MOTHERS OF THE GREAT DEPRESSION: AESTHETIC INTENT OF MA Joad IN THE GRAPEs OF WRATH

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ABSTRACT

While writing *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck described his writing process in a working journal, and in his sixty-eighth entry he wrote, “Today I’m going to deal to a large extent with Ma . . . And I want to build her up as much as possible . . . I want to show how valuable Ma is to society” (*Working Days* 70). The publication of *The Grapes of Wrath* affirmed Steinbeck’s intentions with Ma Joad because he never strayed from his original goal: “to show how valuable Ma is to society.” However, Steinbeck’s use of the phrase “I want to build her up as much as possible” suggests that the natural models for her character, the actual women of the Great Depression, may not have been as “valuable . . . to society” as he had envisioned. Since generations of readers generally accept the novel as an accurate depiction of the Great Depression, this study will show that Steinbeck altered details of Depression women’s lives in order to achieve the novel’s aesthetic purpose of “group survival,” which he portrays through Ma Joad’s role (*Working Days* 88). To compensate for Depression women’s inability to provide the socially “valuable” qualities Steinbeck sought to instill in Ma Joad, he turned to Robert Briffault’s anthropological study, *The Mothers: The Matriarchal Theory of Social Origins*. Through his examination of Briffault’s theories on motherhood, Steinbeck discovered the strong characteristics he ultimately bestowed upon Ma’s character. An analysis of Ma Joad’s role in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Briffault’s influence on Steinbeck, and Depression women’s personal stories—as they are recorded in the “Oral History Collection” archived in *California Odyssey: The 1930s Migration to the Southern San Joaquin Valley*—ultimately demonstrates that Steinbeck altered real women and developed a strong heroic female character in Ma Joad to counter the terrible social alienation that the American migrants endured during the Great Depression.
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INTRODUCTION

In Working Days: The Journals of the Grapes of Wrath 1938-1941, John Steinbeck writes, “Today I’m going to deal to a large extent with Ma . . . And I want to build her up as much as possible . . . I want to show how valuable Ma is to society” (70). Steinbeck wrote this journal entry on September 9, 1938, and by the time The Grapes of Wrath was published in 1939 his conception of Ma Joad, as integral to “society” and the novel itself, never varied. However, Steinbeck’s use of the phrase “I want to build her up as much as possible” suggests that the natural models for her character, the actual women of the Great Depression, may not have been as “valuable . . . to society” as Steinbeck had envisioned.

Based on the fact that Steinbeck had extensive contact with migrant women of the Depression during his 1936 research for The San Francisco News, he certainly would have had many female models to serve as inspiration for Ma Joad and the novel’s other female characters. Yet in The Harvest Gypsies—the compilation of articles Steinbeck wrote following his 1936 travels—his accounts of women imply that they were not the “valuable” influence that Ma Joad became in The Grapes of Wrath. For example, he describes a young mother who recently gave birth to a stillborn baby, which was commonplace during a time of such extreme lack of food and malnutrition, as “tottering around . . . [with] eyes [that] have the glazed, far-away look of a sleep walker’s eyes. She does not wash clothes anymore. The drive that makes for cleanliness has been drained out of her and she hasn’t the energy” (Gypsies 30). In his journal and The Harvest Gypsies, Steinbeck’s words imply that a discrepancy between Ma Joad’s character and the migrant women of the time does exist, and it is this discrepancy that plays a major part in the
articulation of his overall theme of “group survival” in the era-defining novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (*Working Days* 88).

In order to clarify Steinbeck’s aesthetic reasons for depicting Ma Joad in such an uncharacteristically powerful female role, it is important to examine his portrayal of her in the novel and the seldom researched interviews with migrant workers conducted for the “Oral History Collection” archived in *California Odyssey: The 1930s Migration to the Southern San Joaquin Valley*. When comparing Ma Joad’s and the migrant women’s descriptions of their experiences, it becomes clear that the female participants’ responses in their interviews ultimately show how little influence and control they truly had in their families and lives. They were not the “citadel of [their] family” that Ma embodied throughout the novel, which illustrates that Steinbeck altered details of his encounters with and knowledge of Depression women and mothers in an effort to complete his vision of “group survival” and promote his goals of bettering what he saw as an overly individualistic society (*Grapes* 100).

In addition to comparing Ma Joad to the oral histories, a consideration of Steinbeck’s major influences is necessary to understand his motives and sources for her character’s development. As Steinbeck critics note, anthropologist Robert Briffault’s study entitled *The Mothers: The Matriarchal Theory of Social Origins* is of particular importance in Steinbeck’s conception of *The Grapes of Wrath*. According to Warren Motley, Briffault’s “matriarchal theory of social origins” greatly influenced Steinbeck’s notion of the role of women and mothers as central to a community’s success (“From Patriarchy to Matriarchy” 398). Pivotal in the development of Briffault’s theory, and subsequently Steinbeck’s theme, is his assertion that “in [ancient types of society], it was from the woman’s sphere that the chief stimulus [i.e. motivation for the development of a society] was derived, and social organization itself was the expression
of feminine functions” (431). In addition to women’s roles as the organizers of society, Briffault suggests that “the source of social cohesion lies in the maternal instinct . . . [It] is in this sense only that the family should be regarded as the foundation of society. . . . The primordial family was not the unit but was the whole society” (431). Steinbeck’s description of Ma Joad’s actions and expressions in the opening chapters of The Grapes of Wrath reiterate Briffault’s theory. For example, Ma is described as a figure of power with devoted followers, particularly her children: “old Tom and the children could not know hurt or fear unless she acknowledged hurt and fear. . . . And from her great and humble position in the family . . . as healer . . . arbiter . . . goddess . . . if she ever really deeply wavered or despaired the family would fall, the family will to function would be gone” (100). The description of Ma is one that resonates with absolute power and leadership that carries beyond her family and into the realm of “goddess.” Therefore, if Steinbeck equates her role with “goddess,” then he certainly equates her with a leader of society.

However, in stark contrast to Ma’s description are the migrants’ descriptions of mothers and their place in the community. For example, Goldie Farris describes her own mother’s ability to work upon reaching California in 1939, from Gainesville, Texas: “I don’t think my parents, especially my mother who was not a very strong person, had never done field work, did that well” (11). In addition to her mother’s inability to perform the laborious tasks required of migrant workers during the Depression, she also avoided discussing the experience with her children. Farris explains that “as a family we just never talked about it. . . . It must have been terribly difficult, especially for my mother who came from a higher class of people than my father did. I know it must have been terribly difficult for her but I don’t remember her ever talking about it” (11). Farris’s descriptions of her mother are few and far between throughout the interview, but she makes it very clear that her father was the leader of her family when the
interviewer suggests that “is [sic] sounds as though [your father] took the responsibility as head of the family very seriously,” and she answers, “Oh he did, yes” (23). Even though Farris’s interview is only one account among the many migrants who suffered during the Great Depression, this study will provide many more examples of weak and silent mothers that contradict Steinbeck’s characterization of Ma Joad and reveal the motive and extent of his creation.

Ultimately, unveiling Ma Joad’s role as unrealistic in the context of the times is important because generations of readers generally accept The Grapes of Wrath as an accurate depiction of the Great Depression, which is especially misleading in terms of the roles women and mothers held during the era. In his introduction to Steinbeck’s The Harvest Gypsies, Charles Wollenberg notes that much of the subject matter Steinbeck addresses in The Grapes of Wrath was inspired by the “real-life material” he discovered while writing about the migrants for The San Francisco News (ix, v). Furthermore, Wollenberg states that Steinbeck’s guide on his migrant journey, Tom Collins, “helped launch John Steinbeck on a personal and literary journey that would lead to the publication of The Grapes of Wrath” (v). Essential to the “real-life material” Steinbeck used is his call for action that is not only evident in The Harvest Gypsies, but also implied in his theme of “group survival” in The Grapes of Wrath. In his final article of the Gypsies collection, Steinbeck reveals his view of the real migrant condition and the social situation that surrounds them:

The new migrants to California from the dust bowl are here to stay. They are the best American stock, intelligent, resourceful; and, if given a chance, socially responsible. To attempt to force them into a peonage of starvation and intimidated despair will be unsuccessful. They can be citizens of the highest type, or they can be an army driven by
suffering and hatred to take what they need. On their future treatment will depend which
course they will be forced to take. (62; emphasis added)

As Steinbeck himself notes, Ma Joad plays a prominent and “valuable” role in vocalizing his
theme of utilizing “group survival” for social change, but—unlike the setting and the other
characters in the novel—Ma Joad does not adhere to the social norms for real women of the
Great Depression, and as a result she fulfills only an artistic intent. She represents the potential
for society to move beyond the dominating individualistic mindset, which Steinbeck found so
troubling, and towards a social order guided by the notion that “two are better than one. . . . [I]f
one prevail against him, two shall withstand him, and a three-fold cord is not quickly broken”
(Grapes 570-71).
I. “WOMEN CAN CHANGE BETTER’N A MAN”: THE CRITICS AND MA JOAD

Nellie Y. McKay writes that “the disagreements [The Grapes of Wrath] continues to raise speak well for the need to continue to evaluate its many structural and thematic strands,” and “the disagreements” about Ma Joad’s various roles are precisely what make her character so challenging and intriguing for critics (53). The amount of criticism devoted to Ma Joad is extensive, but those who consider her in the context of mother provide valuable insight into her aesthetically derived role in the novel. This chapter covers some of the key critical perspectives of Ma Joad’s role as mother, and the differing individual considerations of her character will highlight the need to evaluate veritable accounts by Depression women because, without historical inquiry into their lives and perspectives, truly understanding how and why Steinbeck altered them to achieve his aesthetic goal of social change is unfeasible.

In an early analysis of Steinbeck’s female characters, Sandra Beatty notes that the author “reduced the multiplicity of female roles to basically two, that of wife and that of mother, with all of his female characters fulfilling, in varying degrees, either one or both of these functions” (2). Beatty adds to the limited characterization of Steinbeck’s women that “many of [his] wives seem to be domesticity personified” (2). However, despite the initial narrow image of Beatty’s description of Steinbeck’s women, she suggests that Steinbeck does not understand “this role as menial or degrading” (2). On the contrary, Beatty indicates that Steinbeck’s women often possess “unshakeable strength” and “knowledge” (2-3). Of all of his female characters, Beatty believes Ma Joad “epitomizes what Steinbeck seems to view as a distinctly female wisdom,” and she goes so far as to propose that Ma is a “philosopher” (3). However, Beatty diminishes this
claim by suggesting that Ma’s role as “philosopher” is merely a method through which she can “assume the male role for a time” rather than become a separate strong female role (3).

Despite her reduction of Ma’s “philosopher” position, Beatty argues that Ma Joad’s true strength of character lies in her role as mother, and she even suggests that Ma is “the epitome of motherhood” (5). Beatty finds, at the root of this motherly fortitude, “some strain of knowledge inherent in women,” but that “knowledge” is not the result of reason, logic, or intellect; instead, at the heart of women’s innate wisdom and will to survive is “the procreation of the species” (5). Oddly enough, Beatty seems to equate female and motherly wisdom solely with the act of reproduction, but nowhere in the novel does Steinbeck ever specifically allude to Ma Joad’s reproductive qualities. The only instance the reader encounters of young Ma’s childbearing experience is the description of the eldest son Noah’s birth, which primarily focuses on Pa’s inadequacies rather than Ma’s role as “procreator” (Beatty 6; Steinbeck 106). Thus, it seems unlikely that Ma gains all of her knowledge of life and survival simply through giving birth.

Without further explanation, Beatty’s conclusions to her brief study about Steinbeck’s women and motherhood are underdeveloped. Yet her argument is important because she introduces the notion that Steinbeck is particularly apt to portray women as strong and “knowledgeable” in their roles as wife and mother (2-3).

