

A Marxist Reading of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*
Highlighting Inequality Issues Through Critical Literacy in the ESL Classroom



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Abstract

This essay explores how a critical reading of the novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) can inform teachers when discussing inequality issues in the ESL classroom. The main questions being investigated are how the novel *The Grapes of Wrath* reveals oppressive and unequal power relationships, and how a critical reading of the novel can be used when teaching and informing others about inequality. In this study, the material is collected through a color coding scheme based on a Marxist reading of *The Grapes of Wrath*. The themes discussed and analyzed from the novel regard unequal power relationships in terms of exploitation, land ownership, the margin of profit, and a struggle between the individual and the group. In relation to the literary analysis, practical implications and possibilities for educators are discussed and considered. A number of conclusions are drawn from the analysis in this study. Firstly, the literary analysis establishes that *The Grapes of Wrath* indeed can be regarded as a critique of capitalism. Secondly, by making connections to a modern day example of economic crisis, aims in the Swedish curriculum, existing theory of critical literacy, and Critical Literature Pedagogy, the analysis shows clear practical implications for educators in terms of using this novel when discussing inequality issues. While this study includes a thorough analysis of *The Grapes of Wrath* and practical implications for educators, it does not cover all aspects of the novel, nor all aspects of working with CLP in the ESL classroom.

Keywords: The Grapes of Wrath, Marxist criticism, critical literacy, CLP, ESL

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Theoretical Background.....	3
Marxism and Marxist Literary Criticism.....	3
Key concepts.....	3
Literary Criticism and <i>The Grapes of Wrath</i>	4
Critical Literacy and Critical Literature Pedagogy.....	5
Defining the concepts.....	5
Limitations.....	5
Implications.....	6
Methodology.....	8
Method and Data Collection.....	8
Method.....	8
Data collection.....	8
Limitations.....	9
Analysis and Discussion.....	10
Owner Versus Tenant: Property Causing Tension.....	11
Exploitation of The Poor and The Desperate.....	13
The Margin of Profit.....	17
Individualism or Unity? “The I” Versus “the We”	19
<i>The Grapes of Wrath</i> , Critical Literacy, and the ESL Classroom.....	21
Practical Implications and Possibilities for Educators.....	23
Conclusion.....	26
Suggestions for Future Research.....	28
References.....	29

Introduction

The Grapes of Wrath is one of the most famous, most read, and most criticized novels ever written by an American author (DeMott, 2006, p. i). It was written by John Steinbeck and published in 1939, in the final stage of one of the worst economic crises of the 20th century, the Great Depression. In 2008, the world witnessed another, equally severe economic crisis, very similar to that of the 1930s (Peicuti, 2014). Throughout the world, these financial breakdowns left millions of people in vulnerable situations, and the ones that were hit the hardest were those already in a weak position (McKay et al., 2010, p. 744). The effects of these crises were rapidly felt globally, penetrating every level of society, and are again noticeable today (OECD, 2013; UNESCO, 2016), which makes inequality an even more urgent and important issue to discuss for both teachers and students in educational settings.

Even so, teachers might feel inclined to ask how a literary analysis can add to their current understanding of teaching literature, which is not surprising since teaching literature is such a well-established practice in language teaching. It is, in fact, highly likely that educators will “be teaching the novel” (Showalter, 2003, p. 88). The answer is not uncomplicated, but one argument is that when adding critical theory to the traditional practice of teaching literature, students are encouraged to interpret and construct their social worlds in new ways (Tyson, 2015, p. 2). Literary works embody “ways of seeing the world” (Eagleton, 1976/2006, p. 3), and in consequence, this means that that critical perspectives offer other, often contrasting views which could support students’ nuanced perspectives of the work and the world. Adding to that, reading and discussing literature can offer unique opportunities for students to develop and feel increased empathy with people in vulnerable and exposed situations (Koopman, 2016, p. 91).

While *The Grapes of Wrath* offers one perspective on one crisis in one country, its

descriptions of that crisis delve into much deeper themes and issues at the heart of human nature, and thus, the implications for using this novel are more far-reaching. In the Swedish education context, these implications can be linked to national policy documents for the Swedish education system. For example, the National Syllabus for English at upper secondary school stresses the need for students “to develop knowledge of living conditions, social issues and cultural features”, and furthermore that students should be able to think critically and reflect about what they read and hear (Skolverket, “Aim of the Subject,” 2012, par. 2). These aims pave the way for a critical literature classroom, guided by Critical Literature Pedagogy—CLP—which allows students to read not only *with*, but also *against* texts (Borsheim-Black, Macaluso, & Petrone., 2014, p. 124). CLP could be guided and further enhanced by theoretical perspectives, such as Marxist criticism, which enables students to see issues of inequality by analyzing and problematizing power structures (Tyson, 2015, p. 2).

Hence, there is reason to argue that a critical reading of *The Grapes of Wrath* could potentially inform teachers on how to highlight social issues. By understanding the renewed significance that the novel has gained with the economic crisis of 2007-08 (Dyen, 2010), the selection of literary work and theme is motivated in the ESL classroom by an increased importance of focusing on injustice in society. In accordance, this essay seeks to critically examine the novel *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck from a Marxist perspective, in order to explore and consider practical implications for using this novel when discussing inequality issues in a classroom setting. In addition, because this study is interdisciplinary, it will simultaneously focus on the following questions:

- How might *The Grapes of Wrath* be seen as a critique of capitalism? That is, in what ways do the text reveal, and invite us to condemn, oppressive socioeconomic forces? Adapted from Tyson (2015, p. 65).
- How can the ideas and information developed in reading with and against *The Grapes of Wrath* be used to inform, persuade others about oppression and injustice? Adapted from Borsheim-Black et al. (2014, p. 127).

