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The Religious Touch in The Grapes of Wrath

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ABSTRACT

John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* is a great piece of storytelling showing readers a glimpse of the American past. And yet, as Steinbeck once wrote to his editors, the novel had at least five layers to it. On one level, *The Grapes of Wrath* belies Steinbeck's moral outrage of the American political and economic system of that time. This paper does not comment on the linguistics or the normative value of the character and plot development, instead exclusively looking at the moral and religious references amidst the turbulent American social and political backdrop. We argue these portraits of morality inserted as scenes in the novel have its roots in various biblical references and Christian thought. In this article, we deconstruct the novel into various themes and scenes and examine these against the Christian Bible.

Keywords: John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, Christianity, 20th Century literature, American literature.

JEL classification: N52, N51, N81, N91, O13.

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1. Introduction

The Grapes of Wrath, written by John Steinbeck in 1939 during the Great Depression, is one of the greatest epic novels in American literature. As a response to the plight of farmers who suffered from the Dust Bowl, Steinbeck's novel serves to expose the injustices that the migrant workers experienced and to praise their resilience. These aims are delicately enunciated through the use of many religious references and allusions used throughout the book, such as the frequent allusions to the Bible and its in-depth debates on the inter-relationships between humans, nature and god. While *The Grapes of Wrath* is a frequently oft-cited piece for its recount of American social and economic history, alongside its linguistic preservation of the unique American English creole used by the lower classes at that time in print. However, the less studied moral and religious aspect pervasive in the novel deserves critical evaluation. It ultimately furnishes *The Grapes of Wrath* with a strong religious and philosophical touch, which in turn forms the basis of its timeless and universal appeal.

One of the most fascinating points about *The Grapes of Wrath* is the duality in which Steinbeck depicts the story in two perspectives: one, a realistic dose of Great Depression portraiture and the other, an actively engaging narration of the lives of the Joads. Throughout the book, Steinbeck places chapters of general description of the society between ones telling the story of the Joad family. The

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novel flows like a strange continuous switch between the Joad family soap opera and a more news-like portrayal of the surrounding events. The “Joads stood for all the Depression-era westward migrants,” and form a network of interlocking determinisms. The chapters of realistic portrayal almost serve as a historical relic, as Steinbeck renders the reader fully aware of the societal and economic hardships that almost every “Oakie” faced during the Great Depression. By doing so, Steinbeck highlights with resounding clarity the pervasiveness of injustices done to displaced farmers during that period of time, thereby arousing indignation and sympathy in his readers. This in turn contributes to his ultimate goal of exposing the cruel reality of the Dust Bowl.

In many layered ways, *The Grapes of Wrath* is a moral condemnation of American social and political conditions at that time. One way in which Steinbeck laced the novel with clear moral condemnation was by referencing Christian biblical events. In this paper, we will do a comparative analysis of *The Grapes of Wrath* against the Bible to analyze these religious references. We will first look at the Christian roots of the title and its symbolisms, and then move to discussing the plot reference to the biblical exodus, followed by Christian naming and naming references within. Next, we will examine the broader link to mother nature that Steinbeck references to draw a comparison with divine retribution, or even a causal recrimination of past deeds. Finally, we will conclude that Steinbeck laced his novel in deep religious terms so as to provide a clear moral benchmark from which he could express his disdain for those in power in America in his time. We hope this paper would contribute to a greater understanding of the religiosity of the piece in literature.

2. Methodology

In this paper, we seek to comparatively analyze Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* alongside the Christian Bible. We have also analyzed the historical and economic context in America during which the novel was staged in. We argue these portraits of morality inserted as scenes in the novel have its roots in various biblical references and Christian thought.

This paper does not comment on the linguistics or the normative value of the character and plot development; instead, it exclusively looks at the moral and religious references amidst the turbulent American social and political backdrop.

3. The religious touch in *The Grapes of Wrath*

The novel has also an abundance of Biblical allusions, as it fervently seeks to frame the situation in concrete benchmarks of morality.

4. The derivation of the title

First of all, the title “Grapes of Wrath” is derived from “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” which in turn refers to a biblical passage in Revelations 14:19-20, where the evil inhabitants of Earth perish. Grapes first appear in the novel in Chapter ten, when “Grampa” talks about his future plans: “I’m gonna pick me a wash tub full of grapes, an’ I’m gonna set in ‘em, an’ scooge aroun’, an’ let the juice run down my pants (Steinbeck, 103).” Here, the grapes are a sign of hope for a better future, as they stand for wine (a higher quality of living) and abundance. Interestingly, the phrase “grapes of wrath” does not appear till near the end of the novel: “In the soul of the people, the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage (Steinbeck, 399).” By this point, the dreams of a renewed life of the displaced farmers are completely decimated by the repeated injustices they faced on their journeys, and the farmers realize the true reason for their predicaments—the greed and power of capitalists. Therefore, the sweet fruit once containing hope and happiness turns sour, and rage bubbles up in them, waiting for a chance to burst open. The title “Grapes of Wrath” can now be seen as a kind of foreshadowing, as the debased population of America soon rose in congregated unions against oppression and attempted to “purge the earth of evil,” just like the biblical passage suggested it would.

