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“It Never Was America to Me”: An Examination of Great Depression Literature

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Abstract

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This Honors thesis examines the ways in which literature focuses on subjects pertinent to the Great Depression like affirmations and disillusionment with the government's response to widespread unemployment and destitute living conditions; loss of faith in religion and other social institutions; the concentration of power that helped cause the stock market crash of 1929 as well as concurrent class divisions; a systematic dehumanization of man in literature during this time period; ways in which agricultural technology displaced workers; and the appeal and fear of reactionary Communist groups within the United States. The specific literature that this thesis examines includes John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath, Of Mice and Men,* and *Cannery Row*. It likewise examines Ernest Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not*, Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*, and poetry by Langston Hughes and William Carlos Williams. This Honors thesis takes historical data into account like the environmental conditions that caused the Dust Bowl, stratification of classes, unemployment figures, economic theories of John Maynard Keynes, and information relating to the present-day Great Recession. There are also many sources of criticism references ranging from original reviews of the literature presented and present-day analysis.

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So the last shall be first, and the first last

—Matthew 20:16

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In terms of history and economics, the Great Depression has received exhaustive analysis and research, but there is an inherent tragedy in that this roughly ten-year period has been largely ignored within the context of literary scholarship in favor of examining other literary periods and canons like Modernism, Postmodernism, World War I and World War II fiction, the Harlem Renaissance, and Southern literature. At best, one generally thinks of the literature of the Great Depression in broad terms limited to John Steinbeck's seminal novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*. Novels like Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* and Ernest Hemingway's *To Have and Have* are generally identified with other literary concentrations, but with other texts, they form a distinct concentration of literature. Poetry also provides an unrefined, honest look at life during the Great Depression. Poets like Langston Hughes and William Carlos Williams wrote extensively about the economic struggles as well as social and political tensions of the time period, but their accounts of this period have largely been overlooked within the broader context of their work. There are many novels, short stories, and poems about the Depression, but there is a lack of scholarship devoted to the specific impact that the Depression had on the literature of its day and it still lacks a finite location as a field of literature in the American canon. The Great Depression is one of the most important time periods in American history and it deserves more study in a literary context.

The literature of the Great Depression focuses on multiple themes like affirmations and disillusionment with the government's response to widespread unemployment and destitute living conditions during the Depression; the concentration of power as well as class divisions that helped cause the stock market crash of 1929; loss of faith in religions and other social institutions; ways in which agricultural technology

displaced laborers and further contributed to class divisions and unemployment; a strong disparity between the reality of economic destitution and the ideal of the United States as a place for economic opportunity and social mobility; and the appeal and fear of reactionary Communist groups within the United States.

For any form of literature to be considered a Great Depression text, I posit that it must be written in the 1930s or '40s: with this qualification, it would examine many of the previously mentioned themes and be in conversation with the Depression as topical event rather than retrospectively. While a novel like Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, for example, takes place during the Depression, it is excluded from this definition of a Great Depression novel: its publication in 1960 is too far removed from the time period and its primary themes relate more heavily to the Civil Rights Movement than the Great Depression. This qualification is important not only because works written in this period better and more directly reflect the Great Depression, but they are the primary texts that empathized with the afflicted, shaped social discourse, and have had the most lasting impact.

There is an important balance of fact and fiction in the study of Great Depression literature. To understand the Depression, historical data like unemployment figures, wealth distribution, and how these figures changed over the time period are necessary. This data directly relates to the subjects and themes of Depression literature, while giving a more full, empirical perspective of the time period where literature cannot. Unlike historical analysis or biographical case studies, however, literature offers a personal perspective of the everyman while showing a broad, shared exploration of what life was like in the Depression. This thesis aims to show both macro-level accounts and

experiences on an individual level that is unique to literature. It also attempts to highlight the shared fears and frustrations of unemployment as well as the disillusionment with social institutions during the Great Depression. The themes addressed in Great Depression literature, like the ability to have financial success as a result of hard work and whether or not the United States is a country of shared prosperity, are distinctly American. The Great Depression also relates closely to the current political and economic atmosphere of our time—the Great Recession. In many ways, the current recession has been a playing-out of the Depression on a smaller level. Most of the broader themes of Depression-era literature have resurfaced: in recent years, there has been a similar level of frustration with the political process and public institutions, uncertainty and fear for one's future, and most perhaps strikingly, a drastic separation of classes. For this reason, the literature of the Depression bears more relevance now than at any point since the works were written.

The Grapes of Wrath is undoubtedly the quintessential work of literature that arose from the Great Depression. Along with Dorothea Lange's photograph, *Migrant Mother*, it is the primary artistic representation of the everyman's hardship during this time period. This novel had an enormous and immediate impact upon its publication. One 1939 review claimed: "With his latest novel, Mr. Steinbeck at once joins the company of Hawthorne, Melville...and easily leaps to the forefront of all his contemporaries. The book has all the earmarks of something momentous, monumental, and memorable" (Angoff, 34). Stanley Kunitz, who would later become U.S. poet laureate, also wrote that year: "A book is published by one of our best novelists. It is greeted enthusiastically by critics as one of the most important books of our time. The American people like the book so much that it becomes one of the fastest-selling titles in American publishing history" (Kunitz, 35). *The Grapes of Wrath* was an enormous critical and commercial as it was the best-selling book of 1939 and was awarded the 1940 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Much of the enduring admiration for *The Grapes of Wrath* is due to its appeal to the alienated common man in the context of the Great Depression. In many regards, Steinbeck asks what it means to be American as noted in a letter to his editor, Joseph Henry Jackson: "I thought that if we had a national character and national genius, these people, who were beginning to be called Okies, were it. With all the odds against them, their goodness and strength survived" (Britch, Lewis, 104). Steinbeck also incorporates much of the American experience within the text of *The Grapes of Wrath*: searching for work and economic opportunity in an unfamiliar land, examining the potential for self-governance, and aiming toward a personal freedom. As Carroll Britch and Cliff Lewis write with regard to the national implication in the novel: "Their will to move may have

been born of necessity, but their movement is sustained by the down-to-earth hopes of better days that have often seen Americans through prosperity" (98). *The Grapes of Wrath*, witnesses a serious deterioration of faith in public institutions as Steinbeck explores broader themes of national identity within the context of the time period in which all of these beliefs were heavily questioned. The result is one of the most consequential and comprehensive examinations of American life in all of its literature.

The Dust Bowl was a focal point for the widespread suffering and economic devastation during the Depression and the migration from this region of the United States, with which the characters have a strong connection, toward the unfamiliar territory of California, is central to the plot in *The Grapes of Wrath*. In his essay, "The Background to the Composition of *The Grapes of Wrath*," Jackson J. Benson provides a wealth of historical and biographical context for what is Steinbeck's most celebrated novel. Contrary to the narrative surrounding the inspiration behind *The Grapes of Wrath*, Benson notes that Steinbeck never travelled from Oklahoma to California with a migrant family, but instead embarked on "four trips to the Central Valley, and on one occasion drove on from Bakersfield over the Tehachapi Mountains through the Mojave to the state line near Needles" (56) in which he witnessed the effects of the Dust Bowl firsthand. Steinbeck opens the novel with a description of the land based upon his experience on these travels. He writes: "To the red country and part of the gray country of Oklahoma, the last rains came gently, and they did not cut the scarred earth" (1). Steinbeck further shows the totality of the arid landscape: "They knew it would take a long time fort the dust to settle out of the air…An even blanket covered the earth. It settled on the corn, piled up on the tops of the fence posts, piled up on the wires; it settled on roofs, blanketed

the weeds and trees" (3). The deterioration and lifelessness of the land reflects the physical toll the Depression has taken on the characters to further show the desolation in the setting of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Steinbeck illustrates the forces that ends the Joads' way of life and source of work, driving them, and countless other families, to travel to California and foreshadows the conclusion of *The Grapes of Wrath*.

The Dust Bowl extended approximately four hundred miles from north to south and three hundred miles from east to west, encompassing southeastern Colorado, northeastern New Mexico, western Kansas, and the panhandles of Texas and Oklahoma (Gale Group) and is generally described as lasting from 1930 until 1940. The causes of the Dust Bowl include soils subject to wind erosion, drought that killed the soil-holding vegetation, incessant wind, and technological improvements that facilitated the rapid breaking of the native sod. The result was a large part of the affected region saw a 15 percent to 25 percent decrease in precipitation and some years only had less than half of the normal annual precipitation, which is equivalent of missing three entire years of expected precipitation in one decade. (National Weather Service). Benson further shows the complexity of the relationship between the land and those who live and worked on it during the Dust Bowl:

> Starting in the early 1930s, over half a million fled the Okie states during the Depression, and of these, about 300,000 ended up in California. Most of these were semiliterate, unskilled workers—farmers and sharecroppers and their families who either had either been dusted off primitive, subsistence farms or, outside the region of blowing dust, had been forced to leave by harsh economic conditions. When they came to California, which already had a surplus of farm

> labor, they found that there was no place for them to go. The land was all taken, and even when available, farm labor paid so poorly that a whole family working from sunrise to sunset earned hardly enough to eat that day (54).

Benson effectively characterizes the dilemma of both the disillusionment of migrant workers, like the Joads, once they reached California as well as the greater broken promise of the American political and economic system and the national belief of work as a means to achieve economic and personal freedom.

It is from this bleak perspective that the novel begins. As poor farmers and people who lived in rural areas were those most affected by the change in weather conditions, *The Grapes of Wrath* immediately addresses the stark class division during the Depression. This division constitutes one of the most significant themes that recurs in the novel. Though Steinbeck is not overtly political and writes for a general audience, the third-person omniscient narration in *The Grapes of Wrath* immerses itself in the frustrations shared by its characters as the author inserts his social commentary throughout the novel. The reader sees little in the way of wealthy individuals in the course of *The Grapes of Wrath*, which reveals their separation from the working class, a lack of humanity in those who profited at the expense of the poor, and to a degree, the effort Steinbeck takes not to demonize people based solely on social status. Steinbeck later characterizes the wealthy from a distance in the narration through symbolism rather than as people:

> In their lapels the insignia of lodges and service clubs, places where they can go and, by a weight of numbers of little worried men, reassure themselves that business is noble and not the curious ritualized thievery they know it is; that

> business men are intelligent in spite of the principles of sounds business; that their lives are rich instead of thin tiresome routines they know; and that a time is coming when they will not be afraid any more (155).

The owners, as a class, are completely aware of their impact, but rely upon tired cultural narratives of self-determinism for comfort and to justify their actions. The upper class is an abstraction and enters the novel primarily to tell farmers they are not welcome on their land or who do not pay the workers enough to farm it. This irony is far from overlooked in *The Grapes of Wrath* as the narration includes: "And it came about that owners no longer worked on their farms. They farmed on paper; and they forgot the land, the smell, the feel of it…" (232). Steinbeck further shows the distance from the owners as he writes from the perspective of the tenant farmers and characterizes the owners as intruders claiming land to which they have no connection. Steinbeck writes:

> "The owners of the land came onto the land, or more often a spokesman for the owners came. They came in closed cars, and they felt the dry earth with their fingers, and sometimes they drove big earth augers into the ground for soil tests. The tenants, from their sun-beaten dooryards, watched uneasily when the closed cars drove along the fields" (31).

Part of this division facilitates a separation between the land and the people who profit from it, which completely opposes the relationship between the farmers and the land: the owners view it as a commodity, but to the farmers, it represents their home and the only way of life they know. Steinbeck punctuates this notion when the Joads prepare to leave Oklahoma for California, Granpa Joad rather dies than departs his home, signaling not only his unshakeable connection with the land, but a dire, imminent social change.

The protagonist, Tom Joad, and his extended family with whom he travels spend little effort showing frustration or anger toward the wealthy: rather than continuing such self-interest, they are more focused with providing for one another as a group. When they do speak of the wealthy, it is in response to how they mistreat the workers rather than in envy of their comfort or blaming them for creating the conditions of the Great Depression. Despite this benign approach, the Joads and families who also search for work are received with scorn. When they arrive in California, a passerby informs them: "Well, Okie use' ta mean you was from Oklahoma. Now it means you're a dirty son-of-a-bitch. Okie means you're scum. Don't mean nothing itself, it's the way they say it." (206). Steinbeck relies heavily upon a rural dialect in the speech of the tenant farmers to reflect their lack of education and low social class. This dialect is universal among the tenant farmers and one of the strongest indicators of social class as it contrasts with the upper class's more refined way of speaking. Not only do the tenant farmers lose their land and home, but because of this displacement, they feel immense shame and helplessness in their newly ascribed identity. Migrant workers are thoroughly dehumanized by the law enforcement and the upper class, which reduce them in terms of a group and see them strictly as a social and financial burden. Although the workers think chiefly about their needs and those of their families, there is much doubt, however, that such class divisions are sustainable and this is a universal view among the migrant workers in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Where Steinbeck describes the wealthy through narration, he uses characters to illustrate both the frustration of looking for decent wages and the belief that the inherent class division cannot last, effectively giving humanity to the characters and their struggle.