Equally significant to the critical conversation that surrounds Ma Joad is Mimi Reisel Gladstein’s essay “From Heroine to Supporting Player: The Diminution of Ma Joad.” Gladstein writes extensively about John Steinbeck and his fiction, and her analysis of the differences between the film version of Ma Joad and the novel version, in this particular essay, provides an enlightening view of Steinbeck’s conception of motherhood. She begins her inquiry into the differing portrayals by giving John Ford, the director of the film The Grapes of Wrath, credit for
his adaptation’s positive reception, and she implies that its acceptance is undeniable. However, she adds that very “few critics” past and present examine a facet of the film that she finds to be the most “troublesome,” and that is Ford’s “reduction and devitalization of the role of women” (125). She also finds his lack of reasons for doing so perplexing, but of utmost importance for her is the fact that he “reduced and softened the character of Ma Joad, and thereby diluted Steinbeck’s depiction of women’s strength, durability, and significance in the human struggle for survival, a depiction that is distinctly embedded in the many layers, both realistic and mythic, of the book” (125). However, Gladstein does not place the entire blame on Ford; she also criticizes the “screenwriter, Nunnally Johnson, and actress Jane Darwell” for the transformation that Ma Joad undergoes in her transition from novel to film. Although Gladstein still believes the film version of Ma Joad “maintains the central role in the Joad saga,” she finds Ma’s status to be “weaker” and even “Pollyannaish,” and the overall effect the film version solicits “falls short [of the novel] on many counts” (126). Following her main reaction to the film, Gladstein provides several crucial examples of the film’s modification of Ma Joad.

In her comparison of the film and novel, Gladstein observes that Ma’s devaluation begins in the opening scenes. Before readers receive a visual description of Ma Joad, Steinbeck gives her a voice, and Gladstein says Steinbeck does this to “reflect her hospitality” that “foreshadows her behavior in inviting Casy [to travel] along with the family” (126). Yet the film neglects to include these instances, and Gladstein argues that by eliminating these scenes Ford confuses the novel’s theme of “community that reaches beyond the boundaries of kinship” (126). Ultimately, omitting these early encounters with Ma causes “these values” to be lost in the remainder of the script (126). Another exclusion that plays an essential part in Ma Joad’s decline is the fact that the film fails to communicate “that Ma has been the de facto head of the family all along. Her
power does not grow; only the overt expression of it does” (128). However, the film fails to accurately indicate her “power” and instead portrays her as restricted by her understanding of traditional gender roles (128). The “tradition” she adheres to in the film ultimately “prevents her overt expression of [her power] except when necessary” (128). Gladstein’s most vivid example of the film’s misinterpretation of Ma’s power is the elimination of “the family council scene,” which consequently erases “both incident and indication of Ma’s eminent position in the family and her sympathy with the kind of communal values that Jim Casy comes to represent” (128). A key term Gladstein uses to define the film’s Ma Joad is “pacifier,” and her examples of deleted scenes that represent this fact reiterate how little the film captures of the novel’s Ma:

   The movie Ma does not determine the judgment of the family council about Casy’s accompanying them, she does not face down the company store clerk, she does not wield the jack handle to keep the family together, and she does not threaten Pa with a stick to anger him lest he become too dispirited. All such scenes in which Ma acts assertively are absent from the movie. (134)

Finally, Gladstein claims that Ford successfully reduces Ma Joad to a “stereotyped mother,” who is “soft, sweet, passive, and long-suffering—[a nurturer], but not [a leader] in the struggle for survival” (135-36). As a result of the film’s adaptation, Gladstein concludes that “one is left disappointed by the devitalization and diminishment of Ma Joad, one of the American novel’s most admirable and engaging heroines” (136).

   Like Gladstein and Beatty, Nellie Y. McKay addresses Ma Joad’s role in The Grapes of Wrath in terms of her functions as wife, mother, and woman; however, her approach is distinctly influenced by “contemporary feminist criticism” (47). In her effort to “place [Steinbeck’s] vision of [women’s] roles within the framework of an American consciousness” that divides men and
women into socially defined gender roles, McKay specifically draws from the works of Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born*, Elizabeth Janeway’s *Man’s World, Woman’s Place*, Nancy Chodorow’s *The Reproduction of Motherhood: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, and Hester Einstein’s *Contemporary Feminist Thought* (51, 47). Before McKay delves into her understanding of Ma Joad, she explains how these works and the feminist tradition influences her.

McKay suggests that “female oppression under patriarchy dictates an institution in which the heterosexual family is at the center of the social system . . . and sex-role stereotyping separates the social expectations of women from those of men,” which presumes “woman’s ideal social, emotional, and psychological state” is that of mother and wife (47). Furthermore, societies that promote such “sex-role stereotyping” encourage “passivity” characterized by “affection, obedience, sympathy, and nurturing” in women and expect “more aggressive behavior” from men with an emphasis on them being “tenacious, ambitious, and responsible” (48). In her application of these gender role definitions, McKay takes from Elizabeth Janeway the idea that “there is no scientific basis for the male-constructed definition of women’s nature, and that opinions on the biological aspects of women’s inability to perform as well as men in some areas . . . are not facts, but are rather social mythology based on . . . a particular set of values” (48). Thus, gender role myths “define the ‘natural’ capabilities of women in ways that make women socially and economically dependent on men” (48). McKay’s notions of wife and motherhood stem from a similar idea that suggests men’s “support” in their roles as “husband/father” is “expected to be largely material” whereas women’s “support” as “wife/mother” is purely “emotional” (49).
In light of these gender role theories, McKay notes that the manner in which women are historically portrayed in literature, especially literature written by men, are “subscribed almost exclusively to the ideology of locating women’s place in the domestic world,” and any women who countered this characterization were “stigmatized as unfeminine, bad mothers and wives, and social deviants” (49). However, these male authors reserve one particular role for woman that depicts them as “positive,” and that was the role of “Earth Mother” (49). The major qualities of the “Earth Mother” are “selfless mothering” and complete devotion “to the welfare of her husband and children” (49). McKay notes that this image of female literary characters largely develops from the “national consciousness” and a “desire for harmony between ‘man’ and nature,” and this “desire” traditionally associates “the American land with woman’s biological attributes” (49-50).

McKay insists that the complex literary and theoretical tradition that defines the roles of women figures prominently into Steinbeck’s fiction, and her view of Ma Joad’s depiction is largely negative. She asserts that Steinbeck’s women “have no independent identity of their own” aside from their relationships with the male characters who dominate his works; however, she does not deny that Steinbeck does perceive “women’s roles in the existing social order” as significant (50). Nevertheless, McKay finds his women adhering to the belief that “the most they can achieve and hold onto with social dignity is the supportive nurturing role of woman’s place in a man’s world” (50). Ma Joad is enmeshed in this existence, and McKay suggests that by placing Ma Joad in this role Steinbeck creates an “idealistic view of womanhood” that unrealistically assigns her to roles of “leader and follower, wise and ignorant, and simple and complex, simultaneously. . . . [S]he is a woman for all seasons, the nonintrusive, indestructible ‘citadel’ on whom everyone else can depend” (51). In addition, McKay’s greatest
disappointment in Ma Joad is the fact that she manages to display “unshakable strength and wisdom” yet “she never achieves an identity of her own, or recognizes the political reality of women’s roles within a male-dominated system. . . . Even when she becomes fully aware of class discrimination . . . she continues to fill the social space of invincible woman/wife/mother” (52). In conjunction with this realization, she believes Steinbeck’s use of Briffault and “matriarchy” is no more than “a system that suited [his] purpose in this novel” to “make America, as a nation, more responsive to larger social needs,” not to fully promote women’s social progression (56; 58). Thus, McKay would like to see Ma Joad develop into a character who not only voices the harmful effect of social oppression, but who also acknowledges men’s oppression of women.

McKay’s main criticism of Ma Joad is the fact that she undermines her traditional role as wife and mother by taking authority in the family and fostering their will to survive only to quickly return to her duties as submissive female counterpart to male influence (64). Ultimately, McKay maintains that “in times of crisis, Steinbeck suggests, the survival of the family and, by extension, the social order, depends on the wisdom and strength of the mother, whose interests are always those of her husband and children” (64). In conclusion, McKay purports that “Steinbeck sees ‘happy-wife-and-motherdom’ as the central role for women,” and in this Ma Joad is the “epitome of Earth Mother” and reiterates the “stereotypical parallels between woman and nature” (66-67). In essence, Ma Joad is an awe-inspiring depiction of women’s strength and endurance, but she does not serve to transform social definitions that limit women to their functions as wife and mother.

In many ways, Lorelei Cederstrom’s exploration into the representation of the “Great Mother” provides the counterargument to McKay’s conclusions about the literary characterization of women as “Earth Mother.” Like McKay, Cederstrom uses Steinbeck’s
portrayal of Ma Joad to support her analysis of the role of women in the novel. At the center of her investigation is what she views as Steinbeck’s application of “the archetypal feminine” (76). Cederstrom explains that Steinbeck draws upon the “archetypal feminine” and promotes “matriarchal cultures” in order to highlight the result of “the patriarchal structures and attitudes that are destroying the earth” (76). Essentially, Cederstrom argues that by employing the “archetypal ‘Great Mother’” Steinbeck uncovers “an alternative to the dominant structures of Western Civilization” (76-77). She points out that in his application of the social “alternative,” Steinbeck’s message is most clear in the victimization of “the migrant families” who are the first to suffer as a consequence of “the failure of Western civilization” (76). Without a societal structure to guide them on their migration, Cederstrom asserts that the migrants form “a more primitive social order based upon feminine values and matriarchal structures” (77).

In her analysis of *The Grapes of Wrath*, Cederstrom views each character through the lens of the “Great Mother,” and as a result she finds that the women in the Joad family are most representative of “the archetypal feminine.” However, her consideration of Ma Joad is paramount in understanding the role of the “Great Mother” in matriarchal societies, because she is the one character that “continually reflects the many aspects of the nurturing force of the Great Mother” (81). Cederstrom indicates that once the family is on the road and disconnected from the land, the men’s duties cease to exist, and as a result women’s work begins to dominate the family’s routine. At the center of the feminine duties is “preparing food and making shelter,” and prior to their migration these are the responsibilities that Ma maintains, which makes her an automatic authority on the road (81). Cederstrom adds to these functions the notion of mystery and “wisdom,” and she suggests that Ma exudes a “folk wisdom” of life and death that emphasizes her personification of the “Great Mother” because the “Great Mother” is a force that
is capable of granting both life and death (82). Overall, the relationship between Ma Joad and the “Great Mother” that Cederstrom explicates is of great importance, because she especially highlights Ma Joad’s role as a mother and her “selfless maternal love” that characterizes that role.

In contrast to Cederstrom’s extremely positive consideration of Ma Joad, Vivyan C. Adair’s relatively recent interpretation of her character is not nearly as flattering. Not only does Adair disagree with Cederstrom’s reading of Ma Joad, but she also opposes the notion that Steinbeck magnifies patriarchal inadequacies in his depiction of her. Instead, Adair believes Steinbeck contributes to the Depression-era literary tradition that perpetuates a “hierarchy that pits the ‘deserving’ against the ‘undeserving’ poor mother” (49). Although Adair categorizes Steinbeck’s depiction of Ma Joad under the title of “Good Ma” and “deserving poor,” she does not mean that this is a positive reflection of his novel (50). In contrast, she believes Ma Joad “re-mythologized the poor white mother within the larger context of the Great Depression . . . [and] both covered up and allowed for the reproduction of mainstream ideology and power” (51).

However, she does note that Steinbeck’s intentions seem to be an effort to help American society cope with the devastation of the Great Depression, but in doing so he reinforces the concept that “male loss and female empowerment” are transitory, not a new societal structure like that which Cederstrom suggests (51). Indeed, Adair views Ma Joad as regressive not progressive because her promotion to authority figure during the novel only serves to reestablish balance in the accepted male-dominated social order. In the end, Ma Joad and other wives and mothers must “return” to their rightful submissive place to show the restoration of American values (51).

In addition to using Ma Joad as a means to return America to its traditional social order, Adair also suggests that Steinbeck’s portrayal of her is not akin to the “Great Mother” or
“Mother Earth” as other critics suggest, but rather Ma contrasts with the land (54). She explains that because the land fails the men during the Great Depression, women must serve as a re-stabilizing force and show that “unlike ‘Mother Earth,’ civilized real wives and mothers—authorities by default—would neither fail nor betray man, but that on the contrary, the deserving poor woman would willingly lay down her body and her own desire in the service of mankind” (54). Thus, since the feminine land deceives the men, Ma Joad and Rose of Sharon in their roles as “‘good’ poor mothers and mothers to be” represent “positive bearers of social value” (54). Adair merely sees Ma Joad and Rose of Sharon as “act[ing] only in the best interest of the male power structure they hope to reinforce and reestablish” (54).

