

## 2020 Classical Literature Scholarship—First Place

Ethan Lynsky

### *Steinbeck in Bolivia*

In a dimly lit hotel room deep in the Andes Mountains of Bolivia, I flicked on a lamp and opened a borrowed copy of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Over the next two weeks, this book would become my guide as I attempted to connect with a country and people whose languages and customs were foreign to me. During the day I moved through the city of Cochabamba in a neon bus that looked straight out of a 70's acid trip. As I peered through grime-covered windows I marveled at the incredible city sprawled out before me but felt distant from the people who occupied it. Bolivia is the poorest nation in South America, and my upbringing left me feeling alienated from those I had been sent to provide aid. At night I returned to my hotel where I joined the Joads as they crept across the midwestern United States dealing with levels of poverty and hardship that would have previously been unimaginable. What stuck out to me through this reading of *The Grapes of Wrath* was how experiencing the world can create forms of solidarity between people that would not have previously been possible. As the Joads are dispossessed from their home and their family unit begins to falter, they find that rather than collapse their concept of a family has simply expanded. No better can this progression be seen than in the Matriarch of the family Ma Joad. In chapter 26 she muses that "They was the time when we was on the lan'. They was a boundary to us then.... we was the fambly - kinda whole and clear. An' now we ain't clear no more. I can't get straight. They ain't nothin' keeps us clear." At this moment she perfectly expressed my adolescent understanding of the world. I existed inside of my bubble where I saw the same people and landscapes and had no conception of the plight of others around the globe. In the last chapter, we see the evolution of her understanding when she

proclaims, "Use' ta be the family was fust. It ain't so now. It's anybody." What at first is seen as the breaking down of her family is, in fact, the expansion of the concept to encapsulate everybody that is in need. Through *The Grapes of Wrath*, I was able to see that this experience was not just the breaking down of my previously limited understanding of humanity. It was also the expansion of my ability to empathize with the Bolivians and everyone around me. Reading *The Grapes of Wrath* may not have taught me Spanish, but I learned that there are ways we can connect with people other than by using words. Through empathy and service, I found that although I could not communicate with the Bolivians I came to understand that we all share a bond that is deeper than any language barrier. Whether it was playing soccer on a dirt field or enjoying the same meal, what drives us as people always seems to be the same. No better is this put than by Casy in chapter 4 when he says, "maybe it's all men an' all women we love; maybe that's the Holy Sperit-the human sperit-the whole shebang. Maybe all men got one big soul ever'body's a part of." In this declaration of Transcendental wisdom it is proclaimed that we are all connected through our love and humanity. Through this book, I have learned that when we look at our similarities rather than our differences and take an approach of empathy, we can connect with others in meaningful ways. Every time I open a copy of *The Grapes of Wrath* I am reminded of how one of the quintessential American novels taught me to connect with people thousands of miles away.