



## Ecological Consciousness in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*.

### KEYWORDS

a larger whole ,interdependent, ecological community

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**ABSTRACT** *The Grapes of Wrath*, one of John Steinbeck's great experiments, explodes upon the American conscience in 1939, picturing the intimate reality of the Joads' suffering and the plight of the Oklahoma Migrants.

Steinbeck's characters are always the ones connected to the natural environment. His troubled characters are frequently disassociated or ignorant of being part of a larger whole. Jim Casy and Tom Joad though troubled of the material pursuits, they find a way to come out of it only in wilderness. It is in the deep forest they find the ultimate truth of life. Tom Joad realize the philosophy from I toWE .

The novel shows human history and natural history as intimately and intricately interdependent. It brings humankind down from its pride state as superior beings and makes not only the characters but also the readers to look at it as just one element in the ecological community.

Ecological Consciousness in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*.

*The Grapes of Wrath*, one of John Steinbeck's great experiments, explodes upon the American conscience in 1939, picturing the intimate reality of the Joads' suffering and the plight of the dust bowl, Oklahoma Migrants. Steinbeck forcefully delineates the state of powerless tenant farmers who struggle for a new life and new self. But they don't fall a prey to crude misery. Instead they shake off their bewilderment, grow angry and fight for survival. Steinbeck establishes the harmony between man and nature and one man and another man.

Dr. Brian Railsback calls Steinbeck as the father of Eco Criticism though the theory was formulated after his death. "It's surprising he's not a central figure," Railsback says. "It's the best way to read him. The medium of nature exists throughout his work."

Steinbeck's characters are always the ones connected to the natural environment. His troubled characters are frequently disassociated or ignorant of being part of a larger whole. Jim Casy and Tom Joad though troubled of the material pursuits, they find a way to come out of it only in wilderness. It is in the deep forest they find the ultimate truth of life. It's what defines them as characters and makes them wise. Tom Joad realize the philosophy from I to WE .

Steinbeck vividly shows that human is a part of nature or ecology and he does not have a role more important than any other species. The Okies are driven away from their land and it is an episode which demonstrates that nature is powerful than man and human is dependent on it. The family of Joad go in search of greener pastures and reach California only to witness a battle for survival. Their movement becomes inevitable.

It is the progression which gives them sustenance and determination. Casy, the preacher, says "People moving, we know why, and we know how. Moving 'cause they want some pin better than what they got. An' that's the only

way they'll ever git it. Wanting' it and need in' it, they'll go out and git it" (GW 8). The Okies' in a destitute state started their progression ready to face any struggle with a hope of breaking the obstacles they face. For the family of Joad, California is the place where they can see their dreams. They are attached to their land but nature proves dominant than man by making him realize that man is not superior in any way.

The novelist hints the plight of the Okies in the opening paragraph of the novel. He uses the land as a symbol to show the plight of the farmers. It shows the pattern of the life. It portrays the movement they undertake. It further marks the dual dominos, joy and suffering, that rule the life. The novelist has said,

The plows crossed and re-crossed the rivulet marks.... The surface of the earth, a thin hard curse, and as the sky became pale, so the earth became pale, pink in the red country and white in the gray country. (GW 5)

The novelist foreshadows the fate of the migrants. It also underlines that the Okies get chained to troubles of drought. The passage ends with a ray of hope. The 'pink' and 'white' symbolize the rain which will come again as a great nourishing force.

The narrative interludes focus to give the picture of the migrants' plight and also supply the background information such as the history of the California agriculture. The descriptive power of Steinbeck comes to the fore in the opening chapter where he introduces the setting and the picture of the land.. Steinbeck has created an effective transition between the end of the interchapter and the beginning of the narrative chapter. The transition is significant because of the change in the tone of the colour of the atmosphere, situation and the mind of the farmers. The introduction of Tom Joad establishes the dexterity of the writer.

The second interchapter with the famous scene of the turtle movement symbolises the migrants. In this chapter he utilizes symbolism as one of the techniques. Like the mi-

grants it must hazard life on the road and like the farmers it has to face the crude force of machines. With the naturalistic symbol of the turtle, Steinbeck has made it clear that the migrants will succeed in carrying new life into the new land. The Route 66 ensures faith in them. The natural imagery of the turtle and its way, figure the story of Joads.

The turtle protects itself against a natural danger like the red ant it kills. The turtle eyes are 'fierce, humorous' it is a force that guides it. The novelist foreshadows the path of the Joads with the movement of the turtle. They survive the difficulties and overcome the threatening forces by standing united. On a deeper level, the family is attempting to rediscover the identity it cost when it was dispossessed. From a devastated state they rediscover order which is a result of their ultimate optimism. This process helps them to understand the unique principle 'I to we'.

The tractors have come, the drought has brought danger, the dust has settled upon the little houses. Disaster and difficulty engulf the reduced farmers. There is no choice but to get out and find food for their life. The depression jolts them and they think about their future with tormented heart. They had to sell all their possessions to fuel their movement. Tom Joad and his family gather together and set out in an old car on "Road 66" to California. The novelist highlights the road:

66 is the path of the people in flight, refugees from dust and shrinking land, from the thunder of tractors and shrinking ownership.... 66 is the mother road, the road of flight. (GW 137)

Jim Casey, an ex-preacher, though fails in his part, successfully frees himself from physical and material urges. Stoddard Martin has quoted the lines of Christopher Isherwood on Casey as "a new – Tolstoy figure, agnostic and perplexed, whose provisional creed is" You gotta do what you gotta do" (GW 71). It is Casey who enlightens Tom Joad. Casey makes Joad realise the power of an individual and how each individual is a part of the Universal entity. His action taught Tom the duty of an individual in a group. Dougherty's image of Casey as in Stoddard Martin's work goes as "Casey is a John-the-Baptist figure, operating as a precursor to Tom" (GW 71). He unfolds the wings of compassion to the people he sees.

It is obvious to the reader—from the very first page to the last, that Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* has the following ecological perspectives and finally the characters experience a transformation which help them to find the ecological and social consciousness from Tom Joad to Sharon.

The novel shows human history and natural history as intimately and intricately interdependent. It brings humankind down from its pride state as superior beings and makes

not only the characters but also the readers to look at it as just one element in the ecological community. The story however measures human intrusion in the environment from an ethical perspective, suggesting that humans are made to account and pay for their way of dealing with the human and non-human environment. The novel shows a natural (and human) world shaped and reshaped by the restless, relentless momentum of a cosmic energy, a force of constant transformation.

The novel clearly portrays that human beings are not the strong base of the ecological pyramid.. Each play a part and it forms a group which finally evolves into a big ecological or universal group thereby strengthening the concept I to WE.

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