In support of her pessimistic view of Ma Joad, Adair provides several elucidating examples from the novel. She maintains that the often positively interpreted description of Ma Joad early in the novel is not actually a favorable account. Instead of evoking images of strength and leadership, Adair demonstrates that phrases such as “heavy, but not fat; thick with childbearing and work,” “high calm and superhuman understanding,” and “goddess” actually reinforce Ma’s role as “the object of male enunciation. . . . Body without agency, she is simply a vehicle for bearing, supporting, and nurturing her ‘fambly of man’” (55). Moreover, Adair stresses that all of the scenes in which Ma serves as an authority are actually an attempt to protect the family from separating. In other words, Ma is not acting in her own interest but only in the interest of others, thus making her passive and submissive rather than powerful and authoritative (57). Finally, Adair completes her criticism of Ma Joad with the conclusion that “what Steinbeck constructs then in this fascinating portrait is the dream of the poor mother and wife as willing midwife to her own oppression—to her own symbolic castration—as she labors only to re-empower man” (59). Despite her extremely negative interpretation of Ma Joad and the
novel itself, Adair’s consideration of both will play a crucial role in understanding how the real women of the Great Depression view their own struggles because her conclusions about Ma’s motives for asserting herself to “re-empower man” could easily apply to the real migrant women’s own motives.

Each of these critics’ perspectives of Ma Joad exemplify the complexity of her character and her tendency to “change” throughout the novel. What one critic sees as empowerment another may view as reinforcing gender stereotypes, and the disagreements among critics, as well as the discrepancy in Steinbeck’s descriptions of Ma Joad and the women he encountered while compiling *The Harvest Gypsies*, reiterate the importance of consulting women’s perspectives outside of the novel. Their experiences and unbiased commentary on the Depression, as well as the story of *The Grapes of Wrath*, will show that Ma Joad is so controversial because she is an alteration of her real-life models.
II. “LOVE OF THE CLAN IS GREATER THAN THE LOVE BETWEEN HUSBAND AND WIFE”: MA JOAD AND ROBERT BRIFFAULT

In addition to the critics mentioned in the previous chapter, Warren Motley is a prominent authority on Steinbeck’s fiction, and his analysis of Ma Joad’s role as mother is perhaps one of the most underappreciated critical interpretations of her character. Specifically, his elucidation of the link between Steinbeck’s creation of Ma Joad and Robert Briffault’s “theories on the matriarchal origin of society” from his work *The Mothers: The Matriarchal Theory of Social Origins* is his most significant contribution to the topic because the connection between the two is equally as underappreciated as is Motley’s analysis (397). Motley credits Richard Astro, another Steinbeck critic, for the discovery of the relationship between Steinbeck and Briffault’s *The Mothers* (398). In his study, *John Steinbeck and Edward F. Ricketts: The Shaping of a Novelist*, Astro states that “it is not entirely clear how Steinbeck became familiar with the works of Briffault . . . [but] Carol Steinbeck affirms that he had been reading Briffault’s anthropological treatise, *The Mothers*. . . . And, Richard Albee, a longtime friend of the novelist, recalls that many of Steinbeck’s group were reading Briffault in the 1930’s” (48). Astro learned of this source during personal interviews with both parties, and Motley uses it as the starting point of his investigation into the influence of Briffault’s text on Steinbeck.

For his interpretation of Ma Joad’s role as mother, Motley also relies on the comment Carol Steinbeck made, in her 1971 interview with Astro, that Ma is “pure Briffault” (Astro 133). From this information, Motley argues that “the Joad family shifts from a patriarchal structure to a predominantly matriarchal one. So doing, they dramatize the influence of the anthropologist Robert Briffault on John Steinbeck as he tried to understand the Depression” (397). Within the
context of this social “shift,” Motley seeks to show that “Steinbeck presents Ma Joad’s growing power as a source of communal strength sheltering human dignity from the antisocial effects of individualism” (398). Importantly, Motley’s accounts of Briffault’s theories simplify the anthropologist’s insight into matriarchal societies in a manner that opens the door to a greater understanding of Steinbeck’s intentions with Ma Joad. However, it is the political emphasis Motley eventually attaches to Steinbeck’s use of Briffault that creates the need for further investigation into Briffault’s work *The Mothers*.

Before reconsidering Briffault, Motley’s perspective on Briffault and Ma Joad must be clarified. The beginning of his Briffault study is significant because much of the insight he provides helps explicate many of the anthropological terms on which Briffault relies. For example, Motley’s differentiation between common misconceptions of the term “matriarchy” and Briffault’s definition of “matriarchy” is particularly useful because Briffault’s meaning is the one Steinbeck applied to the Joads. Motley asserts that “to most people [matriarchy] erroneously connotes a topsy-turvy, Amazonian patriarchy” where women’s control over men mimics the power-relationship in a patriarchal societies where men subjugate women (398). However, he clarifies that Briffault perceives matriarchies to be “a radically different relationship between people based on cooperation rather than power” (398-99). Motley quotes that at the core of these societies is “biologically linked maternal clans of brothers and sisters rather than . . . patriarchal families based on sexual bonds” (399). Furthermore, he finds that a key to Briffault’s observations of matriarchal societies is the fact that divisions based on “physical” strength and “economic advantages” are absent because “all the arts and industries” of matriarchies “were invented and carried out by women . . . [and] men . . . provid[ed] raw materials for these industries” (400). Therefore, modern gender roles based on breadwinner versus housewife did
not dictate the manner in which these societies functioned. Motley also acknowledges that matriarchies, as Briffault and other anthropologists contend, are “primitive,” and they became extinct upon the advent of “advanced agriculture” (400). Ultimately, as a result of this shift, men gained “economic power” and virtually left women jobless, permitting “sexual coupling [to replace] the maternal clan as the controlling unit of society” (401). The changing roles of men, women, and society led to the origin of “individualism” and ultimately the masculine preoccupation with land ownership and social advancement (401). Although civilization established a new social order, Motley infers from Briffault’s work that a “return to a matriarchal stage” is possible, and it is contingent upon the failure of modern “industry” and ultimately the patriarchy, which is exactly where Motley finds the Joads in *The Grapes of Wrath* (401).

By the time the Great Depression unfolded, Americans had either forgotten or had no knowledge of the matriarchies that once reigned, and they found themselves facing the failure of the only societal structure they ever knew: the patriarchy. Motley believes that “Steinbeck shows how the shock of dispossession suffered by the Joads undermines the frontier patriarchy and throws the family back to a more primitive economic and social stage,” and this is where Ma Joad’s role as mother turned matriarch comes into play (402). He argues that “as the older Joad men sink into ineffectiveness and despondency, family authority shifts to Ma Joad,” and in her new-found role she initially “aggressively challenges patriarchal decisions . . . and by the end of the novel she has taken the initiative,” and he provides several instances that illuminate Ma’s transition to authority (404). For example, she is the one to decide when the family should leave the government camp, she “plans Tom’s escape from the peach ranch,” she “controls the family’s money, handles Ruthie’s betrayal of Tom’s hiding place, finds the family work, leads them away from the flooded railroad car, and finally urges Rose of Sharon to suckle the starving
man in the ark-like barn” (405). Motley sees each display of Ma’s authority as Steinbeck’s “promise of hope” to all suffering migrants, which essentially means her power “might provide an alternative basis for authority in American society as a whole” (405). In terms of Ma’s role as mother, Motley suggests that because she endures the agonizing effects of childbirth and cares for the “sick and dying” she gains a “tragic view of life that . . . generates a sustaining stoicism” that “endow[s] her with the mental fortitude” that the Joad men lack (407). He finds that Ma Joad is able to cope with the Depression and lead her family through it because she “has actually given birth to it and nurtured it”; her strength does not come from her masculine ability to take charge, but from her feminine ability to “absorb” the weaknesses of those around her (407). Ultimately, he believes that Ma’s role as mother exists as the sole source of her ability to lead.

Motley bases his interpretation of motherhood and Ma Joad on Briffault’s theories, and his concluding explanation of the relationship between the two is immensely important because his understanding of Briffault does not quite correspond with Steinbeck’s aesthetic intent. Rather than closing his study with a successful and helpful reading of Briffault and Ma’s role as mother, Motley translates all of the characteristics that support Ma’s strength and leadership into a political “philosophy” (408). In an attempt to maintain his positive feminist line of thinking, he suggests the basis of Ma’s philosophic mindset lies in the fact that she is a woman. But his argument for women weakens as he twists her role into a political perspective: “as Ma Joad experiences the scorn and savagery of the California deputies, this matriarchal intuition is tempered into political faith” (408). He believes that Steinbeck, through his understanding of Briffault’s matriarchal theories, uses Ma as a vehicle for his overall “political” message that “a stronger communal government would be necessary to protect individual freedom and dignity” (410). By transitioning into a politically oriented analysis, Motley’s early consideration of
Briffault and motherhood is lost, and his initially strong illustration of Ma Joad dissipates. Ultimately, Motley’s political view of Ma Joad contradicts and misinterprets Steinbeck’s use of Briffault and his intent “to show how valuable Ma is to society” because transforming her into a political message undermines her role as mother and Steinbeck’s social, not political, message (Steinbeck, *Working Days* 70).

Overall, Briffault’s concentration on the social role of mothers does not coincide with the political vision that Motley suggests Steinbeck infused in his novel via Ma Joad because the “object” of Briffault’s work is to “trace the origin of human society” solely on a social level and in terms of “family and of marriage” (27). Based on Steinbeck’s own description of Ma’s social importance, it is clear that Briffault’s emphasis on social, not political, factors is the influence that guides Steinbeck’s aesthetic intent with her character. Steinbeck may have had a political objective as well, but it did not evolve from Briffault’s influence nor did it emanate through the character of Ma Joad as Motley implies. On the contrary, it is Steinbeck’s social goal, a call for society to unite against the unjust and dehumanizing practices that the migrant workers faced during the Great Depression, which Briffault inspired.

When comparing Briffault’s work and *The Grapes of Wrath*, it becomes abundantly clear that Steinbeck bases his portrayal of Ma Joad extensively on Briffault’s conclusions in *The Mothers*. Briffault focuses specifically on primitive societies in order to show how “human society” or “the first social groupings” evolved from “mothers” rather than fathers as “many writers have assumed” (27). He establishes at the outset that readers will have difficulty identifying with his conclusions about society because they are so far removed from their origins, which are more akin to “animal groups in structure than advanced [societies]” because the male has little to no function “in the formation or maintenance of the animal family.”
(Briffault 28). As a result of the males’ absence, Briffault purports that primitive “human societies developed . . . in an association which represented female instincts only”; thus, “human culture must have been moulded . . . by the instincts of the mother” [sic] (28). In addition, Briffault views the development of “the patriarchal ‘family’ of academic social science” as completely contradictory to the “maternal instincts” that originally governed society because he believes the patriarchal structure “is but a euphemism for the individualistic male with his subordinate dependents” (431).

From Briffault’s initial explanation of patriarchy, Steinbeck ascertains his own position on the state of patriarchal society during the Great Depression, and this is most evident in chapter fourteen of The Grapes of Wrath; the interchapter that defines the condition of “Manself” (204). Steinbeck writes that “man, unlike any other thing organic or inorganic in the universe, grows beyond his work, walks up the stairs of his concepts, emerges ahead of his accomplishments” (204). Implicit in his description of man is the notion that men rely on their intelligence or, as Briffault states, “academic social science” to form the “concepts” that guide their lives (Briffault 431; Steinbeck, Grapes 204). However, as the brief interchapter progresses, it is apparent that Depression-era man’s intelligence separates and isolates him from the group, and when alone he faces the unbearable fact that “I lost my land” and he realizes his “concepts” that he so relies on have failed him (204). In this moment, Steinbeck shows that man’s “individualistic” mindset causes him to lose sight of “we,” and now man must find a way to escape his own solitude and reconnect “‘I’ to ‘we’” (206). Through his application of Briffault’s work, Steinbeck aesthetically portrays motherhood and “maternal instincts” as the answer to man’s failure and isolation; he attributes “how valuable Ma is to society” to her ability to rejoin the “I” and “we” (Working Days 70).
Since Steinbeck requires a means by which to comprehend and *artistically*, not realistically, illuminate a terrible episode in American history, he uses Briffault’s theories to elevate the traditional Depression-era functions of motherhood and casts Ma Joad in the position of emerging matriarchal leader and protector in response to a deteriorating patriarchal society. To explain the failure of man’s academic approach to society, Steinbeck learns from Briffault that “in the spheres which are important at [the primitive] cultural level, intellectual advantage is with the female. She is more wary and ingenious than the male” (104). Among the many areas that Briffault describes as realms dominated by primitive women, there are five specific domains representative of women’s “intellectual advantage” that Steinbeck imparts to Ma Joad in order to achieve his aesthetic purpose: social interactions, leadership, work, care, and home.