Theoretical Background

In this section, the theoretical foundation of this essay and its analysis will be presented and discussed. In the following, we will first look at Marxism and Marxist literary criticism. Next, the focus will briefly fall on previous analyses in relation to the novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. Finally, the definitions and background of critical literacy and CLP will be presented.

Marxism and Marxist Literary Criticism

Marxist literary criticism has grown from the theoretical body of Marxism and the writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, and through Marxist criticism, literature is analyzed by interpreting and focusing on the historical context in which it was written (Eagleton, 1976/2006; for an example of a Marxist reading of a literary work, see Davari, 2015). Furthermore, Marxist criticism is, according to Eagleton (1976/2006), "essential for the fullest explanation of any work of literature" (p. 4), meaning that Marxism as a theoretical framework is useful and relevant when analyzing literature in the classroom.

Key concepts. In order to be able to apply Marxist criticism on literary works, fundamental concepts such as *capitalism*, *socioeconomic class*, *ideology*, *consumerism*, *rugged individualism*, and Marx's *labor theory of value* are crucial. In short, for Marxists, *capitalism* is an *ideology* that gives rise to inequality in the world, and human inequality is a result of capitalism's structure where "the means of production are privately owned and ... those who own them inevitably become the dominant class" (Tyson, 2015, p. 55). Because Marxist critics essentially are concerned with how capitalism divides people into different classes, they mainly make the distinction between two groups: "the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'" (p. 52). Therefore, a Marxist would argue that depending on which *socioeconomic class* a person belongs to, he or she is in possession of different grades of "[e]conomic... social and political power" (p. 51). In order for capitalism to flourish and prosper, *consumerism* is a

driving force, as it changes our relationship to *commodities*. According to Marx, the profit of the owners—the capitalists—are “based on the exploitation of the laborer” (Ritzer, 2011, p. 24), which is what is known as *the labor theory of rule*. Capitalists are concerned with their own well-being, which comes at the cost of the society at large, and thus, they are *rugged individualists* (Tyson, 2015, p. 57).

Literary Criticism and *The Grapes of Wrath*

The Grapes of Wrath has since its publication been widely discussed and analyzed. The existing body of research and analysis of the novel is very diverse, but one of the most widely discussed topics of the novel is its symbolism, and Christian symbolism in particular (eg. Fontenrose, 1964; Kawata, 2001; Lisca, 1958; Rombold, 1987; see also Delucia, 2014 for class symbolism). In contrast, other scholars have focused on John Steinbeck as a writer of social change (eg. Cunningham, 2010, Dickstein, 2004; Yee, 2013), and on the reactions to the publication of the novel (eg. Weisiger, 1992; Welsch, 2010).

In order to support our understanding of the vast amount of analysis and critique bestowed upon this novel, we will briefly return to the previous notion of initial reactions to the novel. The fact is that upon its publication in 1939, the novel gave rise to a wide range of critical responses, targeting everything from the much too vulgar language and descriptions in the novel, to the supposedly misleading descriptions of migrant families, meant to increase sympathy for these families (Welch, 2010, p. 90). However, not only did the novel catch the attention of literary critics, but also of the larger population, especially those described in the novel, “the Okies” (p. 92). Conversely, the novel was also praised for its “powerful call for unity, compassion, and justice” (p. 91).

While it is clear from what was presented above that *The Grapes of Wrath* is a work that has caught the interest of many scholars, and despite the fact that it is one of the most read

American novels of all time, next to nothing has been written on the novel in relation to education and teaching. Therefore, the primary task of this study will be to combine a critical reading of the novel with practical implications for teachers, and in consequence, it is relevant to shed light on potential modes of procedure for integrating a critical reading of the novel in a classroom context.

Critical Literacy and Critical Literature Pedagogy

Defining the concepts. Borsheim-Black et al. (2014) familiarize us with the concept of Critical Literature Pedagogy—CLP—which is "a pedagogical framework for merging goals of critical literacy with canonical literature instruction" (p. 123). CLP is interesting here because when one applies critical literacy to canonical literature, one questions and further explores contemporary ruling ideologies upheld or undermined by such literature (p. 124). Furthermore, critical literacy, as a part of CLP, brings many advantages to the classroom, where one prominent feature is its capability to improve students' ability to "read and write *against* texts" (p. 123). This means that critical literacy makes students aware of ideological and political elements of texts, and teaches them to analyze their everyday life. Moreover, critical literacy can, as explained by Lewison, Seely Flint, and Van Sluys (2002), have multiple areas of utility, since it can be used for "Disrupting the Commonplace", "Interrogating Multiple Viewpoints", "Focusing on Sociopolitical Issues", and "For Taking Action and Promoting Social Justice" (p. 383).

Limitations. While the positive effects of pairing critical literacy with teaching canonical literature are evident, Borsheim-Black et al. (2014) indicate difficulties in doing so in practice due to lack of previous best practice research to build on (p. 124). Furthermore, such difficulties could include, as Ko and Wang (2009) identified in their study of teachers' perceptions of critical literacy in the classroom, that students are not able to make use of

critical literacy due to limited proficiency and autonomy (p. 189). On the contrary, Ko and Wang's (2009) results also showed that teachers had a desire and intention to use critical literacy when possible, yet with caution due to a fear of overstepping political boundaries (p. 182). These notions give evidence in favor of a perception of critical literacy as a foreign, and therefore frightening concept to integrate in the classroom. Thus, a possible course of action to take in order to overcome such obstacles should be considered.

