

Title: The Rocky Road to Eldorado: The Journey Motif in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*
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Publication Details: *Steinbeck Quarterly* 14.3-4 (Summer-Fall 1981): p83-93.
Source: *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Ed. Janet Witalec. Vol. 135. Detroit: Gale, 2003. From *Literature Resource Center*.
Document Type: Critical essay

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[(essay date summer-fall 1981) *In the following essay, Garcia argues that The Grapes of Wrath derives its fundamental structure from the "initiation motif of African and Native American quest tales."*]

In *The Grapes of Wrath* John Steinbeck's unhappy travellers span two apparently distinct and opposing worlds: the droughty Oklahoma of the early chapters of the novel and the rich and fertile paradise of Chapter Eighteen and after. His characters, here and everywhere, stand invariably one foot in the Oklahoma of the real world and the other in the California of their dreams. This juxtaposition of promise with sterile reality is pervasive in Steinbeck. Melanie Mortlock contends that his characters "attempt to escape the physical world and the world of reality by creating a dream-world, a world of fantasy or illusion. ..." ¹ For every dream there is an awakening, for every Eden a snake. The longer works, in particular, are impelled by a journey to a land of dreams which evaporates mirage-like as it nears. This pattern seems to hold in *The Grapes of Wrath*; indeed, that is the way the novel is most often read. But the novel and Steinbeck's pattern, I suggest, are far richer and more complex than is generally supposed.

Perhaps the key to this complex pattern--and even a clue to the question of naturalism in Steinbeck--is in the voyage to "Eldorado," to California, and in what this natural paradise comes to mean for them. John Ditsky writes that "we all live east of Eden ... in our race's imagination we come out of the East, out of the land where the sun rises. And in America, in California, we contemplate the starting out on our imaginary journey even as we stand in the place of our dreaming, the embodiment of all our doubts." ² Except as a hell to leave, Oklahoma at first seems of clear and limited importance, while California seems all important as the green, promised land. As a result, all the characters but "mad" Muley Graves in his sanity and Grampa in his senility yearn to leave Oklahoma for the new world.

The structure underlying their quest is that of the initiation motif, here pieced together from African and American Indian initiation rites, and whose stages are: I. Separation from the "Mother"; II. Travel to the Sacred Place of Initiation; III. Arrival at the Sacred Place (usually a mountain, grotto, cave, or, as is the case here, a valley or garden); IV. Confrontation with the "Monster," resulting in a Physical or Psychic Marking; and V. either Failure or Entrance into a Confraternity.

Given this form, the Oklahoma of the first ten chapters--Chapter Eleven is an epilogue to the first movement--is the barren and windy mother, the "scarred earth" with "starved tree clumps" (p. 14), where the "raw smell of hot dust was in the air" (p. 37), where the "land ain't much good ... cottoned damn near to death" (p. 64). Here, over this desolate land, "the dust hung like fog, and the sun was as red as ripe new blood" (p. 16); here "the earth was bloody in its setting light" (p. 121). The machines rule this tired land like malevolent despots. The tractors, "like insects," are "snub-nosed monsters" whose driver "did not look like a man ... he was a part of the monster, a robot in the seat. The thunder of the cylinders sounded through the country, became one with the air and the earth, so that earth and air muttered in sympathetic vibration" (pp. 47-48).

Interestingly, the threat in the first movement of the novel comes invariably from the oppressive, blood-red sun and from the East, traditionally the direction of birth and rebirth, light and enlightenment. "Dusk crept over the sky from the eastern horizon, and darkness crept over the land from the east" (p. 65). Similarly, "a redness grew up out of the eastern horizon" (p. 94). Just so, the orders to displace the Okies come from the East (p. 52). The sterility of the desolate mother earth--where Rosasham's baby was conceived and for which it is a symbol--encloses the inhabitants too. One of the tenant farmers says or thinks, "this land, this red land, is us; and the flood years and the dust years and the drought years are us. We can't start again [here]" (p. 119); "they's somepin worse'n the devil got hold a the country, an' it ain't gonna let go till it's chopped loose" (p. 175), Casy says.