In terms of social interactions, Briffault believes first and foremost that “the group subserves to the maternal instincts and is governed by them” (96). He suggests that a major contributor to this relationship between mother and group is “mother-care” or “mother-love” (38; 44). For Briffault, “the origin of all social bonds . . . is that created by mother-love” and “the new relations which are established by protracted mother-care transform the very springs of action and behavior, for they cause the individual mind to be linked up with others to form a new organism—the group bound by social ties” (44; 38). Nowhere in *The Grapes of Wrath* is the prevalence of the “mother-love” and “mother-care” concept more evident than in the relationship between Ma Joad and her oldest son, Tom Joad. Although neither character is ever overtly affectionate towards the other, Steinbeck establishes, during their very first encounter in the novel, the intense connection between the two:

She moved toward him lithely, soundlessly in her bare feet, and her face was full of wonder. Her small hand felt his arm. . . . And then her fingers went up to his cheek as a
blind man’s fingers might. And her joy was nearly like sorrow. Tom pulled his underlip between his teeth and bit it. . . . Then she knew, and her control came back, and her hand dropped. (101)

The scene initiates the “mother-love” instinct that motivates many, if not all, of Ma’s actions. Her behavior is undoubtedly instinctual as evidenced by her wandering “blind man’s fingers”; she is not aware of her movements because they are governed by her innate love for her child (101). Furthermore, Steinbeck purposefully leaves the phrase “then she knew” unexplained so as to imply that she is well-aware of Tom’s reciprocal love, despite the fact that he does not vocalize it; once again her knowledge stems from “maternal instinct” (Briffault 27).

Ma and Tom’s relationship also follows Briffault’s assertion that “mother-care transform[s] the very springs of action and behavior” and permits the “mind to be linked up with others” because her love for Tom is essentially the foundation that allows him to bond with Casy “to form a new organism—the group bound by social ties” (Briffault 38). If “all social bonds” develop from the mother’s influence, then Ma’s emphasis on family and the group would have implanted itself in Tom’s mind long before he met Casy. In her description of life prior to the Joad’s journey to California, Ma explains to Tom that “we was always one thing—we was the fambly—kinda whole and clear” (536). When Tom must leave the family at the end of the novel, he expounds on the significance of the group and explains that he learned from Casy that “he jus’ got a little piece of a great big soul . . . [and] his little piece of a soul wasn’t no good ’less it was with the rest, an’ was whole” (570). However, he would not have bonded with Casy if it were not for his mother’s “care” and her prior emphasis on the group and the “fambly” being “whole” (Briffault 38; Grapes 570). Through Ma’s maternal role, Tom is able to articulate the knowledge
he acquired through her influence; a knowledge subsequently solidified through his relationship with Casy, which is a relationship only possible because of her influence in his life.

As outlined earlier, Ma Joad’s leadership is a topic of great contention among critics, and though many of them cite Motley’s interpretation of Briffault, none of them goes directly to the source. To understand Briffault’s “matriarchal theory of social origins” and that theory’s influence on Steinbeck’s depiction of female leadership, one must consider Briffault’s references to the numerous primitive societies he examines throughout The Mothers. In his discussion of the leaders’ role in his many examples of primitive societies, Briffault acknowledges a common feature among them: “in the great majority of uncultured societies, women enjoy a position of independence and of equality with the men, and exercise an influence which would appear startling even in the most feministic of modern societies” (70). For example, he observes that “the most noticeable feature of [Seri of the Californian Gulf’s] organization is the prominence of the females” where “the social unit is the maternal clan, determined by descent from a common line of mothers” (Briffault 64). Furthermore, he says, “the clan is headed by a clan-mother and comprises of a hierarchy of daughters and granddaughters. . . . It was often difficult to identify the husband . . . partly because of his lack of authority. . . . [T]he men tacitly accept the decisions of the mother” (Briffault 64-65). While critics often claim that the basis of the hierarchy among the Joads is the men in the family, Steinbeck alludes to the women as the main hierarchy in the family.

A particular scene that critics often point to as exemplifying the male-oriented family hierarchy is the Joad men’s “squatting” circle, which is where the men gather to make decisions about the family’s journey (136). Motley especially focuses on the scene as an indication of the “patriarchal structure of the Joad family,” and he suggests that the manner in which the men
gather “reflects the traditional authority of the pioneer as clearly as would a legislative chamber” (402). He also links the scene to Briffault, and argues that “Steinbeck describes the squatting posture of the Joad men in unusual detail, as if, like Briffault, he were recording the symbolic ritual of a primitive tribe” (402). Motley’s assertion that the scene is reminiscent of Briffault’s descriptions of primitive tribes is partially correct in that he does indeed illustrate aspects of their ritual customs; however, that these customs center on the men is not in keeping with Briffault’s main focus: matriarchal tribes. Thus, in the “squatting” circle scene, Steinbeck does describe each man as he individually takes his place in the circle, but “then Ma came out of the house, and Granma with her, and Rose of Sharon behind. . . . They took their places behind the squatting men; they stood up with their hand on their hips” (136). Contrary to Motley’s claim, it is the description of the women that is clearly hierarchical as they are listed in a group beginning with Ma in the position of leader; the men, however, are mentioned individually in no apparent order. Moreover, the women’s stance is much more visually authoritative than the men because they stand behind and over the “squatting” men, which minimizes the men’s size and status. In addition to the visual scene that Steinbeck creates, Ma Joad also makes the final decision despite the men’s discussion about whether or not Casy should come with them on their journey to California. Pa actually turns to her for her approval and in doing so he illuminates Briffault’s idea that “the men tacitly accept the decisions of the mother” (64-65). Like Pa, Tom also seeks Ma’s guidance when he and Pa cannot convince Grampa to get onto the truck headed for California. Tom makes it seem as though he and Pa will make the decision themselves because Tom says, “Pa, come in the house. I wanna tell ya sompin,” but upon entering the house he immediately calls for “Ma [to] come here a minute,” and again it is Ma who makes the final decision to placate Grampa with “soothin’ sirup” (152-53). In both cases, the two superior
members of the supposed male hierarchy, Pa and Tom, go to Ma before making any decisions on their own.

One reason Briffault attributes men’s tendency to answer to the mother as leader in primitive societies stems from the Micronesian custom which adheres to the woman’s, specifically the wife’s, regulations, because she “‘absolutely rules the house: she is the master and the husband is unable to dispose of anything without her consent.’ If he displeases her, she maltreats him or quits him altogether” (71). Ma displays very similar behavior when Pa or anyone else “displeases her.” For example, when the Wilsons’ car breaks down and Tom suggests he and Casy stay behind to fix it while everyone else continues on in the truck, Ma completely disagrees. But it is Pa who infuriates her when he agrees to the plan, and he finds himself facing an irate Ma armed with a “jack handle” (229-30). Clearly Ma is more than “displease[d]” by her husband’s actions, and she threatens to make his life miserable if he does not concede to her. Later in the novel Pa admits that “when she got that jack handle . . . [he] wouldn’ wanna be the fella took it away from her,” and his confession supports Briffault’s assertion that “the wife absolutely rules” (Grapes 309; Briffault 71). In addition, Pa and Ma seem to borrow directly from Briffault in their conversation about how “times is changed” (481). Pa says, “Time was when a man said what we’d do. Seems like women is tellin’ now. Seems like it’s purty near time to get out a stick,” and Ma replies, “you ain’t a-doin’ your job, either a-thinkin’ or a-workin’. If you was, why, you could use your stick” (481). Here Steinbeck not only restates Ma’s “absolute rule,” but he also implies that their interaction adheres to Briffault’s notion that “the women are the only real workers” and as such the men obey their commands (Briffault 71; 65).
In addition to their leadership, Briffault admires primitive women’s work ethic, and Steinbeck indicates equal admiration in his portrayal of Ma Joad’s work ethic. Briffault clarifies a common misconception about women’s work in primitive societies: “many writers have been misled by the hard work done by women to suppose that their status was one of slavery and oppression. . . . Generally speaking, it is in those societies where they toil most that their status is most independent. Where they are idle, they are as a rule little more than sexual slaves” (72). Ma’s willingness to work is palpable throughout the novel; in fact, she seems to work more than any other member of the family. From the moment Steinbeck introduces Ma in Chapter Eight, she is consistently in an active working state. Before he describes her appearance, he describes Tom’s first sight of her upon returning home, and she is “lifting the curling slices of pork” (99). Directly following the reunion between Ma and Tom, Ma is quickly back to work “[taking] down a heap of tin plates . . . stack[ing] the plates on the kitchen table . . . [and] pouring coffee” (102). On the road, Ma is equally as hard working and does not ever seem to quit; Steinbeck describes her as going “quickly to work” upon each stop (183). However, the opposite can be said of Rose of Sharon who is Steinbeck’s “idle” example (Briffault 72). She is pregnant, but Ma makes it clear that “they’s times when how you feel got to be kep’ to yourself” and she puts her to work (413). When comparing the two women, Ma is constantly in motion and always “toil[ing],” and as a result she is “most independent,” but Rose of Sharon, despite being the oldest daughter, is rarely active and is the most dependent child in the entire family (Briffault 72). Her relationship with Connie accentuates just how dependent Rose of Sharon truly is. In the instances where Steinbeck describes their interactions, he focuses on their affection towards each other and portrays her as immature and even “silly,” which indicates a dependent, not independent, young woman (175). However, Rose of Sharon’s tendency towards “idle[ness]” is most apparent the
moment Connie abandons her and she cries, “I want Connie. I ain’t a-goin’ till he comes back” (378). Rose of Sharon may not be quite a “sex slave” in this case, but she is certainly a slave to Connie’s affections and as a result she appears to be only a shadow of her mother’s fortitude.

In conjunction with his emphasis on women who “toil,” Briffault comments on the nature of primitive women’s work when the family travels, and he explains that “some travellers have noted that, when savage people make a journey, the women bear the burdens while the men only carry weapons” (97). As the Joads travel, the arrangement among them is very similar to what Briffault describes. For example, rather than “only carry[ing] weapons” the men tend to the truck, which is their primary concern throughout much of the road trip. Steinbeck also shows his use of Briffault by having Ma “bear the burdens” for the entire family, and this is most evident in her response to Granma’s death. When officers stop the family to perform their “agricultural inspection,” it is Ma, not the men, who challenges them and she “seemed to fight with hysteria” (307). After managing to avoid the “inspection,” Ma remains calm and convinces the family that Granma’s “awright” despite the fact that she knows the woman has already passed away (308). Ma is so determined to protect the family on the road that she “bear[s] the burden” of Granma’s death alone (Briffault 97). When the family finally makes it to their destination and Pa asks how Granma is doing, Ma reveals that she is gone and has been since “before [the officers] stopped [them] las’ night” (311). Steinbeck describes the family’s response to Ma’s resilience and ability to “bear the burden” as one of shock and awe as they “looked at Ma with a little terror at her strength” (312).

Coupled with primitive women’s ability to “bear the burden” for their family as they travel, Briffault also includes their control of “trade” in the category of work (103). He notes that “since all surplus production belongs to the women, both as cultivators of the soil and as keepers
of the food store, it is theirs to dispose of. In all early culture, the barter and traffic is in the hands of the women” (103). Steinbeck also gives this quality to Ma Joad, which she displays at the “company store” (509). Steinbeck uses Briffault to show how much power and control Ma truly has inside and outside of the family because she is equipped with the independence that work gives her. When she enters the store, the “tiny man . . . behind the counter” acts as though he will not waver despite Ma’s “stern,” “fierce,” and even “menacing” approach to the outrageous food prices (510-11). However, after she reluctantly purchases overpriced “meat . . . potatoes, bread, [and] coffee,” the man’s reluctance to barter begins to fail him when she asks to “have some sugar an’ [she’ll] bring the slip later” to pay for it (512-13). As matriarch of the family, she controls the money and the purchases and it is up to her to “barter and traffic,” which she does expertly (Briffault 103). The store manager gives in to her negotiating and “[takes] ten cents from his own pocket” and simply asks her to “bring in [her] slip an’ [he’ll] get [his] dime back” (513). This scene serves to reiterate Ma Joad’s independence and power as well as Steinbeck’s use of Briffault to convey her strength.

