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Social Criticism in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores powerful social observations on the plight of the working class and the disenfranchised during the Great Depression. Steinbeck shacks radiance on the harsh realities faced by Dust Bowl migrants, tenant farmers, and laborers, highlighting issues of deficiency, poverty, abuse, and economic injustice. The novel highlights the disparity between the promise of prosperity and the harsh reality of poverty and oppression. Steinbeck powerfully demonstrates the frantic plight of Depression-era migrant workers, whom the author felt had been deserted by society. Steinbeck used many techniques to convey his criticism of middle-class values, the economic system, social, religion, exploitation, conformity and prejudice.

Keywords: Sentimental, Social, Religious, Economic, Exploitation, Conformity and Prejudice

INTRODUCTION

John Steinbeck was an American novelist, best known for *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), which summed up the bitterness of the Great Depression decade and aroused widespread sympathy for the plight of migratory farm workers. The novel centres round the great and continuing divisions in American society, but there is a serious vein of thought underlying the topical nature of the subject-matter and its local background. Steinbeck has searched broadly for a philosophical framework in which to embody his ideas of the good life and the good society. A study of his novels makes it clear that his most characteristic alternative to the materialism of life in the United States is the spirituality of Hinduism.

This oversimplification is a pity, not because it spoils *The Grapes of Wrath* (it does not), but because it prevented Steinbeck's writing a book which would have been much more universally American. When the Joads arrive in California and the inevitable clash arises, we see its effect only on one party. We do not get the story of the little people on the other side. Yet the men who fought against the Joads were just as terrified and in the long run just as luckless. When circumstances turn them against their own kind, the plight of the have-a-little is just as pitiable as that of the have-nots. Steinbeck goes to some lengths to establish our faith in the fact that his people are typically American, not only by introducing the classical rural jokes about sex in the barnyard, but by laboring over the native mysticism of Tom and more especially of Casy, the ex-preacher who can't feel religious without wanting a woman, too.

The point needs not be labored. It is enough to put beside the Mayor's exit speech from The Moon Is Down Tom Joad's final speech to his mother, in *The Grapes of Wrath*. It will be remembered that the Mayor goes out to be shot after quoting the words of the Phaedo which have to do with the paying of Socretes' debt of a cock to Asclepius. Now hear this:

"Then it don't matter. Then I'll be al aroun' in the dark. I'll be everywhere – wherever you look. Wherever they'd a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever they'd a cop beat in' up a guy, I'll be there. If Casy knowed, why, I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad an' – I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry an' they know supper's ready. An' when our folks eat the stuff they raise an' live in the houses they build – why, I'll be there. . . ."(The Grapes of Wrath,77)

Tom's goodbye to his mother has in it some of the homegrown mysticism which I find annoying wherever it turns up in Steinbeck, but there is no getting around the fact that it also has an emotional tension to which the reader's emotions respond; there is warmth in these words. There is no warmth in the Mayor, nor, as he stands in print, is their breath. Steinbeck is simply too detached from him; he and his characters are on the same side against a common enemy, but if the Mayor did not happen to be head of a town taken over by the Nazis it is inconceivable that Steinbeck would even speak to him on the street. The difference between Tom Joad and the Mayor is that Steinbeck loves Tom Joad. And so he concluded with a statement that might serve as preface in and of itself: "Throughout I've tried to make the reader participate in the actuality, what he takes from it will be scaled on his own depth and shallowness. There are five layers in this book, a reader will find as many as he can and he won't find more than he has in himself."(The Grapes of Wrath, 82)

The Grapes of Wrath philosophically profound is not to say that Steinbeck's best novel is without technical weaknesses. There are heights of excellence side by side with marks of weaknesses like sentimentality, weak characterization and theatricality. "Steinbeck's failure in *The Grapes of Wrath.* It should have been one of America's great books...Steinbeck wrote not a great and firm novel but a disappointing melodrama in which complex good is pitted against unmitigated, unbelievable evil"(Gardner, John 44)

Tom Joad is admired for being a good mechanic, but no blame is attached to him for killing a man in a drunken brawl. Sentimentalising ruins, too, some of what would otherwise have been good realistic situations and turns them into tear-jerkers. The father of a migrant family comes into a restaurant with two little boys to purchase bread worth ten cents, which is all he can afford. A loaf costs fifteen cents and the girl at the counter does not want to sell only ten cents worth of it. At last she gives the whole loaf for ten cents only and candy worth ten cents for one cent only for the little boys. The sentiment is out of place since the chapter deals with t the weary discontent of the rich and the exploitation of the migrants by businessmen along the way. For example, in the same restaurant are three slot machines, and when any one of them is ready to pay off, the owner himself plays and gets the jack pot. It is meant to suggest that it is only the poor who help the poor; the incident a described is unrealistic. Sentimental, too, is the scene of the final illness of Sairy Wilson. It has the same maudlin quality as of the death of Smike in Charles Dickens' Nicholas Nickleby and of Eva in Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin.