One of the more striking examples of a character questioning the class division of the Depression, occurs when the Joads encounter a tire salesman who says in passing: "There ain't room enough for you an' me, for your kind an' my kind, for rich and poor together all in one country, for thieves and honest men. For hunger and fat. Whyn't you go back where you came from?" (120). This view succinctly represents the collective frustration and disillusionment of the average worker. There is an inherent belief in nearly all of the migrant workers that the American promise of the middle class and upward mobility is a relic of the past and has no place in the bleak future they envision. The predominating view is that the extreme inequality of wealth distribution and disastrous unemployment would remain indefinitely, and for good reason as income inequality reached its highest point of the 20th century in 1927, just before the crash (Saez). Tom Joad likewise expresses his helplessness at being among the have-nots: "I know it ain't their fault. Ever' person I talked to is on the move for a damn good reason. But what's the country comin' to? That's what I want to know. What's it comin' to? Fella can't make a livin' no more. Folks can't make a livin' farmin'." (127) Not only do the farmers feel hopeless in their search for jobs, they severely question their self-worth, as they believe their skills, way of life, and role in society are rapidly becoming obsolete. The narratives of hard work and economic security with which they have been raised and have trusted, undergo significant erosion and appear irreparable. Despite both a literal economic crisis and an existential questioning of the self, the Joads remain resilient. Characteristic of the tough Tom Joad who never backs down from a fight, he says to Ma, the wise guiding light of the Joad family: "They comes a time when a man gets mad…They're a-tryin' to make us cringe an' crawl like a whipped bitch. They 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." (278-9). From this stark separation of classes, however, also comes the ability for the Joads they grow together and find strength in one another and they use this strength to confront their greatest source of anger, law enforcement, which appears consistently throughout the novel.

Secondary to disillusionment with national narratives and a declining way of life during the Depression, another major theme in *The Grapes of Wrath* is a loss of faith in government and other public institutions. There is no mention of New Deal programs in *The Grapes of Wrath*. The workers do not see anything in the way of programs like the Works Progress Administration or the Civilian Conservation Corps, which signifies an argument that whatever relief came about during the Depression did not reach those who needed it most. The biggest source of frustration that the Joads experience, however, is law enforcement. The distrust toward the police begins in the opening pages of the novel in which Tom Joad has been released from prison for killing a man in self-defense and it steadily increases during the novel. Police officers closely mirror the owners of the large farms who tell the Joads and other workers that they are unwelcome, have no opportunity for work, and are in violation of the law, which represents the primary hypocrisy in the novel. Steinbeck writes of many families that seek work, but law enforcement consistently denies them such an opportunity and resents them because of their lack of economic worth. Likewise, these families search for work and are willing to settle for less-than-desired conditions because they believe in the American narrative that if they work hard, they will have an adequate standard of living. The result, however, is a thorough unraveling of this belief and subsequently, a loss of faith in public institutions.

Tom characterizes this contradiction and distrust toward law enforcement: “He tol’ me up there the deputies got to take guys in. Sheriff gets seventy-five cents a day for each prisoner, an’ he feeds ‘em for a quarter. If he ain’t got prisoners, he don’t make no profit” (271). In a large sense, there is a suspension of enforcing the law as it was once known and the essence of democracy has been demolished: the prevailing view among the tenant workers is that the government is more interested in putting its resources and attention toward incarceration and removing the problem of migrant workers than in investing in a solution of providing employment or offering economic relief. They are part of a self-defeating civil society and the migrant workers are those who suffer the most because of it.

Where the Joads maintain an enormous level of distrust toward law enforcement in *The Grapes of Wrath*, their faith in government is restored, to a degree, when they reach a government camp. It is unclear where the funding for the camp comes from, most likely federal government, but Steinbeck includes it in *The Grapes of Wrath* to show the potential for government to provide relief and avert, to a degree, some of the suffering of the Depression. The camp serves to provide relief and most of all, a renewed sense of humanity for migrant workers. Tom’s sister Ruthie describes the camp:

> Over by Weedpatch. Got nice toilets an’ baths, an’ you kin wash clothes in a tub, an’ they’s water right handy, good drinkin’ water; an’ night the folks plays music an’ Sat’dy night they give a dance. Oh, and you never seen anything so nice. Got a place for kids to play, an’ them toilets with paper. Pull down a little jigger an’ the water comes right in the toilet, an’ the fella runs the camp is so polite, comes

> a-visitin' an' talk an' ain't high an' mighty I wisht we could go live there again (254).

The government camp provides amenities that the workers did not have access to since leaving their homes and would not have found elsewhere while looking for work. One can assume that based upon the poverty of the migrants that it could have been the first instance in which they had access to what would, in the present day, be considered basic to one's standard of living. In addition to providing a sense of humanity to the workers in the form of an adequate standard of living, the government camp gives those who live there a greater sense of value as a person as it is the most significant instance of community among migrant workers from across that the region of the country. Each member of the camp greets newcomers warmly and people commonly offer to share food, tell others about potential work, and look after one another's children. Social events are planned and people enjoy the company of others around campfires, but the greatest unifying part of the camp is the Central Committee.

The Central Committee is the governing body of the camp, comprised of one member from each of the five units of the camp and despite the decline of faith in government and other public institutions, it represents the American ideal of the potential for self-government to allow equal participation in public affairs and to work for the benefit of the people. When the Joads enter the government camp, they view its democratic process as novel, which signifies the brokenness and exclusionary elements of the politics during the 1930s. When a watchman tells the Joads about the Central Committee, he says with regard to its members that "you can vote 'em out jus' as quick as you vote 'em in" (287) effectively removing the potential for the elected members to

exercise the tyranny the police enjoy or the lack of concern the workers feel the federal government has toward them. The watchman also addresses the respite of the government camp in that police officers need a warrant to enter it. The government camp represents a sort of paradox with regard to the ambivalent view of government the characters of *The Grapes of Wrath* espouse: on one hand, it acts as a refuge from the police targeting the workers and it also provides them with services that other government programs have lacked. It is important to note, however, that despite the compassion and the higher standing of living the Joads receive at the camp, they are unable to work and earn money. They find food but cannot earn enough money to get ahead. *The Grapes of Wrath* notes that the need for work is paramount to human existence as Steinbeck writes earlier in the novel: "The last clear definite function of a man—muscles aching to work, minds aching to create beyond the single need—this is man. (150). While Steinbeck uses gender to separate tenant farming and housework, he views work as a universal source for human progress and self-worth. Only through fulfilling the desire for employment are sustainable economic stability and pride in oneself possible. Steinbeck shows not only the potential for self-government to create positive change for the average person, but also embraces the idea that the government has a crucial role in both ensuring the economic well-being of its citizens and providing an opportunity for them to find work: government must also do what it can to help those in need regain their faith in it. Steinbeck notes that despite government programs and minimal relief, it has failed to help the average individual find work.

Despite the Joads having a tendency not to overreact to the dire prospects for work and instead maintaining their faith in their ability to provide for themselves,

electing to travel onward instead of threatening the power structure of landowners and law enforcement, the workers reach a tipping point in which they choose no longer to tolerate the systematic denial of fair wages. This erosion of trust in public institutions, disenfranchisement of poor workers, and the undermining of democracy open the broader theme in *The Grapes of Wrath* of revolting against tyranny. Steinbeck does, however, view the public institution, whether formal or informal, of the union as favorable and beneficial. There is an evident romanticizing of the power of oppressed people using numbers to their advantage in threatening their oppressors. Steinbeck cogently illustrates this pattern: "And the little screaming fact that sounds through all history: repression works only to strengthen and knit the repressed." (238). Not only do the powerful actively seek to profit from the mistreatment of workers, but they also infringe upon the rights of assembly and association as they accuse those who exercise their rights as being Communists. This sort of accusation paired with the denial of a fair wage, the inability to find work, the exclusion of the worker from participating in civil society signifies nothing short of a crisis of democracy. While the characters have already experienced dehumanization from law enforcement, the detriments of class divisions, their remaining and most human right of assembling in community is heavily damaged. The potential for democracy is still not abandoned, but the workers reach the conclusion that it cannot exist in their current setting and economic condition. Tom laments toward the conclusion of the novel:

> I been thinkin' how it was in that gov'ment camp, how our folks took care a theirselves, an' if they was a fight they fixed it theirself; an' they wasn't no cops wagglin' their guns, but they was better order than them cops ever give. I been a-

> wonderin' why we can't do that all over. Throw out the cops that ain't out people. All work together for our own thing—all farm our own lan' (419)

Steinbeck contends that there needs to be a fundamental shift in political power in order for democracy to continue in the United States. Neither Tom Joad nor any of the workers find much appeal in Communism or an overthrow of the political system, but there is an evident belief that the essence of democracy, the ability for citizens to actively participate in civil society, demands an increase of rights, wealth, and role in civil society for the worker. They are unsure, however, of how this should be accomplished. Steinbeck likewise does not provide a solution to this problem, but hints instead at an imminent reestablishment of the social, political, and economic order later on in the conclusion of the novel.

Another major public institution that the characters of *The Grapes of Wrath* call into question is organized religion and Steinbeck maintains an ambivalent position with regard to it as both a source of disappointment and deception as well as one for hope and as a useful system of belief during one of the greatest periods of hardship in American history. At first glance, it appears that the novel takes an unmistakably unfavorable of religion as Tom, while leaving jail, encounters the major character, Reverend Jim Casy, who is Tom's former minister and personifies a loss of faith in religion common amongst the workers. This sort of disillusionment toward religion closely mirrors the lack of trust in government: both are systems established with the purpose of helping and empowering people, especially in hardship, but have wholly failed to do so during the Depression. Rather than acting as a source of inspiration or healing for the Joad family when he

embarks upon travelling with them, Casy's loss of faith has profound implications for others.

Casy's loss of faith and the concurrent views he adopts represent the larger group of people whom he encounters in the novel. He first explains his loss of faith is largely due to his guilt for promiscuity when he was a minister. He expresses regret to Tom when he speaks of the women with whom he slept, and to a degree, equates his former behavior with his current state. This duality can be read as reflecting a common view of decreased morality—that the Great Depression was the result of decadence in the preceding decade and that it was both deserved and inevitable. There are much stronger considerations of religion that Steinbeck offers, however, as Casy reveals that for much of his time in the ministry, he did not fully believe what he was preaching. He tells Tom: "An' sometimes I love 'em to bust, an' I want to make 'em happy, so I been preachin' somepin I thought would make 'em happy" (23). Casy not only no longer believes in religion, but suggests that it is another belief system, like American narratives promising the potential for upward mobility, that have betrayed the Joads and other migrant workers. There is, however, a systematic shift away from the Christian doctrine and toward a loosened interpretation of religion. Casy primarily, as do many of the other characters in the novel, views religion less in terms of salvation, but still finds value in its ability to strengthen relationships and help people empathize with one another. He develops a fundamental change in belief as he says to Tom: " 'Why do we got to hang it on God or Jesus? Maybe,' I figgered, 'maybe it's all men an' women we love; maybe that's the Holy Sperit—the human sperit—the whole shebang. Maybe all men got one big soul ever'body's a part of' " (24). Casy leans toward a type of humanism, which celebrates the

power of man and his ability for compassion and this, rather than a more traditional sense of religion, is the spiritual belief that the Joads most rely upon throughout the novel.

Despite most of the characters in *The Grapes of Wrath* embracing a very relaxed interpretation of religion, especially for rural Americans in the 1930s, Steinbeck formidably uses Christian themes in this novel. The first of which is the migration from Oklahoma to California. While it can be read as symbolic of the American narrative of many people travelling westward in search of a stronger economic future, it likewise reflects the Old Testament. As Ray Lisca notes: "the twelve Joads are the twelve tribes of Judea; they suffer oppression in Oklahoma (Egypt) under the banks (Pharaohs); undertake an exodus; and arrive in California (Canaan, the land of milk and honey)" (92). Although they Joads find that California is far from being a promised land, this religious parallel is undeniable. Steinbeck's use of the extended Joad family travelling with the Wilsons and encountering several others from Oklahoma, a land where there are long familial ties, particularly in the case of Granpa Joad, certainly reinforces this sort of reading.

Steinbeck's religious symbolism reaches a climax with Jim Casy's transformation from an ex-minister who has profound doubt in religion into that of a Christ-figure. Lisca notes this gradual process, which begins early in the novel as Casy undermines church doctrine in favor of his own interpretation of morality and spirituality:

> Beginning with his initials, J. C.; his rebellion against the old religion; his time of meditation in the wilderness; his announcement of the new religion; his taking on his head the sins of others; to his persecution and death crying out, 'You don' know what you're doin''; Jim Casy is clearly a modern Christ figure (92).