In this land the machine has replaced the organism and become an apt representation both of lost humanity and of lost communion with the land. The machines and trucks have displaced the people not only because of the conditions of drought but because some spirit has died in them which must be recovered before they can change and before the land, in turn, can be

made productive once again. "The land," Steinbeck writes, "bore under iron and under iron gradually died; for it was not loved or hated, it had no prayers or curses" (p. 49)--as if the iron is the result, and the loss of feeling and prayers the curse. In a harsh but appropriate parody of the once-loving relationship between man and the land, now "behind the harrows, the long seeders--twelve curved iron penes erected in the foundry, orgasms set by gears, raping methodically, raping without passion" (p. 49). The goggle-eyed driver, eating Spam sandwiches and looking like an insect, is the new regent of the wasteland, like a newly fallen Lucifer in Hades. This is the cursed and infected land of iron, of "not plowing but surgery" (p. 48), not of love but of passionless rape, of "cutting," "slicing," and "combining with iron teeth." Even "the house was dead, and the fields were dead; but [their] truck was the active, the living principle ... the new hearth" (pp. 135-36). The truck, their ark, is the perfect symbol of their changed status as thirteen homeless pilgrims, a homeless dog--later to be killed by an automobile--and a preacher without a vocation, Jim Casy, later to be killed in mindless violence by heartless people once he has found his vocation as an activist preacher in overalls.

In classical or mythological terms, a drought such as that which drives the Okies out has a cause in some failure in the people themselves, or in their Fisher King, whose impotence is a symbol for their general sterility. In my opinion, Steinbeck intends for us to consider this as a symbolic cause of the drought in the novel, even if not for the actual drought from which the novel derives. If this is true--even if it is not--the movement to the promised land by the Okies suffers from a false premise: that the causes of the drought are external, that a change of place will alleviate their misery. It does not. It merely changes the location of their suffering and, finally, makes California a decayed false-paradise, infected by the same worm of callous disaffection and greed which devours Oklahoma. The people themselves must first change, then their conditions will change, for "if they ever know themselves, the land will be theirs" (p. 325).

Too little is written of Uncle John's symbolic function in this scheme. Repeatedly he illustrates how aware he is of a sin or curse, and how the family might be the carriers of a sin. He feels, however, that *he* is the carrier, when in reality the sin is widespread. But he is the chorus in this Morality Play, aching "all over, an' I got it comin'. I oughta go away where I won't bring down punishment on my own folks" (p. 435). One of the displaced tenant farmers muses on the drought which drove them west: "maybe we sinned some way we didn't know about" (p. 271).

Where Oklahoma was a formless desert, California is "vineyards, the orchards, the great flat valley, green and beautiful, the trees set in rows, and the farm houses" (pp. 309-10); it is a "valley golden and green" (p. 313), a "purtier--better lan'" (p. 577), where "it never gets cold. Why you can reach out anywhere and pick an orange" (p. 46), "where I can pick me an orange when I want it. Or grapes" (p. 112); California is "the new rich land ... where the fruit grows" (p. 119), where it's "never cold. An' fruit ever'place ... an' the little fellas go out an' pick oranges right off the tree" (p. 124) and "they's grapes out there, just a-hangin' over into the road" (p. 126). The pilgrims are a people "in flight from the sun and the drought" (pp. 274-75), always moving away from the domain of the evil and pitiless sun and east, to the green pastures of the west. Always, their dream is associated with greenness, abundance, fruit, and with "the mother road, the road of flight" (p. 160) to "a new and mysterious place" (p. 264). All of them except Tom embrace the dream of western plenty. Even Ma, who knows everything but how to drive a truck, has only a flicker of doubt: "I'm scared somepin ain't so nice about it" (p. 123), she says. His imagination tempered by four years in prison, only Tom avoids completely the effusiveness and extravagant metaphors for California, to conclude eventually, "this ain't no lan' of milk an' honey like the preachers say. They's a mean thing here" (p. 342).

Thus, in literature, as in religion, a journey is always more than a movement from one place to another. The archetype of the journey is the quest in sterile darkness for the light, for the holy grail of insight, in which the traveller must undergo trials and ordeals to leave the maze of the cursed, manifest world, of which both Oklahoma and California are symbols, to reach the garden of knowledge and peace, which is beyond time and place. California is merely the *illusion* of that garden, but it is also the desert from which the real New Jerusalem will be seen, intangible and spiritual.

