

# *The Embodiment of Symbolism, Realism and Naturalism in The Grapes of Wrath*

Xinyu Zhang  
 College of Foreign Languages  
 Bohai University  
 Jinzhou, China  
 ninazhang1260@aliyun.com

**Abstract**—The *Grapes of Wrath* won the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for John Steinbeck. The following paper is a study of the artistic characteristics running through the novel. The *Grapes of Wrath* is the historically authentic story of the Joad family; Oklahoma farmers dispossessed of their land and forced to become migrant farmers in California. Steinbeck's majority novels had the theme of social realism, but *The Grapes of Wrath* has been considered the best example. It is also a sympathetic description exhorting us for greater social commitment and compassion as well as formulating policies of equality and justice. In the novel great feelings for nature, land, wilderness, mountains and shores were found to show the nature of Americans. The paper aims to explain the viewpoint that symbolism, realism and naturalism are well incorporated and embodied in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

**Keywords**—*symbolism, realism, naturalism, The Grapes of Wrath, conflict, social commitment*

## I. INTRODUCTION

John Steinbeck was born on February 27, 1902, in Salinas, California. One of his masterpiece *The Grapes of Wrath* won the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize in 1940. *The Grapes of Wrath* is the historically authentic story of the Joad family; Oklahoma farmers dispossessed of their land and forced to become migrant farmers in California. No writer captures more vividly than John Steinbeck what it was like to live through the Great Depression of the 1930s. John Steinbeck aims to express the American political and social system as the reflection on characterization, plot, and symbols in the novel [1]. Some scholars argue the case for John Steinbeck's place in the Modernist tradition of the early twentieth century; some critics still categorize Steinbeck as either a realist or a naturalist; others generally thought that John Steinbeck belongs to symbolism. Undoubtedly due to the primary place *The Grapes of Wrath* holds, and likely will continue to hold, in the Steinbeck canon. This article brought up with the idea that Steinbeck does incorporate elements of symbolism, realism and naturalism in *The Grapes of Wrath*. The following argument could prove the viewpoint.

## II. THE BACKGROUND OF THE GRAPES OF WRATH

John Steinbeck wrote some of his best fiction about the area where he grew up. The territory that Steinbeck wrote

about is an area covering thousands of square miles in central California. He particularly used the Long Valley as a setting in his fiction, which extends south of Salinas, Steinbeck's hometown. The Long Valley, covering more than one hundred miles, lies between the Gambian Mountains to the east and the Santa Lucia Mountains on the Pacific Coast. The major site of *The Grapes of Wrath* is the San Joaquin Valley, which lies east of the Long Valley and the Gambian Mountains. The Long Valley is also the general setting for *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and *East of Eden* (1952), two of Steinbeck's other well-known works. This rich agricultural area is an ironic setting for a novel that examines the economic and social problems affecting people during the Depression [2]. It was no promised land for the Joads and others like them. One of Steinbeck's major achievements is his remarkable descriptions of the environment and nature's effects on social history. He was also ahead of his time in writing about the circumstances of the migrant workers and small farmers fighting corporate farms and the financial establishment decades before such subjects gained national press coverage in the 1970s.

## III. SYMBOLISM IN THE GRAPES OF WRATH

The major symbol in the novel *The Grapes of Wrath* is the family, which stands for the larger "family" of humanity. The Joads are at the center of the dramatic aspects of the novel, and they illustrate human strengths and weaknesses. Dangers in nature and in society disrupt the family, but they survive economic and natural disasters, just as humanity does. At the end, the Joads themselves recognize they are part of a larger family. The land itself is a symbol that is equated in the novel with a sense of personal identity. What the Joads actually suffer when they lose their Oklahoma farm is a sense of identity, which they struggle to rediscover during their journey and in California [3]. Pa Joad, especially, loses his spirit after the family is "tractored off" their land. He must cede authority in the family to Ma after their loss.

There is also a sequence of Judeo-Christian symbols throughout the novel. The Joads, like the Israelites, are a homeless and persecuted people looking for the promised land. Jim Casy can be viewed as a symbol of Jesus Christ, who began his mission after a period of solitude in the wilderness. Casy is introduced in the novel after a similar period of retreat. And later, when Casy and Tom meet in the strikers' tent, Casy

says he has “been a-gin’ into the wilderness like Jesus to try to find out sumpin.” Also, Jim Casy has the same initials as Jesus Christ. Like Christ, Casy finally offers himself as the sacrifice to save his people. Casy’s last words to the man who murders him are significant: “Listen, you fellas don’ know what you’re doing.” And just before he dies, Casy repeats: “You don’ know what you’re a-doin’.” [4] When Jesus Christ was crucified, He said, “Father forgive them; they know not what they do.” Tom becomes Casy’s disciple after his death. Tom is ready to continue his teacher’s work, and it has been noted that two of Jesus’s disciples were named Thomas.

Biblical symbols from both Old and New Testament stories occur throughout the novel [4]. Twelve Joads start on their journey from Oklahoma, corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel or the twelve disciples of Christ (with Jim Casy, the Christ figure) on their way to spiritual enlightenment by a messiah. Like Lot’s wife, Grampa is reluctant to leave his homeland, and his refusal to let go of the past brings his death. Later, the narrative emphasizes this symbolism when Tom selects a Scripture verse for Grampa’s burial that quotes Lot. The shifts between the Old and New testaments coalesce with Jim Casy, whose ideas about humanity and a new social gospel parallel Christ’s new religion two thousand years ago. Biblical myths also inform the final scene through a collection of symbols that demonstrate the existence of a new order in the Joads’ world [4]. As the Joads seek refuge from the flood in a dry barn, the narrative offers symbols of the Old Testament deluge (Noah’s ark), the New Testament stable where Christ was born (the barn), and the mysterious rite of Communion as Rose of Sharon breast-feeds the starving man. With this ending, it is clear that this is a new beginning for the Joads.

