



John Steinbeck's Social Concern In The Grapes Of Wrath

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Abstract

The Grapes of Wrath is a novel about migrant workers escaping environmental catastrophe being subjected to racist abuse and robbed of their dignity and basic rights by extreme poverty. It explores the social and economic hardships faced by the migrant farmers during the Great Depression. The novel highlights the plight of tenant farmers dispossessed of their land due to drought, agricultural mechanisation and the greed of large landowners. It portrays the struggle of the Joad family and others like them as they migrate to California seeking work and a better life, only to encounter poverty, exploitation and systematic injustice. The novel criticises the dehumanising aspects of capitalism and champions the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity. Here, grapes symbolise abundance and fertility while wrath suggests anger and divine punishment. The contrast between grapes and wrath highlights the disparity between prosperity and poverty. To conclude, *Grapes of wrath* serves as a social commentary on the Great Depression, shedding light on issues of poverty and exploitation. It is nearly forty years since John Steinbeck died, and while his popularity as a novelist still endures. His honours were many and varied and included the Nobel Prize and the United States Medal of Freedom. His best novels came early in his career: *In Dubious Battle* (1936), *Of Mice and Men* (1937), *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). It would be good to record that rereading his three major novels is a valuable experience, from an aesthetic as well as an historical perspective.

Key words: Racist, Dignity, Poverty, Great Depression, Landowners, Wrath, Dehumanise etc.

The Grapes of Wrath, still Steinbeck's most famous and popular novel, is a very problematical work and very difficult to judge. Although Steinbeck's social concern is reflected on almost every page of *The Grapes of Wrath*, it is his presentation of the contemporary socio-economic crisis, through the break-down of a single suffering family, the Joads, that transforms the work from a social document of limited relevance to one of the finest expression of realistic art of our time. The gradual disintegration of the family unit under economic pressure microcosmically enacts the dissolution of the old value structure which once derived its strength from the now defunct landowning, agrarian community which had hitherto functioned democratically. But the Joads are not mere archetypes. Each Joad is distinct from the other and is sufficiently individualized. Their disintegration as a family unit may typify a contemporary social crisis in a general sort of way, yet their individual trials play a critical role in keeping them together. Members of the family either die of old age and fatigue or just quietly walk away as the Joads oldest son Noah does when they camp by a river. Noah's walking away cannot be explained only in economic terms as a sacrifice. His symbolic abnormality is as significant as his economics.

The reader feels implicated in the story because of Ma Joad's desperate struggle to keep her 'family' from breaking up. At the core of the elaborate fictional structure that incorporate various philosophic and sociological concerns is this simple peasant family and at the centre of the family is the mother. From this central figure radiate all the basic impulses familiar to human beings of all times and places. Thus by making an intensely significant social crisis incarnate in the Joad family, Steinbeck achieves a remarkable thematic focus. All socio-economic implications relevant to the Californian migrants are gathered into one knot which constitutes the Joad family. Thus crucial sociological facts which would exist as academic abstractions are dramatized into a human situation. The intensity of Ma's struggle to preserve the unity of her family is the measure of the wretchedness generated by governmental, financial and industrial mismanagement. More than all the splendid stylistic experiments of the chapters, it is the desperation of the Joads to stay united against all odds that indirectly indicts the exploitative social system most severely. Their psychological anxiety symbolized drastic social calamity.

But Steinbeck does not romanticize the Joads. The Joads are a rough bunch on the whole and at times. Ma herself acquires a fierceness of character. Indeed she defends her family like a lioness every time she senses a threat to it. During their first mechanical breakdown on their way to California, she snarls away all suggestions from others, including her husband, that they split into two units. "Only way you gonna get me to go is whup me. She moved the sack handle gently again. 'An I'll shame you, Pa. I won't take no whuppin' Cryin an a - begin."

Everyone is bewildered by the ferocity of Ma's outburst. "I never been her so sassy" (230)

Just before they cross into Californian Gramma passes away and the detection of her dead body by officers of Agricultural Inspection would cause them immense difficulties. Ma Joad acts with courage and fortitude and pleads with the officers with great dignity. She sleeps next to the dead body under the tarpaulin cover during the night. When she discloses this the rest of the family can only look at her with a little terror at her strength. Tom says "Jesus Christ! You layin' there with her all night long" The family hadda get acrost, Ma said miserably." (312).

The education of Joads compels them to think in terms of communal 'we' instead of 'I' and enables to integrate with larger community. The education of Joad family begins once they are rendered homeless and find themselves rattling along with other migrants towards California. They soon discover that their homelessness and poverty have changed them into social pariahs the Okies as the migrants are called. This changed status disorients them to a degree and makes them react sharply, as when Tom Joad sternly rebukes the petrol pump attendant for doubting their ability to pay their way, they also derive some solace from the thought that they are not the only ones to be so uprooted.