Implications. Despite these challenges, CLP combines "[reading] *with* and *against* a text" (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014, p. 124), making it an applicable tool for language teachers. Reading *with* a text is what most would consider a traditional practice of teaching literature, while reading *against* a text is about identifying and questioning ideologies of literary works and written texts (p. 124). Although it is easy to "see these two ways of reading as dichotomous", i.e. reading with and against a text, Borsheim-Black et al. (2014) argue that "learning to read *with* might be seen as necessary to be able to read *against*" (p. 125). This view is supported by Huh (2016), who found that mixing and combining traditional literacy practices with critical literacy practices can convey very positive effects. From a study of integrating critical literacy in his own teaching, Huh (2016) concluded that "[i]n students' engagement with critical literacy practices, they demonstrated strong comprehension of the reading texts" (p. 232). Another quality of applying critical literacy when teaching canonical literature is not only that it questions the ideological elements of literary works, but also that it examines why a work has come to be canonized to begin with (p. 125).

Before moving on, it is relevant to consider some more arguments in favor of a critical literacy classroom. Beach, Appleman, Hynds, and Wilhelm (2011) suggest that teaching literature is about more than just teaching literature as a way of teaching "our cultural heritage" (p. 153). Instead, teaching literature should *also* support students' understanding of the "social, political, and cultural contexts that shape their lives" (p. 153), and hence, the

function of critical literacy is to make visible elements of ideology in literary works and in the contexts of students' everyday lives. Based on Beach et al.'s conception of what teaching literature essentially should be, critical literacy is not just an optional tool for teaching literature, but rather a necessity to ensure that students' are equipped with the right skills and qualities to be able to critically, and in a nuanced way analyze their world.

Methodology

In this section, the methodology will be presented. Here, the modes of procedure for data collection will be described, along with the limitations of the method of this study, limitations of the theoretical foundation, and limitations of the study as a whole.

Method and Data Collection

Method. The material in the analysis will be gathered through a color-coding scheme, as suggested by Zhang and Wildemuth (2009). While the coded themes have emerged from reading the novel, the critical reading has been informed by previous research and Marxist theory, in accordance with Zhang and Wildemuth's (2009) argumentation of a combination between inductive and deductive reasoning while working with qualitative content analysis (p. 3). Furthermore, this study is both quantitative and qualitative in character in that it combines working from the hypothesis that the novel is a critique of capitalism, while also operating inductively to generate themes from the novel (Zhang and Wildemuth, 2009, p. 1). In addition, because this study attempts to verify, but also to add to existing theory and research on the subject, the analysis is *directed* in character (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1281). Yet, this study is also *conventional* in that previous findings and theories are included and compared in the discussion (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1279).

Data collection. During the first reading of the novel, themes and passages that could be related to the novel as a capitalist critique were highlighted. During a second reading, all the highlighted passages were grouped and categorized with colors according to the following themes: *exploitation* (blue), *tensions in land ownership* (green), *the margin of profit* (yellow), and *"we" versus "I"* (red). The relevant passages with page numbers were subsequently arranged in a table according to category. While many interesting and potentially relevant passages emerged from the analysis, only the most central extracts that fitted into one of the

four categories were chosen to analyze further. This was done in order to make sure that the “information [...] correspond[s] to the aim” of the study (Bengtsson, 2016, p. 12).

Limitations. The method and theoretical foundation of this study entail certain limitations which are crucial to point out. Firstly, it is necessary to note that this study makes no claims to portray how Marxist criticism and CLP can be used generally, but merely offers these perspectives in relation to *one* literary work. Furthermore, Marxist criticism is one theoretical framework among others, such as Feminist criticism, and while Marxist criticism is a far-reaching theoretical framework, this study does not cover all aspects of Marxist criticism. Moreover, it should be noted that a majority of the questions presented throughout the analysis are not explicitly answered in this study, and that their function primarily is to be used as questions for reflection and consideration for readers and teachers. Moreover, because qualitative content analysis, which is the data collection method for this study, relies much on interpretation, there is necessarily a high grade of subjectivity in this study (Bradley, 1993; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Nunan, 1992). In terms of Bradley’s (1993) notion of transferability, this study is limited due to its narrow focus on one written work and one school system in the world. Nevertheless, the transferability of this study is best estimated by others attempting to do similar studies.

Analysis and Discussion

The analysis in this study consists of six different sections with four different themes from the novel. The analysis will both be based on the narrative chapters that follow the fate of the Joad family, and the interchapters “which suggest how to interpret both the story and the social world” (Cunningham, 2010, p. 345). Thirteen of the interchapters “serve to amplify the action created by the Joad family”, and three chapters focus on adding historical information (Lisca, 1958/1972, p. 84). After the first four sections, two sections will follow with considerations and practical implications for teachers. Before we begin analyzing the novel, a very brief overview of the historical context in which the novel was written will be included, drawing on Cunningham (2010).

The Grapes of Wrath was written in the final stages of the Great Depression, and is, according to Cunningham (2010), “an exemplary radical analysis of the exploitation of agricultural workers” (p. 329). The migration that is depicted in the novel was triggered by storms that caused the land in ‘the Great Plain States’ to become hopeless, or impossible, to cultivate (p. 331), but the bad circumstances for the agricultural workers were aggravated by several other factors:

The Depression exacerbated the collapse because the non-agricultural industries of the urban areas slowed down considerably, greatly hindering the absorption of displaced agricultural workers. The land retirement policies of the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) furthered that displacement, as did the mechanization of farming, which was more pronounced in the Southwest than in the old South. (Cunningham, 2010, p. 333)

While the determining factors listed above are not always explicitly referred to in the novel, many of the themes and ideas that are presented and problematized in the novel and in this analysis can be directed to these economic, social, and political circumstances.

