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Research Paper Literature

The Grapes of Wrath - an Aesthetic Discovery

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ABSTRACT

John Steinbeck was a writer who created memorable stories and deeply cared about people, particularly the dispossessed and the persecuted. These people were the subject of his greatest novels. Steinbeck's critics in the 1930s viewed him as an anti-capitalist and anti-industrialist because of his desire to document the horrid living conditions in the agricultural fields of California's Central Valley, but, in reality, Steinbeck's beliefs and attitudes were ambivalent when writing about the complex relationships that drove the social and economic life in the 1930s. This paper focuses on an aesthetic, philosophical influences, agricultural depression, rural sociology and sociopolitical perspective of John Steinbeck's novel The Grapes of Wrath.

KEYWORDS : complex relationships, aesthetic and sociopolitical

INTRODUTION

John Steinbeck is one of the few American writers who can be discussed in relation to the past as well as the present. He might have been the last writer of a generation for whom being an American seemed in it a special thing and being an American an extraordinary thing. He is generally regarded as the most versatile of contemporary American fictional artists. "An American writer who had appeared with a sure and subtle sense for literary effect, a story-teller worthy to be compared to Chekov or Anatole France for his skill in shaping up the stuff of human lives in forms that delight the mind and imagination" (1957: 80) and that was John Steinbeck, as Joseph Warren Beach rightly put it.

Steinbeck with his novel *The Grapes of Wrath* at once joined the company of Hawthorne, Melville, Stephen Crane, and Norris and easily leapt to the forefront of all his contemporaries. "Steinbeck is now a better novelist than Hemingway, Farrell or Dos Passos, he does not invoke comparisons, he simply makes one feel that Steinbeck is, in some way all his own, a force", as Louis Kronen Berger would consider (1939: 440-41).

The greatest literary event of the year 1939 was the publication of his classic novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. It won the Pulitzer Prize of the year and also brought him the Nobel Prize for literature in 1962. Steinbeck has written nothing else so successful as this. Few writers however, have written one such work, one that marks not only the high point of its author's career but the close of an era in American history and literature. Before the Nobel Prize in literature was awarded to John Steinbeck only five Americans had been previously thus honoured, Ernest Hemingway in 1954 and William Faulkner in 1949. It made Steinbeck stand among the great American writers like Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson, Mark Twain, William Faulkner, T.S. Eliot, Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway and Toni Morrison.

ABOUT THE GRAPES OF WRATH

The Grapes of Wrath was first announced in *Publisher's Weekly* on December 31, 1938. Three advanced printings occurred before the novel actually appeared in March. By April it was selling 2,500 copies a day, by May it reached the top of the best-sellers list. Viking shipped out 430,000 copies by the end of the year.

Overseas translations were quickly arranged in Danish, Dutch, French, Italian, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Rumanian, Swedish and Russian, but the outbreak of war in Europe delayed the novel's wide distribution there.

In his *Biography of Steinbeck*, Brain St. Pierre notes of *The Grapes of Wrath* that "In 1982, *The New York Times* reported that it was the second best-selling novel ever in paperback in American, with 14,600,000 copies printed". Feeling ran highest in Oklahoma and California; writing in 1944 Martin Shockley reported that *The Grapes of Wrath* sold sensationally in Oklahoma bookstores.

The three phases of response, each of about fifteen years, can be roughly characterized as the Histrionic, the Formal and the Contextual. In the first, the novel is subjected to a correspondence theory of truth that measures it against some putative social reality and the commentator against his or her political credentials. In the second, the novel provokes attention as a work of art that fulfills literary conventions and expectation. In the third, the novel is framed by its biographical and regional fields of force.

On February 13, 1940, reviewer Harry Hansen, announced that members of the American Book Sellers Association had chosen *The Grapes of Wrath* as their favourite novel of 1939. Steinbeck received from booksellers an engraved bronze paperweight in the form of an open book.