Steinbeck also portrays Ma’s caring side in terms of Briffault’s understanding of primitive women’s roles in the areas of medicine and death. Briffault explains that “the word ‘medicine,’ and the name Medea, the medical herbalist witch, come from the same root—a root meaning knowledge or wisdom,” which are two feminine qualities that critic Sandra Beatty accurately suggests Steinbeck uses as a main female quality in many of his works (Briffault 104; Beatty 6). Briffault also maintains that women “[are] the primitive practitioners of [medicine]” and “in many areas the women are the surgeons and treat all injuries” as well as partake in the “treatment of the sick” the vast majority of the time (104). Ma Joad’s role imitates this description throughout the novel, but her “position as healer” is especially evident as she cares
for the elderly and dying Grampa and Granma Joad (100). Despite the fact that they are her in-
laws, Ma treats them as if they are her own parents. Her love for and dedication to them is
apparent from the first family encounter when Tom arrives home. Steinbeck describes Grampa
“emerging from the bedroom . . . [as] he fumbled with the buttons of his fly. . . . Ma came in
with her hands, and her palms puckered and bloated from hot water and soap. . . . And though he
struggled, she held him and buttoned his underwear and his shirt and his fly” (125). The scene
establishes Ma’s caring quality and shows her instinctual reactions to those in need because she
seems to unconsciously go to Grampa to help him without taking the time to dry her hands; it is
as if helping is so innate that she does not even actively think about what she is doing.

Briffault’s assertion that “primitive medicine is . . . for the most part a department of . . .
women” is also manifest in Ma’s tendency to pass on knowledge of “medicine” or care to her
oldest daughter, Rose of Sharon. When Ma cannot tend to the sick herself, she looks to Rose of
Sharon to fulfill the role. For example, after Grampa dies on the road, Ma instructs Rose of
Sharon to “go lay down with Granma,” and without saying a word Rose of Sharon enacts her
developing feminine instinct and “got to her feet and walked to the mattress and lay beside the
old woman” (198-99). Importantly, Ma asks Rose of Sharon to comfort Granma, not Pa—
Granma’s own son—which reiterates Briffault’s belief that women “were the primitive
practitioners of [medicine]” and as such they possess the “wisdom” needed to care for the sick
(Briffault 104). Although Rose of Sharon, as the second woman in line in the Joad family, is
becoming more and more capable of performing the female role of care-taking, Ma’s care of
Granma is Steinbeck’s most obvious use of Briffault’s understanding of women’s position as
“primitive practitioners” (Briffault 104). Once Grampa passes, Granma’s will to survive
deteriorates quickly as the Joads progress across the country, and, as she worsens, Ma’s primitive
medical “knowledge” and “wisdom” becomes more prominent (Briffault 104). For instance, when the Wilsons’ car breaks down, Ma not only makes the decision as leader to stop at a camp, but she does so because of her instinctual need to care for Granma. Al supports this when he tells Tom that “Ma says they gotta be near shade an’ water ’cause a Granma” (238). Ma’s role as healer is also evident as Granma grows closer to death: “under the spread tarpaulin Granma lay on a mattress, and Ma sat beside her . . . and with a piece of cardboard drove the flies away and fanned a stream of moving hot air over the tight old face” (285). As Ma tends to the old woman, her “eyes were patient, but the lines of strain were on her forehead,” and she seems to know that Granma is dying because she cuts off Rose of Sharon in her attempt to ask about her grandmother’s fate (286).

Briffault’s explanation of how primitive societies handle death is also apparent in Ma’s care for the dead. Briffault contends that “Throughout primitive society, lamentations and mourning are performed by the women. All wailing, however ritualistic, devolves everywhere upon the women, and the care of the dead is usually their function” (376). Ma’s function as caretaker to the sick transitions into caretaker of the dead, especially as the elderly Joads’ lives come to an end. The duty of disposing of Grampa’s body certainly, as Briffault notes, “devolves” upon Ma, which Pa makes clear when he asks her the seemingly rhetorical question “You’ll lay ’im out?” (191). She is very methodical and “ritualistic” in her treatment of Grampa’s body: “For a moment, Ma looked down at the dead old man. And then in pity she tore a strip from her own apron and tied up his jaw. She straightened his limbs, folded his hands over his chest. She held his eyelids down and laid a silver piece on each one. She buttoned his shirt and washed his face” (192). At the beginning of each short sentence describing the scene, Steinbeck uses the feminine pronoun “she” so as to repeatedly instill within the reader’s mind that it is a primary duty of
women to care for the dead. He also reiterates this fact in his description of Pa and Sairy Wilson’s involvement. Even though it is his own father who has died, Pa simply provides the “two half-dollars” that Ma ritualistically places on Grampa’s eyes (192). Sairy, on the other hand, asks to assist Ma, which again shows Steinbeck’s reliance on Briffault’s notion of women’s role in death since no man offers to help or seems capable of helping (192).

Finally, Steinbeck also relies on Briffault in his depiction of the home. According to Briffault, “we are not accustomed to think of architecture as a feminine occupation. Yet just as the animal builds its nest or burrow, so also primitive woman was the actual home-builder,” and he attributes this to “the fact that the female, not the male, determines the dwelling-place [based on] the biological fact that it is the female of the species who chooses a suitable lair” (103; 69). In support of this observation, Briffault claims that “(All animals may be said, in so far as they form sexual associations, to be matrilocal in habit, and it is natural to infer that habits of primitive humanity were similar). The validity of this inference is proved by a social fact to which there are no exceptions” (69). Ma Joad’s attachment to the home, which the tractors force her family to leave, initiates Steinbeck’s application of Briffault’s definition of the female’s control over the home. For Ma, the home is not only a “suitable lair,” but it is also a physical representation of her dominant role, which is an aspect that Briffault associates with the male’s lack of participation in “home-build[ing]” (103). He claims that since “dwellings are erected by the [primitive] women without help from the men, [they] belong exclusively to the matrons” (Briffault 64-65). Each of Briffault’s conclusions about the woman’s part in choosing the home and “home-build[ing]” explains the connection Steinbeck creates between Ma and the Joad home in Sallisaw, Oklahoma.
Tom, upon arriving at his old home for the first time in years, is the first character in the novel to express Ma’s role in the home. Since the house is in horrible condition and there is no one there to explain to him how it reached that state, Tom assumes that “they’re gone—or Ma’s dead” (56). From Tom’s comment, Steinbeck encourages readers to understand that there is no home without Ma. As Tom explores the abandoned house, it becomes increasingly apparent that the home is Ma’s realm because every time he sees an object that stands out he describes a memory about Ma to Casy. For example, when he notices “the low gate across the front door” is ajar, he says, “If Ma was anywheres about, that gate’d be shut an’ hooked” (56). He also finds “a woman’s high button shoe” and remembers that they were Ma’s (56-57). Tom’s tendency to take notice of signs of Ma and her belongings places importance not only on her, but also on her possessions. Steinbeck especially emphasizes the feminine association with and significance of items within the house in the scene where Ma must decide what she can and cannot take with her to California. As she rummages through a “stationary box” she faces the troublesome decision of limiting her keepsakes to only a few precious items; however, the difficulty of the task represents her coping with the loss of one home and her ability to move on and transition into her “biological” role of seeking out a new “suitable lair” (Grapes 148; Briffault 69). Once on the road, Steinbeck makes it clear that the temporary homes the Joads find themselves in are still within Ma’s domain, which he demonstrates in his description of her at the government camp: “It was still dark when Ma roused her camp” (491; emphasis added). In this example, rather than neutrally describing the family’s temporary residence as “the camp,” Steinbeck describes the family’s current home and their existence as a group as “her camp,” which highlights the fact that the home-like arrangement still belongs within Ma’s domain.
As a subcategory under home, Briffault notes that women also have control over the food, and he states that “it is a significant detail that, in most parts of the uncultured world, the maximum care is bestowed on buildings in which food is stored, and which therefore belong to the province of women (103). Steinbeck translates the significance Briffault places on the food “buildings” into the importance of Ma’s kitchen. As previously mentioned, much of the work Ma performs when Tom first returns home takes place in the kitchen where she is in the process of organizing plates, serving coffee, preparing biscuits, and making gravy (103-4). Steinbeck reminds readers of the importance of Ma’s kitchen when he describes the family’s meal on the night before they depart for California. When the meal is ready, he portrays the group as gravitating almost unconsciously towards the kitchen as if it holds some unknown or unspoken power over them, but the only individual he specifically refers to in the entire description of the meal is Ma (141-42). After everyone eats he writes, “And then, all of a sudden, the family began to function,” which implies that only after everyone partakes in the meal that Ma prepares in the room that Ma controls are they capable of “function[ing]” in a meaningful manner (142). Like Ma’s control over the home, her control over the food does not end when the family leaves the house, and even without a kitchen the acquisition and preparation of food is still completely within her “province” (Briffault 103). One example of Ma’s command of the food occurs while Al, Tom, and Casy work on the Wilson’s car, and Al brings the other two men “some bread an’ meat Ma sent” (238). In this example, Steinbeck once again mentions “Ma” in a place where he could easily substitute “they,” but he purposefully mentions “Ma” in order to stress her authority over the food.

In Ma’s control of the food, Steinbeck highlights Briffault’s notion of maternal instinct, which he relates to her choices with the family’s food. Despite the fact that food is extremely
scarce, Ma faces several situations that challenge her primary impulse to protect and feed her own family first. As a mother whose dominating quality is one of care, one of the most difficult predicaments she faces occurs when she encounters starving children. While preparing the little food she has for her own family at a particularly destitute camp, starving children seem to swarm around Ma. Her maternal instinct leaves her torn between feeding her family and feeding the children who are clearly on the brink of starvation, and she explains, “I’m a-gonna set this here kettle out, an’ you’ll get a little tas’, but it ain’t gonna do you no good” (351). Here, the best she can do is leave the remaining morsels at the bottom of her kettle for the “silent and wolfish” children (351). However painful this scene is, Steinbeck’s use of Briffault is evident in Ma’s need to feed the children, because her instinct to care for her own family and the starving children simultaneously reiterates Briffault’s understanding of the primitive mother’s role in caring for her children, controlling the home, and portioning out the food.

Establishing the connection between Briffault and Steinbeck and providing evidence of that connection only answers part of the question that this study seeks to answer, and that partial answer is that Steinbeck did indeed have a source that aided in his aesthetic goal with Ma Joad. However, in order for Steinbeck to complete his vision of Ma Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath*, he had to have some realistic model on which to base his understanding of Briffault. He found the real models he needed in his encounters with real women during his 1936 travels for *The San Francisco News*. Yet when comparing Steinbeck’s portrayal of Ma Joad to the few examples of real women that he provides in *The Harvest Gypsies*, his drastically contrasting approach to the two further highlights the Briffault lens Steinbeck used to alter his models of real women and mothers to fit Ma Joad’s character. The difference also suggests that Steinbeck altered these women because his descriptions of them reveal that they are nothing like Ma Joad.
Steinbeck focuses primarily on the men in *The Harvest Gypsies*, but the two main
eamples of women that he provides are extremely important in the investigation of his sources.
His first example was previously discussed in the Introduction to this study, but her description is
worth mentioning again to show just how severe the contrast really is between Steinbeck’s
encounters with real migrant women and Ma Joad. Steinbeck focuses on the migrant woman’s
role as mother and writes, “Four nights ago the mother had a baby in the tent. . . . After it was
born and she had seen that it was dead, the mother rolled over and lay still for two days. . . . This
woman’s eyes have the glazed far-away look of a sleep walker’s eyes” (*Harvest Gypsies* 30).
When compared to Ma Joad’s reaction to her own stillborn grandchild, not only does the contrast
between the two women stand out, but Steinbeck’s obvious use of the real women he
encountered as material does as well. Of Ma Joad’s reaction to the stillborn baby Steinbeck
writes, “[Ma] looked at Pa for a moment, and her eyes were wide and staring, like a
sleepwalker’s eyes” but she advises Pa, “Don’t take no blame. Hush! It’ll be awright” (604-5).
Rather than blaming herself or the family for the baby’s demise, Ma Joad, unlike the real woman
Steinbeck encountered, insists on moving forward and reminds Pa, “They’s changes—all over”
(605). The real woman, on the other hand, merely “totter[s] around” as if she has nothing left to
live for (*Harvest Gypsies* 30). Furthermore, the repeated use of the phrase “a sleepwalker’s eyes”
suggests Steinbeck drew from his *Gypsies* material while developing Ma Joad’s character.

