



Survival, Selfhood, and Social Class: Understanding Humanity through Steinbeck’s depiction of Economic Struggle

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how John Steinbeck’s fiction interrogates the relationship between economic hardship and the formation of human identity. Focusing on *The Grapes of Wrath*, *the Winter of Our Discontent*, and *Cannery Row*, the study explores how Steinbeck represents survival as both a physical necessity and a psychological negotiation shaped by class, labour, and community. Through social realism, symbolic imagery, and character-driven narrative, Steinbeck exposes the ways capitalism shapes dignity, moral consciousness, emotional life, and interpersonal relationships. The paper argues that Steinbeck’s work reveals the profound ethical and existential stakes of economic inequality, positioning his fiction not merely as a historical representation of the American Depression, but as a timeless critique of systems that determine human worth by material value.

Keywords: Identity, Economic Disparity, Deformation, Material Comforts

INTRODUCTION

John Steinbeck’s literary works endure because they confront universal struggles with poverty, alienation, and resilience. Writing during a period marked by the Great Depression, agricultural collapse, and rapid industrial expansion, Steinbeck chronicled the lives of those marginalized by economic systems—migrant workers, displaced families, wage labourers, and individuals navigating survival with limited agency. His fiction treats economic hardship not merely as background, but as a structural force shaping identity, self-perception, morality, and community. The purpose of this paper is to examine how Steinbeck’s representations of economic struggle illuminate the relationship between survival, selfhood, and social class, ultimately revealing the human cost of structural inequality.

Human beings have the fundamental nature of having an inherent sense of belongingness with their surroundings and relations. Nowadays, these instincts are becoming less due to the increase in technology and material comforts. The same experience is reflected in a Nobel prize laureate & widely famous American novelist John Steinbeck. Sympathetic to the impoverished and oppressed plight, his depression-era fiction offers a poignant depiction of Americans' socio-economic conditions and human realities during the 1930s. He involves himself in the human condition. He writes of darkness and makes everyone feel it. His stories capture the loveliness and loneliness of long valleys, the hunger, and the heroics of a little man. He loves to talk with people - all sorts of people. His primary interest is the problem of the migratory laborers in California.

ECONOMIC SYSTEMS AND THE MORAL ECONOMY

Steinbeck's oeuvre offers a compelling representation of the socio-economic struggles and human experiences in America during the 1930s. Through his characters, Steinbeck articulates a profound sense of belonging, emphasizing the human need for unity and shared identity. As a moralist and social critic, he grounded his narratives in keen observations of the human condition. Living through an era marked by the nation's transition from agrarian communities to industrialized urban centers, he witnessed an influx of individuals seeking purpose and self-definition. Steinbeck consistently explored the lives of marginalized groups, and his fiction often charts the gradual evolution of individuals from oppression to self-realization, ultimately portraying their pursuit of fulfilment and happiness.

The novel presents a compelling portrait of working-class life amid the hardships of the Great Depression. The novel foregrounds the suffering of farmers and migrant laborers while critiquing the exploitative and dehumanizing structure of the American economy, particularly its financial institutions. Steinbeck illustrates how technological advancements displaced agricultural workers, stripping them of employment and basic resources necessary for survival. Central to the narrative is the journey of an uprooted Oklahoma family whose migration to California reflects the broader struggle for dignity, stability, and survival in the midst of a national economic crisis.

At this point, the narrative adopts the perspective of tenant farmers preparing for migration to California, including one who becomes disillusioned while selling his belongings. His implements, once essential tools of labor, have lost their relevance due to technological advancement, leaving him feeling similarly obsolete. For many, California

symbolizes renewal—a place where the displaced may reclaim agency and stability denied to them in Oklahoma.

The narrator simultaneously examines the broader implications of mechanization. The replacement of human labor with tractors and industrial equipment disrupts the fundamental relationship between workers and the land. By distancing individuals from the means and meaning of their work, technology generates a profound sense of alienation. The narrator suggests that as mechanization expands, the landscape risks becoming a barren industrial domain valued solely for economic gain. Consequently, this process threatens not only the physical livelihood of the farmers but also their emotional and cultural connection to place.