Having lost all their earthly possessions and almost all worldly symbols so on; the migrants cling fiercely to their image as average but respectable members of society. Their struggle to retain their individuality in the face of great homogenizing political and economic disaster links them to the archetypal wanderers in search of the promised land. This pattern operates at three levels in the novel. Besides, the archetypal pattern of the exodus implied in the Joads story, two other typically American patterns are re-enacted by them. In their endeavour to retain as much of their original Oklahoman characters as they can, they are rather like their ancestors who, coming from different European backgrounds, tried to preserve as much of the culture of their own country as they could in the new land of their adoption. And finally going across to California in a long caravan of cars which replaced the wagons, the nineteenth century mode of transport, they recapitulate the whole history of the westward expansion of the American Frontier.

In manipulating these three levels, Steinbeck takes great care to see that none of them regresses into myth, dragging with it the essentially contemporary episode of the migrants as victims of a modern exploitative economic system spawned by the twentieth century. This picture of a typically modern social catastrophe is always kept in the foreground. Steinbeck's triumph lies in his ability to orchestrate all the three patterns with equal force without letting the mythical historical patterns overshadow the contingent reality of the migrants situation.

The representation of the Bank as a monster reinforces the impersonality of the destructive force and at the same time stresses the mechanical quality of the evil bred by the cross materialism which characterizes modern society. The bank has an insatiable appetite. As the voices in one of the chapters say, "The bank the monster has to have profits all the time. It can't want" (100). Like a monster in the ancient Greek legends devouring citizens, the bank is an impersonal evil that has acquired an independence existence. The migrants were the slaves, who having lost their lands back have come to California in search of work, only to find that in accepting work on the farms they had sold their souls to the devil. "Some of the farms grew so large that one man could not even conceive of them any more (317).

We can see how Steinbeck is at pains to stress the impersonality of the exploitative system. The plight of the migrants whose search for economic security ultimately delivers the faceless owner instead of the faceless bank, is delineated with clear bold strokes. No punches are pulled. Some of these sections make the experience of reading the book really harrowing one, but as Steinbeck wrote in a letter to his publisher Pascal Covici: I have too many thousands of hours on this book, every incident has been too carefully chosen and its weight judged and fitted. The balance is there. One other thing I am not writing a satisfying story. I have done my damndest to rip a reader's nerves to rags. I don't want him to be satisfied."2

It is the heroic struggle the Joads put up and the consequent suffering that land their story a tragic dimension. It is their refusal to let themselves be assimilated into this system which seeks to transform them into automatons with no human ties which implicate every reader in their fate. The Joads as the archetypes of an average family enact the eternal drama: humanity struggling to survive in a world where the frame of reference for determining good and evil is no longer derived from both Judaism and Christianity heritage but from a materialistic philosophy which measures man's worth in terms of the cash he earns. The migrants in general and the Joads in particular expose the emptiness of the modern wasteland. It is they who put up the last ditch-fight to prevent man from changing into a beast. It is typical of Steinbeck that his heroes and defenders of human value spring from among the outcasts and oppressed. It is the untutored and rough Joads who expose the superficiality and laxity of those who masquerade as guardians of society's morals.

The more they long to settle down the more are their attempts frustrated. The migrants never beg. All they want is work. But there is no work. They go hungry, their children's bellies swell with hunger, their eyes droop with debility but they continue to look for work. The exploitative system has also corrupted law and with the help of the Sheriffs the Grovers' Association continues to squeeze the migrants dry. As Tom puts it: "They're a workin' away at our spirits. They're a -tryin' to make us cringe an crawl like a whipped bitch." (381)

Steinbeck's depiction of the migrants plight in the squatters camps is shattering in its impact. Men, women and children waste away dying a slow death fiercely proud of their rights to live without selling their souls, trying to retain a modicum of dignity even while unable to stop their children dying of malnutrition: "The granaries were full and the children of the poor grew up rachitic, and the pustules of pellagra swelled on their sides." (387-88) settling But the migrants dream of settling down remains a dream. Even the image of their 'home' they carry begins to pall. Unimaginable horror is perpetrated by the growers who spray kerosene oil on oranges and allow them to rot to keep their prices up while the children of the migrants starve to death.

Conclusion

Frederick I. Carpenter in an essay maintains that ideas about the individual's sacrifice in the larger interests of the community which are expressed in their characteristically homely manner by Casy, Ma Joad and Tom resonate in the writings of such pioneers in American literature as Emerson and Whitman: The Grapes of Wrath brings together and makes real three skeins of American thought. It begins with the transcendental oversoul, Emerson's faith in the common man, and his protestant self-reliance. To this it joins Whitman's religion of the love of all man and his mass democracy. And it combines these mystical and poetic ideas with the realistic philosophy of pragmatism and its emphasis on effective action." How successful Steinbeck is in fusing this religious concept of martyrdom with the socialist ideal will have to be examined separately. Suffice it to say here that the biblical overtones reverberating throughout the novel offset any tendency towards political morality that Steinbeck's writing may have.

NOTES AND REFERENCES:

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