This novel has two climaxes: one false and one real. The first and false one occurs at the arrival at the Promised Land with Chapter Eighteen; the second closes the novel. The mood of great promise and arrival at the sighting of the valley of their dreams is compromised beautifully in several respects. First, Ma announces that Granma has died during the night, perhaps precisely when Rosasharn and Connie had intercourse. Thus they have made their rite of passage to Eldorado in the company of a corpse (which must later be buried, ignominiously, by the County). As they descend into the valley, "a rattlesnake crawled across the road and Tom hit it and broke it and left it squirming" (p. 314). This garden has a snake, as all gardens apparently do. Immediately after this, Chapter Nineteen gives the history of how land in California accumulated in the hands of a few, which is precisely the curse of Oklahoma. They have travelled from Oklahoma to California and nothing has changed but the landscape. If anything, conditions are worse because the abundance exaggerates their poverty. Here, in Eldorado, "the decay spreads over the state" (p. 476), ruining, in turn, the cherries, the prunes, the pears, the grapes, the people. Worse, "the smell of rot fills the country" (p. 477) because "men who have created new fruits in the world cannot create a system whereby the fruits may be eaten. And the failure hangs over the State like a great sorrow" (p. 476). The government camp is a small oasis in a vast moral wasteland, offering flush toilets, showers, and hospitality, but even this sanctuary lasts but a month, and when they leave it, yet another "snake wriggled across the warm highway. Al zipped over and ran it down and came back to his own lane" (p. 499), just as the turtle of Chapter Three was hit. But this one is a harmless gopher snake and Tom reprimands Al for what he has done. Eden has both good and bad snakes for those who can discriminate. Whereas dryness and dust typified the sterility of Oklahoma, in California "if the rain can git in the way of a crop, it'll rain" (p. 584), but the effect is the same, drought or flood: lost crops and fugitives.

Further, the "monster" of the archetypal passage in California differs in no essential respect from the sphinx which besieges

Oklahoma, whose agents are the large landowners and banks, and whose riddle the people cannot decipher: "... the owner men explained the workings and thinkings of the monster that was stronger than they were. ... Those creatures don't breathe air, don't eat side-meat. They breathe profits; they eat the interest on money ... the monster's sick. ... It's the monster. Men made it, but they can't control it" (pp. 43-45). The monster is thus typified by its intent--to destroy the family, to steal the land--and by its coldly impersonal, mechanical nature. The monster is not Nature, but it acts through and upon it, as well as through and upon men.

Like the owners from the East who expropriated lands in Oklahoma, the large owners of California convert farming to industry, create the mega-farm, displace the grain fields, and remove themselves from the land to rule in absentia, while exploiting the dispossessed and attacking their primitive efforts to unionize. The union, in this respect, is the political manifestation of the family. Maxwell Geismar says that Steinbeck here finds the origin of human frustration "in the social pathology of an economic system both incoherent and inexcusable. The 'Curse' is indeed civilization,"³ thus properly analyzing the role of the association of landowners, but neglecting the collaboration of Nature and the possible root cause in the people themselves, for this is literature, not a tract.

The archetypal monster must always pose a threat--to dismember, devour, fixate, deprive, dissolve, ensnare, extinguish, render impotent, or kill.⁴ This is the collective threat of the monster of the novel, and the common denominator of Oklahoma and California, from first to last. Its object of attack is the family. Read with this threat in mind, the novel reveals a pervasive concern with the changing condition of the family. In my opinion, this is the major theme of the novel: the assault on the family by inhuman forces and inhumane authorities and institutions, and the startling insight, allowed only to the chosen, that the family can survive--will survive--only when it redefines itself. Almost all of the pilgrims are assaulted in this regard in one form or another, and they either threaten to leave or are driven out, die, or are killed. Grampa is too weak and old to survive the flight. Without him, Granma soon becomes ill, suffers convulsions, becomes dislocated, and dies. "They were too old" (p. 313), and, by implication, too weak. Noah, the mental defective, wanders off at the river. The combined Joad-Wilson family is broken when Sairy Wilson is left dying and Mr. Wilson remains to care for her. Connie, "jackrabbit-quick and fox-sneaky" (p. 425), goes up the river, because as Pa says, "Connie wasn't no good. ... Didn't have no guts, jus' too big for his overalls" (p. 372). Uncle John repeatedly threatens to leave, to "go away where I won't bring down punishment on my own folks" (p. 435). Al threatens to leave first to get a garage job and again later to marry Aggie Wainwright, even though this would leave the family truckless in Gaza. Casy threatens to leave: "I was thinkin' I'd go off alone by myself. I'm a-eatin' your food an' a-takin' up room" (p. 341). Rosasham threatens to leave after Connie has abandoned her, and "Pa's lost his place" (p. 536) too, says Ma. Even Tom threatens to leave, to be talked out of it by Ma and to be forced to leave later, although to take up a higher cause. Only Ma sees the threat: "We're crackin' up, Tom," she says. "There ain't no fambly now" (p. 536).