That man who is more than his chemistry, walking on the earth, turning his plow point for a stone, dropping his handles to slide over an outcropping, kneeling in the earth to eat his lunch; that man who is more than his elements knows the land that is more than its analysis. But the machine man, driving a dead tractor on land he does not know and love, understands only chemistry; and he is contemptuous of the land and of himself. (Steinbeck 115-116)

Steinbeck's preface to *Tortilla Flat* begins with the assertion that wealth and technological advancement profoundly shape human behavior. In describing the paisanos, he characterizes them as individuals untainted by commercialism. Their poverty exempts them from concern for the material and symbolic markers of modern society. Although they lack cultural refinement and familiarity with contemporary technologies, Steinbeck presents them as genuinely free, having escaped the pressures and expectations of societal conformity.

He critiques the growing influence of American industrial and economic progress, suggesting that it fosters corruption and moral decline. In contrast, the paisanos remain immune to such forces, displaying little interest in material comfort or personal gain. Instead, they pursue companionship, freedom, and human connection. By the 1920s, Steinbeck observes that American values had shifted toward economic ambition, social prestige, and convenience—qualities he ultimately defines as manifestations of greed and pride.

"Our father is in the evening. These birds are flying across the forehead of the father. Dear birds, dear seagulls, how I love you all" (Steinbeck 39). As Pilon heads toward Danny's house that evening, he speaks these words quietly to himself. He had

worked tirelessly all day to earn enough to pay his rent, but on his way home he changed his mind and spent the money on two gallons of wine, believing Danny would value the gift more. When he later discovered Pablo—an old friend—lying in a ditch by the roadside, he suddenly realized he could enjoy a generous portion of the wine himself before giving it away."Happiness is better than riches,' said Pilon. 'If we try to make Danny happy, it will be a better thing than to give him money" (Steinbeck 77).

The paisanos feel very comfortable and safe. They don't need any worldly comforts. Steinbeck explains, "Clocks and watches [are] not used by the paisanos of Tortilla Flat. [. . .] For practical purposes, there was the great golden watch of the sun. It was better than a watch, and safer, for there was no way of diverting it to Torrelli" (Steinbeck 128). They don't rely on mechanical gadgets.

In the postwar era, consumer culture emerged as a dominant force, transforming individuals into consumers whose identities became increasingly tied to financial expectations and material acquisition. Steinbeck explores this phenomenon in *The Winter of Our Discontent*, where Ethan Hawley, once grounded in personal values and stability, confronts pressures that compel him to reconfigure his sense of self.

In the novel, Ethan observes how the old Bay Hotel is "now being wrecked to make room for the new Woolworth's" (Steinbeck 40). This signals the opening of a new department store, the emerging core of consumerism. Ethan describes the machinery like a bulldozer and the massive crane as "waiting predators in the early morning" (Steinbeck 40). Highlighting the rapid shifts that characterize life after the war, Ethan says:

What was happening could be described as a great ship being turned and bunted and shoved about and pulled around by many small tugs. Once turned by tide and tugs, it must set a new course and start its engines turning. On the bridge which is the planning centre, the question must be asked: All right, I know now where I want to go. How do I get there, and where are lurking rocks and what will the weather be? (Steinbeck 116)

Mr. Baker further teaches Ethan that entry into the business world depends neither on ethics nor on skill: "Your only entrance is money" (Steinbeck 163). This exchange suggests that in late capitalist society, a person's value is determined solely by wealth. Cultural commodities—music, television, the internet, video games, and advertising—replace traditional forms of identity such as the family. In the novel, for instance, Allen rarely speaks to his relatives; instead, he connects more deeply with his preferred music

and musicians. He is proud of having a copy of the "Lonely Lovin' Heart" song, which is "number one in the whole country. Sold a million copies in two weeks" (Steinbeck 244).