The only other detailed example of women that Steinbeck provides in *The Harvest
Gypsies* reiterates the horrible conditions that young pregnant mothers faced during the Great
Depression:

Wife of family with three children. She is 38; her face is lined and thin and there
is a hard glaze on her eyes. The three children who survive were born prior to 1929, when
the family rented a farm in Utah. In 1930 this woman bore a child which lived four months and dies of “cholic.”

In 1931 her child was born dead because “a han’ truck fulla boxes run inta me before the baby come.” In 1932 there was a miscarriage. “I couldn’t carry the baby ’cause I was sick.” She is ashamed of this. In 1933 her baby lived a week. “Jus’ died. I don’t know what of.” In 1934 she had no pregnancy. She is also a little ashamed of this. In 1935 her baby lived a long time, nine months.

“Seemed for a long time like he was gonna live. Big strong fella it seemed like.”

She is pregnant again now. . . . This is an extreme case, but by no means an unusual.

(Harvest Gypsies 50-51)

In this example, Steinbeck’s and the mother’s matter-of-fact tone show an emotionless, coping-mechanism side to the Depression that seems to result from the knowledge that very few babies could survive in such an impoverished condition. However, Steinbeck does not acknowledge this in the same frank manner in The Grapes of Wrath. Instead, he alters what he really knows to be true in order to provide an optimistic angle for readers, and again he does this via Ma Joad.

When Rose of Sharon awakens to realize she has lost her baby, Ma’s first response is “You can have more”; it is not clear whether or not she truly believes this is possible at the time, but her comment contradicts what Steinbeck learned from the mother in the example above (611).

Since Steinbeck gives so few examples of mothers in The Harvest Gypsies, and those he does give only pertain to pregnancy, it is necessary to seek other sources of real women who lived during the Great Depression. The need to hear their voices is also essential in understanding how Steinbeck used Briffault’s five categories of social interactions, leadership, work, care, and home to alter real women in those areas. Ultimately, testimonies from women of
the time will show that Steinbeck uses Briffault, in his construction of Ma Joad, in order to modify real women in a manner that achieves his aesthetic goal of proving how “group survival” is essential in combating the inhumane social practices that dominated the Great Depression (*Working Days* 88).
III. “MY MOTHER WAS A WEAK WOMAN”: DEPRESSION WOMEN’S PERCEPTION OF MOTHERHOOD

After exploring the extent to which Steinbeck’s conception of Ma Joad’s character adheres to Robert Briffault’s “matriarchal theory of social origins,” it is crucial to investigate the degree to which her character is inconsistent with real life examples of migrant women to reveal Steinbeck’s aesthetic intent with her character. Since Steinbeck does not include a sufficient sample of real women in *The Harvest Gypsies*, this chapter will analyze interviews with migrant workers, specifically women, conducted for the “Oral History Collection” archived in *California Odyssey: The 1930s Migration to the Southern San Joaquin Valley* in order to confirm his artistic reasoning behind his development of Ma Joad.

Among the fifty-two interviews conducted for the “Oral History Collection” from 1980-1982, twenty-seven of the interviewees are women and nineteen of them address motherhood either from their perspective as mother, child, or the combined standpoint of both. Overall, this analysis will focus on fifteen interviewees who discuss motherhood specifically in terms of the five mother-dominated categories that Steinbeck borrows from Briffault: social interactions, leadership, work, care, and home. A critique of the discrepancy between Ma Joad’s role and the real migrant women’s roles, according to Briffault’s five categories, will expose how Steinbeck aesthetically altered the experiences of real women to achieve, through Ma Joad, his socially driven goal which sought to encourage Americans to strive towards a “rearrangement of the attitude toward the treatment of migrant labor” (*The Harvest Gypsies* 57).

The first of the many areas in which Ma Joad and actual migrant women of the Depression diverge is in their social interactions. Briffault proposed that “human societies
developed . . . in an association which represented female instincts only” (28), thus designating “mother-love” as “the origin of all social bonds” (44). However, many of the “Oral History Collection” participants indicate their father’s and/or husband’s influence was the dominating social presence in their lives. Therefore, the “maternal instinct” that Briffault attributes to the mother and refers to as “the source of social cohesion” actually takes root in the paternal realm during the Great Depression (431). As Briffault contends, mothers rely on “instinct” as the figurative glue that holds society together, but fathers on the other hand depend on “academic social science” and “individualistic interests” in order to promote the “patriarchal ‘family’” (431). Yet in The Grapes of Wrath, Steinbeck portrays—particularly in chapter fourteen—the patriarchal structure in a state of collapse, but the interviewees’ testimonies reveal that the masculine notion of “academic[s]” and “individualistic interests” were very much active in their families and society, thus providing the first indication that Ma Joad is indeed an artistic, not realistic, creation.

In regard to the paternal “academic” social structure, several of the women express that their father or husband either introduced them to an intellectually empowering side of an academically oriented upbringing or he limited them extensively and consequently stunted their intellectual potential. Despite the overall positive or negative feelings the women have towards their educational relationship with the men in their lives, their interviews significantly reveal that their families’ social relations enact Briffault’s description of patriarchal structures where the focus is on masculine “academic” interactions that foster “individualistic” associations rather than promote the group bound by “mother-love” or “maternal instincts” like the Joads (44). Among the interviewed women, the most limited and socially affected by paternal logic and reason are Rosie Harlas Laird, Viola Killian Maxwell Mitchell, and Vera Ruth Woodall Criswell.
Laird explains that, despite her mother’s best efforts, her father believed that “‘women didn’t need no education—all she needed to know was how to cook and have kids’” (55). In this case, Laird’s father’s approach to women’s roles in society also placed her mother in a position that drastically contrasts with Ma Joad, because he also believed that “men should wear the pants of the house and they should be the ruler of the house” (55). As a result of her father’s domination, Laird’s mother’s “maternal instincts” could never help her daughter achieve the academic goals she desperately felt Laird deserved in a world dominated by men like her father, and Laird wishes her father would “have listened to [her] mother,” which the Joad men certainly did throughout The Grapes of Wrath (56).

Viola Killian Maxwell Mitchell offers a comparable story about her father and husband’s “academic” and “individualistic” part in her social interactions. In her response to the interviewer’s question about her schooling, Mitchell says, “Now my dad wouldn’t let me be smart. If I learned a new word in school, he wouldn’t let me use it. He said I was showing off” (16). She explains that she “tried very hard to get self-educated” and even wanted to return to school when her children were old enough to be alone during the day, but when she suggested this to her husband he “just had a fit” (16). Perhaps the most disconcerting part about the men in Mitchell’s life is that they actually convinced her that women should not strive for education, and in turn she began to do the same to her daughter because she “didn’t care for her [daughter] being smart” (16). Since Mitchell was raised in a home that simultaneously isolated her from and insisted upon what Briffault calls a “patriarchal ‘family’ of academic social science,” she lost sight of her natural “maternal instinct” to socialize and live based on “sentimental bonds” and passed on the only the only form of social interaction she knew (431). Mitchell’s limiting influence over her daughter is a far cry from the intentions Ma Joad has for Ruthie and Winfield.
because she believes that “soon’s we get set down, they’ll go to school” (509). Even though education is seldom mentioned in *The Grapes of Wrath*, it is important to note that Ma, not Pa, is the one who declares that the children, most notably Ruthie, need to go to school, which again counters paternal “academic social science” and promotes “maternal instinct.”

Similarly, Vera Ruth Woodall Criswell’s father’s social influence also culminated in certain expectations about how his children should be educated and who they should be educated with. Criswell explains that, although “a black woman raised [her father] more than any other one person did” and was “the nearest to a mother that he had as he was growing up,” he “could hardly accept the fact that [his children] were going to school with black kids” (12-13). She argued with him on numerous occasions because she “could never understand” why he believed his children could not interact with black children “on a social level,” and his only excuse was “that’s the way I was raised” (12-13). That her father was “raised” with these beliefs implies that his mother-figure’s impression on him was overshadowed by the need to become “the individualistic male with his subordinate dependents” in a patriarchal family (Briffault 431). If he had been raised to understand that “the maternal instinct is the only true altruism,” then the social interactions he passed on to his daughter would have been more akin to those in *The Grapes of Wrath* (Briffault 431). Ultimately, Criswell says she “had no say in what [they] were doing” as a family, which is something Ma Joad would never accept (13). Criswell’s experience is not one that Ma Joad would tolerate because, as Steinbeck’s vehicle for social change, she supports that “woman can change better’n a man . . . [and] people is goin’ on—changin’ a little, maybe, but goin’ right on” (577). However, in reality, the “change” that Ma Joad calls for and embodies is not one that actual women—like Laird, Mitchell, and Criswell—were able to
achieve as long as their husband’s and father’s, not their mother’s, social influence dictated their actions.

Additionally, Hazel Oleta Thompson Smalling’s grandfather was the central social influence in her life, and she offers a conflicting depiction of his effect on her. She recounts that she “loved [her] grandfather . . . more than anybody” and enjoyed helping him around his farm, because she “just felt like [she] was the most important person in the world walking beside him” (5). However, she also notes that although she loved school “there was no way [she] could go to college [because her] grandfather didn’t think girls should go away from home to go to school” (2). Again, the paternal figures in the interviewees’ lives championed a social structure and attitude that excluded women. However, Ma Joad would not accept the limitations that Smalling’s grandfather imposed on Smalling, and Ma would likely “slap [him] with a stick of stove wood” if he tried (230). Yet not all of the men in the interviewed women’s lives were as overtly controlling, but achieving the “academic” status the men held was still an aspiration for some of the women. Goldie Mae Jarrell Farris, for example, recollects “being three years old and sitting on a footstool by my father’s chair and I thought if I looked at him reading that newspaper long enough I could figure out how he did that. . . . I became completely and totally absorbed in wanting to learn to read” (121). Although Farris’s memory is positive, the important aspect of her early recollection of her father is the fact that she was inspired by him and yearned to do the activities he did, not the duties her mother performed. In fact, she spends much of her interview reminiscing about her father and the work he did during the Depression, and she merely glosses over her mother’s role as simple and only involving taking care of the children and “the chickens and things like that” (121). As Farris’s dismissal of her mother’s position shows, despite the role men had in these women’s social interactions, it is clear that the “maternal instincts” that
Briffault recognizes in primitive women and Steinbeck promotes through Ma Joad were not nearly as prevalent as the authors suggest.

In conjunction with the academic influence their fathers and husbands had over their social interactions, the interviewees also often demonstrate varying or opposing attitudes to Briffault’s “mother-care” theory which states, “the new relations which are established by protracted mother-care transform the very springs of action and behavior, for they cause the individual mind to be linked up with others to form a new organism—the group bound by social ties” (38). The women’s impression of being “linked up with others” falls along a spectrum that spans from a complete lack of compassion towards others to extreme sorrow for others, but those who felt the same as Ma Joad towards others did not have the authority to act on their feelings. For instance, in addition to the comments Laird makes about her father’s belief that women should not receive an education, she also describes an occasion in which her limitations as a woman prevented her from acting on behalf of others. She reveals to the interviewer that, while staying in a camp during her migration to California, several “colored people” set up a tent near her family’s and that “half the camp marched up to the boss and told him to get them out of there . . . so they moved,” but she states that “they had as much right there as anybody else” (43). Unlike Ma Joad who acts on and teaches Tom her belief that “each’ll help each,” Laird shows how little “mother-care” was able to “transform the very springs of action and behavior” among many people in Depression society (Grapes 202; Briffault 38).

When Viola Killian Maxwell Mitchell describes how her mother did not nurture either her or her siblings, she adds a different perspective to “mother-care” that reveals mothers were oftentimes as guilty as fathers in preventing their children from connecting or “[linking] up with others.” Mitchell expresses some resentment towards her mother’s lack of care when she
remarks, “I had to get up in the middle of the night and take care of the kids. My mom never did
get up and take care of them. . . . I also took care of my mom when I was nine years old and my
sister was born” (12). Although Mitchell seems to bear malice towards her mother’s disregard
for her children, she displays a similar lack of sympathy towards individuals who had to live in
“ditch camps” during the Depression, which indicates that her mother’s tendency to neglect her
children had a negative impact on their “action and behavior” later in life (14; Briffault 38).
Mitchell reiterates the result of her mother’s negligence when she belittles “ditch camp”
residents and says she remembers feeling “like the people that lived in there could have come out
of it and made something of their-self but they weren’t the kind that would” (14). Furthermore,
she ascertains that they were in that situation because they “just didn’t have very much pride . . .
or they could have done something else if they tried” (14). Mitchell’s insensitivity towards the
migrants forced to live in “ditch camps” suggests that, unlike Ma Joad, she did not understand
“the group bound by social ties” or believe that “each’ll help each” (Briffault 38; Grapes 202).