Owner Versus Tenant: Property Causing Tension

One very central conflict that was intensified by the previously mentioned circumstances was the tension between landowners, and tenants, and workers. In the novel, we quickly come to see that the Joad family has been evicted off their land and have joined the migration movement westward. Yet, because they have received a hand bill stating that there is plenty of work in California (Steinbeck, 2006, p. 90), a predominantly positive view emerges from the first part of the novel regarding what land-owning will be like in the new country. For example, Ma Joad dreamingly describes how she longs for California with “people just bein’ in the happiest places”, living in “white houses in among the orange trees” (p. 91). Similarly, Pa Joad still talks of the Promised Land when the Joads have already crossed the border to California (p. 204). Unlike Ma and Pa, however, Tom is not as naïve as to ignore the warning signs in the stories about how it is really like in California. In the same way that Tom reminds Ma of what he has heard about the miserable conditions of migrant workers in California (p. 92), he tells Pa that “Jesus Christ, Pa! This here *is* California.” (Steinbeck, 2006, p. 204).

Pa and Ma’s views are not unique because, as Cunningham (2010) explains, “[i]f the migrants began with dreams of sharing the wealth of the great agricultural valleys by eventually becoming small landowning farmers, what they found was an entrenched corporate agribusiness that mocked agrarian myths” (p. 334). Tom’s misgivings are confirmed by what the Joads ultimately meet when they set out to find work in California, which is that the land there, like back home, is owned by big corporate bodies. Still, while the story takes its starting point with the Joad family, who abandon their farm and set out on the road from a Dust Bowl state, the novel delves into much more complicated themes of land-ownership and exploitation. As the story evolves, we see that the land ownership relationships are much more complex than the over-simplistic explanation that land owners simply exploit

agricultural workers. Instead, what we come to realize through examining land ownership in the novel, is that Steinbeck “attacks the logic and consequences of private property itself” (Cunningham, 2010, p. 346).

The critical standpoint on land ownership taken in the novel is clear when Pa and Tom, upon the Joads’ arrival in California, speak to a man who explains the situation in California:

[s]he’s a nice country. But she was stole a long time ago. [...] you can’t have none of that lan’. That’s Lan’ and Cattle Company. An’ if they don’t want ta work her, she ain’t gonna git worked. You go in there an’ pant you a little corn, an’ you’ll go to jail!
(Steinbeck, 2006, p. 205)

Pa, confused and bewildered by the man’s explanation, goes on to ask whether there are any positive sides to it. The man continues: “Sure, nice to look at, but you can’t have none of it. They’s a grove of yella oranges-an’ a guy with a gun that got the right to kill you if you touch one” (Steinbeck, 2006, p. 206). When the man describes that “she [the land] was stole a long time ago” (p. 205), he refers to how the land once was occupied and claimed, which we understand from chapter nineteen.

In chapter nineteen, the view expressed in the passage above is reinforced when readers are more closely familiarized with the development of land ownership in California. The description reads that land that once belonged to Mexicans has been occupied and made into possession by profit seeking Americans (Steinbeck, 2006, p. 231). Furthermore, this possession has developed farming into a business that can only be counted in money, and with time the farmers have grown fewer and they have become bureaucrats that hire other men to farm their land (p. 232). Moreover, an interesting notion is that this passage has been noted as one of the few places in the novel with mention of non-white migrants and their history (Cunningham, 2010, p. 343).

What makes chapter nineteen of relevance here, however, is that it enables us to understand how land ownership transitions have formed the present. A similar mechanism is

displayed in chapter twenty-one, where the fates of small scale fruit growers are comparable to those of other farmers in the novel: they are forced to succumb to the big owners of the canaries and leave their land (Steinbeck, 2006, p. 284). Still, the relationships between the owners of the land and the workers of the land are more complicated, which is demonstrated when Tom Joad, upon his arrival at the government camp, goes along with two men who are already employed to get a job. Their employer informs them that he has to cut their wage by 5 cents due to pressure from “the Farmers’ Association” and “The Bank of the West” (p. 294). The same view that is given in chapter nineteen is confirmed here, where we see that while the men and Tom are migrant workers at a farm, it is not the farmer himself that exploits them, but rather the association and the bank. Similarly, when Ma Joad meets a man looking for workers to pick cotton on his farm, he tells her that the wages are out of his control, and that “[t]he association sets the rate, and we got to mind. If we don’t—we ain’t got a farm. Little fella gets crowded all the time” (p. 421).

The highlighted passages demonstrate a clear tension of land ownership between different classes, which leads readers to reflect over what it is that substantiates this view of land ownership as a natural right. Within a capitalist system, one of the very cornerstones is the God-given right to own property (Tyson, 2015, p. 54), which certainly gives rise to intense reactions when land is ‘stolen’ from a person or a group claiming to own that land. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the issue of land ownership is presented as so problematic as to be one of the underlying reasons for the severe situation of the poor and the vulnerable.

Exploitation of The Poor and The Desperate

While the issue of land ownership presented in the previous section is not labeled here as exploitation, its fundamental conflict is intensified by other, more explicit notions of

exploitation in the novel. Key to understanding exploitation here is that the drive for “the accumulation of more and more capital” depends on increased exploitation (Ritzer, 2011, p. 62). In the novel, we are mainly familiarized with two kinds of exploitation that fundamentally work under the same mechanisms. On the one hand, we see how the poor are exploited through trade, and on the other hand we see how migrant workers are mistreated because the owners of the farms are conscious and aware of the migrants’ desperate situation. Eventually, as the Joads start working, they too “become aware of their position near the bottom of the social order by experiencing superexploitation—being forced to work for less than subsistence wages” (Cunningham, 2010, p. 345).