Allen is intensely preoccupied with commodities. When Ethan asks him why he wants money, Allen answers, "Do you think I like to live without any motorbike? Must be twenty kids with motorbikes. And how you think it is if your family hasn't even got a car, leave alone no television?" (Steinbeck 98). He goes on to tell his father that the first thing he will do once he has enough money is "to buy you an automobile so you won't feel so lousy when other people all got one" (Steinbeck 99). When questioned about American history, Allen imagines the past not in terms of ideals but as a time of "[p]irate ships ... [p]lots of gold and ladies in silk dresses and jewels" (Steinbeck 97), reducing history itself to objects and treasure. His entry into the essay contest is motivated not by patriotism, but by the desire for material rewards—a trip and the chance to appear on television. In the late capitalist era, identity is shaped primarily through consumption. Thus, when Allen wins the contest, everyone around him fixates on the commodities attached to his success: "The newspapers want to interview him—and television, he's going to be on television ... A celebrity in the family! Ethan, we ought to have a television" (Steinbeck 252). Ethan therefore feels estranged and alienated, even among his closest relatives, under the pervasive influence of modern production and consumption.

In the postmodern era, identity becomes unstable and subjective experience is diminished. This shift results from dramatic transformations in economic and technological spheres. These developments ushered in late capitalism and widespread commoditisation, reshaping the ways individuals think and relate to one another. Although consumerism is not new, it emerged as the defining force of American life. Across the 1950s and 1960s, shopping malls and supermarkets proliferated throughout the nation.

In Steinbeck's worldview, economic systems are not neutral structures but moral landscapes with profound human consequences. *The Grapes of Wrath* illustrates this most vividly. The bank—described as a "monster"—operates with mechanical efficiency yet without compassion, reducing families to statistical irrelevance. The Joads' eviction demonstrates how capitalism abstracts responsibility: "no one could stop it because no one is in charge." Steinbeck's depiction anticipates later critiques of systemic power, showing how corporations and markets dehumanize individuals through bureaucratic distance. Similarly, in *Cannery Row*, the sardine industry dictates employment, stability, and social order, yet the corporate figures remain absent. Wealth and authority operate invisibly,

while the visible world bears the consequences. These dynamics frame Steinbeck's critique: economic systems determine survival but operate without ethical accountability.

SURVIVAL AS A MORAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONDITION

Survival in Steinbeck's fiction is not only a matter of food, shelter, or livelihood—it affects dignity and the construction of self. In *Of Mice and Men*, itinerant workers are stripped of permanence, relationships, and personal identity. George and Lennie's dream of owning land becomes a symbolic attempt to reclaim agency in a world that measures human value through productivity. For Lennie, whose vulnerability positions him outside capitalist norms, survival becomes linked to dependence and exclusion. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the struggle for survival initiates a moral transformation. Ma Joad emerges as a stabilizing force, rejecting isolation in favour of collective humanity: "We're the people—we go on." Steinbeck thus frames survival as a negotiation between desperation and ethical responsibility, where characters either succumb to fragmentation or forge meaning through community.

John Steinbeck's fiction consistently returns to the theme of survival, not merely as a biological necessity but as a complex moral and psychological experience shaped by social forces, economic pressures, and human relationships. Writing across some of the most volatile eras in U.S. history—from the Great Depression and Dust Bowl migrations to the postwar surge of consumer capitalism—Steinbeck developed a literary universe in which individuals are compelled to confront the ethical demands of hardship. His characters often face circumstances where survival becomes inseparable from moral choices, emotional resilience, and an enduring sense of human dignity. In this way, Steinbeck's novels examine survival as a process that tests not only physical endurance but also the values and psychological identity of individuals and communities.