This disruptive pattern is prefigured when, the family truck in disrepair, Tom suggests in Chapter Sixteen that the Joad-Wilson party (who "got almost a kin bond" [p. 227]) separate, just before which "the shadow of a buzzard slid across the earth, and the family all looked up at the sailing black bird" (p. 227). But Ma violently asserts her authority over Pa, who agrees with Tom: "Pa was amazed at the revolt" (p. 229). Jackhandle in hand, she faces down Pa and the others, exclaiming, "What we got lef' in the worl'? Nothin' but us. Nothin' but the folks. ... An' now, right off, you wanna bust up the folks--" (p. 231). This is the pivot in the novel from male to female, for now "she was the power. She had taken control. ... 'All we got is the family unbroke. ... I ain't scared while we're all here, all that's alive, but I ain't gonna see us bust up'" (p. 231). The threat of the monster is unrelenting and, apparently, victorious, given the impressive casualty list of the novel. The five-part initiation structure is not severely compromised by the failure of the monster to appear (it is omnipresent but visible only through its functionaries), to win (as it appears to do), or to lose (as it in fact does). The monster will not let itself be so neatly formulated.

Part IV of the initiation pattern, dealing with the physical and/or psychic scarring, and Part V, the entrance into the confraternity, are easier to chart, but they too are important only if we see that physical marking must lead to an emotional insight to be of real symbolic importance; and, secondly, that we must consider the "family"--not its individual members--of primary importance. For if the threat of the monster is the disintegration of the family, the promise in and of the people is one of union. Given this, only four of the original thirteen pilgrims have the capacity to "see" this and thus to be numbered among the elect. The others, echoing the dreams in *Of Mice and Men*, seek only to "live off the fatta' the lan'." Further, insight must be rendered "active" to be fully significant, "active" meaning that the chosen one must reach out in some manner to extend the concept of the family. Frederic I. Carpenter points to *The Long Valley* and *The Grapes of Wrath* as suggesting "the possible realization of the American Dream through courage and active intelligence. ... In *The Grapes of Wrath* Steinbeck's characters have integrated dream with action. ..."⁵ But not all of them do. Ma, the "arbiter," as remote and faultless in judgment as a "Goddess" (p. 150), is active in this sense repeatedly, from the very beginning in Chapter Eight when she is willing to feed two supposed strangers (her returning son Tom and Jim Casy) until she feeds hungry children from limited stores in Chapter Twenty. More than anyone else, she knows what she must do, hold the family together, and the threat that faces them: "the fambly's breakin' up" (p. 381), she warns repeatedly, and, "You ain't got the right to get discouraged. This here fambly's goin' under" (p. 479).

Casy too is marked very early, for "the light of the morning made his forehead seem to shine" (p. 93). He knows, even in Oklahoma, the sacred information that nature whispers only to those who can hear. Wandering, "like Jesus," he has "got tired like Him, an' I got mixed up like Him, an' I went into the wilderness like Him" to learn that "there was the hills, an' there was me, an' we wasn't separate no more. We was one thing. An' that one thing was holy. ... I got thinkin' how we was holy when

we was one thing, an' makin' was holy when it was one thing" (p. 110). When he says this, he becomes "suddenly a spirit, not human any more, a voice out of the ground" (p. 111). Tom, baptized by Casy himself, "wasn't mean, but you was tough. Sometimes a tough kid grows up with a big jolt of the sperit in him" (p. 57). We must remember that the curse on the people is that the "sperit" has died in them. It is Tom who admonishes Casy later in California, "when ya think you can get ta work an' quit thinkin' a spell?" (p. 341). He becomes active in the interests of others in an interesting fashion, by kicking a "deputy in the neck" when the police attempt to round up Floyd Knowles, Tom Joad, and other agitators. Both Tom and Casy thus become leaders of the people, although California is Tom's wilderness.