On April 1, 1940, it was announced during an intermission at the *Social Work Follies of 1940* that *The Grapes of Wrath* had received the first annual award of *Social Work Today*, a publication of the social service Employees Union, for "individual work which has interpreted most effectively unmet social and economic need". A bronze statue accompanied this award.

On May 6, 1940, the trustees of Columbia University echoed the choice of the critics by announcing that the Pulitzer Prize for the year's most distinguished novel had indeed gone to *The Grapes of Wrath*.

LITERATURE SURVEY

In American literature only, one novel which is Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* had previously brought together the political, sociological, and aesthetic powers, with its searching indictment of the south and of the institution of slavery; it struck the human conscience with its unequalled brilliance and its use of the vernacular.

Novels that have become classics do more than tell a story and describe characters; they offer insight into men's motives and point to the springs of action. Together with the moving picture, they offer a criticism of life.

Although this theory of art may seem classical, all important modern novels, especially American novels have clearly suggested an abstract idea of life. The Scarlet Letter symbolized 'sin', Moby Dick offered an 'allegory of evil', Huckleberry Finn described the revolt of the "natural individual" against "civilization" and Babbitt (like Emerson's "Self Reliance") denounced the narrow convention of "society". The Grapes of Wrath goes beyond these to preach a positive philosophy of life and to damn that blind conservatism which fears ideas. The Grapes of Wrath is a shrewd novel, a lively pattern of experience, varied and skillful in texture.

WHAT IS AESTHETICS?

Aesthetics is the study of beauty and taste, whether in the form of the comic, the tragic, or the sublime. The word derives from the Greek *aisthetikos*, meaning "of sense perception." Aesthetics has traditionally been part of philosophical pursuits like epistemology or ethics, but it started to come into its own and become a more independent pursuit under Immanuel Kant, the German philosopher who saw aes-

thetics as a unitary and self-sufficient type of human experience.

AESTHETIC DISCOVERY IN THE GRAPES OF WRATH

In his study of John Steinbeck's work, Peter Lisca ends the introductory paragraph on The Grapes of Wrath as follows: Although thus associated with this class of social-protest fiction *The Grapes of Wrath* continues to be read, not as piece of literary or social history, but with a sense of emotional involvement and aesthetic discovery. More than any other American novel, it successfully embodied 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 (1982: 48-49).

The novel is clearly Steinbeck's best work, as it has proved to be, it is most assuredly an important and influential novel, possibly as Lisca claims "a 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 500,000 Americans that lived in the covers of that book. I would like to see the Columbia Basin devoted to the care of the 500,000 people represented in *The Grapes of Wrath*" (1940:17).

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

Steinbeck wrote a realistic novel that mimics life and offers social comments on real life in Midwest American in the 1930s. But it also offers a social comment, directly in the intercalary chapters and indirectly in the places and people it portrays. Typical of very many, the Joads are driven off the land by far away banks; they set out on a journey to California to find a better life.

However the journey breaks up the family, their dreams are not realized and their fortunes disappear. What promised to be the land of milk and honey turns to sour grapes. In the same way, the hopes and dreams of a generation turn to wrath. Steinbeck did see this mess come together, and the public did put it to the side. Steinbeck places *The Grapes of Wrath* out there to the public to really prove what was happening in this world. By catching the people's attention he could tell the people what he thought of the situation.

