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Social History, Poverty In John Steinbeck's Novel The Grapes Of Wrath

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Abstract: In literary criticism the last decades of the twentieth century have been particularly fruitful, since the rise of the New Criticism in the 1950s, which focused the attention of critics and readers upon the text itself. There has emerged a whole variety of critical methods which have brought a rich diversity of perspectives, social, historical, political, psychological, economic, ideological and philosophical, while attention to the text itself as thought by the new critics remains at the core of contemporary interpretation, the widely shared assumption that works of art generate many different kinds of interpretations has opened up possibilities for new readings and new meanings.

Introduction: No critical, scholarly, textual, linguistic or structural method yet invented or discussed by many or computer has failed to find in one aspect or another of Steinbeck and his world appropriate fodder to feed. Moreover, no single aspect of that Steinbeck world has been given more comprehensive attention than that given to his splendid novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*. The novel has sustained since then, hundreds of essays and book-length discussions.

Discussion and Interpretation: No American novel since Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has had combined popularity and social impact as *The Grapes of Wrath*. It was first announced in the *Publisher's Weekly* on 31st December, 1938. Three advanced printings occurred before the novel actually appeared in March. By April, the 619 page book sold 2500 copies a day, by May it reached the top of the best seller list. On Sunday evening of 9th July, 1939 an American commentator, speaking on the BBC National Radio programme, devoted almost the whole of his quarter-hour talk to eulogize a novel that had been published in April in New York and that was currently topping the best-seller lists in the United States. Indeed, he implied that no one on his side of the Atlantic seemed to be reading anything else. The commentator was Alexander Woolcott, and the novel was John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. Woolcott delivering his weekly "Letter from America" spared his British listeners no superlatives.

"I am not", he declared, "forgetting such books as **Moby Dick** and **Leaves of Grass** and **Life on the Mississippi** and **Death Comes for the Archbishop** when I say **The Grapes of Wrath** seems to me as great a book as yet to come out of America (1989:74)

Elsewhere during his talk, he described the book, "as an American *Les Miserable's*", and linked Steinbeck's name with that of the incumbent President, Franklin D. Roosevelt, as the two men whose voices were the representative ones through which America should be heard and judged at the moment in history. On 3 August 1939, H.G. Wells's new book, **The Fate of Homosapiens**, was published in London. Wells added to his voice was what was rapidly to become a virtual chorus of pre-publication praise for Steinbeck's book:

John Steinbeck in his *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), has given an unforgettable picture of the last stage of that process of material and moral destruction and disillusionment with which the story of sturdy individualism in America concludes. He gives it all, from the exhausted soil dribbling down to dust, to the broken pride, the hopeless revolt and the black despair of the human victims, without rhetoric, without argument, but with an irresistible effect of fundamental truth (1939:172-73)

The novel has been often compared to Erskine Caldwell's **Tobacco Road** and to Maxim Gorky's **Mother**. Louis Kronenberger in his article "Hungry Caravan" (1989:23) says, It should be pointed out that **The Grapes of Wrath** comes at a needed time in a powerful way. It comes perhaps as the **Drapier's Letters** or **Uncle Tom's Cabin** or some of the social novels of Zola.

A critic in his reviews says, "for all of its sprawling asides and extravagances. **THE GRAPES OF WRATH** is a big book, a great book and one of many two or three American novels in a class with "**Huckleberry Finn**" (1947:3). **The Grapes of Wrath** has been more often discussed than any other of Steinbeck's novels. The story of its reception, the adulation it inspired in many readers and its bitter denunciations by praised it and quarreled with it. There would seem to be little to say about the novel, especially since it has attracted probably as large an audience as any novel about a serious contemporary theme.

In his study of John Steinbeck's best work, as it has prove to be, it is most assuredly an important and influential novel, possibly as Lisca claims's work of literary genius" (1982:49). In 1940 President Roosevelt went on national radio to say:

"I have read a book recently, it is called **The Grapes of Wrath**. There are 5,00,000 Americans that lives in the covers of that book. I would like to see the Columbia Basin devoted to the care of the 5,00,000 people represented in *The Grapes of Wrath*" (1940:17) Writing in the **Herald Tribune** (1963:114) Joseph Henry Jackson found the book "completely authentic". Even those who disliked **The Grapes of Wrath** saw it as something that had to be defended as true.