The former notion of exploitation, namely through trade, is also the more prominent form of exploitation in the novel. At one point, the mechanisms of capitalism are embodied by a description of how car salesmen work to exploit clients, where customers coming in who are supposedly only “lookers” are not worth caring for (Steinbeck, 2006, p. 61), while customers who “look good for one and a quarter” should be started “at two hundred and work[ed] down” (p. 61). In order to lock customers to feel the need to buy a car, you should “[g]et ‘em under obligation. Make ‘em take up your time.” (p. 62). This is a mechanism that recurs later, when Tom and Casy visit a scrapyard looking for a spare part, and an employee explains that “[the boss] be findin’ out how bad you’re hung up, and how much jack ya got” (p. 181), in order to maximize the profit of every deal made. What is portrayed here is a form of exploitation that primarily targets the human psyche and its inability to avoid becoming completely powerless in the act of buying, which relates to humans’ relationships to the commodity. Drawing on Marxism, this relationship is not based on the usefulness of the commodity, but rather on the exchange value of the product (Tyson, 2015, p. 59). In other words, how much is something worth, and how much is someone willing to pay for it?

A similar position is taken in other parts of the novel, although the victims of such

exploitation are the poor and the needy in particular. For example, in chapter twelve, this is illustrated when a migrant truck has blown a tire, and the narrator explains that “[t]hey look a fella over. They know what he got to go on. They know he can’t wait. And the price [for the tire] goes up” (Steinbeck, 2006, p. 120). Likewise, Ma Joad is victimized when she is convinced to buy meat of poor quality at too high of a price in the local shop on The Hooper Ranch (p. 374). In contrast, however, it has been suggested that this passage is significant not primarily because of its exploitive elements, but rather because it highlights a sense of “kinship” between the cashier and Ma Joad, as he eventually decides to pay from his own pocket to help Ma buy sugar for Tom’s coffee (Dickstein, 2004, p. 128). Nevertheless, what emerges from these examples is a pattern that shows how businessmen “skim” migrant families in order to find out how desperate they are, so that they can drive up the prices.

Analogously, in terms of purchasing migrant families’ goods, strategic businessmen deliberately abuse their knowledge of migrant families’ situation where they might have no other choice but to sell what they have for little or almost nothing, as every day is a fight for survival for these families. For example, this is portrayed on one occasion where a family is driven off their land, and in consequence is left with no option but to sell a plow that once cost thirty-eight dollars for only two dollars, just because their farming equipment has lost its utility (Steinbeck, 2006, p. 86). Similarly, one character describes how “[f]ellas come aroun’ ever’ week, buyin’ cars” (p. 293), and these “fellas”, too, make use of people’s desperate state of being, as can be seen in the description “if you’re hungry, why, they’ll buy your car. An’ if their hungry, they don’t hafta pay nothin’ for it” (p. 293). This means, in effect, that migrants are being used and exploited, through trade, whenever they depend on something for survival, and still, the exploitation of the poor and desperate does not stop there.

At a last resort, when these families no longer can be exploited by means of trading commodities, they have to sell their workforce for inhuman wages that barely are enough for

survival. The Joads, still in high spirits over a new life in the promised land, and in consequence unconscious of the actual state of things, are made aware by a young man how the mechanisms of buying and selling labor are at work in California:

‘S’pose they’s a hunderd men wants that job. S’pose them men got sick kids, an’ them kids is hungry. S’pose a lousy dime’ll buy a box of mush for them kids. S’pose a nickel’ll buy at leas’ somepin for them kids. An’ you got a hunderd. Jus’ offer ‘em a nickl—why, they’ll kill each other fightin’ for that nickel. [...]. ‘That’s why them han’bills was out. You can print a hell of a lot of han’bills with what ya save payin’ fifteen cents an hour for fiel’ work.’. (Steinbeck, 2006, p. 245)

As a result of this wake-up call, the Joads’ blind faith in the promise of work presented on the hand bills passed out back home slowly turns into skepticism and doubt as they start seeing how things are not as uncomplicated as they might have seemed in the initial stage of their journey. The mechanism that was described by the passage above is further demonstrated when Tom overhears a voice from a new car arriving at the Hooper Ranch. The supervisor checking in the new workers manipulates them by stating that there are two-hundred other men that would gladly take the job (Steinbeck, 2006, p. 394), and because he knows that the migrants are in desperate need, he also knows that they will take the job in spite of the low wages. What this passage adds to under previous understanding of the exploitation described in the novel, is that people in charge of the large farms—the owners, the law et cetera—use manipulation in order to delude the desperate migrant workers to accept the low wages, which can be understood through Marxism as a power relationship where the owners can “coerce workers through their power to dismiss workers” without using any actual force (Ritzer, 2011, p. 56).

Conclusively, in order to understand how the critical situation for the poor prevails and is upheld, it is relevant to ask the question: “Why don’t the economically oppressed fight back?” (Tyson, 2015, p. 53). Informed by the Marxist perspective, the answer to this question is straightforward: the poor are held in a position where they might fight every day of their

lives for survival, which prevents them from engaging in political activism for a better society (p. 53). In the novel, the severe economic situation evidently keeps the poor out of the political sphere, although Casy eventually becomes politically engaged, and it lies in the interest of the farm owners and capitalists that this remains to be the case, in order for them to be able to continue their exploitation.