This conversion into a Christ-figure occurs when the Joads leave the government camp for an opportunity to work. Tom encounters Casy who, earlier in the novel, symbolically sacrifices himself to protect Tom when he was involved in a fight and spends time in prison. Casy directly alludes to the parallel between himself and Christ: "Jail house is a kinda funny place. Here's me, been a-goin' into the wilderness like Jesus to try find out somepin" (381). Casy recognizes this and implicitly predicts his imminent death. He immediately and selflessly involves himself in a conflict when the Joads and other workers are offered an unlivable wage. Casy protests:

> We come to work there. They says it's gonna be fi' cents. They was a hell of a lot of us. We got there an' they says they're payin' two an' a half cents. A fella can't even eat on that, an' if he got kids—So we says we won't take it. So they druv us off. An' all the cops in the worl' come down on us. Now they're payin' you five When they bust this here strike—ya think they'll pay five? (383).

Not only does Casy protest the established religious order, but he also challenges the combined powers of law enforcement and landowners in a way that not even Tom Joad, for all his aggression and anger, or any other character in *The Grapes of Wrath* can match. It is also worth nothing that Casy espouses sort of Christ-oriented view with regard to wages and unequal wealth, championing the poor and warning the wealthy of consequences for their greed: he is as much an exemplar of Christianity as he is of activism, putting the interests of the group well above his own. When Casy challenges this power, he, like Christ, is accused of being an agitator and is killed. Steinbeck uses Casy's interpretation of religion to show that the devastation of the Great Depression will end and that a more hopeful economic and social era will come. In the closing pages of

the novel, Tom recalls scripture Casy had earlier mentioned: “Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, the one will lif’ up his fellow, but woe to him that is alone when he falleth for he hath not another to help him up” (418). Though the source of this passage is not specifically mentioned, it comes from the fourth chapter of Ecclesiastes, which explicitly combines religious faith with that of a promising future. Both Casy and Tom recognize the power of solidarity and are rewarded.

Where the novel opens with a portrait of a landscape devastated by drought and a nearly uninhabitable climate, it closes with rainfall, literally ending the source of the Joad family’s struggle of an inability to farm and symbolically signaling a new age. Steinbeck writes of the rain’s arrival in a triumphant, lyrical style:

> And at first the dry earth sucked the moisture down and blackened. For two days the earth drank the rain, until the earth was full. Then puddles formed, and in the low places little lakes formed in the fields. The muddy lakes rose higher, and the steady rain whipped the shining water. At last the mountains were full and the hillsides spilled into the streams, built them into freshets, and sent them roaring down the canyons into the valleys (432).

While the farmers could see the rain as a nuisance, considering their lack of stable shelter, they unanimously and immediately see it as a long-awaited source of relief, rebirth, and hope for the future. Despite the series of migration, disappointment and frustration, throughout the novel much of its immediate appeal, one can assume, is due to the ultimately promising conclusion *The Grapes of Wrath* takes with regard to the suffering of the Great Depression.

Since its initial publication in 1946, *All the King's Men* has been assumed to have taken much of its influence from Huey "Kingfish" Long, populist Governor of Louisiana from 1928 to 1932 and United States Senator from 1932 until his death in 1935. In his 1963 essay, "*All the King's Men*: The Matrix of Experience," Robert Penn Warren states: "When I am asked how much *All the King's Men* owes to the actual politics of Louisiana in the '30s, I can only be sure that if I had never gone to live in Louisiana and if Huey Long had not existed, the novel would never have been written" (54). Despite this parallel between Long and the novel's protagonist, Willie "Boss" Stark, Robert Penn Warren has long denied the relationship between the work of fiction and 1930s Louisiana, which has made its place in Southern literature more ambiguous and intensified the interest surrounding the novel. Because of its entrenchment in the setting and culture of the American South, *All the King's Men* has been placed almost exclusively within the Southern canon. It is a hallmark of Southern literature and while it has a uniquely American perspective, it is a novel that cannot be separated from its setting. *All the King's Men* likewise relies upon the time period of the 1930s and again, could not have the same effect had it been placed in another era. Warren's commentary on class structures is patent and is among the most dynamic in all of American literature. While most Depression literature is told from the perspective of the poor and oppressed, what truly sets *All the King's Men* apart from novels during the Depression is its exploration of an impoverished, rural setting through the lens of an elite class. Warren's Southern influence diversifies Depression literature in a significant way and the authority and perspective with which he writes gives the novel an irrefutable place not only among Southern literature, but also the literature of the Great Depression.

While most novels set in the Great Depression involve the struggles of ordinary people, Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* focuses almost exclusively on an elite, influential, and insular social class of people from an unnamed state in the American South. The nucleus of power in *All the King's Men* exists with the protagonist, Boss Stark, Adam Stanton, an influential doctor, and the narrator, Jack Burden, whose allegiance shifts between his employer, Stark, and his childhood friend, Stanton. While the reader sees the novel through the lens Burden, he remains largely detached from its action. Burden rather gives *All the King's Men* a moral distance without aligning himself too strongly to any of the competing forces of power in the novel. Warren uses this concentration of power within the larger context of the Great Depression to show the degree to which the wealthy controlled the inner workings of government and recklessly jeopardized the well-being of the everyday citizen without personal consequence.

Boss Stark, as a politician, thrives as a larger-than-life figure and is one of the most dynamic and memorable characters in all of American literature. He is the only member of the elite class in *All the King's Men* who was not born into wealth and this exclusion fuels his desire for power and social prestige. In contrast to the general disillusionment surrounding capitalism and social mobility during the Depression, Warren uses Boss Stark to argue for the potential of upward mobility, which raises the stakes for the reader when considering the similarities between Stark and the biography of Huey Long. The reader sees a concrete glimpse into upbringing as he explains in a concession speech after his first run for Governor:

> Get ready to bust your sides for it sure is a funny story. It's about a hick. It's about a red-neck, like all of you all, if you please. Yeah, like you…He knew what

> it was to get up before day and get cow dung between his toes and feed and slop and milk before breakfast so he could set off by sunup to walk six miles to a one-room, slab-sided schoolhouse (136).

Warren does not directly show the reader any of the Boss's childhood, but one can fairly assume that there is not embellishment in this speech, especially considering the poverty in the rural South that the elite classes witness throughout the novel. Despite the charisma and political savvy Stark eventually develops, as a member of the lower class, he is initially ignorant of the ways of the elite and the reader sees this education through the lens of Jack Burden. In contrast to Stark, Burden is born into the wealthy, well-connected class: the area in which he grew up is named for his family, his mother has married multiple wealthy men, he had the opportunity to study at Harvard University, and was temporarily enrolled as Ph.D. student in History. Despite Stark's relative lack of formal education, his alignment with Jack Burden helps him achieve social prominence. Warren presents the class disparity between the two both to highlight class differences and to heighten Stark's rise to power. Early in the novel, Burden recalls his introduction to Willie Stark in the humble setting of the back room of Slade's pool hall. Burden describes Stark as not "anything but the County Treasurer of Mason County" (18). He also notes Stark's timidity with public speaking and the inferiority he feels among the elite as a young man from a poor background with little political experience. Burden, as a member of the elite, mocks Stark for his appearance and lack of political instinct:

> You could see Willie standing on a street corner, sweating through his seersucker suit, with his hair down in his eyes, holding an old envelope in one hand and a pencil in the other, working out figures to explain what he was squawking about,

> but folks don't listen to you when your voice is low and patient and you stop them in the hot sun and make them do arithmetic (91).

In addition to looking upon Stark, initially, as a naïve idealist, Burden also shows his attitude toward the average voter in their state, whom he believes to be unintelligent and disengaged with the political process. Burden does, however, help educate Stark, and in a span of only a few years, he is able to make a remarkable ascent into the elite with immense social and political power. Through this dichotomy of Burden's and Stark's respective inherited social classes, Warren argues that even those without the advantage of wealth, social connections, or formal education can achieve upward mobility—the requirement for Stark, however, is immersing himself within the class of corrupt, concentrated power and wealth.

While Stark is largely self-educated and is highly driven to succeed, Warren challenges the American narrative of the self-made man with Stark's rise to power and shows the moral compromise that it requires. After Stark loses his first bid for the governorship, he further dedicates himself becoming a high profile lawyer in the State, which gives him the financial resources and the clout to make another run for Governor. The reader sees the Boss's self-sufficiency as he refers to himself in his powerful concession speech that he:

> figured if he wanted to do anything he had to do it himself. So he sat up nights and studied books and studied law so maybe he could do something about changing things. He didn't study that law in any man's school or college. He studied it after a hard day's work in the field (136).

After his failed run for Governor, Stark's initial political breakthrough occurs with two events in a short period of time: the first comes as he represents a gang of workmen who were injured on a bridge the state was constructing and the other is due to his involvement in the litigation between an oil company and independent leaseholders in which he "saw folding money for the first time in his life" (145). Not only is Stark undoubtedly an opportunist, but contrary to the image of himself he projects, his political and economic gains are largely due to a fortuitous ability to gain from the success of others. He likewise gives little credit to Jack Burden for educating him in politics and how to interact with wealthy, influential people. It is also worth noting that Stark's initial presence on a statewide political stage is also based upon luck and his former political naïveté rather than on his personal merit as he was chosen by high-ranking state to divide the vote of the incumbent Governor's challenger. For Warren, social mobility is a sort of enigma and Stark is the only character in the novel that truly achieves it in an upward form. Warren directly confronts the idealized notion of hard work and ingenuity as concomitants for financial success. Rather, he views this narrative with immense skepticism, as seen with how Stark uses his biography to seduce voters and give them false hope of better economic conditions. It is also a tool primarily for the self-gain of the powerful that is particularly elusive for the working class during the Great Depression.

Through Stanton, Warren argues the need for the wealthy to use their power to help others, and in many ways, Stanton is a foil to Stark. The reader learns that Stanton was born into wealth as his father was once the Governor of the State and Stanton likewise grew up with Jack Burden in privilege. While Stark and nearly every character among the elite seek upward mobility and greater social influence for self-gain, Stanton

actively seeks to downplay the wealth he was born into in order to devote himself entirely to helping the less fortunate. Burden describes his childhood friend after not seeing him in years as:

> a hot-shot surgeon now, with more folks screaming for him to cut on them than he had time to cut on, and a professor at the University Medical School, and busy grinding out the papers he published in the scientific journals or took off to read at meetings in New York and Baltimore and London (152).

Stanton's social standing and competence in his profession are immediately evident to the reader. His choice to live in a shabby apartment likewise shows the reader his devotion to his profession and helping others. Warren presents Adam Stanton as the exception to the inherent corruption and selfishness that defines the elite class in *All the King's Men*. He is an exemplar of benevolence in a self-interested setting. Although the novel was published after the Depression, his inclusion argues for this class to have played a greater role in addressing the needs of those suffering during this time period. Stanton's role in *All the King's Men*, however, is contingent upon Stark choosing him to run the children's hospital. In this regard, Stanton and Stark heavily rely upon one another's power: Stanton need Stark's political power in order for him to make a greater impact for others and Stark needs Stanton's expertise as a doctor and philanthropist to ensure the success of his political legacy. Although the Boss has the legislative goal to build a massive hospital free of charge for residents of the State, his motives are not as altruistic as they appear and he is primarily concerned with advancing his power and legacy. By contrast, Adam Stanton expects nothing for his medical help for others. Burden characterizes Stanton's rejection of his ascribed wealth and recognition of his ability to alleviate the suffering

during the Great Depression: “I used to wonder why he lived the way he did when he must have been having quite a handsome take, but I finally got it through my head that he didn’t ask anything from a lot of the folks he cut on” (152). Warren further reveals the separation between a character like Burden and the common person during the Depression, through Burden’s bewilderment that Stanton would choose to live significantly below his means and work to help the less fortunate.

Along with *All the King’s Men*’s solidified placement within the Southern canon and as a political novel, it is generally read as an exploration into both the inherent nature for man to become corrupt in search for personal power as well as the resonating consequences of attaining such power. This is especially relevant during the setting of the Great Depression as Stark is a realistic, familiar character that cogently represents power structures in this era. While Warren asserts the ability for one to achieve upward social mobility, he adds that largely requires one to manipulate and cause injury to others. Boss Stark characterizes this traditional interpretation of the novel with his *modus operandi* that appears multiple times in *All the King’s Men*: “Man is conceived in sin and born in corruption and he passeth from the stink of the die to the stench of the shroud.” (75). Arthur Mizener, likewise offers a common argument of the novel’s themes of the ability for power to corrupt the individual:

> Thus, in the confrontation of its two central characters, *All the King’s Men* poses what is for Mr. Warren the central problem of existence, the irrepressible conflict between the conception of life that gives action meaning and value and the act of living in the world in which meaning and value have to be realized. This conflict appears unendurable. Yet both Jack Burden, who tries to exist in the conception

> without accepting the responsibility of action, and Willie Stark, who drifts into acting effectively for its own sake, find it impossible not to know that it must be endured (61).