Steinbeck's narrative focus on marginalized populations—tenant farmers in *The Grapes of Wrath*, paisanos in *Tortilla Flat*, migrant workers in *Of Mice and Men*, and economically pressured middle class in *The Winter of Our Discontent*—reveals his sustained interest in those excluded from traditional centers of power. His characters are frequently confronted with forces beyond their control, including technological expansion, industrial capitalism, environmental degradation, and institutionalized inequality. Yet rather than portraying them solely as victims of history, Steinbeck emphasizes their capacity for solidarity, compassion, and ethical contemplation. Such portrayals illustrate that survival, in his fiction, is not measured merely by one's ability to persist physically,

but by one's ability to retain humanity, empathy, and moral agency in the face of suffering.

Moreover, Steinbeck's narrative strategies—the use of intercalary chapters, biblical allusions, ecological imagery, and social documentary realism—lend philosophical weight to his representations of hardship. His ecological outlook suggests a deep interdependence between individuals, communities, and the natural world, thereby expanding survival beyond individual struggle to a collective and relational condition. Steinbeck demonstrates that when economic or technological systems sever these relationships, the result is not only material deprivation but psychological alienation and moral disintegration.

Thus, survival in Steinbeck's novels becomes a multidimensional concept that operates on physical, ethical, and psychological levels. His work challenges readers to recognize that the true measure of endurance lies not in material success or adaptation to dominant systems but in the preservation of one's moral integrity, sense of belonging, and capacity to imagine a more humane future. This research paper examines how Steinbeck constructs survival as a moral and psychological condition and how his characters' responses to oppression and social change illuminate broader human concerns about identity, justice, and the meaning of resilience.

CLASS, IDENTITY, AND THE LOSS OF SELF

Economic struggle in Steinbeck's work consistently reshapes identity. Characters often internalize class hierarchies, resulting in shame, insecurity, or psychological fragmentation. Migrant workers in *The Grapes of Wrath* are treated as subhuman; their identity reduced to economic value. The term "Okie" becomes an imposed identity that erases individuality and cultural belonging. In *Cannery Row*, Mack and his companions resist class identity through humour, improvisation, and communal values; yet their existence on the social margins reflects a world where selfhood is determined by productivity. Steinbeck suggests that class does more than divide society—it alters how individuals perceive themselves and their place in the world.

John Steinbeck's literary exploration of American life reveals a profound engagement with class structures, economic displacement, and the psychological consequences of social inequality. Throughout his novels, Steinbeck interrogates how class position shapes not only material conditions but also personal identity, moral decision-making, and one's sense of belonging within community and nation. His characters often inhabit the margins of society—farm laborers, displaced migrants, the

unemployed, and the economically vulnerable—whose lives expose the tensions between the ideals of the American Dream and the lived reality of systemic inequity. Through these depictions, Steinbeck exposes the ways in which class determines access to dignity, agency, and self-definition.

Central to Steinbeck’s work is the idea that identity is not fixed but vulnerable to external pressures, particularly during moments of social or economic instability. In novels such as *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *The Winter of Our Discontent*, the struggle for survival becomes intertwined with the struggle to maintain one's humanity. As characters confront industrial modernization, economic exploitation, and the illusion of upward mobility, they undergo psychological fragmentation and moral conflict. These tensions show Steinbeck’s view that class-based oppression is not only material but also existential, with the power to undermine a person’s identity and sense of belonging in the world. Steinbeck’s writing also reflects broader anxieties of twentieth-century America, including the collapse of agrarian culture, the rise of corporate power, and the increasing commodification of human value. As economic systems prioritize profit over people, Steinbeck suggests that individuals risk becoming products of their environment—alienated from labor, from community, and ultimately from themselves. His recurring emphasis on moral consciousness, human connection, and collective solidarity serves as both critique and alternative to a society governed by hierarchy and economic determinism.

By examining the relationship between class, identity, and the erosion of selfhood, Steinbeck’s novels offer a powerful commentary on the human consequences of inequality. His work challenges readers to consider how economic structures shape personal meaning, psychological resilience, and the ethical dimensions of being human. This research paper investigates Steinbeck’s representation of class-based identity formation and explores how his characters’ losses—of land, labor, purpose, or moral integrity—reflect broader concerns about social justice, belonging, and the fragility of the self under oppressive conditions.