5. The Biblical Exodus in fiction

The Grapes of Wrath also cleverly borrows the Biblical Exodus journey in its plot development. The novel begins with the Dust Bowl, a natural disaster akin to the ten plagues that Egyptians endured

before the Israelites were allowed to leave the nation. The original story includes captivity, journey, and the Promised Land, all of which are reflected in the novel. The displaced farmers were once captives of their land parallel to how the Israelites were captives of the Pharaoh, and both groups set out on a tedious journey in search of a better future. Through this parallel drawn, one can easily glimpse Steinbeck's empathetic attitude towards the migrant farmers as he deliberately likens them to good Christian biblical figures of the old.

6. Biblical names

The names of the characters are also Biblical in origin. For instance, the name "Rose of Sharon" is likely an allusion to the line from the Hebrew Bible: "I am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys" (Solomon 2:1). The name can be seen as a symbol for a fertile future for the Joads, as Sharon is a fertile plain along the coast of Israel, and late in the novel, she is the fertile plain full of promise and nourishment for survival. Like the Rose of Sharon, the displaced farmers thrive on, and strive for a place in the cruel society. The Rose of Sharon later shares her breastmilk to keep others' alive, in a clear allusion to the fertility of mother nature. The Rose of Sharon thus represents the fertility of mother nature and forces us to consider humanity's relationship and reliance on mother nature.

Some might wonder why Steinbeck includes so many Biblical references in *The Grapes of Wrath*. In *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*, Thomas Foster believes that by giving their work a Biblical title, authors may convey a similar literary "authority" as quoting from Shakespeare. Biblical allusions are also important in literature because they can assist readers in understanding key messages, as most western people are familiar with Biblical stories and can resonate with them. It also acts as a clear and objective moral benchmark that Steinbeck can readily use to assess and judge the characters within. Therefore, the Biblical allusions in *The Grapes of Wrath* can help readers objectively judge the truth about the immorality of the entire situation by making them link the experiences of the farmers with authentic and familiar religious stories. This enhances the clarity of the situation and their understanding of the whole situation, thus pushing them to empathize with the Joad family and all other unfortunate people like them.

7. God and Mother Nature in Steinbeck's world

Apart from biblical allusions to God and morality, Foster also touches on humanity and God's relationship with mother nature. For example, rain can be symbol of retribution, but also an emblem of cleansing and restoration. Therefore, making a character walk through rain can have a symbolic meaning of cleansing their sins. This can be seen in *The Grapes of Wrath*, as at the end of the novel, a relentless rain pours down. The downpour lasts for days and takes away many lives, but at the same time, it symbolizes redemption and a new beginning, thus lifting the spirits of readers and drawing a hopeful end to the whole story. The flood it causes can also be seen as an allusion to the Biblical story "Noah and the Great Flood," when God sent down a flood to purge the earth of evils. In the novel, the boxcar that the Joad family stays in symbolizes Noah's Arch, and as they ride through the weather, they are purified, their sins forgiven, their souls saved. The rest are perished in the Revelations' style "purge the earth of evils."

The Christian God is one that is almighty, and that has control of the weather and climate. Even in other religions and cultures, natural disasters are often closely alluded to God for it is out of control of the ordinary man. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, natural disasters strike more than once and in fact are omnipresent throughout the novel as it forms a critical tool to the plot development. Dust Bowl migration, the shaping of Californian identity, and human connection to the environment are all deeply personal topics for Steinbeck. They represent the realistic trials and tribulations of those living in that era. For example, the Dust Bowl is a natural disaster and the cause of all the hardships that the farmers endure. It is an utter destruction of a way of life and were stemmed from forces seemingly beyond the control of the Joads. It is a demonstration of divine retribution from the farmers' own greed in unsustainable intensive farming from the decade prior to the Dust Bowl, combined with ignorance of extensively removing virgin topsoil through deep ploughing. But the punishment from nature was then compounded by the hellish inhumanity of men: the callous banks, the unscrupulous salesmen, and the gears of capitalism.