The Boss's desire for power, even after achieving great social mobility, can be read as a further commentary of American values of upward mobility and self-determinism during the Great Depression. While Warren affirms the possibility of achieving social mobility during the Depression in his portrayal of Willie Stark's rise, he also shows the detriments that result in an individual's unfettered ambition. Stark refers to his unguided search for power and states in reference to the governorship: "Hell a man can lie there and want something so bad and be so full of wanting it he just plain forgets what it is he wants" (116). Stark initially seeks less to become powerful than to prove to himself that he has the intelligence and the fortitude to enter a class to which he had been excluded during his upbringing. The result of his greed for power eventually causes his decline and has calamitous effects for others: while many of Stark's constituents suffer through the Great Depression, most of his action in office involves personal political gain and trying to hide his corruption. Stark's self-interest largely prevents him from helping his constituents by building the children's hospital, which is never constructed by the end of the novel.

Boss Stark's manipulation of others and ability to connect with his everyday constituents becomes evident during his entrance into the novel, which underscores the Governor's near-universal approval among the State's lower class and the degree with which Stark can both identify and control it for his own purposes. While stopping at a drug store in Mason City in 1936, a crowd approaches Willie while he makes an elaborate speech about not making a speech. Through his colloquial rhetoric, Stark

identifies with the uneducated lower class that makes up his political base and whose interests he claims to represent. Stark says: “But I’m not a politician today. I’m taking the day off. I’m not even going to ask you to vote for me. To tell the God’s unvarnished and unbuckled truth, I don’t have to ask you (15). He goes on to say: “But I don’t expect all of you to vote for me. My God, if all of you went and voted for Willie, what the hell would you find to argue about? There wouldn’t be anything left but the weather, and you can’t vote on that” (16). In effect, Stark has the approval of the lower class without having enacted any effort to alleviate its suffering in the form of unemployment benefits, welfare, or job creation for example. Stark’s foray into the corruption of politics, however, begins in earnest by employing Jack Burden to find incriminating information about Judge Irwin to use for his political advantage. Stark tells Burden: “Yeah, I’m Governor, Jack, and the trouble with Governors is they think they got to keep dignity. But listen here, there ain’t anything worth doing a man can do and keep his dignity” (58). This revelatory statement reflects the novel’s powerful class. Stark is not only aware of his moral shortcoming, but he reflects Warren’s larger argument that the injury of others is a necessary part of obtaining power and elevating one’s social status. Irwin, another major character in the novel, is likewise no exception from the nearly universal corruption of the elite. When Burden researches into Irwin’s past, he learns of Irwin’s personal neglect of the lower class for personal gain. This revelation represents a crisis to Burden: not only does he think less of Stark for his eagerness to bring down a political opponent, but he learns that even the man whom he views as “more of a father to me than those men who had married my mother and come to live in Ellis Burden’s house” (60-61) is guilty of this same moral shortcoming, which is symptomatic of his social class.

Robert Penn Warren introduces a minor character, Lily Mae Littlepaugh, and contrasts her with Judge Irwin with to reveal the enormous class division during the Depression and the consequences it had upon individuals. The reader learns that as a result of Irwin's corruption, Littlepaugh's brother, Mortimer, committed suicide and unlike Irwin who is part of the elite ruling class and has political protection, Lily Mae subsequently lives in poverty and fear. Warren uses Lily Mae to illustrate the consequences of a corrupt ruling class and as the most concrete example of the widespread fear and suffering during the Great Depression. While Mortimer has the honest intention to make Irwin's corruption known, he lacks Irwin's financial and political clout and is threatened. The system in place is designed to reward corruption and prevent any threat to the structure from coming to light. Judge Irwin, however, is an influential judge, a plantation owner, a former Attorney General of the state. As the one who violated the law, he is rewarded: Burden learns that Irwin resigned to "become counsel and vice-president for the American Electric Power Company, at a very good figure, $20,000 a year" (329). This outcome reflects the opinion many had toward those who caused the Depression: that those who were to blame and suffered few consequences, while the people who suffered were uninvolved. Through this development, Warren further argues of the disregard for others inherent in one's rise to financial or political power and to Burden, this marks a validation of Stark's belief that every man, despite appearances of honesty or morality, is conceived in sin and born in corruption.

Perhaps the most notable example of Stark's loss of honest intentions and ability to be corrupted lies in the State Hospital, which reveals the view toward government

during the Great Depression that *All the King's Men* espouses: while it is potentially effective for helping those in need, it instead, often benefits those in power. The Boss intends to build, a $6 million complex, which is the centerpiece of his legislative agenda as Governor. The hospital also reaffirms Stark's initial belief of government's ability to help its citizens during the Depression and it reflects his concern for the poor. The conception of the hospital begins as a genuine effort on the part of Stark to use his power as Governor to provide to others what he had been deprived of when he was younger and in a lower social class. Stark promises an institution in which: "Any man or woman or child who is sick or in pain can go in those doors and know that all will be done that man can do. To heal sickness. To ease pain. Free. Not as charity. But as a right" (392). The function of Stark's hospital and the rhetoric with which he presents it closely resemble Huey Long's political slogan of "Every Man a King." Warren's lack of black characters in the novel, especially in a Southern setting, and Stark's populist, lower class political base in the 1930s presents significant ambiguity as to whether or not Stark's proposed hospital would benefit each of his constituents regardless of race. There are not any notable invocations of race in *All the King's Men* and it is not a subject that characters of either the elite or lower class offer much consideration. Instead, the demands of the governorship and the need for Stark both to maintain and expand upon his power as Governor, however, distract him from beginning construction of the hospital. Its purpose shifts from helping the people of the state and toward representing Stark's legacy as Governor and serving as a monument to himself as he will be its namesake. The Boss characterizes his misguided intention and ambition to build the hospital:

> I'm going to build me the God-damnedest, biggest, chromium-platedest, formaldehyde-stinkingest free hospital and health center the All-Father ever let live. Boy, I tell you, I'm going to have a cage of canaries in every room that can sing Italian grand opera and there ain't going to be a nurse hasn't won a beauty contest in Atlantic City and every bedpan will be eighteen-carat gold and by God, every bedpan will have a Swiss music-box attachment to play 'Turkey in the Straw' or 'The Sextet from Lucia,' take your choice (209).

To Stark, the hospital becomes an unrealistic abstraction and significantly diverges from its original intention to provide health care to the State's lower class. By the conclusion of the novel, the hospital is never constructed due to contract mismanagement and estrangement between Boss Stark and Adam Stanton and with this failure to enact legislation, Warren argues that the government and the wealthy class that controlled it have severely neglected those who elected them to office in favor of their self-interest.

In contrast to the insular elite social class, there is mention of largely inconsequential characters that make up the lower class, which reveals not only class division but also the elite class's disengagement and contempt toward those who do not share its social prominence. The reader sees the scorn with which those in power direct toward the poor. One instance occurs when Burden encounters a person in poverty whom he describes:

> An unfortunate is a bum who is fortunate enough to get his foot inside a softy's door and stay there. If he gets a good berth he is promoted from bum to unfortunate. The Scholarly Attorney had, on several occasions before, taken in unfortunates. One unfortunate had popped the organist down at the mission where

> the Scholarly Attorney operated. Another unfortunate had lifted his watch and Phi Beta Kappa key" (294)

This perception of the poor dominates the opinion of the ruling class in *All the King's Men*. Although Adam Stanton does not view those in lower classes this way, Stark frequently shows malevolence toward the poor, though he grew up in poverty and has experienced such hardship. He dehumanizes the poor as a group rather than viewing them as individual people. He makes this explicitly clear toward the middle of the novel, when he tells Byram B. White, his State Auditor: "A fellow like you, fifty years old and gut-shot and teeth gone and never had a dime, if God-Almighty had ever intended you to be rich he'd done it long back" (197) and shortly after, says to Burden: "My God, you talk like Byram was Human! He's a thing! (203). Stark shows no respect to those not in his social class and only views them in terms of his ability to benefit from them. Jack Burden and Willie Stark also demean Stark's driver, Sugar Boy, which is evident in his name, and is a reflection of the simple-mindedness they believe him to have. He is, like many of the lower class, viewed simply in terms of his usefulness to Stark.

The most notable example of degrading those not in the insular elite class occurs with Tiny Duffy, who by virtue of his perceived cluelessness and lack of political threat, is Stark's Lieutenant Governor. Burden introduces Duffy early in the novel: "If the wind was right, you knew he was a city-hall slob long before you could see the whites of his eyes. He had the belly and he sweated through his shirt just above the belt buckle…" (18). Burden also fails to take Duffy seriously because he is merely a Tax Assessor, and as far as the reader knows, this is his only political experience before becoming Lieutenant Governor. While technically a part of the ruling group, there is an

unquestionable exclusion of Duffy in the state's governance, which reveals not only Stark's lack of responsibility in governing, but also his manipulation of those in a lower class. Jack Burden describes Duffy and his relationship to Stark: "Tiny Duffy became, in a crazy kind of way, the other self of Willie Stark, and all the contempt and insult which Willie Stark was to heap on Tiny Duffy was nothing but what one self of Willie Stark did to the other self because of a blind, inward necessity" (147). Rather than appointing people whom Stark believes to be competent, Stark selects a Lieutenant Governor on the simple basis that he serves Stark's simple self-interest. This disregard for his constituents has detrimental effects. When Stark is assassinated, Duffy assumes the role of Governor and as someone who has little political knowledge and is believed to be wholly incompetent, he is presumably unable to help the state and its people in a time of economic calamity. In this regard, Tiny Duffy is a symbol like Stark's Children's Hospital of government breaking its promise and not serving the interest of the poor as they are left suffering.

All the King's Men is undoubtedly a tragic novel as both Adam Stanton and Willie Stark are killed during its climax. The real tragedy, however, lies in the elite's unlimited, unused power to alleviate the suffering of the enormous poverty and suffering specific to *All the King's Men*'s time and location. The novel's remarkable realism and verisimilitude illustrate the undeniable similarities between the misuse of power in Warren's Southern State and the ways in which the powerful caused the Great Depression and left others to suffer, while they were protected. As the reader finishes the novel, the inevitable reaction is wondering happens to those who must live with the

consequences of Stark's governorship and the same question of needless suffering must be asked in the study of Great Depression literature.

In many ways, *To Have and Have Not* is represented within Ernest Hemingway's body of work similar to other writing involving the Great Depression within the larger context of early 20th century literature—at best, its importance is secondary to the Modernist aesthetic and war fiction. *To Have and Have Not* also represents the periphery of Hemingway's fiction in subject matter and as one of his few works both to take place in the United States and to have been written in the 1930s. As the protagonist, Harry Morgan navigates the route from Key West to Cuba by ship, *To Have and Have Not* confronts themes of a devaluation of life and the relative nature of morality with regard to economic circumstance in an exemplary manner. The novel's negative treatment of race, however, adds to both of these themes and implores the reader to examine its datedness as a work of Great Depression literature. In spite of its relative obscurity and age as a literary text, *To Have and Have Not* has the merits of being a landmark novel and remains relevant in the present day in the context of studying the history of the 1930s.

To Have and Have Not begins by presenting the reader with the Great Depression's devastation to a protagonist and his family and shortly after, it opens into the familiar contradiction inherent to the study of literature in the Depression: Harry Morgan must earn money by smuggling people and goods in and out of the country at the risk of being arrested by a government that cannot provide a favorable economic climate or guarantee its promise of shared prosperity. Harry Morgan succinctly characterizes this double bind: "What worse trouble you going to get in than you're in now? What the hell worse trouble is there than starving?" (98). Morgan has exhausted all of his options and when confronted with this choice, he only engages in it begrudgingly and out of desperation. In fact, the real motivator for Morgan is not self-interest, but providing for

his family, whom the reader sees little of during the novel. Morgan further summarizes his dilemma as the need to earn money separates him from his family:

> All right, what was I going to do now? I couldn't bring in a load because you have to have money to buy the booze and besides there's no money in it anymore. The town is flooded with it and there's nobody to buy it. But I was damned if I was going home broke and starve a summer in that town. Besides, I've got a family (28).