The Grapes of Wrath, as Warren French has noted (1982-49) stands apart, the novel has having no quarrel with the past, no especially innovative or experimental form, no obsession with multiplicity or ambiguity and no fear of sentiment.

James N. Vauljean, a reviewer, in his article **The Grapes of Wrath** (1989-32) writes.

The Grapes of Wrath is a monograph on rural sociology, a manual of practical wisdom in times of enormous stress, an assault on individualism, an essay on behalf of a rather vague form of pantheism, and a bitter, ironical attack on the evangelistic religion which seems to thrive in the more impoverished rural district of this vast country.

Edward Weeks, editor of **The Atlantic Monthly** (1990-95) considered **The Grapes of Wrath**: The summation of eighteen years of realism, a novel whose hunger, passion, and poetry are indirect answers to the angry stirring of our conscience these past seven years. Lisca's 1957 PMLA article (1990:7) on, "**The Grapes of Wrath as Fiction**" marked his key contribution to the appreciation of the novel as a form:

Steinbeck's great achievement in **The Grapes of Wrath** is that while minimizing what seem to be the most essential elements of fiction – plot and character, he was able to create a well-made and emotionally compelling novel out of materials which in most other hands have resulted in sentimental propaganda.

In 1940 the novel won both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. In 1962, the **New York Times** reported that it was the second-best-selling novel even in paperback in America, with 1,46,00,000 copies printed. Professional literary critics took their cue from the tone of the public furore. The novel served commentators as a pretext for argument about social justices in the United States and even about the ultimate nature of humankind. The tone and the imagery clearly suggested that Steinbeck and concerned himself as much with a mythic vision of America as with actual conditions. Even since its publication it has been considered Steinbeck's most celebrated work, and has been the subject of a variety of controversial appraisals. Seen by some as "an attempted prose epic, a summation of national experience at a given time", others belabour its ideological and technical flaws. The disagreement it continues to raise speak well for the need to continue to evaluate its many structural and thematic strands.

The story is simply told. Driven out of the few acres where their ancestors had lived and died for many generations, the Joad family joins the thousands of the homeless unemployed on their long journey – from Oklahoma to California – in search of work. **THE GRAPES OF WRATH** is the record of the journey. After numberless vicissitudes and harrowing experiences, a broken attenuated family finds itself on the Promised Land – which turns out to be really a mirage. Not the imagined sweet grapes but only the stinging grapes of wrath are for these poor and famished Joads and thousands of families like them.

Steinbeck aims to convey the harsh realities of the Depression not just by facts and objective description but by an imaginative reconstruction which convinces and moves and reader. He shows how an almost endless accumulation of suffering changes the Joads' initial puzzlement to discontent, from discontent to hopelessness, and from hopelessness to that terrible wrath mentioned in the book's title : an angry certainty of the injustice of the system that has pauperized and enslaved them. The result is, with little doubt, Steinbeck's fines achievement on epic account which can still move the modern reader.

The Grapes of Wrath is a work clearly and specifically grounded in conditions and events that were then making news. In fact, so directly and powerfully did this novel deal with contemporary events that it itself became an important part of those events – debated in public forums, banned, burned, denounced from culprits, attacked in pamphlets, and even debated on the floor of Congress. Along with such works as Upton Sinclair's **The Jungle** and Harriet Beecher Stowe's **Uncle Tom's Cabin**, **The Grapes of Wrath** has achieved a place among those novels that so stirred the American public for a social cause as to have had measurable political impact. Although thus associated with this class of social-protest fiction, **The Grapes of Wrath** continues to be read, not as a piece of literary or social history, but with a sense of emotional involvement and aesthetic discovery. More than any other American novel, it successfully embodies a contemporary social problem of national scope in an artistically viable expression. It is unquestionably John Steinbeck's finest achievement, a work of literary genius.

Conclusion: Steinbeck's great achievement in **The Grapes of Wrath** is that while minimizing what seems to be the most essential elements of fiction – plot and character – he was able to create a "well-made" and emotionally compelling novel out of materials which in most other hands have resulted in sentimental propaganda. Moreover, he has always avoided fashionable experimentation and cultivated the traditional

arts of narrative. The results are an exact and topical realism, given a timeless quality by its presentation of human suffering and human dignity

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