The novel is in reality two novels: a road novel taking up agrarian travellers in conflict with apparently unfelling nature, the other a "political" novel, beginning with the arrival at Hooversville in the long Chapter Twenty, roughly at mid-point of the narrative. That awareness is insufficient unless its travelling companion's political action accounts for the unmistakable shift in the work. One of the functions of the interchapters analyzed so astutely by Peter Lisca is to forebode this shift. Thus Lisca concludes that in *To a God Unknown* and *Of Mice and Men* "the relationship [of man to the land] is mystical, symbolic, and mythical. While these values persist in *The Grapes of Wrath*, man's identification with the growth cycle is also seen as pragmatic, socially practical in Jeffersonian terms."⁶

Lastly, Rose of Sharon, heiress to the crown of mother-goddess, Ishtar to her mother's *mater dolorosa*, smiles the mysterious, knowing smile of the novel's close very early (p. 175), and "her hair, braided and wrapped around her head, made an ash-blond crown" to accompany her "self-sufficient smile" (p. 129). She senses some truth beyond herself early, but she must transcend her childishness, her impetuosity, and her lack of patience to undergo her apotheosis. Oklahoma is not enough; she must undergo the fire and flood of California. H. K. Crockett points out that Rose of Sharon, a "self-centered girl," must be "tempered by suffering ... before she is worthy to share Ma's great spirit."⁷ Most of all, she must transcend her distorted hierarchy of values, at whose apex is her worthless and selfish garage-dreaming husband, and even her baby. This she finally does, for she gains what the other three have. Thus, I disagree with Mortlock that Steinbeck believed that "man's continual attempt to create heaven on earth must always result in failure," of which she sees *The Pastures of Heaven* as a text, or even that paradise will be lost "at the first opportunity," as she contends.⁸

To a rationalist, what they learn must seem simplistic, even simple-minded; yet they have travelled to a new Eldorado, to a knowledge, as Jim Casy would say, "beyond thinkin'." As Paul Shepherd points out in his brilliant *Man in the Landscape: A Historic View of the Esthetics of Nature*, this "ancient belief that the natural world is composed of a myriad of living patterns or beings in social union" may be "the key to understanding the universe."⁹ This is the lesson of poetry and poverty. Nor is it necessary that Steinbeck have read Josiah Royce to come to his theory of the relation of the individual to the whole,¹⁰ for Steinbeck's vision transcended but included social organisms and organizations. Of the thirteen pilgrims, only four are capable or worthy of achieving something so simple that it can re-order the universe, dispel the dust of fear or hate, and raise "bright-red" flowers in the flood. B. R. McElderry feels that their quest is "the uncompleted journey toward opportunity and justice,"¹¹ but this interpretation sees it as complete because some have found themselves, even if--perhaps because--robbed of opportunity and denied justice; their spiritual journey is completed. California is not what they expected, yet it is more; they have empty bellies but full hearts.

Henry David Thoreau asks, "What does the West stand for? Is it not our own interior white on the chart?"¹² All the travellers get to California but only a few find the Eldorado of the integrated and expanded self because they travel a road contiguous to the highway of flight, Highway 66. In his early review of the novel, Christopher Isherwood says of the pilgrims, "they have exchanged a bad life for a worse," and he contends further that the flood is "the final scene of their disintegration."¹³ The first statement is correct but narrow, the second, in my opinion, a misreading of Steinbeck's intent, for they have found themselves.