The basic need for Morgan and his wife and children to eat, figures prominently throughout the novel and remains the only motivation for him to continue sailing from Key West to Cuba. Morgan does not earn large amounts of money in his illegal shipping of immigrants and goods either: he simply earns what he needs to stay alive. While Morgan feels trapped between making money illegally and the need to make ends meet for his family, he also feels enormous pressure from multiple angles. He shows enormous distrust toward Mr. Sing, who persuades him to transport Asian immigrants. Morgan is frequently at risk of being caught by U.S. government authorities with the consequence of a ten-year prison sentence. He also must remain mindful of the Cubans who do not hesitate to kill those whom they cannot trust. While some readers could view Morgan as an immoral figure for deliberately and egregiously breaking the law, he simply engages in an action similar to many other characters in Depression literature: doing something unfavorable because it is necessary and the best option possible for survival.

Like in *The Grapes of Wrath*, the view that *To Have and Have Not* takes toward government is that it is more preoccupied with punishing those who break the law out of necessity than improving the economic climate or helping people find work and relief. It

is an entity to avoid rather than a source of help or trustworthiness. While Morgan cannot count on government to provide relief to him and his family, it reliably looks to punish him, specifically, for doing what he sees as necessary for survival. The reader sees the extent to the government's targeting of Morgan when Captain Willie tells him: "I got a guy here on board some kind of stool from Washington. More important than the president, he says. He wants to pinch you. He thinks you're a bootlegger" (83). *To Have and Have Not* views the government's response to the Great Depression as counterproductive as it is aggressively aims to prosecute people like Morgan, while its efforts to end the crisis are impotent. This response reaffirms the perception that the economic and political system in place insulated those with wealth and power and punished the everyman. Morgan characterizes this view of government familiar to Depression-era literature:

> Look at me. I used to make thirty-five dollars a day right through the season taking people out fishing. Now I get shot and lose an arm, and my boat, running a lousy load of liquor that's worth hardly as much as my boat. But let me tell you, my kids ain't going to have their bellies hurt and I ain't going to dig sewers for the government for less money than will feed them. I can't dig now anyway. I don't know who made the laws but I know there ain't no law that you got to go hungry (96).

While Morgan's actions are illegal, Hemingway adds a perspective that is sympathetic to the average person willing to risk his well-being and sense of morality in order to survive. Hemingway constructs Morgan's character with honesty so that most readers can identify

with him at this capacity, effectively contrasting the contempt with which the poor in the period were viewed.

Hemingway's novel also shows the to dehumanization of the individual during the Great Depression, which occurs on several accounts. In a more figurative sense, the reduction of man occurs as the novel overwhelmingly takes the view that during the Depression, the value of certain goods exceeded that of an average person. Morgan's boat represents his capital as well as what is seemingly his only value as a person. At the beginning of the novel, Morgan says: "I make my living with the boat. If I lose her, I lose my living" (4). There is no separation between his worth as a person and what he owns: both Morgan and the other characters of the novel determine his value entirely upon economic output. As is the case with his capital, the value of Morgan's product also outweighs the importance of his life. Wesley, the only black character in the novel that is given a name, asks: "Ain't a man's life worth more than a load of liquor?" to which Morgan answers "No. They take the liquor and the boat and you go to jail" (69). In this context, Wesley's and Morgan's questioning of the value of human life refers to the American authorities, but this type of thinking applies to any context of the novel. The government, businessmen, people working on the black market, and ordinary workers like Morgan each recognize the universality of the decreased value of man.

This devaluation of man continues as Morgan and Mr. Sing treat the Asian immigrants as a commodity. Because of their race and extremely low social status, they are entirely dispensable and there is a complete lack of concern if one of them is to die while travelling to Florida. The reader sees such dehumanization through Morgan's racist language when he gives the instruction as the immigrants arrive on his boat:

> One Chink is going to bring those twelve out. He's going to give me some money at the start. When they're all on board, he's going to give me some more money. When you see him start to hand me money the second time you put her ahead and hook her up and head her out to sea. Don't you pay any attention to what happens" (47).

This represents a large hypocrisy for Morgan: he recognizes that the economic conditions have diminished the inherent value of man as he, in particular is a victim of the Depression, but because of his relative sense of power in this setting, he becomes the oppressor. This phenomenon is reminiscent of *The Grapes of Wrath* when people decide to work for the bank to avoid the fate of the farmers. They are able to profit by kicking farmers off their land and telling them: "One man on a tractor can take the place of twelve or fourteen families" (33). The desperation for money and food promotes opportunism and the widespread continuation of oppressing other men. In this respect, the forces that reduce Morgan's sense of worth also cause him to continue this mistreatment of man. Those involved in the illegal shipping of immigrant and goods recognize both their lessened place in society and, within the context of the Great Depression, that they are powerless to change it.

Due to the illegal nature of the action in *To Have and Have Not*, it is easy to understand that Harry Morgan would get shot and lose his arm, which represents a very literal deterioration of man and a type of castration. As someone whose profession involves manual labor, it removes Morgan's agency, much of his ability to work, and sense of masculinity while instead, giving him and his peers a defeatist approach toward trying to survive the Depression. This violence as a result of economic conditions

happens elsewhere in the novel. Where there is murder in *All the King's Men*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and *Of Mice and Men* its motivation is generally personal and specific to another character. In *To Have and Have Not*, violence and murder are systematic and done in haste. Although Morgan gets shot in the arm, he is not innocent of the violence in this novel as he kills Mr. Sing. His motivation for killing Sing is simply to: "keep from killing twelve other Chinks" (55). Hemingway makes the efficacy of this murder quite ambiguous and it seems little more than another instance of needless violence. It is also one of the more significant instances in which Hemingway blurs the virtue of an otherwise upright character and forces the reader ponder the relativity of morality inherent in the Great Depression. Through this novel, the reader sees that the Great Depression has reduced human life to subjectivity and this violence punctuates the paradigm of the oppressed becoming the oppressor. It also reflects the everyman's fear, uncertainty, and willingness to go to extraordinary lengths to keep himself alive.

In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison reflects on Hemingway's use of race in *To Have and Have Not*. She writes: "My interest in Ernest Hemingway becomes heightened when I consider how much apart his work is from African-Americans" (69). There are African-American, Asian, and Cuban characters in the novel, but their roles are largely periphery: few are given names or the ability to communicate and they are presented largely in negative stereotypes. There is excessive and consistent use of racial epithets for African-American and Asian characters in this novel, which most present-day readers would find appalling. The racism in *To Have and Have Not* also represents its most significant form of the dehumanization of man. Morrison's primary concern with regard to race in the novel is its treatment of

African American characters and the use of the term "nigger." For Hemingway, she argues, the word "occupies a territory between man and animal and thus withholds specificity even while marking it (71). The same dehumanization can be said of Asian characters as Morgan frequently says the term "chink" and describes Mr. Sing as "the smoothest-looking thing" he had ever seen (30). As previously mentioned, Asian immigrants are treated as commodity and the novel's predominately white characters view them, along with African-American characters, with sub-human status. Whether intentionally used to reflect attitudes of the time or not, the racism in *To Have and Have Not* marks a parallel to Steinbeck's use of animal metaphors in *Of Mice and Men* to convey a removal of humanity from the characters. The reader overwhelmingly sees that to Morgan and in a greater social context, their value derives solely from the profit they can provide to those who have power over them.

Morrison also addresses the implications of Hemingway's intentionality regarding Harry Morgan's status as a sympathetic character with regard to race, arguing that if Harry Morgan, rather than the narrator, were to address Wesley with the word "nigger," he would no longer be a character with which the reader could sympathize. Morrison further notes that it is only after Morgan makes an apology to Wesley, and Wesley acknowledges and accepts an inferior status, that Morgan can, and freely does, refer to him with this epithet. As the racism inherent in *To Have and Have Not* signifies its most notable form of dehumanization, Hemingway's treatment of race from the perspective of a reader in the 21st century is likewise the most significant deterrent from Harry Morgan's status as a generally sympathetic character in the novel. The obvious difference between this significant moral compromise, opposed to Morgan's other moral ambiguities,

however, is that the Great Depression did not play a role in Morgan's racism as it did in his use of violence, violation of the law, and oppression of man. It is not a quality that can be dismissed, and for many readers, it is not forgivable. Such instances of racism further reveal why *To Have and Have Not* exists at the periphery of Hemingway's work as well as Great Depression literature and in many ways, it makes the novel extremely dated nearly eighty years after its initial publication. Morrison does not argue, however, that this invalidates it as important literature. Rather, she offers genuine praise for Hemingway's "compellingly" writing "about what it was to be a white male American" (90). Toni Morrison also acknowledges Morgan's laudable qualities in that he represents "the classic American hero: a solitary man battling a government that would limit his freedom and individuality" (70). The aim of *Playing in the Dark* is not to deliberate any particular author's treatment of race, but to serve as a reminder that "readers and writers, are bereft when criticism remains too polite or too fearful to notice a disrupting darkness before its eyes" (91). This presents difficulty in reading *To Have and Have Not*: while on one hand its racism cannot be overlooked, it maintains value through its unintentional portrayal of the ways in which people of color were treated and dehumanized during this time period.

In *To Have and Have Not*, Hemingway examines the ambiguity of morality during the Great Depression in several dimensions. Harry Morgan, for the most part, is an honorable protagonist, but there are serious considerations to be made with regard to his treatment of his fellow men and the means by which he survives the Depression. Hemingway implores the reader to question the validity of actively breaking the law, promoting a culture of lawlessness in order to survive, and exhibiting a significant level

of racism. While not specifically posited, by omission, the reader comes away from this novel wondering the degree to which vices perpetuate themselves and appear to make their continuation seem more necessary. While perhaps more subtle in its social or political commentary than other Depression novels, Morgan represents the uncertainty of the time period and the questioning of what had been formerly accepted as cultural truths. With regard to institutions, Hemingway invites the reader to assess the merits of government's morality: he presents it with a similar level of ambiguity as it persecutes others for what it believes to be wrongdoing, but by not actively seeking to help citizens, it appears to share the lack of virtue. In a time period of drastic, pervasive uncertainty, *To Have and Have Not* provides an exemplary look at the ambiguous nature of morality in this setting and is essential to the study of literature of the Great Depression.

John Steinbeck's texts, *Of Mice and Men* and *Cannery Row* depict opposing perspectives of the Great Depression to the degree that they almost seem to describe different time periods. *Of Mice and Men*'s consideration of the American search for work, independence, a greater sense of happiness as well, as man's place in the world is much more widely read and has received substantially more criticism than *Cannery Row*. George Milton and Lennie Small are likewise two of the most consequential characters in 20th century American literature, and for their dramatic portrayal of the 1930s, it is easy to understand why *Of Mice and Men* has become ubiquitous within American and Depression-era literature. *Cannery Row*, on the other hand, has less to say about the oppression of man and the injustices of the Depression, but it does, however closely examine the ways in which communal bonds strengthen in difficult times. It presents itself as a counterweight to the more common Depression narrative of struggle and hardship and has much to say about the potential of democracy, capitalism, and the capacity for man to share compassion with man. With these two texts, John Steinbeck asserts himself as a writer who understands the enormous complexity of the time period in which he writes and offers a comprehensive, detailed account of what it meant to live during the Great Depression.

The characters in *Of Mice and Men* maintain optimism, for most of the novella, in their distinctively American hope of upward mobility, despite the devaluation of man that persists. Lennie and George are like any average working-class characters in Depression literature, but what makes them unique is that they are easily able to find work. Their difficulty is less immediate than in texts like *The Grapes of Wrath* or *To Have and Have Not*, but they face the same inability to transcend their poverty and live with financial

stability. Despite this confinement to their class, they maintain their work and belief of a better future until the closing pages of the novella. George has a specific vision of what his independence and happiness will look like and he discusses it with Lennie frequently, nearly at any instance of downtime or lull in conversation. He describes to Lennie: "Well, it's ten acres. Got a little win'mill. Got a little shack on it, an' a chicken run. Got a kitchen, orchard, cherries, apples, peaches, 'cots, nuts, got a few berries. They's a place for alfalfa and plenty water to flood it" (57). The character of Candy, another hand at the ranch, adds another dynamic to the pursuit of financial independence in *Of Mice and Men*. Candy sees strength in George and Lennie's plan to work together to save money for a house and property and proposes to George the he become involved in their plan. In many respects, Candy's belief and excitement in these American narratives are stronger than George's or Lennie's and this is the defining part of his character. In another time period, the dream that the three characters share is entirely attainable. It is not lavish or overly idealized and work ethic is never called into question. In the context of the Depression, however, this belief leads to the characters largely becoming pacified like Boss Stark's constituents in *All the King's Men*: instead of recognizing their status as pawns and demanding a greater role in the political and economic process, they entertain a misguided belief of a brighter future specific to American cultural narratives. The position that *Of Mice and Men* takes is that due to the Great Depression, people from the working class cannot escape it: those who control the political and economic system have prevented the possibility of upward economic mobility for others.

