

That Controversial Ending

Ma's eyes passed Rose of Sharon's eyes, and then came back to them. And the two women looked deep into each other. The girl's breath came short and gasping.

She said, "Yes."

Ma smiled. "I knowed you would. I knowed!" (ch. 30)

Nothing in *The Grapes of Wrath* so outraged its first readers as the scene in chapter 30 where Rose of Sharon offers her breast to save the dying man from starvation. Clifton Fadiman in *The New Yorker* wrote that "the ending is the tawdriest kind of fake symbolism."¹ Many critics would agree with him, but if we examine the novel closely we find that the ending is "right." Rose of Sharon, who so often in the early chapters is a whining, selfish, immature girl, grows into a woman like her mother, who cares for others first, no matter the cost. In fact, at the novel's end, we find that each of the major characters has changed. In Warren French's term, each has received an "education of the heart," resulting "in a change from the family's jealousy regarding itself as an isolated and self-important clan to its envisioning itself as part of one vast human family."² Most begin, like Tom, "jus' puttin' one foot in front a the other" (ch. 16). Uncle John lives in the past, harboring guilt over his wife's death. Al lives for girls and cars. Pa is so broken at the loss of his farm that for much of the novel he allows all decisions to be made by Ma. Ma at the novel's beginning has only one passion: to keep the "fambly" together. Ruthie torments her brother and exhibits childish ways until almost the end of the book. Even Casy, when the novel opens, is adrift. He's sure there's something to be learned in the midst of all the suffering, but until he goes to prison, even he lacks real conviction or directed action.

The critical reader sees a change coming that is more than a restlessness in the land. The main characters by chapter 30 have all undergone an education. The suffering has changed them, has redeemed them. We've already looked at the point at which Rose of Sharon proves she has changed. In the space below, identify points in the novel or actions which exhibit change in the other characters:

1. Can you identify events in the novel which help to change the hearts of the Joads?

¹Warren French, "From Naturalism to the Drama of Consciousness—The Education of the Heart in *The Grapes of Wrath*," in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Grapes of Wrath*, ed. Robert Con Davis (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1982), 25.

²*Ibid.*, 26.

Name _____

Date _____

2. Can you identify events in the lives of the following characters where they show that they have changed?

Ma

Pa

Tom

Al

Ruthie

Uncle John

Casy