With Ma and Rosasharn's final act of charity, even angry nature, which "hammered on the roof and curtained the entrance" to the barn where it takes place (p. 616) is subdued: "the pounding of the rain decreased to a soothing swish on the roof" (p. 617). This particular family has been brutalized, but those who could see finally do see; those who could not were blind for a reason. They looked only for a physical paradise of perpetual spring and plentiful crops, of picket fences and white houses. Clearly, Steinbeck did not believe in the democracy of vision or insight. In Oklahoma the seer, "mad" Muley Graves, knew that he must share his freshly-killed rabbits with Tom Joad and Jim Casy, a family act to which Casy responded, "Muley's got a-holt of somepin, an' it's too big for him an' it's too big for me" (p. 66). Having no need to go to the Promised Land, he is left in the novel wandering through the cemetery, a prophet whom no one understands. The others go to California and fare worse, most of them. The novel admits of two alternate and mutually exclusive interpretations, first because it is a big book and one finds what one looks for in big books, but chiefly because we follow too readily down the path of early, easy, earthly definitions of Paradise. When Steinbeck slowly lifts his view from the road immediately ahead to the far horizon, from soured paradise to a state of awareness, we too readily conclude that the quest has been a failure, that they have not found their Eldorado. But even in California one can learn.

Steinbeck's rage for travel--he saw mobility and restlessness as American traits in *America and Americans*--was a rage for order, for each element in the natural and social schemes to vibrate in harmony; the only alternative to this biological rhythm is the mechanical disorder diagnosed in the novel, in which one element, turtle or man--turtle *and* man (both travellers)--is violated. I do not know if Steinbeck would agree with Emerson that "traveling is a fool's paradise." It would

depend, I suppose, on the road and the paradise. He himself travelled a great deal. In May of 1960 he wrote, "I'm going out alone, out toward the West by the northern way but zigzagging through the Middle West and the mountain states. I'll avoid cities, hit small towns and farms and ranches, sit in bars and hamburger stands and on Sunday go to church. I'll go down the coast from Washington and Oregon and then back through the Southwest and the South and up the East coast but always zigzagging. ..."14 He was looking for the "idiom" of his people and he zigzagged, but he knew the way.

Notes

1. Melanie Mortlock, "The Eden Myth as Paradox: An Allegorical Reading of *The Pastures of Heaven*," *Steinbeck Quarterly*, 11 (Winter 1978), 7. References to *The Grapes of Wrath*, incorporated parenthetically, are to the Viking Compass edition (New York: Viking Press, 1958).
2. John Ditsky, "The 'East' in *East of Eden*," in *John Steinbeck: East and West, Steinbeck Monograph Series*, No. 8, eds. Tetsumaro Hayashi, Yasuo Hashiguchi, and Richard Peterson (Muncie, Indiana: Steinbeck Society, 1978), p. 61.
3. Maxwell Geismar, "John Steinbeck: Of Wrath or Joy," in *A Casebook on "The Grapes of Wrath"*, ed. Agnes McNeill Donohue (New York: Crowell, 1968), p. 139, referred to as *Casebook* in subsequent footnotes.
4. See the schema following p. 82 in Erich Neumann's *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1955).
5. Frederick I. Carpenter, "John Steinbeck: American Dreamer," in *Steinbeck and His Critics*, eds. E. W. Tedlock, Jr. and C. V. Wicker (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1957), p. 69.
6. Peter Lisca, *The Wide World of John Steinbeck* (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1958), p. 153. See also Chester Eisinger's "Jeffersonian Agrarianism in *The Grapes of Wrath*," *Casebook*, pp. 143-50.
7. H. K. Crockett, "The Bible and *The Grapes of Wrath*," *Casebook*, p. 114.
8. Mortlock, pp. 14-15.
9. Paul Shepherd, *Man in the Landscape: A Historic View of the Esthetics of Nature* (New York: Knopf, 1967), p. 96.
10. See Charles Shively's "John Steinbeck: From the Tidepool to the Loyal Community," in *Steinbeck: The Man and His Work*, pp. 25-34.
11. B. R. McElderry, *The Grapes of Wrath: In the Light of Modern Critical Theory*, *Casebook*, p. 130.
12. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (New York: Knopf, 1946), p. 286.
13. Christopher Isherwood, "The Tragedy of Eldorado," *Casebook*, p. 77.
14. *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters*, eds. Elaine Steinbeck and Robert Wallsten (New York: Viking Press, 1978), pp. 666-67.

Source Citation (MLA 7th Edition)

Garcia, Reloy. "The Rocky Road to Eldorado: The Journey Motif in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*." *Steinbeck Quarterly* 14.3-4 (Summer-Fall 1981): 83-93. Rpt. in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Ed. Janet Witalec. Vol. 135. Detroit: Gale, 2003. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 7 Nov. 2012.

Document URL

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