It is not until Lennie discusses his and George's plans with Crooks, another worker and the novella's only black character, that his beliefs are called into question.

There is a hierarchy even among the tenant workers, who are all of the lower class in a larger societal context, and Crooks is at the bottom of the power structure because of his race. This also causes him to experience isolation from the rest of the workers. Charles Johnson characterizes Crooks's placement in *Of Mice and Men*: "During the Great Depression, it also presented a strong and influential indictment of racial segregation, for which Steinbeck is still praised today, and rightfully so" (236). Crooks has worked at the ranch longer than most characters and through his experience, he has become disillusioned with the idea of workers planning for financial independence. Johnson also argues with regard to Crooks: "Often in fiction published during the modernist period, the racial Outsider is given the role of being a vehicle for truth, a truth that 'insiders' and people who are privileged or conform to society cannot know" (247). One of the truths to which Johnson refers is Crooks's recognition of the inability for George, Lennie, or Candy to achieve the financial independence they envision for themselves. Crooks tells another character:

> I see 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. Hunderds of them. They come, an' they quit an' go on; 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 (74).

While a white character like Candy maintains belief in the possibility for social mobility, because of his race, Crooks recognizes such a belief as delusional for a tenant farmer during the Depression. The doubt in this dream begins shortly before Lennie kills Curley's wife and it becomes absolute afterward. Candy approaches George how this death will affect their plan, to which George answers: "—I think I knowed from the very

first. I think I knowed we'd never do her. He usta like to hear about it so much I got to thinking maybe we would" (95). For most of the novella, George's belief in the ability to realize his independence seems honest and genuine, but with this revelation, it becomes quite obvious that this American narrative is a misleading source of comfort and false hope used against the working class to prevent them from realizing their fate and opposing the class system in place. There is a fundamental, pervasive view that the American narrative of hard work and its ability to create upward social mobility is broken. Steinbeck's seminal novella argues that what makes the United States unique as a nation eroded during the Depression. With this development, the novella builds upon such disillusionment to ask, in an existential sense, what is the value of man.

From the beginning of the novella, Steinbeck presents no ambiguity to Lennie's mental disability. Lennie is described as "a huge man, shapeless of face, with large, pale eyes, with wide sloping shoulders; and he walked heavily, dragging his feet a little, the way a bear drags his paws" (2). Especially within the context of the 1930s, there is very little sympathy given to Lennie's disability and most of the attention he receives for it is scornful. Lennie is arguably the best-known character with a mental disability in American literature and Steinbeck uses him to address an injustice prominent in the 1930s. In a 1937 interview with *The New York Times*, Steinbeck reflected on the autobiographical parts of the novella and his experience as a bindlestiff in California.

> The characters are composites to a certain extent. Lennie was a real person. He's in an insane asylum in California right now. I worked alongside him for many weeks. He didn't kill a girl. He killed a ranch foreman. Got sore because the boss had fired his pal and stuck a pitchfork right through his stomach. I hate to tell you

> how many times. I saw him do it. We couldn't stop him until it was too late (Parini).

Steinbeck not only uses Lennie to show the emblematic devaluation of man, particularly of those from the lower class, but he also speaks to the greater injustice of the mistreatment of people with mental disabilities in the time period. Steinbeck dramatizes a systematic misunderstanding of people with disabilities, which caused Lennie's death and precluded the institutionalization of someone Steinbeck knew who should have received proper care rather than being forced to work as a ranch hand or institutionalized. With Lennie's tragic death at the climax of the novella, Steinbeck makes a poignant case for improving both the standards for how those with disabilities are cared for and how they are treated by society. Despite Lennie's mental disability and the perception of him as less than human, however, he is valued for his strength and ability to work. Rather than giving Lennie a greater sense of value as a person, however, it further represents his devaluation as he is viewed in terms of nothing more than the amount of work he can do and the profit her can generate to his employer. In this way, Lennie is an ideal worker for those who own the ranch: he can do more work than anyone else and does not possess the mental facility to question the mistreatment he receives. Lennie's strength, which easily surpasses that of any of the other workers, is the only reason he is able to work on the ranch and provides his only value as a person in the world of the novella.

Along with Steinbeck's portrayal of Lennie as someone with a mental disability who represents the devaluation of man in the Depression, Steinbeck frequently uses animal imagery, as he makes reference to mice, bears, and most of all rabbits, when describing Lennie, which serves a similar purpose. Where George's ambition lies mostly

with having his own property, Lennie's vision for himself involves his obsession with rabbits. He tells George: "Tell about what we're gonna have in the garden and about the rabbits in the cages and about the rain in the winter and the stove, and how thick the cream is on the milk like you can hardly cut it" (14). The topic of animals is the most concrete example the reader sees of Lennie's thoughts in *Of Mice and Men* and Lennie is more concerned with being around them than finding work or financial independence, which is the priority of most of the workers. Lennie's obsession with animals also shows the reader a compassionate, gentle side of him contrary to the perception that the other characters have of him, which is someone who is dangerous and incapable of having thoughts or much emotion. Through this imagery, which appears consistently throughout *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck offers the perception that both for people with disabilities, and on a larger scale, working people in the Depression, their value is akin to that of an animal and are only as usefulness as the profit they can provide to those with capital.

The devaluation of man in *Of Mice and Men* continues most strongly and immediately with the two murders in the novella: the first of which is Lennie's unintentional murder of Curley's wife, which leads to George killing Lennie. Lennie is as simple in death as he is in life: George leads him to an area away from the ranch and shoots him with his back turned as one would shoot a rabid animal. In fact, Steinbeck makes this connection between man and animal explicit as Carlson shoots Candy's dog at the beginning of the novella in the belief that it has become useless. There is foreshadowing involved as Carlson says: "If you was to take him out and shoot him right in the back of the head—right there, why he'd never know what hit him" (45). This is not only exactly what George does to Lennie in the closing pages of the novella, but the back

of the head is also exactly where he shoots him, which makes this parallel undeniable. There is, however, no violent intent or maliciousness. George simply aims to remove the burden of life from Lennie and takes into his own hands what the state would have likely done anyway. Lennie's death is fatalistic as either his mental disability or lowly social status would cause his death or play a role in it. There are only a few words spoken and presumably, George leaves the body there without ceremony or a burial. It is at once a simple act as Slim tells George: "Never you mind. A guy got to sometimes" (107) before suggesting that the two of them get a drink. This murder, does however, force the reader into examining the inherent worth of human life within the context of mental disability, social status in the Great Depression, and as someone who unintentionally kills someone else. Despite the enormous stakes for the reader, within a diegetic context in *Of Mice and Men*, Lennie's death is inconsequential in that the only person who knew him well or will miss him is the one responsible for his death.

The death of Curley's wife, however, is more complex. Steinbeck has alluded to this complexity by saying of Curley's wife: "She's not a person, she's a symbol. She has no function, except to be a foil—and a danger to Lennie" and this is why she was not given a name (Parini). Curley's wife's is the only female character in the novel and each of the workers view her as a very attractive woman. She is of a higher social class than the other characters and represents, through both seduction and social class, what they cannot have: this is also what inadvertently kills her. While Mark Spilka has also drawn attention to Steinbeck "taking a boss's son and his wife as sources of privileged pressure on migrant farmhands," (66) Howard Levant sees her as a sort of femme fatale who embodies "the Hollywood ideal of the seductive movie queen is the only standard of

love" (83). Curley's wife also uses both her class and sexuality to threaten the only other character with a status as low as Lennie's, which is Crooks. Curley's wife is quick to exercise this power and foreshadows her role in Lennie's death when she tells Crooks: "Well, you keep your place then, nigger. I could get you strung up on a tree so easy it ain't even funny" (81). Not only does Curley's wife have more power than any character in the novel, she maintains an obvious level of malevolence. When Curley's wife lets him touch her hair, he effectively kills her, cementing her status as a pawn within the larger drama at hand. Steinbeck again invokes animal imagery, but this time for Curley's wife, as he writes: "he shook her; and her body flopped like a fish. And she was still, for Lennie had broken her neck" (91). While quite different, the deaths of Lennie and Curley's wife share a short, simple, non-glorified view of death. The general attitude of the workers is that the death of Curley's wife represents a sort of morality plot: Candy immediate recognizes the danger her presence was bound to cause as someone from a higher class living among migrant workers. He says: "You God damn tramp. You done it, di'n't you? I suppose you're glad. Ever'body knowed you'd mess things up" (95). In this respect, the view that *Of Mice and Men* takes toward social classes is that they must remain separate, for the upper class will cause injury to others. In contrast to the relative lack of consequence in Lennie's death as an unimportant everyman, Curley's wife's death not only demands Lennie's inevitable death, but unlike Lennie, she has someone who will truly mourn her and seek retribution. Curley's wife's death is also more permanent to those who remain on the ranch than Lennie's death. Her class and lack of mental disability, like Lennie's, give her life inherently greater worth than his. Steinbeck not only wonderfully exploits class dynamics in his writing, but with this pair of murders,

he offers perhaps the most dramatic, poignant argument for the diminished worth of working people in Great Depression literature.

While Steinbeck's novella is in some ways simple and economical, its implications transcend familiar literary themes and time period of the Great Depression. Although it fits rigidly in the category of Great Depression literature and has been less appropriated into other literary periods than many Depression texts, it retains relevance outside this context. Through its elements of friendship, pursuit of independence, and tragedy, *Of Mice and Men* has a universal appeal with regard to the value of life and the implications of death. These motifs are at the root of its continued widespread readership and have solidified its place as a prominent work in both American and Great Depression literature.

In contrast to the egregious, systematic mistreatment of people in *Of Mice and Men,* Steinbeck's 1946 novel, *Cannery Row* offers an optimistic alternative for the possibility of people to work together. This novel takes place in Monterrey, California and Lee Chong is the proprietor of a general store in which the community of Cannery Row buys essential goods and socializes. Racism is not an unfamiliar topic in Depression-era texts: there is obvious racism in *Of Mice and Men*, while characters Ernest Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not*, likewise show a great level of racism toward black and Asian characters. Langston Hughes's poetry of the 1930s, likewise examines the disparity between the American ideal of equality and the reality of racial discrimination. There is, however, no significant mention of Chong's Asian background in *Cannery Row*, nor does his race define him as a character. He transcends a stereotypical perception of his race not seen in *Of Mice and Men* or *To Have and Have*

Not which, given the time period and his social role, further adds to a utopian dynamic in the community.

Instead of receiving mistreatment from others because of his race, Chong is an integral part of the community. His store is perhaps as much a social institution as a place of business and it gives a concise glimpse into the ways in which people depend on one another in a social context and to make a living. In the novel's opening pages, the reader learns:

> The grocery opened at dawn and did not close until the last wandering vagrant dime and had been spent or retired for the night. Not that Lee Chong was avaricious. He wasn't, but if one wanted to spend money, he was available…Over the course of the years everyone in Cannery Row owed him money. He never pressed his clients, but when the bill became too large, Lee cut off credit (5).

Chong's business is not an idealistic perception of community outreach or charity and it still applies by basic business principles, but right away, the reader sees that compared to most places of business, there is something different about it. Lee is not married and does not have children as far as the reader knows. There is little indication that he does much with himself when not working. He does, however, offer as much as possible of himself and his resources to those on Cannery Row and because of this, he enjoys the patronage of all its citizens as indicated by the narration: "if the tenants ever had any money, and quite often they did have, it never occurred to them to spend it any place except at Lee Chong's grocery" (12). *Cannery Row* cogently argues the merits of a specific brand of capitalism and democracy. Chong's business is the center of the community and he is its main creditor. There is likewise little in the way of social programs aimed at providing

economic assistance. Business is paramount and charity is seen, to some degree as an insult to one's dignity and to personal relationships between people. When someone needs financial help in Cannery Row, he or she can obtain it with self-respect as there is always a solution to be created. While this text takes the approach that capitalism is the most effective system to generate prosperity for all classes, it also clearly shows that an economic system is more productive when there is not a drastic separation of classes and when people, rather than institutions or large businesses are empowered to play a large role in civil society.

Cannery Row can also be read as a microcosm of Keynesian economics. As stated in John Maynard Keynes's *The General Theory of Employment Interest and Money*, the ability for governments to invest money, whether in the form of public works or unemployment benefits, helps increase consumption and reduces unemployment. Unlike the view of public institutions in *The Grapes of Wrath*, the characters of *Cannery* Row hold the system they created in exceptionally high regard and exercise a near-exemplary form of democracy. Keynes writes that the government "will be liable, willingly or unwillingly, to run into a budgetary deficit or will provide unemployment relief, for example, out of borrowed money" (98). He goes on to say: "employment can only increase *pari passu* with an increase in investment; unless, indeed, there is a change in the propensity to consume" (98). There is an accepted system of debt, borrowing, and investment that sustains the economy in Cannery Row, which mirrors Keynes's economic prescriptions. Chong has the most capital of the characters in the novel, gives credit to them, and expects them to do the same for others. He also invests more in the community than any other character and subsequently has the most debt. Steinbeck describes

Chong's position in the community: "What he did with his money, no one ever knew. Perhaps he didn't get it. Maybe his wealth was entirely in unpaid bills. But he lived well and he had the respect of all his neighbors" (6). Steinbeck shows that there is not societal pressure or guilt that motivates the interconnectedness of Cannery Row's economy as he argues that it is in everyone's best interest to help others.