In addition to the interviewed women’s accounts of social interactions and “mother-care,”
another aspect of their lives that conflicts with the portrayal of Ma Joad is their inadequate
leadership abilities. As discussed in the previous chapter, Briffault declares that “in the great
majority of uncultured societies, women enjoy a position of independence and of equality with
the men, and exercise an influence which would appear startling even in the most feministic of
modern societies” (70). Furthermore, he finds that “the men tacitly accept the decisions of the
mother,” which is a definite characteristic of Ma Joad’s role as leader (Briffault 64-65).
However, the majority of the women interviewed profess that their opinion was of very little
significance in decision making. Mitchell notes that she never wanted to migrate to California,
but her “dad and [her] husband wanted to leave home . . . [because] there wasn’t no jobs” so she
had no control over the matter (2). Smalling declares that she did want to go to California, but her grandfather stood in the way of her decision to go (9). She also describes how her husband made all of the money decisions, and that he decided on his own to give everything they had saved to his “desperate” family (13). She claims that she “really didn’t care” about his decision, but later admits that she “was really scared,” which implies she would have handled the situation differently if she had had a role in the decision making and could lead (13).

Lillie Ruth Ann Counts Dunn’s relationship with her husband is similar to Smalling’s in that he controlled all of the money, but unlike Smalling, Dunn not only cares about how her husband dealt with their money but she also admits that “it was a mistake to marry” him in the first place (4). Dunn is one of the few married interviewees that solely supported her family at certain points during the Depression because her husband could not find work; however, he still made decisions about the money she made without her. She explains that when she “went into business” with a café owner she was only able to work for a few weeks before her “husband became jealous of the man and without [her] knowledge he sold the business . . . and said he was coming to California where he could get a he-man’s job. He received an old Essex car and $90. [She] never saw the $90” (5-6). She also discloses that, while raising turkeys for a different employer, her “husband wanted to take the money [she’d] earned from selling the turkeys to buy the ingredients to make some booze—that’s where the money went—the little bit [she] made from the sale of those turkeys went for booze” (7). Although Dunn sought to have more autonomy in her marriage and the family decision making, other women, like Clara Beddo Davis, blindly accepted their place. Davis tells of the time inspectors pulled her family over on the road to California, and she did not think she was being mistreated because she “was raised that people in authority know more about what they’re doing than [she does]. . . . It didn’t bother.
[her] a bit” (13). Davis’s willingness to accept the demands of those in authority do not coincide with the leadership and challenging nature that Steinbeck infuses in the character of Ma Joad, which is especially and appropriately evident during her confrontations with inspection officers.⁸

Other interviewees confirm that their mothers’ weaknesses contributed to their inability to lead. Lillie Eva Grose May provides a very candid description of her mother when she refers to her as “a weak woman,” and this comment is even more telling when compared to the phrases she uses to describe her father: “he was strong and he never complained” (25, 36). She also says, “I looked up to my dad and I babied my mother. . . . I was the only one of the children who called her Mother and I’d call her my little baby when she’d get sick” (36). The manner in which May treated her mother could not be more opposite of how the Joad children regard their mother’s leadership role. The adjectives that Steinbeck uses to describe Ma Joad reiterate this fact in that they directly contrast with those May uses to describe her mother. When asked by the interviewer, “What was your mother like?” May gloats in her response that “she was a little doll. She was a very delicate southern gal and my dad spoiled her rotten and us kids spoiled her rotten. . . . She was like a china doll. In Oklahoma we had a colored mammy and she’d rock my mother to sleep when my mother was ill. . . . [W]e looked at our mother as something that had to be very protected and we couldn’t see her do any hard work. . . . She’s a darling little thing” (3). With children that viewed their mother in such a way, it is no wonder that May’s mother did not lead. When compared to Steinbeck’s introductory description of Ma Joad, the difference between the two is astounding:

Ma was heavy but not fat; thick with child-bearing and work. She wore a loose Mother Hubbard. . . . The dress came down to her ankles, and her strong, broad bare feet moved quickly and deftly over the floor. . . . Strong, freckled arms were bare to the elbow. . . .
And since old Tom and the children could not know hurt or fear unless she acknowledged hurt and fear, she had practiced denying them in herself. . . . From her position as healer, her hands had grown sure and cool and quiet; from her position as arbiter she had become as remote and faultless in judgment as a goddess. (99-100)

The descriptions of the two women define polar opposites: where May’s mother is “delicate,” “spoiled,” “doll[-like],” “protected,” and “darling,” Ma Joad is “thick,” “strong,” “healer,” “arbiter,” and “faultless” (May 3; Grapes 99-100). May’s mother was clearly not the female leader Steinbeck used for his social message in The Grapes of Wrath.

Loye Lucille Martin Holmes and Esta Mae Lewis Rymal also describe their mothers’ main weaknesses, but rather than being physically weak like May’s mother, these women’s weaknesses stem from their fears while on the road, which also diminishes their ability to lead. Both women specifically feared the mountains they encountered on their journey. Holmes remembers that on one particular day, as they were crossing through Arizona, her mother could not take the narrow mountain roads that made the “the truck bed [hang] out over the canyons,” and her “mother was screaming and hollering all the time ‘tell Daddy to get over!’” (8).

Eventually, Holmes’s mother was so terrified that she made Holmes get out of the truck with her and hike up the mountain as Holmes’s “Daddy went on chugging along” (8). Rymal recalls a similar memory of her mother, and says the mountains her family went through had “one little lane around those curves and [her] mother was so scared . . . because you just make a little wrong move and over you’d go over the side” (8). Of course, in each instance their fathers were driving, but that did not ever thwart Ma Joad from making the travelling decisions. Her leadership and strength on the road is especially evident when the Joads are with the Wilsons and the men suggest going on the California; rather than getting out of the truck to show her disapproval, Ma
simply pulls out her “jack handle” (230). The “jack handle” scene is one of the few humorous moments in the novel, but it also shows that Ma is firm in her leadership and does not back down for anyone, much less a mountain road.

Although Steinbeck infuses several Ma Joad scenes with humor, his regard for her work is serious and important. Briffault links women’s leadership and independence with work, but where as real women are unable to lead and be independent they are also unable to work (Briffault 72). During their interviews, many women discuss how their fathers either disapproved of or prevented their mothers from working outside of the woman’s sphere, which almost exclusively revolved around the home and children. For instance, May reveals that her “mother never worked a day in her life,” and she believed that “no daughter of hers would ever work” either (14). Even while May’s friends worked in the fields, her mother never wavered and maintained that it “was a ‘no no’ in [their] family” (26). Elizabeth May Garber Day also remembers that her mother never worked, and she even directly contradicts Briffault’s notion, and subsequently Steinbeck’s, that where women “toil the most their status is most independent” (72). Day recollects that her mother was happy to migrate to California because “she was relieved of the drudgery of being a farm wife . . . [because] it wasn’t 24 hours of toil, toil, toil. [She] think[s] for her it was Utopia even though there still wasn’t enough money” (12). Overall, Day learned from her experience that “the burden falls on the man. . . . The man has the responsibility. He’s got to keep the income coming in,” which also contradicts Steinbeck’s portrayal of Ma Joad and Briffault’s belief that “women bear the burdens” while on journeys (26; Briffault 97). Comparably, Dorothy Louis Price Rose’s father had “a certain belief” that women should not work, and as a result he kept her mother from contributing to the family’s income (29). Unlike each of these mothers, the value that Steinbeck places on Ma Joad’s work
throughout *The Grapes of Wrath* is perhaps the quality he develops with the most painstaking detail and care, which shows that women’s work was a key area that he altered after encountering real women. A life without “toil” would not be a life without independence for Ma Joad.

In addition to descriptions of fathers disapproving of or preventing mothers from working outside of their sphere, and therefore being independent and leaders, other women report that their husbands were the reason they did not or could not work. Initially, Ward was not completely restrained by the men in her life, because her father and the rest of her family relied on her to be the “wage earner in the family” due to her teaching job, which, in addition to nursing, was a socially acceptable occupation for women that took place outside of the home during the Depression (6). However when she married her husband and the Depression hit, her husband decided they would migrate to California. She admits that she “could have stayed there and continued to teach, but my husband didn’t want that. Being a young man he wanted to work” (3). In other words, he could not bear to have her replace what he felt was his duty as a man in patriarchal society. Mitchell also notes that her “husband never did like for [her] to work. He said he would make a living for [them],” but later in her life she came to regret her decision to listen to him because “when he died . . . he had worked thirty some years and . . . [she] never got to see a penny of it” (16). Mitchell says her husband claimed he was saving money while he was alive, but in actuality he spent it “as long as he lived” (16). If she had valued her work enough and been independent and strong enough to challenge her husband’s judgment like Ma Joad, Mitchell could have avoided having to financially depend on her children following her husband’s death (16).
Although the migrant women interviewed differ from Ma Joad in the areas of social interactions, leadership, and work, one especially salient example of Steinbeck’s revision of their experiences is his treatment of medical care and death. Briffault asserts that women in primitive societies are the sole providers of medical care for the living and the dead, and, as the previous chapter indicates, Ma Joad successfully fulfills that same role (104). However, the women of the “Oral History Collection” disclose a very different arrangement in the medical realm of the Great Depression where men and hospitals fulfill the vast majority of medical needs. In almost every meeting, the interviewer asks the participants what they did when someone became ill, went into labor, became injured, and so on, and numerous women who answered indicated that male doctors were the primary care-givers. In addition to relying upon male doctors, migrants also relied upon hospitals—a reliance that differs significantly from the treatment of medical issues in *The Grapes of Wrath*. When asked “what if you got sick during the time? What kind of medical care was available?” Ward answers “you went to the county hospital” and she emphasizes that she “didn’t think the care was what it should have been” because she “had a baby and then [she] had stitches afterwards and no anesthetic of any kind was given, not even for the stitches” (13). She also criticizes the hospital because when she “went to screaming when the baby was coming . . . they rushed [her] into the delivery room. The doctor wasn’t available [she] guess[es] because the nurse grabbed [her] knees and held them together until the doctor got in there and [the nurse] wouldn’t let the baby come” (13-14). Rather than having the comfort of either her female relatives or friends, as Rose of Sharon does in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Ward reports that her treatment by male doctors was painful, impersonal, “not right,” and “no good” (14). Ward’s experiences imply that although Ma Joad’s treatment of the sick and dying may be primitive and the outcome of her care still fatal, the manner in which Ma addresses the medical needs of others
stems from “maternal instinct,” and thus she negates the impersonal care administered by male doctors and hospitals during the Depression.

As horrible as Ward’s medical experiences sound, Viola Elizabeth Shakelford Holliday’s numerous experiences with sickness and death, and her particularly stoic responses to these encounters, are alarming and reiterate the contrary nature of medical care for real women. She begins by describing her own first serious injury and explains that she “was climbing on up to the top of the porch and [she] fell and hit [herself] in the side with the point of a chair. All afternoon [she] gasped for breath. [She] couldn’t see a doctor because her grandparents were gone. . . . When [her] grandparents got home they got a doctor” (4). In this example, Holliday counters the implication that women typically handle all of the injuries and illness as the characters in The Grapes of Wrath portray because her grandparents rushed her to the doctor rather than caring for the injury themselves. The tale Holliday tells of her parents contracting the flu is equally as candid as her description of her own injury. She explains, with seemingly little emotion, that “my parents both came down with the flu . . . [and] my stepfather didn’t get over [it], he died shortly after that” (7). She also divulges that her mother and grandmother both “got tuberculosis” and when asked “could the doctor do anything for them,” she responds that it was hopeless because they had to “[walk] three miles almost to town. . . [and] it was so dark you couldn’t see where you were going. [They] just had to feel [their] way through to get help” (7).