The Margin of Profit

Another prominent theme in the novel problematizes one of the very rudiments of a capitalist system: the margin of profit. While much of what has been presented hitherto relates to this theme, the margin of profit is also explicitly referred to in certain passages in the novel as one of the 'evils' of capitalism. The anger and fury that the margin of profit provokes in the eyes of the people is intertwined in the novel as a whole, both through single individuals' and families' fates, and through the interchapters' descriptions of a rage at large among the poor and the exploited.

Early on in the novel, a minor character named Muley expresses his wrath over the fact that owners drive families off their land. He expresses his sorrow and anger over how the owners have emptied a land that was once full of life and joy, just for the cause of their margin of profit, and how even though the land is worthless, the owners have forced honest people off their land (Steinbeck, 2006, p. 52). From this passage, it is evident that the owners of the land drive people off their farms just because they can no longer generate the profit required, meaning that the tenants' utility is gone. The tenants become dehumanized machines that are taken out of use because they no longer serve any purpose. While Muley's words establish how the margin of profit is a driving force behind the tenants being ejected from

their farms, it is not until much later, in chapter twenty-five, that we come to realize the true cruelty resulting from the drive for profit.

In chapter twenty-five, one of the strongest and most vigorous passages of the novel is presented when readers truly come alive to how the poor and needy must suffer, only so that the margin of profit can be guaranteed:

The works of the roots of the vines, of the trees, must be destroyed to keep up the price, and this is the saddest, bitterest thing of all. Carloads of oranges dumped on the ground. The people came for miles to take the fruit, but this could not be. How would they buy oranges at twenty cents a dozen if they could drive out and pick them up? [...]. There is a crime here that goes beyond denunciation. There is a sorrow here that weeping cannot symbolize. There is a failure here that topples all our success. [...]. And children dying of pellagra must die because a profit cannot be taken from an orange. (Steinbeck, 2006, pp. 348-349)

Not only does this passage offer an insight into how the margin of profit is at work, but it furthers our understanding of how the mechanisms of capitalism interact to guarantee the margin of profit for those already in power, and to keep those out of power continuously hungry and powerless. This is, ultimately, a chapter where “the juxtaposition between waste and want is given its fullest articulation” (Cunningham, 2010, p. 347). In order to understand how this mechanism functions and prevails, we must turn to Marx’s view of the “[l]ink between human suffering and the economic structures” (Ritzer, 2011, p. 56). Indeed, because the capitalist system ignores this link, it fails to make connections between the economic system and suffering among those who are being exploited (p. 56). The passage above demonstrates this, according to Marxism, fundamental failure in capitalism, which is part and parcel of understanding how this novel can be read as a capitalist critique.

Individualism or Unity? “The I” Versus “the We”

A common feature and conflict in all of the previous discussions is the struggle between the individual and the group, as the novel simultaneously functions to criticize individualism and to advocate unity and solidarity between people. However, this struggle is more clearly emphasized in some passages, as in chapter twenty-nine, where “fear” in the eyes of the men turns to “anger” and “wrath” (Steinbeck, 2006, pp 434-435). Not only is unity described as superior to individualism, but what is more, solidarity becomes a driving force behind survival for the migrant families. The Joad family, and Ma Joad in particular, becomes a prominent figure in the struggle for solidarity, justice, and unity among the poor, as a leading voice “to change the future of humankind” (Yee, 2013, p. 257).

Early on, the Joads’ solidarity with other migrant families is evident, and is declared both through their actions and words. For example, the Joads help the Wilson family to repair their car, and then propose that they should continue together, jointly. Ma says: “[y]ou won’t be no burden. Each’ll help each, an’ we’ll all git to California” (Steinbeck, 2006, p. 148). The same view of unity that we saw in the passage above is still evident by the end of the novel, when the Joads are in a much more severe situation than they were in their encounter with the Wilsons. An old woman explains to Ma that “[e]ver’body’s in the same wagon. S’pose we was down. You’d give us a han’” (p. 445). Ma, convinced by the same solidarity, says to the woman “‘Use’ ta be the fambly fust. It ain’t so now. It’s anybody. Worse off we get, the more we got to do” (p. 445).

Ma Joad, as the leader of the family, goes even further in her ambition to unify “their” people: the poor, the powerless, the exploited. At one point in the novel, Ma tells Tom that “[w]hy, Tom—us people will go on livin’ when all them people is gone. Why, Tom, we’re the people that live. They ain’t gonna wipe us out. Why—we’re the people—we go on” (Steinbeck, 2006, p. 280). What Ma tells Tom, in other words, is not that the impoverished

will prevail because they are vulnerable, but that the unity among the poor and the powerless makes them powerful, and that this unity in the end will prevail. In addition, an interesting notion is Lisca's (1958/1972) interpretation of the symbolism in this passage, where he draws parallels to the Bible and the Israelites in Egypt, which helps us to understand that Ma Joad uses these phrases as a result of having read her bible faithfully (p. 95).

The struggle between the 'we' and the 'I' is powerfully finished off by Rose of Sharon's final action on the last page of the novel, where she, just after giving birth to a stillborn baby, lets a man drink milk from her breast so that he will not die (Steinbeck, 2006, p. 455). As has been noted by scholars previously, this final event is not only a symbol of solidarity at last resort, but it furthermore anticipates that "only if the people nourish and sustain one another will they achieve their ends" (Fontenrose, 1964, p. 69), and while it is "an act of desperation", it also reflects the very foundation of human nature (Dickstein, 2004, p. 130). To that could be added that the very last sentence in the novel states that Rose of Sharon's "lips c[o]me together and smile[s] mysteriously" (Steinbeck, 2006, p. 455), hinting that even when all hope seems to be lost, the unity of the people has trumped all else.