Not only does Lee Chong own the primary place of business, but in the first chapter, the reader also learns that his capital extends beyond the store. When Horace Abbeville, who is noted as having "a grocery debt second to none in Monterrey," (6) seeks to pay off his debt without having any money, Chong agrees to acquire a property that Abbeville owns in exchange for paying off the debt. A few pages later, when Mack, who is frequently referred to as a "bum," asks Chong to rent the building to him and his friends for four dollars per month, Chong begrudgingly agrees. Being able to contribute to the local economy is not reserved to those with capital. In Chapter Nine, Mack tries to assist Doc, a marine biologist who, like Chong, is a selfless person and an integral part of the community. Steinbeck writes: "Now Doc really needed the frogs. He tried to work out some method which was business and not philanthropy. 'I'll tell you what I'll do,' he said. 'I'll give you a note to my gas station so you can get ten gallons of gas' " (53). Mack, despite not having any capital, provides Doc, the second-most influential person in Cannery Row, with the resources to do his job and Mack likewise benefits. As many economists view Keynesian economics as having helped end the Great Depression and save capitalism, these types of exchanges similarly allow the people of Cannery Row to avoid the destitution seen in many other Depression texts. The intentional system of

lending and borrowing, debt and capital provide basic necessities in the community as well as prevent excessive hardship and give dignity to the citizens.

In many ways, Steinbeck's novel is admittedly light and simple. There is not much in the way of a definite plot or character development: much of the text's premise involves Mack attempting to gather people for a party to show appreciation for Doc. It cannot even be said with much certainty that Chong is *Cannery* Row's protagonist. The personal relationships between the characters, however, very closely reflect their economic relationships. Steinbeck clearly displays this parallel when Mack says to Lee Chong: "I think a guy's friends ought to help him out of a hole when they can, especially a nice guy like Doc. Why I bet he spends sixty seventy dollars a month with you" (55). While *Cannery Row* has much to say about the benefits of these interactions based upon business, it offers much more in the way of the importance of community and personal relationships: for solidarity during hardship and as a source of greater meaning in the lives of individuals. It does not idealize the shared suffering of the Depression or ignore the reality of economic and personal devastation. One minor character, Joey, for example, mentions toward the end of the novel that his father committed suicide after a year of unemployment. This addition to the novel addresses the very real social problem of suicide in the Depression, which increased from fourteen per 100,000 to seventeen after the crash of 1929 (The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project). Although *Cannery Row* does not evade social realities of the time period, it mostly reads as a divergence from the typical Depression narratives of hardship, offering a lighter more optimistic perception.

Whether through George and Lennie in *Of Mice and Men* or in the wider setting in *Cannery Row*, relationships between individuals are at the core of texts. As John Steinbeck famously wrote in a journal entry:

> In every bit of honest writing in the world . . . there is a base theme. Try to understand men, if you understand each other you will be kind to each other. Knowing a man well never leads to hate and nearly always leads to love. There are shorter means, many of them. There is writing promoting social change, writing punishing injustice, writing in celebration of heroism, but always that base theme. Try to understand each other (Shillinglaw).

Steinbeck employs dehumanization of man, mental disability, and tragic death in *Of Mice and Men* not only to show the devastation of the Great Depression, but also to argue for a greater emphasis of human value in the setting. *Cannery Row* likewise aims to communicate this value and show the possibility for human interaction as a vehicle to create understanding and optimism between people even among the fear and frustration of the Great Depression. Despite the drastically opposing narratives dealing with the Great Depression, *Of Mice and Men* and *Cannery Row* have a significant commonality in that they each exemplify Steinbeck's belief that the primary goal of literature is to makes readers more compassionate and aware of the interconnectedness of man.

Like many writers who chronicled the suffering of the Great Depression, William Carlos Williams is often considered a Modernist poet and grouped with poets like Ezra Pound, Hilda Doolittle, and the Imagists. His best-known works include "The Red Wheelbarrow," "This is Just to Say," and "The Great Figure," which are notable for their economical use of words and their intense focus on seemingly unimportant objects. These early works and his large late-career poem *Paterson*, dominate the discussion of Williams's poetry. Like many in his generation, however, Williams became disillusioned with the potential for art after the destruction of World War I. He "longed for a 'normalcy' in which the avant-garde could function as before" (Frail 127) and in this period, Williams began a transformation in his subject matter and an understanding of the necessary function of a poet. He would later say: "The mark of a great poet is the extent to which he is aware of his time and NOT, unless I be a fool, the weight of loveliness in his meters" (141) and in this regard, he focused his attention and creative output toward the dominant social and political issue of interwar America—the Great Depression.

Contrary to popular associations with work, Williams wrote a great deal on everyday life during the 1930s and addresses many familiar themes in Great Depression literature, which include drastic class division and a systemic disregard for the lower class, rural Americans being excluded from the political process, and questioning the very idea of democracy after the crash of 1929. For his skepticism toward the cultural narratives like the United States being a nation of social mobility and opportunity, Williams is an essential part of any study of the literature that arose from the Great Depression. Perhaps Williams's most visual representation of hardship during the Great Depression occurs in his poem, "The Yachts," which creates an allegory of social

mobility in the United States in the form of a race between varying sizes of watercraft. Williams establishes class division in the setting of an "ungoverned ocean" (3) and further notes a "well-guarded arena of open water surrounded by / lesser and greater craft" (12-13). This setting symbolizes the lack of financial regulation that preceded the stock market crash and the upper class's insulation from its effects—a system of inequality in which the highest five percent of the population received about one-third of all personal income (Zinn 386). Williams definitively contends: "Today no race. Then the wind comes again. The yachts / move, jockeying for a start and they / are off" (21-23). The ocean symbolizes democracy and the race refers to capitalism. Despite the appearance of the two being compatible, as well as the societal belief that despite economic hardship, social mobility is still attainable, Williams argues that the wealthy will always have an undisputable advantage over the lower classes. It is also important to note that while there are a small number of yachts and many smaller boats, there is not an intermediate size of boats, which signifies the absence of a middle class. By virtue of this disparity, Williams argues that even before the Depression there was never any chance for entry into the upper class. Instead, the ruling class will both exert its influence for self-interest and be protected from economic calamity.

Whereas dehumanization of the lower class is a recurring theme in Great Depression literature, Williams inverts this common conception and uses a material status symbol to represent the elite as something other than human. Much like Steinbeck's use of cars and tractors in *The Grapes of Wrath* to represent the landowners and bankers, the symbolic yachts in Williams's poem remove all humanity from the upper class that has been protected from the fallout of the Depression. This reductive representation suggests

that, as a whole, the wealthy are not capable of experiencing sympathy for the poor. There is little ambivalence in Williams's symbolism and disdain toward the self-interest of the ruling class. As evidenced by the poem's title, the lack of concern for those outside the ruling class is the preeminent social injustice of the time period. Rather than referring to the lower class or the lawless setting in the title, Williams implies that human suffering and poverty are inevitable: the ease with which the ruling class caused the Depression, however, is a more important and constructive focal point for his verse.

While Williams uses a material status symbol to dehumanize the wealthy, the destruction of bodies represents in a more literal sense, the neglected lower class. This representation is reminiscent of Henry Morgan's corporeal deterioration in *To Have and Have Not.* The speaker describes the bodies as: "Broken / beaten, desolate" (31-32). Not only has the working class experienced economic and physical suffering as well as a lessened sense of self-worth, Williams continues this symbolism to argue that they are unable to change it. Williams uses synecdoche to show the reduction of the working class as the bodies are described as: "Arms with hands grasping seek to clutch at the prows / Bodies thrown recklessly in the way are cut aside. / It is a sea of faces about them in agony, in despair" (26-27). The great numbers of bodies represent the immensity and duration of suffering in the Great Depression. "The Yachts" argues that the individual's struggle will largely be forgotten: there is nothing that distinguishes one's suffering from another's. As the suffering is ignored during the Great Depression, there is little chance that it will receive attention afterward. "The Yachts" predicts an inability for civil society to learn from the mistakes and wrongdoing that led to the stock market crash of 1929. It contends that the neglect of the lower class will continue in the future. In this way,

Williams's poem can be read in an identical light from the time of its publication with regard to the Great Recession: it overwhelmingly applies to the current economic climate and is as relevant now as it was during the 1930s.

In his poem, "The Forgotten City," first published in *Poetry* magazine in September 1939, William Carlos Williams examines the economic devastation of the Great Depression by presenting an ethereal, unfamiliar setting after a massive and destructive event. Williams chooses the setting of a city to better communicate the fragility of economic prosperity and to illustrate the degree to which such an economy and society are not sustainable. The speaker begins by noting the landscape of the city: "When I was coming down from the country / with my mother, the day of the storm" (1-2) and uses this singular event as a metaphor to characterize the stock market crash of 1929. It is also important to recognize the dichotomy of location in this poem: a city setting suggests innovation and a more cultured, civilized society opposed to that of a rural area. There is also a strong connection to time as the speaker reports his findings. Williams is careful not to make the eponymous city sound archaic, but aims for the reader to identify with his chosen setting and to apply the juxtaposition of "the metropolis" and the city where the setting takes place to Depression-era America. The speaker notes: "extraordinary places, as vivid as any / I ever saw" (12-13) yet there is an unfamiliarity between the speaker and his surroundings. This unfamiliarity and detachment from the widespread suffering of the Depression is further noted when the speaker shows his bewilderment, despite his physical proximity to the forgotten city: "I had no idea where I was and promised / myself I would some day go back to study / this curious and industrious people" (22-24). These lines also allude to uncertainty of what had happened

with the stock market crash: nothing like it had happened before and there was no way to truly understand the economic and personal destruction it caused. Such an understanding would require time to pass and distancing oneself from the storm that occurred. Williams also removes much ambiguity in the final lines of the poem as the speaker asks:

> How did they get
> cut off this way from representation in our
> newspapers and other means of publicity
> when so near the metropolis, so closely
> surrounded by the familiar and the famous (28-32).

As a defining characteristic of Great Depression literature, there is a distinct corrosion of the relationship between people from different settings, but more importantly, among the upper and lower classes. There is a lack of unity and sense of concern for people of different backgrounds. Williams argues that this separation is what both caused the Depression and accounted for the continued suffering that resulted. As is the case with the entirety of "The Forgotten City," these conclusive lines in particular, emphasize the neglect of those suffering on both a public and private level.

A few months later, in May of 1940, Williams also published "Raleigh Was Right" in *Poetry* and this poem both laments the lack of work in Depression-era America and longs for a time in which opportunity was more plentiful. This straightforward poem of three stanzas with seven, nine, and nine lines apiece, begins: "We cannot go to the country / for the country will bring us / no peace (1-3). It is unclear if Williams writes of the country in terms of nationalism or in a rural setting, but there is an evident, pervading belief that the country to which this poem refers has lost its sense of identity and

uniqueness. There is a sense of unfamiliarity with the current setting: the speaker does not communicate his connection with the country other than previously being there and he denounces what was the country once was. The speaker laments for a time that has passed:

> when country people
> would plow and sow with
> flowering minds and pockets
> at ease—if ever this were true (13-16).

There is a careful consideration in line 16 not to ascribe an idealized view of pre-Depression work conditions and ability for an individual to thrive. There is, however, a sense that the country will not be able to reproduce this age in which work and opportunity were common. Williams also makes an explicit connection between the ability for one to find work and realizing his potential as an individual as he reiterates this crucial link between economic and human value in the poem's conclusion as he writes: "Empty pockets / Make empty heads" (19-20). "Raleigh Was Right" advocates a connection between an economic system of shared prosperity and increased human worth, which benefits civil society. He relies less upon emotional appeals and maintains the practicality involved in the country living up to its value of economic opportunity for all.