The non-dualistic philosophy *The Grapes of Wrath* advocates, the powerful story it narrates, the great art with which the narrative and intercalary chapters are juxtaposed and integrated, and the number of strategically employed prose styles, like the structural rhythms of the Old Testament in some passages, the staccato prose of some others, the beautifully controlled objective passages of others still, and the earthy speech of the characters which give variety and epic sweep to the novel, have deservedly craned high praise from critics. But even in this excellent novel Steinbeck remains an incorrigible sentimentalist. His sentimental approach to life may be seen in his celebration of non-intellectuals. "Others who were accused Steinbeck of exaggerating camp conditions to make a political point. He had visited the camps well before publication of the novel and argued their inhumane nature destroyed the settlers' spirit" (Shillinglaw, Susan 101)

Another defect in *The Grapes of Wrath* is the theatricality of certain situations. The last scene in which Rose of Sharon breast-feeds the starving old man is a highly symbolic episode expressing the central theme of the novel that all life is holy, but it leaves the impression that it has been manipulated to carry a moral. Still another defect is that some of the idealistic passages do not ring true. The well known passage about progress is eloquent but unconvincing:"This you may say of man . . . when theories change and crash, when schools, philosophies, when narrow dark alleys of thought, national, religious, economic, grow and disintegrate, man reaches, stumbles forward, painfully, mistakenly sometimes. Having stepped forward, he may slip back, but only half a step, never the felt step back" (*The Grapes of Wrath*, 135)

This reads as though the writer was trying to convince himself of something of which he was not too sure himself, And when Tom expresses, at the end of the novel, transcendental metaphysics in words of one syllable, it is difficult to believe that an illiterate Okie like Tom could give expression to beautiful thought. "There is reason to argue that a critical reading of The Grapes of Wrath could potentially inform teachers on how to highlight social issues. By understanding the renewed significance that the novel has gained with the economic crisis" (Dyen, 21)

In spite of all these weaknesses, however, The Grapes of Wrath remains a great novel and Steinbeck holds an important position in that minor stream of American thought which has been reaching towards the Orient from the days of Emerson onwards. The Transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau were directly influenced by Hindu thought, and transcendentalism is the cultural heritage of all Americans, except very recent immigrants, whether it is recognized as transcendentalism or is called by some other name. "The novel gave rise to a wide range of critical responses, targeting everything from the much too vulgar language and descriptions in the novel, to the supposedly misleading descriptions of migrant families, meant to increase sympathy for these families" (Welch, 90)

It has ever remained a force in American culture and it is so pervasive that it is natural for Steinbeck to have imbibed it as a part of his heritage. There are several important parallels between Steinbeck's and Upanishadic thought, and since The Grapes of Wrath is his most representative work, they are found reflected in it. But because of the presence of myths from the Old and New Testaments and some Christian symbolism, the Hindu thought has been missed by critics. And it will be seen that the 'major intended meaning' is not merely 'thoroughly Christian', as claimed by Martin Staples Shockley, but that there is more to Jim Casy and the way he is presented than we can find by restricting analysis to Christian symbolism. Through Casy, Steinbeck expresses not the dualism of Christianity but the non-dualism of the Upanishads.

The Grapes of Wrath ends with a highly symbolic episode, but it also ends in medias res, on an equivocal note. The novel ends, on the story level, on a note of tragedy Jim Casy is dead, Tom leaves the family, Al is about to leave, Connie has deserted, Rose of Sharon's baby is still-born, the Joads have nothing left no cash, no food, and no transport. They have, however, not lost everything, for even as they have been losing their material possessions, they have been evolving spiritually. And so they live to fight another day buttressed by their recognition of the brotherhood of man. Though the novel records the spiritual progress of the Joads, the idea of the cyclic pattern of events in the universe is hinted at again and again. Steinbeck makes use of myths to suggest the recurrence of migrations in all ages and in all countries. A cyclic pattern of events is also seen in the fact of the earlier generations of the Okies driving out the Indians and occupying their lands and the present Okies being deprived of those very lands by more powerful forces, and the banks.