The novel is, in conclusion, an objection to an individualized society where 'a minority owns the majority', and a description of the fear among the minority for the majority to join together and start a movement. This is emphasized in chapter fourteen, where the narrative speaks to the great land owners, and indeed any owners of great property, in saying that "the quality of owning freezes you forever into 'I', and cuts you forever from 'we'" (Steinbeck, 2006, p. 152). This, Cunningham (2010) notes, is a view that suggests "that private ownership stands against the processes of history and nature" (p. 350). In other words, what this passage offers is not simply a critique of land owners' wealth and power, versus poor migrants' poverty and powerlessness, but it furthermore indicates that the 'we' lies closer to human

nature than the 'I'. This critique fundamentally targets the concept of *rugged individualism*, which would place the 'I' as superior to the 'we' (Tyson, 2015, p. 57).

***The Grapes of Wrath*, Critical Literacy, and the ESL Classroom**

So far in the discussion, the focus has merely been on interpreting *The Grapes of Wrath*. However, when considering how the novel can be used in a classroom setting to highlight and discuss inequality issues, it is important to keep an additional set of questions in mind. The following questions will be considered and discussed below: what are the curricular aims and justifications for discussing inequality issues? How does the literary work help students in their understanding and processing of such issues? How do critical theoretical perspectives and CLP support and expand students' conception and cognitive understanding of issues presented in the novel?

The first question relates to the theoretical justification for combining literary analysis with discussing inequality issues in the classroom. In order to motivate the choice of area and material for the classroom, we must return both to the theoretical foundation of this study, and to national curricular aims. As we have seen, the benefits of working with literature by applying critical perspectives are evident, because it enables students to see literary works and the world in new ways (Eagleton, 1976/2006; Tyson, 2015). In addition, we have noted that using CLP in educational settings pave way for students' ability to read *against* texts, allowing them to question what they read, and why they read it (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014).

In terms of justifying what we teach and why we teach it from the perspective of teaching as an exercise of public authority, we need to consider national guidelines and policy documents. The National Syllabus for English at upper secondary school in Sweden determines that students should be given the opportunity "to develop knowledge of living

conditions, social issues and cultural features” (Skolverket, 2012, “Aim of the subject,” para. 2). The Curriculum for the upper secondary school goes even further in establishing that Swedish upper secondary schools should rest on basic values such as “the equal value of all people, equality between men and women, and solidarity between people” (Skolverket, 2013, p. 4). Consequently, discussions on inequality issues are in accordance with core values and aims presented in Swedish national policy documents for education.

The themes that have been analyzed in the novel clearly relate to the issue of inequality between people, where the common thread is unequal power relationships. Not only do the themes highlight these issues, however, but they furthermore demonstrate how the author, implicitly and explicitly, criticizes and problematizes ruling economic and political systems, which partly relates back to Tyson’s (2015) question presented initially in this study. Thus, a wide number of opportunities to discuss issues of inequality emerge from a critical reading of *The Grapes of Wrath*. When such opportunities for classroom practice are considered, it is relevant to return to Lewison et al.’s (2002) areas of utility for critical literacy. Firstly, the work invites students to examine the exploitation of poor and desperate workers, but also to understand and sympathize with their vulnerable situation. Secondly, it invites students to problematize wealth among a few at the expense of millions of people, and to consider how this relates to inequalities in the world. Hence, students are “disrupting the commonplace” (Lewison et al., 2002, p. 382), in that they reflect on and problematize “the commonplace”. Finally, students are lead to not only understand the social reality of then and now, but moreover to actually problematize, question, and take action for a better world by making connections to their own lives and experiences (p. 383). Problematizing one’s own life is an important aspect of reading against a text, which can support students in their understanding of inequality in society (Borsheim-Black et al., 2015, p. 127).

Practical Implications and Possibilities for Educators

With the previous discussion in mind regarding *The Grapes of Wrath* in a classroom in terms of highlighting inequality issues, some of the potential ‘hows’ of analyzing this novel in a classroom setting will be considered. As was proposed previously, one useful tool when it comes to teaching literature critically in a classroom is CLP because it poses questions that examines and explores the underlying ideologies, motifs, and criticism embodied by a literary work. In order to highlight inequality issues and enhance the effect of CLP, it is also relevant to include a critical theoretical perspective, such as Marxist criticism. What should be stated, however, before any modes of procedure are proposed, is that Marxism as such is a political ideology, and that when teaching through a Marxist perspective, or indeed any other theoretical perspective, teachers must be careful not to advocate one perspective before the other. Instead, teaching students through multiple perspectives and frameworks will give a more nuanced view of the work and the world (Beach et al., 2011, p. 154).

By reading *The Grapes of Wrath* as a work that condemns fundamental parts of the capitalist system, topics are revealed that highlight how social, economic, and political systems shape a society, and the people who live in that society. In other words, as Beach et al. (2011) has noted, historical works allow readers to take part of what the life of a “typical” person during a particular time in history could look like (p. 65), with the reservation that works such as *The Grapes of Wrath* is a fictional work. For students, this means that the historical work serves as a narrative or an interpretation of a period in history which ideally should relate to their own lives in some way. Students must find relevance in what they read, which is preceded by the teacher looking for topics of relevance for the specific classroom context. In the case of reading novels, this means that teachers must “help students [to] find a way in” in order to be able to explore themes further (Beach et al., 2011, pp. 66-67). With the

CLP framework in mind, making connections to the students' personal experiences is a crucial part of reading with a text (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014, p. 127).