As with the shift in William Carlos Williams's poetry from being primarily an Imagist poet to one with a clear, cogent social message, the poetry of Langston Hughes began a similar transformation during the 1930s. Where Williams is associated with the Imagists, Hughes first enjoyed literary fame with writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Claude

McKay, and Countee Cullen who explored poetics of black identity and makes use of black vernacular expression during the Harlem Renaissance of the preceding decade. This remains, in the present-day, the most popularly studied time period in his career, which spanned into five decades. Where much of the focus of Williams's poetry lies in poems like "The Red Wheelbarrow" or "The Great Figure," much of both the study and popular appreciation for the poetry of Langston Hughes is limited to his works like "The Weary Blues," "Suicide's Note," and "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" or later, less socially involved poems like "Harlem" and "Theme for English B." The divide between such studies of Hughes's career is so great that critic James Smethurst has noted: "No portion of Hughes's literary career has been more commonly dismissed than that of the 1930s" (185). Likewise, this period of "red poetry" was, as Smethurst asserts, "spurned by English departments across the nation" (185). Thematically, Hughes explores political disenfranchisement, financial struggle, and the appeal of Communism common to much Depression poetry, but builds upon the black identity poetics of his earlier work and offers a stark rejection of religion and capitalism unique in the poetry of the Great Depression.

Of the poetry written in this time period, that which is most familiar with the general public is "Let America be America Again." First published in *Esquire* in 1936, and described as "Whitmanesque," it invokes many of the common themes in this period of Hughes's career (Kutzinski 211). It enjoys such familiarity because it is less objectionable to firmly established cultural beliefs and enjoys a palatable status for a mass audience while still offering sharp social criticism. In a way, the speaker in this poem appears to be a detached from time and place, while dreaming of a nation that is

able to live up to its stated values of equality, freedom, and opportunity. Despite this seeming separation from time, however, the year in which "Let America be America Again" was published and its reference to "The millions on relief today?" and "The millions who have nothing for our pay?" (53, 55) clearly makes this a Depression poem. Hughes directly alludes to the discrepancy between a nation's values and the economic and social reality of the 1930s in the refrain in which the speaker attempts to minimize, through the use of parentheses, his personal frustration with power structures in the United States. First, the speaker says: "(America never was America to me.)" (5) and later expands this critique: "(There's never been equality for me, / Nor freedom in this 'homeland of the free.')" (15-16). Hughes refers to a litany of oppressed people in the poem including African-Americans, the Irish, the poor white, farmers, and workers to whom the elusive promise of prosperity in America has been denied. Hughes goes a step further and refers to a collective removal of the lower class from the political process and a role in the economic system of the time. This disenfranchisement signifies a stark contradiction to the ideal of the American narrative of opportunity and self-government that dominates the poem. Hughes nonetheless maintains optimism in America to connect the reality to its ideals. "Let America be America Again" is as important for what it includes as for the subject matter it omits. There is no mention of Communism, Marx, Lenin, the Soviet Union or anything related to it. By his careful calculation to make a palatable argument for the American population, it is easy to understand why this poem has served as an important reference in the study of African American poetry and civil rights and has been consistently evoked by politicians since its publication. With his poems praising Communism and the Soviet Union, however, Hughes makes similar

arguments of equality and disillusionment with the political process of the 1930s, seen in "Let America be America Again," but in a much more bold, subversive manner.

In "Goodbye Christ," Hughes makes no attempt to make his opposition toward capitalism and organized religion ambiguous and for its unapologetic refutation of the social order of the 1930s, it gives an invaluable glimpse into the marginalized, Depression-era political thought. The speaker shows frustration while deconstructing Christianity's ability to simultaneously preach against wealth, while profiting from this message. The speaker believes that a Christian message of poverty is admirable but has long been corrupted by institutionalized religion as the poem begins: "Listen, Christ, / You did alright in your day, I reckon— / But that day's gone now" (1-3) and goes on to say: "The popes and the preachers've / Made too much money from it" (7-8). This sort of hypocrisy has particularly strong implications in the context of the Great Depression with regard to a loss of faith in organized religion and other public institutions seen in many Depression works. It also mirrors the disparity of American values of equality and the reality of disenfranchisement in "Let America be America Again." While on one hand, Hughes offers a condemnation of the Christ figure, the speaker replaces his former belief with an exaltation of a self-empowering brand of Communism. There is a dramatic shift in the poem as the speaker says:

> Make way for a new guy with no religion at all—
>
> A real guy named
>
> Marx Communist Lenin Peasant Stalin Worker ME—
>
> I said, ME! (20-23).

Hughes represents the widespread disillusionment of a country in which unemployment

reached one-fourth to one-third of the population in 1933. “Goodbye Christ” aims to affirm the validity of the average worker and offers a contrasting argument to the prevailing belief of the day, which can be characterized, for example, by Henry Ford who said in March of 1931: “the average man won’t really do a day’s work unless he is caught and cannot get out of it. There is plenty of work to do if people would do it” (Zinn 387). Unlike in “Let America be America Again,” where there is hope in the American economic and political systems to eventually reach widespread equality, “Goodbye Christ” unequivocally argues that a very fundamental change in these systems is a necessary response to the Great Depression. Such a prescription for change is common in Depression-era literature, but Hughes’s unrelenting critique of religion and the economic system separates this poem from many social critiques in the literature of the Depression. This is also an idea that continues in Hughes’s poetry from the 1930s.

Langston Hughes’s poem, “Put One More ‘S’ in the U.S.A.” has an unmistakable polemic tone and where “Goodbye Christ” implores the reader to substitute dogmatic religion for the advancement of Communism and the need to assert one’s individual rights, this poem argues for a large scale movement to achieve the prescriptions laid out in the previous poem. “One More ‘S’ in the U.S.A.” first appeared in the *Daily Worker* in 1934 and it is, along with “Goodbye Christ,” part of what prompted Senator Joseph McCarthy’s Senate subcommittee to subpoena Hughes in March, 1953 (Kutzinski 188, 194). The speaker in this poem refers not to an “I” at any point, but rather to a “we” as a lyrical call for workers to take control of the farms and factories much like in his poem “Good Morning Revolution.” The “S” to which the title refers is an important affirmation of this idea as it stands for Socialist as in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Like

The Grapes of Wrath and *Cannery Row*, one of the most significant themes in "One More 'S' in the U.S.A." is finding strength in numbers to create social change. There is noted ambiguity with regard to the means in which this change should occur as the speaker says: "So let us take things in our hand / Then down and way with the bosses' sway—" (18-19). At first, this appears a direct endorsement of a violent overthrowing of the established order, but there is, however, a lack of an explicit call to violence. Contrary to the fears of the Red Scare, Hughes subverts the association of Communists plotting to overthrow the government and instead argues that the wealthy who profit from war are to blame:

> Oh, the bankers they are planning
>
> For another great big war.
>
> To make them rich from the workers' dead,
>
> That's what all that war is for.
>
> So if you don't want to see bullets holding sway
>
> Then come on, all you workers,
>
> And join out fight today (33-39).

Rather than advocating violence, the speaker calls upon those of different races to live in harmony and uses Communism as a means to accomplish this by saying: "Come together, fellow workers! / Black and white can all be red" (30-31). Hughes boldly takes issue with the Depression's effect upon the financial standing of black America. African Americans were among those who suffered most in the Depression. In 1932, Harlem, for example, had an unemployment rate of 50 percent, which was nearly double that of the national

average, and property owned or managed by African-Americans in Harlem fell from 30 percent to 5 percent in 1935 ("The Great Depression"). Hughes's sort of American utopia, however, resonates with the tone and vision as seen in "Let America be America Again," though it presented Hughes with difficulty in seeking publication for poems of social protest in the decades after the Great Depression. Hughes's poems endorsing Communism indeed show their age when read in the present-day. While Communism represented an undeniable opposition to the political order during the Depression and through the 1950s, after McCarthyism and particularly since the end of the Cold War, it has at best, been reduced to the fringe of the political left in the United States. Hughes's consideration maintains significant value when considering the historical context of these poems. This period of Hughes's career demands a renewed study, not only to account for a more full, honest look at Langston Hughes's political views, but to gain a firmer understanding of an underrepresented perspective of life in the Depression.

William Carlos Williams and Langston Hughes are two of the most important American poets of the 20th century. While poets like Robert Frost and Wallace Stevens generally receive such accolades, in contrast, Williams and Hughes deserve such equal status for both their involvement in social issues and as poets of color in a pre-Civil Rights movement America. Despite the age of some of Hughes's pro-Communist poems, the Depression-era writings of both Williams and Hughes remain as relevant to the Great Recession as in the 1930s for their consideration of the inherent contradictions of American values and the economic and social reality of the time.

Time is a pendulum. Not a river. More akin to what comes around goes around.

—Ishmael Reed

The Great Recession began in December 2007, and while technically lasting until June 2009, its effects are evident in the present-day and will continue long after the economy fully recovers. The Great Recession witnessed a 53.8 percent decrease in the Dow Jones Industrial Average and in October 2009, unemployment reached its highest level of this time period, which was 10.8 percent (Geewax). In September 2013, a study by the University of California—Berkeley, reported that U.S. income inequality was at its highest since 1927 as the top one percent of households accounted for 19.6 percent of household incomes and the top 10 percent represented "just under half of all income in the year" (Saez). The Great Recession came as a shock for many and exhibited a betrayal of American ideals similar to that of the Depression. Though not nearly as severe, the Great Recession has undeniable parallels with the Great Depression.

During the past decade, and particularly since 2008, countless Americans have experienced a similar level of disillusionment to that seen in the literature of the Great Depression: many have lost faith in the ideal of upward economic mobility, have felt resentment in the both government's insufficient response to the economic downturn, the American promise of upward mobility with the concomitant of hard work has been betrayed as many Americans have felt financially unable to get ahead, and the political rhetoric of bailing out Wall Street rather than Main Street and the American people has particularly resonated with many. The years leading up to the Great Recession were "the worst for the U.S. economy in modern times" in which there was zero net job creation

between December 1999 and the following decade and economic output rose at its slowest rate of any decade since the 1930s (Irwin). In fact, according to a January 2014 Gallup poll, 67 percent of Americans are dissatisfied with wealth distribution (Riffkin). President Barack Obama frequently noted this disparity during his 2012 presidential campaign, calling income inequality the defining of our time.

In recent years, economic inequality and political dysfunction have appeared irreparable: when the American people have needed government action and leadership most, it has largely been absent. Perhaps one of the greatest differences between the Depression of the 1930s and the current recession is that public opinion helped galvanize New Deal programs and legislation like the Glass-Steagall Act, which redefined the regulation of the financial system and helped create the stable economy that succeeded the Great Depression and the Second World War. Public resentment toward the federal government and the financial system have largely diverged in several directions and have been manipulated by the interests of mass media and opportunistic political movements. Instead of Americans finding a sense of shared responsibility and unity, politically and socially, the public has been more divided than during any time in recent memory. Perhaps the most threatening development, however, is a lost a sense of national unity and confidence. As Thomas Friedman and Michael Mandelbaum argue in their book, *That Used to Be Us*: "As a country, we lost the plot. We forgot who we were, how had become the richest and most powerful country in the history of the world, where we wanted to go, and what we needed to do to get there" (232). The parallel between the political and social climate of the 1930s and that of today is staggering and largely speaks for itself.

There are, however, major differences between the Great Depression and the Great Recession. While the peak of unemployment in the Depression was more than double that of the worst of the present-day unemployment figures, such economic catastrophe seems less forgivable today. As the 2008 Nobel laureate in Economics, Paul Krugman, writes in his book, *End the Depression Now!*: "In the Great Depression leaders had an excuse: nobody really understood what was happening or how to fix it. Today's leaders don't have that excuse. *We have both the knowledge and the tools to end this suffering*" (20). Among the ruling class, there is a greater lack of concern for the consequences of calamitous financial decisions, which heightens the sense of resentment and helplessness among the millions who are unemployed and struggling to stay financially afloat. While the suffering of the Great Recession pales in comparison to that of the Depression, its impact demands inquiry that should last decades.

If the major roles of literature include discussing and navigating the issues of the day as well as providing human account to what will be studied in the future, it is absolutely necessary both to read the literature of the Great Depression and for it to have a more substantial place in the study of literature. Such consideration of Great Depression literature certainly provides a better understanding of the past, can help our citizenry make more sense of the current devastation, and can even help establish a more firm understanding of our cultural values and the responsibility to one another's well-being we have in civil society. It will also encourage literature that captures the human suffering in today's economic climate where unemployment figures and stock market indexes do not suffice. Literature like Philipp Meyer's 2009 novel, *American Rust*, which follows the lack of opportunity for two young men in a dilapidated steel town in Pennsylvania, or

Charles Simic's poem "Driving Around," which features a blighted, desolate Main Street and was published in June 2012 in *The New Yorker*, has already begun this chronicling of our time. The Civil War is perhaps the only other time period that presented a similar level of doubt toward democracy and division among citizens as the Great Depression. Writers like Steinbeck, Warren, Hemingway, Hughes, and Williams are not only among the most notable writers in the American canon, but they exemplify the possibility for literature to communicate the difficulty of life during such a tumultuous time period. Their works are an irreplaceable source for us to learn about who we are, where we are, and how we got here.

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