A similar cycle of events may be seen in the suggestion that the rich land-owners of California who lead an easy life will get soft and fall a prey to the aggression of the Okies. Ma Joad tells Tom, Rich fell as come up an' they die, and their kids isn't no good, and they die out. But, Tom, we keep a-coming" (*The Grapes of Wrath,* 257) but the Okies, too, will become soft if they lead an easy life. This theory of his has been explained by Steinbeck in the 'Log'. He thinks that the fiercer the competition, the healthier it is for the animals, and the greater the odds they have to fight against, the greater is the toughness they build up. He writes:

"There was an exuberant fierceness in the littoral here, vital competition for existence. Everything seemed speeded-up; starfish and urchins were more strongly attached than in other places, and many of the univalves were so tightly fixed that the shells broke before the animals would let go their hold. Perhaps the force of the great surf which beats on this shore has much to do with the tenacity of the animals here. It is noteworthy that the animals, rather than deserting such beaten shores for the safe cove and protected pools, simply increase their toughness and fight back at the sea with a kind of joyful survival" (.The Grapes of Wrath 58)

When the conditions for survival become easy, animals as well as men become soft. Steinbeck continues:

"Perhaps the pattern of struggle is so deeply imprinted in the genes of all life conceived in this benevolently hostile planet that the removal of obstacles automatically atrophies a survival drive. With warm water and abundant food, the animals may retire into a sterile sluggish happiness. This has certainly seemed true in man. Force and cleverness and versatility have surely been the children of obstacles. Tacitus, in the His places as one of the tactical methods advanced to be used against the German armies their exposure to a warm climate and a soft rich food supply. These, he said, will ruin troops quicker than anything else. If these things are true in a biologic sense, what is to become of the fed, warm, protected citizenry of the ideal future state"(The Grapes of Wrath 227)

It should, however, be mentioned here that Steinbeck is not consistent about this theory, for in The Grapes of Wrath the Joads survive not only because they are hardy, but because they are good. There is price to pay, however, for the tragedy we get. Steinbeck's compassion leads to oversimplification, distaste for complication which extends beyond a mere dislike off complicating personalities. For our purposes it is unimportant that the original popularity of *The Grapes of Wrath* was a product of its timeliness and topical interest, that it appeared at a moment when interest in alleviating the lot of the migrants was widespread; the book is no whit greater because, as a reform tract, it did have practical and beneficial effect on the condition of the Okies and Arkies in California. We do not now read *The Grapes of Wrath* for these reasons. The important thing for us here and now is that the plight of these people rose in Steinbeck the passion and anger which caused him to write the book. In his wrath he goes too far. He can see only two kinds of people, those like the Joads and those who whirl past the migrants on Highway in expensive cars. One page of *The Grapes of Wrath* reveals the violence of the antithesis:

"Langid, heat-raddled ladies, small nucleuses about whom revolve a thousand accounterments: creams, ointments to grease themselves, coloring matter in phials-black, pink, red, white, green, silver-to change the color of hair, eyes, lips, nails, bows, lashes, lids. Oils, seeds, and pills to make the bowels move. A bag of bottles, syringes, pills, powders, fluids, jellies to make their sexual intercourse safe, odorless and unproductive. And this apart from clothes. What a hell of a nuisance!. . . Beside them, little pot-bellied men in light suits and panama hats; clean, pink men with puzzled, worried eyes, with restless eyes. Worried because formulas do not work out; hungry for security and yet sensing its disappearance from the earth. In their lapels the insignia of lodges and service clubs, places where they can go and, by a weight of numbers of little worried men, reassure themselves that business is noble and not the curious ritualized thievery they know it is; that business men are intelligent in spite of the records of their stupidity; that they are kind and charitable in spite of the principles of sound business; that their lives are rich instead of the thin tiresome routines they know; and that a time is coming when they will not be afraid any more" (The Grapes of Wrath,211)

CONCLUSION

The Grapes of Wrath as merely a topical novel written in the context of the migration of the Okies from the dust bowl to the rich lands of California, or as an appeal to the rich to behave, or as an appeal to the migrants to organize themselves, insist that the intended meaning is only Christian is to diminish the stature and the symbolic richness of this great novel. Besides love, Steinbeck needs wrath an emotion strong enough to hold his pages together. And this is exactly what is lacking in his postwar books. He merely loves the people he loves and wants them to be happy. Happiness, in such a context, seems to be little more than freedom from serious worried and the uninhibited assuagement of the more pressing biological urges. It seems to reside, very largely, in the region of the pelvis. An older generation, at this point, would have talked of a fundamental lack of moral seriousness.

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