright 43), but he respectfully retracts his hostility as Grandpa mumbles his final words: "Rejoice, for God has picked out my s-s-e...in-in h-heaven..." (Wright 141). Also, Richard is forced to work harder for the family when his mother succumbs to a series of paralyzing strokes. This sudden gain of responsibility places Richard in a difficult predicament, which he describes as being "suddenly thrown emotionally upon my own" (Wright 86). Likewise, the Joads struggle through turmoil, as they lose two family members while fleeing from the ruins of their Oklahoma farm. Granpa Joad, a lively spirit, becomes sick soon after leaving his home. Casy believes that Granpa "died the minute [they] took 'im off the place" because leaving detaches him from his land (Steinbeck 146). Soon, a "good, quick stroke" seizes his soul, and the Joads face the rest of the journey without the honorary head of the family (Steinbeck 138). Granma cannot handle the news of her husband's passing, and she falls into a state of shock. She remains bedridden for the rest of the trip, and Mama reveals that "Granma's dead" upon reaching California (Steinbeck 228). These two families avoid desperation, even when they seem to fall apart. Although the losses in these books are tragic, the mourning families learn to persevere.

Because poverty triggers frustration and anger within people, the characters in both *Black Boy*

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and *The Grapes of Wrath* fight to survive. In fact, Richard engages in combat to be accepted by his classmates at each school he attends. Any boy that bumped into him he “stood [his] ground” and “shoved him away violently” (Wright 91). While this is an ordinary schoolyard brawl, people are innocently killed in other situations. Richard’s Uncle Hoskins is “killed by whites who had long coveted his flourishing liquor business” (Wright 54). Correspondingly, the Joads are forced to deal with murder. Tom Joad keeps his record clean, as he cannot afford to return to prison: “I killed a guy. Seven years [in prison]. I’m sprung in four for keepin’ my nose clean” (Steinbeck 13). However, watching his friend Casy as “the heavy club crashed into the side of his head with a dull crunch of bone” made his blood boil (Steinbeck 386). Unable to resist the urge, he avenges the preacher, as “his crushing blow found the head” of the guilty police officer (Steinbeck 386). In both the cases of the Joads and the Wrights, difficulty equals ferocity, and ferocity equals bloodshed. These moments teach to keep a level head in times of trouble and despair.

In their darkest moments, the Wrights and the Joads look for faith in every nook and cranny, even when it seems lost. Some people take advantage of this by providing them with a false sense of hope and security. For example, when Richard’s bike gets a flat tire, white men offer him a ride, and he temporarily believes that tolerant whites exist in the south. However, when he relaxes and accidentally addresses a man casually, he feels “something hard and cold smash [him] between the eyes. It was an empty whisky bottle” (Wright 180-181). Richard eventually heads to the north, where African Americans appear to lead freer lives. “There lay a deep, emotional safety in knowing that the white girl who was now leaning carelessly against me was not thinking of me, had no deep, vague, irrational fright...” (Wright 270). While segregation rarely appears in the north, Richard finds that Negroes “must restrict [themselves]—when not engaged upon some task—to the basement corridors so that they would not mingle with white nurses, doctors, or visitors” (Wright 303). The search for hope theme in *Black Boy* reappears in *The Grapes of Wrath*. When sharecroppers are kicked off their land, they travel west, and car salesmen use a multitude of lies to make a profit: “Goin’ to California? Here’s jus’ what you need. Looks shot, but they’s thousan’s of miles in her” (Steinbeck 66). In fact, most of these jalopies break down well before reaching The Golden State. When the Joads prepare for their trek westward, “some fellas come through with han’bills—orange ones. Says they need lots a people out here to work the crops” (Steinbeck 245). However, Tom learns from a young man in Hooverville that “ever’ dam’ fam’ly seen them han’bills” (Steinbeck 245). Essentially, the farmers release handbills for more workers than they could possibly pay. In this way, they cheat the migrants, and the excess of workers allows the farmers to pay less. The Joads and the Wrights, two flustered families, fall victim to the manipulations of their opponents. These tribulations help them to avoid deception in the future.

The Wright and Joad families maintain a remarkable level of optimism, even after countless mishaps and misfortunes. As a young boy, Richard amuses himself with the fascination of

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superstition in times of trouble: “If I had a cold and tied a worn, dirty sock about my throat before I went to bed, the cold would be gone the next morning” (Wright 72). When he departs for the north, Richard suspects that it is too good to be true, “half expecting someone to call me back and tell me that it was all a dream” (Wright 257). Although he lies to his boss to make it appear that his behavior will remain the same, he “wanted to tell him that [he] was going north precisely to change...” (Wright 256). Similarly, the Joads sustain this positive mindset, even after being informed of the lack of work in California. Tom eradicates his mother’s worries about California by saying, “Don’t roust your faith bird-high an’ you won’t do no crawlin’ with the worms” (Steinbeck 91). Even after reaching Hooverville and being told that jobs are scarce, Tom is “jus’ gay as a toad in spring rain” (Steinbeck 249). The Joad family never fails to stay optimistic, even in their most depressing moments. After Granma’s death, they kept their focus, saying that they “got to find a place to stay. [They] got to get work an’ settle down” (Steinbeck 241). Both the Joads and the Wrights endure hazardous situations and disturbing deaths. However, both remain optimistic through these trials; therefore, they have a good mentality to assist them in overcoming difficulties.

The Joads and the Wrights become tougher and find meaning through adversity. Through their economic quest, survival, and reliance on faith, they live optimistically and are strengthened through their troubles. Both families recognize the challenge to be physically, mentally, and emotionally strong. "Goddamn it, a fella got to eat" (Steinbeck 344). These words from one of the troublemakers at the California government camp should have been Richard's motto in *Black Boy*. Both the Wrights and the Joads traversed a treacherous path. However, by finding meaning through their adversity, they realize that anything is possible.

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