PHILOSOPHICAL INFLUENCES IN THE GRAPES OF WRATH

The movement of the major characters in the novel from a religious-based to a humanity-based philosophy of life supports the concept of humanism found in Steinbeck's social theory. This thought reflects the political ideals of the nineteenth century American poet, Walt Whitman, who believed that democracy was based on the existence of a mutual connection between individuals, a situation in which the group entity was of as great an importance as the individual. Humanism can be traced back to Whitman's exaltation of the common man and can best be understood as a love of all persons. This is the spirit that Jim Casy is referring to when he claims that it's "all men and women that we love…the Holy Sperit — the human sperit." This love will most often be physically expressed by the mother figures in the novel: Ma, Sairy Wilson, and eventually, Rose of Sharon. From her first appearance in the novel, Ma is the epitome of the concept of loving one's neighbor. She is the first to extend comfort or nourishment to strangers. This willingness to help people is seen in her welcoming of Casy into the family and her feeding of the hungry children in the Hooverville camp. She works selflessly for others and tries to instill the same attitude in Rose of Sharon. Sairy Wilson's compassionate help during Granpa's death, in spite of her own illness, is another example of human love extending outside the family. Rose of Sharon is slow to embrace this selflessness and giving, focusing instead on her own comfort and well-being for the majority of the novel. In the end, however, she, too, becomes part of this embracing of all humankind when she offers her life-giving milk to the starving stranger.

The theory of Jeffersonian agrarianism was later recognized by critic Chester E. Eisinger to be the fourth strand of Steinbeck's social philosophy. Agrarianism is a way of living that is intricately tied to one's love and respect of land. Through connection with the growth-cycle of the land, humankind gains identity. Steinbeck's symbolic treatment of this idea can be found repeatedly in *The Grapes of Wrath.* Steinbeck uses the life force in a horse and the mechanized power of the tractor to metaphorically contrast the productiveness that comes from a love of the land with the deadness that arises from an isolation from it. Men are whole when they are working with the land, and conversely, they are depleted, emotionally and physically, when they are taken from the land. Losing the farm "took somepin' outa Pa," and one displaced tenant states, "I am the land, the land is me." When that land is taken away, the men lose part of themselves, their dignity, and their self-esteem. Also closely tied to the land is family unity. With the separation from the land comes a disintegration of the family unit. Ma expresses this most succinctly when she observes, "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."

AGRICULTURAL DEPRESSION AND RURAL SOCIOLOGY IN THE GRAPES OF WRATH

The Grapes of Wrath is a novel about the agricultural Depression of the 1930s, and that memory of the folly and failure of man, the dustbowl. Yet it is a novel not about conditions, but about people, the common people of the Howells even though Howells would have been shocked at the novel itself. Steinbeck's despair and imagination are too great for a Howells, and his characters far from the familiar society of a Howell – like Anderson and Faulkner, in contrast to Howells, he even questions the assumption of free will in the individual. This novel, unlike most of the novels of the previous century, is as much about a few central people.

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 that evangelistic religion which seems to thrive in the more impoverished rural districts of this vast country.

John Chamberlain, in *Harper's Magazine* (1963:109) found it "a wise and tender and moving book as well as a social document of the first order". Charles Angoff, writing in the dying *North American Review* (1936-110) observed that, "The book has all the ear marks of something momentous monumental and memorable. Peter Monro Jack, writing in *The New York Times Book Review* (1963:110) said that "the real truth is that Steinbeck has written a novel from the depths of his heart with a sincerity seldom equalled". In the *Literary History of the United States* (1948), Maxwell Geismar, spoke of *The Grapes of Wrath*, "recalling as it did the historical meaning of the frontier in terms of social crisis," as "a big and life-giving book" (1963:194). Malcolm Cowley, declaring fervently that "A whole literature is summarized in this book and much of it is carried to a new level of excellence", went on to state that "in the Joad family, everyone from Granpa down to the two brats, Ruthie and Winfield, is a distinct and living person" (1963:193). Joseph Warren Beach declared in 1941 that *The Grapes of Wrath* is "probably the finest example produced in the United States of what in the thirties was called the proletarian novel" (1963:192). Miss Mary E.Lemon of Kingfisher wrote to the *Oklahoma City Times* (1963:122): To many of us, John Steinbeck's novel, *The Grapes of Wrath* has sounded the keynote of our domestic depression, and put the situation before us in an appealing way.

CONCLUSION

John Steinbeck achieved worldwide recognition for his keen observations and powerful descriptions of the human condition. He championed the forgotten and disenfranchised while affirming the strength of the human spirit. His life was as rich and provocative as the Salinas valley he immortalized in his writing. Steinbeck drew his inspiration from this land and became known throughout the world.

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