In addition to the harrowing experiences Holliday endured as a child, she also reveals the horrible care her own children received. She explains that when she had her daughter the baby contracted “whooping cough” and she developed a heart problem which resulted in the need for a full-time nurse (12). However, the nurse was of little assistance because she refused to administer the shots that Holliday’s baby needed to survive, which forced Holliday to inject them
herself (12). Finally, if the illnesses and deaths that Holliday faced during the Depression were not awful enough, she offers the worst case of medical neglect when describing her sister’s death. She says her sister “died of Valley Fever. [She] didn’t feel that she got good care. The nurses didn’t think she was as sick as she was . . . [and] told her she wasn’t as sick as she let on to be” (17-18). The nurses’ failure to correctly diagnose the illness ultimately led to the young woman’s death.

As the migrant women’s accounts reveal, the medical treatment they received during the Depression undoubtedly lacked the maternal “knowledge or wisdom” that Steinbeck portrayed as a pivotal motherly quality of Ma Joad. However, in order for Steinbeck to achieve his aesthetic goal of “group survival” and social change, he had to place Ma at the center of medical care because she is the force that ultimately guides the group to survival, and health is certainly essential to human survival. Ultimately, to fulfill his artistic goal Steinbeck had to prove how “valuable Ma is to society” and part of her role stems from Briffault’s assertion that medically “the service of women is regarded as more valuable” (104).

According to Dr. Juliet Thorner, one of the few female doctors whose medical “service [was] regarded as . . . valuable” during the 1930s, the numerous deaths and the treatment that Holliday and her family members received during the Depression were not uncommon, especially for mothers. Much of what she describes in her interview is not revealed in The Grapes of Wrath, but her perspective provides a unique angle from which to view and further understand the social and medical conditions in which migrant women and mothers lived and how they differed from Ma Joad. She confirms that “the babies kept coming” during the Depression, but what she found to be most disturbing was the frequency of incest. She explains that incest resulted “partially because of the close living conditions and [the migrants] particular
sexual mores” (7). She also accuses some mothers of being at fault for occurrences of incest and says, “sometimes the father or another adult male would be involved [with his daughter] with the knowledge of the mother and without her intervention” (7). She recalls that on one occasion she was “deliver[ing] a mother [and] in the next bed was her daughter who was also giving birth. . . . Standing outside the door waiting to find out the results was the father of both infants. He happened to be the father of the young adolescent who was giving birth as well” (7). Although descriptions like these are distressing, Dr. Thorner’s tone towards such incidents reveals the perspectives of non-migrants, which Steinbeck sought to call attention to and combat via Ma Joad.

Dr. Thorner’s opinion of the migrant’s ability to endure hardships also directly contradicts the dignity that Steinbeck saw in them and emphasizes in Chapter Nineteen of The Grapes of Wrath: “Our people are good people; our people are kind people. Pray God some day kind people won’t all be poor” (326). Dr. Thorner never directly says the migrants were bad people, but she does not see the goodness in them as Steinbeck did. When asked “was there any particular strength that these people had? Was there something that you saw that seemed to keep them going?” Dr. Thorner replies, “I decided they kept going and didn’t succumb because they’d reached the bottom of the barrel and there was no place else to go but up. . . . Health wise I marveled that more of them didn’t die. I finally figured out that they were so emaciated, lived on such slim rations, and were in such poor physical condition that even the bacteria gave up and left” (12). Dr. Thorner’s position towards the migrants’ strength is devoid of empathy; she does not seem to admire their ability to endure or pity them for the conditions they survived, which suggests why Steinbeck felt the need to encourage Americans to strive towards a “rearrangement of the attitude toward the treatment of migrant labor” (The Harvest Gypsies 57). However, her
attitude also shows how little medical support and control real women and mothers had in the face of devastation, because they did not necessarily have the care of each other as women do in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Another area where migrant women also, and unexpectedly, lacked control and diverge from Ma Joad was the home where they performed only the duties prescribed to them at the time—cooking, cleaning, caring for children, and so on. Briffault argues that primitive women established the “dwelling-place” for their families, and it is culturally assumed that the home continues to be an area traditionally associated with the woman’s sphere throughout Western history (103). Steinbeck reaffirms this fact through his depiction of Ma Joad’s attachment to the original Joad home, and her control over the makeshift homes where the Joads reside on the road; however, the interviewees describe their home-life during the Great Depression as contrary to this traditional belief and Steinbeck’s portrayal. Like the previous four areas that Briffault and Steinbeck associate with women, the interviewees reveal that men actually dominated the home as well. Mitchell provides an excellent example of the male-oriented home situation when she narrates the story of how she and her husband lived during the Depression. She explains that she never really wanted to move to California, but one day her husband decided they would and pulled up “in the wagon and got me and just took me over to another house” (10). She also notes that when they arrived at the new house, “he had it set up and everything” and she never took part in furnishing or arranging the home (10). Mitchell’s tone towards the fact that her husband took it upon himself to “set up” the home has a hint of shock in it, which shows that he had unexpectedly dominated a duty that would typically have been assigned to her. She also recalls a time when she attempted to work on her family’s home, a duty that resides in the man’s sphere, and was stopped by her landlord. She says, “one time I had a paint gun and I was spraying the
outside of that house and Mr. Jobe come by in the car. In a little bit the guys on the truck come by and said, ‘Mr. Jobe said you had no business doing a man’s work and sent us down here to paint this house’” (7). In both cases, Mitchell’s instinct and desire to build and better the home is thwarted by the men in her life, and starkly contrasts with Ma Joad because the Joad men never once questioned or impeded her ability to establish the family’s “dwelling-place” or to perform men’s work within that place (Briffault 103). For example, in one of the last camps the Joads reside, it is clear that Ma does both the work required of her as a woman—cooking, cleaning, caring—as well as man’s work because Tom asks her “How was pickin’ today?” which indicates that she was out in the fields working with the Joad men whether they approved of it or not (540).

Like Mitchell, Criswell describes a similar home situation in her family where the mother/wife was expected to perform specific duties prescribed to her as part of women’s sphere. She focuses primarily on the impact the migration had on her mother’s ability to establish a home, and unlike Ma Joad who continued her role as “home-builder” on the road, Criswell remembers how her family’s new home in California was “never really furnished” like their previous home (Briffault 103; Criswell 11). She credits her mother for the new home’s lack of comfort, because after being forced to move “[her] mother didn’t have her heart in it” to establish a new home (11). Criswell also remembers her mother saying “she wasn’t going to stay here so she was just going to buy what we had to have” (11). Criswell’s mother’s attitude towards the family’s homes during the Depression suggests that, unlike Ma Joad, she either never had or lost the instinct to find a “suitable lair” for their families (Briffault 103).

The mother’s intuition and impulses govern each domain that Briffault assigns to primitive women, and Steinbeck to Ma Joad, but it is the instinct to simultaneously spurn social
interactions, take on leadership roles, perform difficult work, administer medical care, and establish a home that the mothers of “Oral History Collection” lack. Without the feminine animalistic instinct to survive, there is no “group survival,” and without the vision and need for “group survival” there is no message for social change, and ultimately there is no Ma Joad (Working Days 88). The need for someone or something to personify what it would mean and what life would be like for American society if it could change for the better and recognize the value of the group during the Great Depression is essentially the role that falls upon Ma Joad as Steinbeck creates her to fit his aesthetic vision. She is his method of understanding and potentially resolving the devastation, hunger, homelessness, death, and total loss of spirit that he witnessed during the Great Depression. Through her role as mother, Ma Joad serves as the executor of the “plan” Steinbeck insisted “must be contrived to take care of the problem of the migrants”; he demonstrates, through her, the change that can emanate from simply caring (Gypsies 58).
CONCLUSION

In his writing journal, Steinbeck writes, “If only I could do this book properly it would be one of the really fine books and a truly American book,” which announces his desire to create an accurate account of the migrants’ struggles during the Great Depression (Working Days 29). With his goal of maintaining a realistic perspective throughout the novel, it is not surprising that The Grapes of Wrath is often considered to be testimony to the actual events that occurred during the Great Depression. However, as Steinbeck’s goal to “build [Ma] up as much as possible” and the comparison of Ma Joad to migrant women and their experiences reveals, not every aspect of the novel is realistic. Yet the hardships Steinbeck witnessed the migrants endure during the Depression were desperate enough to inspire him to render a means for American society to comprehend the results of the inhumane treatment they executed towards each, and that means was the voice of a mother: Ma Joad.

In order to articulate, through Ma Joad, the actions Steinbeck felt Americans needed to take for social change, he relied on the work of Robert Briffault. In his conclusion to The Mothers, Briffault argues against patriarchal structures and purports that “human society could not have arisen out of conflicting individualistic interests,” but those patriarchal “interests” are precisely what Steinbeck perceived as dominating and destroying American society during the Depression (431). Steinbeck reiterates this notion in his first article of The Harvest Gypsies, when he writes that “the migrants are needed, and they are hated. . . . They are never received into a community nor into the life of a community. Wanderers in fact, they are never allowed to feel at home in the communities that demand their services” (20). This shows that “community” was an essential element that Steinbeck believed Depression society lacked due to
“individualistic interests” (Briffault 431). In order to reconcile the mentality that gave birth to the hatred of migrants and to remind Americans of the importance that lies in community, Steinbeck created Ma Joad in primitive women’s image.

For Steinbeck, Ma Joad had to be aesthetically derived to fit Briffault’s model of primitive women because, as the “Oral History Collection” participants reveal, women of the time no longer possessed the power, authority, or strength of their foremothers. Briffault notes that “the leaders of men, who founded kingdoms or expanded the primitive matriarchal into an extensive society, inherited from the primitive mother and priestess her sacred magical character,” and it is that “character” that Depression women lost which could only be figuratively, not realistically, reborn to combat individualism in The Grapes of Wrath (431). Thus, in keeping with Briffault’s understanding of primitive women, Steinbeck aesthetically altered real women to promote the reemergence of primitive “sentimental bonds” through “mother-love” and “maternal instinct” (Briffault 431). Ultimately, Steinbeck concluded that the only answer for deteriorating society is to return to their “social origins” that emerged through the mother.

In order to return American society to its “social origins,” Steinbeck knew the mother must fulfill the role of leader that would rescue Depression society from its failures because those failures were largely the result of patriarchal interests in financial gain. From Briffault, Steinbeck learned that “the primitive ascendency of women is founded not on economic power but on the constitutions of the social group,” and that is why the success of Steinbeck’s theme of “group survival” rests solely in Ma Joad’s hands (96; my emphasis). For Steinbeck, Ma Joad is “valuable to society” simply because she is a mother and because “human society developed” and originally survived because of maternal and “female instincts only” (Working Days 70;
Briffault 28). Therefore she is the only character capable of solving “the problem of the migrants” and returning American society to order (Gypsies 58).
NOTES

1. Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 577

2. Briffault, *The Mothers* 110

3. The Briffault/Steinbeck connection extends beyond Steinbeck’s initial encounters with the anthropologist’s theories. Briffault’s influence on Steinbeck is traceable back to his first novel, *Cup of Gold*, which was published in 1929. According to Astro, Steinbeck applies theories about “the evolution of rational thought” from Briffault’s 1919 work *The Making of Humanity* to the character Henry Morgan in *Cup of Gold*; since the novel was published in 1929 this further indicates that Steinbeck was at least familiar with Briffault prior to his 1936 travels (97). Furthermore, if Steinbeck was interested in Briffault’s 1919 work by 1929, then it is likely he would have also been intrigued by Briffault’s 1927 work, *The Mothers*, which was published nine years prior to his migrant travels in 1936. Therefore, based on Steinbeck’s very early interest in communal functions, the comments of Carol Steinbeck and Richard Albee, and the simultaneous timeline of Steinbeck’s familiarity with Briffault’s works and his career in fiction, it is extremely likely that Steinbeck had a particular Briffault-inspired vision of motherhood before he interacted with real mothers in 1936. The combination of these intricately connected factors creates the foundation of the aesthetic intent behind Steinbeck’s conception of Ma Joad.

4. Both MacKay and Gladstein indirectly quote Briffault via Motley, which suggests their interpretations of Briffault may not be accurate since they relied on Motley’s interpretation of Briffault rather than interpreting Briffault’s work themselves (McKay 51, 68; Gladstein 126, 137).
5. I borrow this phrase directly from the title of Briffault’s work *The Mothers: The Matriarchal Theory of Social Origins*, not from within the text.

6. In this specific instance, Briffault is directly quoting a missionary who was an eye witness to such female dominance.

7. Lillie Eva Grose May 25

8. For specific scenes of Ma Joad’s interactions with inspectors, see Steinbeck, *Grapes* 291, 308.
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