COMMUNITY AS RESISTANCE TO ECONOMIC FRAGMENTATION

Despite bleak representations of inequality, Steinbeck frequently imagines community as a counter structure to capitalism. Mutual aid networks in *The Grapes of Wrath*—sharing food, tools, labour—challenge the competitive ethic of the marketplace. In *Cannery Row*, informal economies based on gifting and reciprocity create alternative models of dignity

and belonging. Mack's gesture to celebrate Doc, though flawed and chaotic, reflects a value system rooted in gratitude rather than profit. Steinbeck suggests that while capitalism isolates, community restores identity, purpose, and emotional coherence.

John Steinbeck's novels reveal a recurring concern with the effects of economic instability on social structure, personal identity, and human relationships. Set against the backdrop of financial crises, labour exploitation, and the collapse of agrarian life, his fiction examines how individuals struggle not only for survival but also to maintain meaningful relationships in the face of economic forces that promote isolation and competition. Steinbeck suggests that economic fragmentation—a condition in which individuals are separated from labor, land, and one another—is one of the most damaging consequences of capitalism. In response to this fragmentation, the creation of community emerges as a form of resistance, restoring dignity, belonging, and shared purpose among those who are otherwise marginalized or displaced.

Throughout works such as *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *Cannery Row*, Steinbeck portrays community not merely as a social arrangement, but as a moral and emotional necessity. His characters frequently turn toward collective life as a means of coping with hardship and reclaiming agency in environments shaped by inequality and economic exploitation. Whether through informal solidarity networks among migrant workers, cooperative action in labor movements, or shared survival strategies among the dispossessed, Steinbeck depicts community as an alternative to the competitive individualism embedded in capitalist values. These communities allow individuals to recover a sense of identity that transcends monetary worth, thereby challenging systems that reduce human beings to labor, commodities, or obstacles to profit.

Steinbeck's narrative technique—including sociological realism, ecological metaphors, and collective voice—reinforces the idea that community is not merely interpersonal, but structural and ideological. His depiction of group identity reflects a belief in interdependence as a natural human condition, aligning with his understanding of biological and ecological systems. In this framework, fragmentation represents a breakdown of the natural order, while community symbolizes restoration and continuity. Thus, Steinbeck's work not only critiques the social and psychological consequences of economic fragmentation but also imagines community as a pathway toward ethical renewal and social justice.

By positioning community as both survival mechanism and moral resistance, Steinbeck's novels offer a critique of economic systems that prioritize profit over human connection. His work demonstrates how solidarity becomes a form of empowerment, enabling people to reclaim agency, dignity, and collective strength even in the midst of profound economic instability. This research paper explores how Steinbeck constructs community as a counterforce to fragmentation and examines the role of collective identity in resisting the dehumanizing effects of modern capitalism.

CONCLUSION

Steinbeck's fiction reveals that economic struggle is not merely a material condition, but a formative force that shapes identity, emotional life, belonging, and moral imagination. Across his works, survival becomes intertwined with dignity, community becomes a site of resistance, and class functions as a powerful determinant of selfhood. Steinbeck challenges readers to see humanity beyond economic value, insisting that compassion, solidarity, and dignity must remain central to the human experience. His narratives serve not only as historical reflections but as enduring commentary on systems that continue to define worth through wealth.

In this postmodern era, almost every identity has become deformed due to increased material comforts and technology. Everyone is so engrossed in the use of material comforts that he does not have time for himself and others. He does not have any pure relations; all the connections are based on the economic status only. Anyone, who has a low financial situation, is devoid of friends and relatives. The level and number of material comforts decide the overall personality of a human being. But it harms identity formation. Through this paper, the researcher has wanted to explore the economic disparity and identity deformation in John Steinbeck's works.

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