All the symbols express hope and regeneration despite the continuing desperate circumstances. So Steinbeck’s social preoccupations show a very different emphasis.

#### IV. REALISM EMBODIED IN THE CONFLICT BETWEEN THE MIGRANTS AND THE ESTABLISHED

The conflict in the novel between the impoverished migrants and the established, secure business people and Californians serves as a strong criticism of economic injustice. In fact, *The Grapes of Wrath* can be read as a social comment on the economic disasters of the time. The migrants’ agrarian way of life has all but disappeared, threatened not only by nature’s drought and dust storms, but also by big farms and financial establishments, called “the Bank”. At the beginning of the novel, the owners and the banks push the tenants off their land. Later the arrival of hundreds of thousands of poor people causes conflict in California [5].

The migrants represent trouble for businessmen in the form of higher taxes, labor unions, and possible government interference. There are also conflicts within the family that reflect the materialistic concerns of this class conflict. Rose of Sharon is preoccupied with her pregnancy and daydreams of the future. The novel demonstrates the individual’s instinct to organize communities within the groups of migrants in roadside camps. “In the evening a strange thing happened: the twenty families became one family, the children were the children of all. The loss of home became one loss, and the golden time in the West was one dream.” The Joads are also on

an inward journey. For them, suffering and homelessness become the means for spiritual growth and a new consciousness. Ma sums up this new consciousness and what it means to her when she says: “Use’ ta be the fambly was fust. It ain’t so now. It’s anybody.” [6] Yet although each of the four characters undergoes a spiritual transformation, each also finds an individual way to help others in the world and to take action. At the end, Tom has decided to become a leader in the militant organizing of the migrants. Ma accepts her commitments to people other than her family. Rose of Sharon loses her baby but comes to understand the “we” of the starving man to whom she blissfully gives life as if he were her child. Casy, who has been jailed, reappears as a strike leader and union organizer, having discovered that he must work to translate his understanding of the holiness of life into social action. Casy dies when vigilantes attack the strikers and kill him first.

Steinbeck makes clear that this potential for transcendental consciousness is what makes human beings different from other creatures in nature. In Chapter 14, Steinbeck describes humanity’s willingness to “die for a concept” as the “one quality [that] is the foundation of Manself, and this one quality is man, distinctive in the universe.”

#### V. NATURALISM EMBODIED BY SOCIAL COMMITMENT EXTENSIVELY DEVELOPED IN THE GRAPES OF WRATH

Steinbeck develops extensively the theme of social commitment. Both Casy and Tom were inspired to make Christ-like sacrifices. When Jim Casy surrenders to the deputies in place of Tom and Floyd, Jim is acting on his commitment to love all people. He later becomes a labor organizer and dies in his efforts. His statement to Tom, “An’ sometimes I love ‘em fit to bust...” exemplifies his commitment. In Tom, the development of commitment is even more striking [7]. At the beginning of the novel, Tom is determined to avoid involvement with people. After his experiences on the journey and through his friendship with Casy, Tom becomes committed to social justice. His commitment extends to a mystical identification with the people. When Ma worries that Tom might also be killed like Casy, Tom tells her: “Then I’ll be ever’where—wherever you look. Wherever there’s a fight so hungry people can eat, I’ll be there. Wherever they’s a cop beatin’ 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.” [8]

#### VI. CONCLUSIONS

From this four viewpoints, it can be forcefully proved that elements of symbolism, realism and naturalism are well embodied in *The Grapes of Wrath*. The opinions that Steinbeck’s place in only one of these three categories are not exactly. Steinbeck’s ability to combine harsh critiques of the political and social systems of his times with genuine artistry in his characterization, plot, and language is unique in American literature [9].

## REFERENCES

- [1] MN Lončarvujnović, AM Andrejević, “Theme and symbolism in Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*”. Зборник радова Филозофског факултета XLII (1), 2012, pp. 311.
- [2] “The Grapes of Wrath.” International Dictionary of Films and Filmmakers. . Retrieved December 18, 2018 from Encyclopedia.com: <https://www.encyclopedia.com/movies/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/grapes-wrath>
- [3] “The Grapes of Wrath.” Bowling, Beatniks, and Bell-Bottoms: Pop Culture of 20th-Century America. . Retrieved, October 18, 2018 from Encyclopedia.com: <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/culture-magazines/grapes-wrath>.
- [4] J. Steinbeck, retrieved October 23,2018, from Baidu Wenku: <https://wenku.baidu.com/view/24b6be150b4e767f5acfcefa.html>.
- [5] D. Pizer, *American Realism and Naturalism*, Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2000.
- [6] MN Lončarvujnović, AM Andrejević, “Theme and symbolism in Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*”. Зборник радова Филозофског факултета XLII (1), 2012, pp. 314.
- [7] J.Steinbeck, retrieved October 23,2018, from Baidu Wenku: <https://wenku.baidu.com/view/24b6be150b4e767f5acfcefa.html>.
- [8] J.Steinbeck, *The Grapes of wrath*, New York: Penguin, 1992.
- [9] MN Lončarvujnović, AM Andrejević, “Theme and symbolism in Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*”. Зборник радова Филозофског факултета XLII (1), 2012, pp. 311.