Finally, Steinbeck cleverly intertwines symbolisms of animals and insects into a thread of religion and persistence. For instance, Steinbeck takes up a whole chapter to describe a land turtle at the beginning of the novel. The turtle refuses to change its direction even though it is constantly impeded. Its simplest meaning may be to showcase the persistence of the migrants, who refuse to give up in both literally moving from Oklahoma to California despite the hardships on the way, and in metaphorically trudging on in life even after losing their land to the bank, their money to unscrupulous salesmen, and their friends and family members to the tribulations on the road. To those familiar with Christianity, it also replays the persistence of the enslaved Hebrew people in Egypt (the “children of Israel”) in Moses’ time and their tireless and enduring return to Israel. In a sense, it is a *déjà vu* of the oppressed and their commendable efforts to get back up on their feet replayed after more than a millennium. *The Grapes of Wrath* retells the same themes as its millennium-old counterpart, except with perhaps a more “modernized” Great Depression setting and a realistic portrayal that brings such religious and morality themes closer to American readers.

8. Result discussion

To a casual reader, *The Grapes of Wrath* might be a cozy read about a family in the forgotten past. To a curious reader, he may learn about American history from realistic portrayal of the socio-economic conditions of that time over the span of the novel. But an in-depth analysis of the religious and moral undertones of the novel would teach us more about the intrinsic social contracts and morally acceptable behavior, and finally the fundamental conditions that led to our present-day society.

The actual content remains a good reminder of certain moral values that stood the test of time, from Moses till Steinbeck till now.

The implications on our modern world are many. For instance, the Oklahoma farmers initially intensively farmed for profit, without a care of future implications. At any stage of scientific development, we will never know unforeseen developments and will only be able to call it science in retrospect after the disastrous consequences have set in. In modern times, climate change naysayers may push solutions into a blind box of “future possible scientific innovations” in the same way that the Oklahoma farmers had probably irresponsibly assumed nothing would happen or that 20th century science would somehow save them. While the dust bowl has stopped and better farming practices has made Oklahoma suitable for farming again, there was a huge social cost in the form of all the Joads in real life 20th century America. In today’s age, the climate change naysayers had proclaimed science “would find a way” since decades ago. And indeed, science has found a way. In Singapore, Australia and South Africa, science has enable these countries to cope with droughts and insufficient water. But at what cost? The people in these countries are currently drinking and bathing in recycled toilet water, courtesy of science.

On another parallel, the Joads and the Oklahoma farmers moved Westward in an unfounded hope for new land, work and better living conditions. Unfortunately, the reality is that California had an oversupply of workers and did not have much land to spare. Fast forward to 2020, the same greed plagues human migration crises. Other than the Syrians who fled from war, other middle eastern refugees attempted to flee to Europe, hoping to migrate for better social conditions. The reality is that European nations themselves cannot handle that number of refugees and living conditions are not what the asylum seekers expected. Most do not become European, get free housing, a high paying job, free education and social security. Instead, they live in squalid camps to the point a news report cited an Iraqi asylum seeker saying if he knew he would be living in such refugee camps, he would rather have just stayed in Iraq. History hence repeats itself with the same greed or necessity from the migrants and the same overwhelmed conditions that lead to a free market “not too good to be true” equilibrium.

It is tempting to assume the greed of the past has been buried in history and the moral messages from Steinbeck are a fragment of the past. And sure enough, the circumstances will change. But the narrative will not, because morality, and the lack thereof, has not changed since biblical times. Consequently, the problems stemming from such corrupted morals will never go away, but only evolve in modern shapes and forms.

9. Conclusion

John Steinbeck once wrote: “I want to put a tag of shame on the greedy bastards who are responsible for this [the Great Depression and its effects].” The *Grapes of Wrath* perhaps captures no one’s wrath better than his own, as a cathartic vent towards the capitalists of those days. It aimed to capture the injustice of the people during a transitional time in American history and praise the resilience of the displaced farmers. Through allusions to the Bible, an in-depth discussion of human and their relationship with nature, and a thoroughly scrutinized view of the loose morality prevalent in those with money or power in that era, Steinbeck crafts an intricate story of the Great Depression. In doing so, he outlines the emotionally undermined facets of real human suffering and succeeds in repainting the narrative with great clarity – eventually revealing the greed of capitalism as the truth behind all the wanton suffering. Oppressed by this system, “the grapes of wrath” ripen in the hearts of the poor and the unfortunate, foreshadowing a better future. Indeed, *The Grapes of Wrath* did cause a political uproar upon its release and led to changes that improved the economic and social conditions of farmers. This success should be credited to the various allusions to morality used throughout the novel, as they created empathy amongst readers and spurred public opinion to correct the human evils of the Great Depression. In this day and age too, it remains relevant as our human greed once again sets off a domino of natural disasters – raging Australian and Californian bushfires and destructive annual hurricanes becoming the new normal. As it creates more Joys of the 21st century, I wonder, when will humanity ever learn?

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