The link to students' lives can be found, as is suggested here, by making connections to the economic breakdown of 2007-2008 and its consequences. Nevertheless, this economic crisis, and its similarities with the Great Depression of the 1930s—a crisis clearly present in the novel—is just one area of interest among many that could potentially be used when working with the novel. For teachers, the following questions are suggested as potential issues and themes to build- and focus on after introducing the topic through discussing economic crises: what does it mean to exploit someone and what does it mean to be exploited? How are issues of inequality manifested in the novel? Are there any similarities with our modern society? How is the question of private ownership presented and problematized?

While processing such questions require high proficiency in English, and thorough pre-knowledge on the topic together with a fuller understanding of the entire novel, tasks could certainly be adapted for less proficient readers or readers of lower stages of English, in order to still make use of the novel. For example, it would not be necessary to use the full novel, as it is both long—almost 500 pages—and because it involves so many complex themes and ideas. One of the benefits of using this specific novel is that it is arranged in narrative chapters and so-called interchapters, where the former follow the fate of one specific family, and the latter serve to help readers understand the societal change at large (Cunningham, 2010; Lisca, 1958/1972). Consequently, when discussing themes of inequality, questions can be adapted either to a specific passage or chapter that follows the Joad family, or to a chosen interchapter that describes societal changes at large.

While the main purpose of this study is not to discuss, nor to suggest ways to assess classroom work that includes reading and analyzing *The Grapes of Wrath* or other novels, there is still reason to briefly consider what critical literacy and novel reading offers in terms

of opportunities for assessment. What will be proposed here is a formal written assignment in relation to reading the novel, as has been suggested by Beach et al. (2011). The reason that this type of assignment is encouraged in this essay is that it allows students to “move beyond simply summarizing a text to formulate an essay that reflects sustained, systematic analysis or interpretation” (Jago, Shea, Aufses, & Lawrence Scanlon, 2010 paraphrased in Beach et al., 2011, p. 212). Somewhat simplified, this means that students can be assessed firstly on “their ability to interpret content”, secondly on their “ability to adapt language to different purposes, recipients and situations”, and finally on their “ability to discuss and reflect on living conditions, social issues [...] in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used” (Skolverket, 2012, “Teaching in the subject of English should give students the opportunities to develop the following,” points 1, 4, and 5).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay has focused on exploring *The Grapes of Wrath* through the critical theoretical perspective of Marxism. Drawing on the literary analysis, this essay has attempted to make connections to educational practice and practical implications for teachers in terms of discussing inequality issues with the support of the CLP framework, which has helped to find a meeting point between literary analysis, critical literacy, and the ESL classroom. The main focus of the literary analysis has been to highlight how the novel *The Grapes of Wrath* can be interpreted as a capitalist critique, and in terms of reading against the text, this analysis mainly offers a view on the question regarding how the literary work challenges “normative ways of thinking” (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014, p. 126).

In terms of challenging normative ways of thinking, it was concluded from the four themes in focus in the literary analysis that the novel takes aim at criticizing numerous fundamental principles of capitalism. The issue of centralized land ownership is described as fundamentally wrong because its ultimate goal is to generate profit for the large owners, which transforms the small farmers and tenants to tools whose utility is gone when profit no longer can be guaranteed for the owners. When these farmers have been evicted from their land, they are used as cheap labor, and due to their desperate situation, they are exploited to the limb. Still, while the migrants are starving, crops are being dumped to keep up the prices in order to maximize the profit. In conclusion, these are all issues that are presented as problematic because they serve the interest of a few individuals at the public expense. Hence, the solution suggested in the novel is to unify and fight back, or as Yee (2013) has pointed out, it is a demand to take action for a better society (p. 255).

Much of what has been found and discussed in this study has been noted and highlighted by scholars focusing on the same novel previously, but what this study can add to an existing understanding of the novel are conclusions drawn about practical implications for

reading this novel critically and including it in ESL classrooms. It was found that the issues presented in this analysis can be exemplified and further problematized in a classroom discussion on inequality issues, for example through the connection made initially between the economic crisis of 2007-2008, and the Great Depression of the 1930s, which is a central theme in the novel. On the one hand, while being a work of fiction, the novel offers authentic connections to students' reality. On the other hand, reading with and against the novel equips students with tools for recognizing and problematizing issues of inequality in their everyday lives and in the school context. In addition, it was suggested that including this novel does not necessarily oblige educators to teach the entire novel, or to shed light on all themes and issues presented in it. Instead, certain passages or chapters can be read and discussed as a way to inform about unequal power relationships and issues of inequality.

Suggestions for Future Research

While this study has focused on *The Grapes of Wrath* as a novel that criticizes capitalism in general, there are certainly other themes and patterns that could have been explored further. For example, no great emphasis has been put on exploring the far-reaching religious symbolism of the novel, which has been done previously by amongst others Lisca (1958/1972). One example which has been left out of the analysis due to lack of relevance for this study is the symbolic turtle in chapter three, which has been considered one of the most important passages in the novel (Lisca, 1958/1972, p. 86),

Similarly, the elements of racism that can be pointed out in the novel have been the focus of other researchers (eg. Cunningham, 2010), but has not been examined in this study. In an increasingly multicultural and diverse society and education system, one important responsibility and challenge for educators and researchers lies in guiding students to use

literature as a tool to empathize and engage in issues related to injustice in society. Thus, future research could include exploring the reception of migrants in the novel, comparing it to present-day equivalents of migrant crises, and making connections to teaching, curricular aims, critical literacy, and CLP.

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