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AMERICAN DREAM A MIRAGE IN JOHN STEINBECK'S "THE GRAPES OF WRATH"

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ABSTRACT

The publication of the American fiction *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck is one of the greatest literary events in the year 1939. It brought Pulitzer and Nobel prizes to the author. It represents the temperament of the angry decade than any other contemporary works. It has been greeted enthusiastically by critics as one of the most important books of the time. It's being trumpeted as the greatest American novel. It's a milestone in American fiction.

John Steinbeck is regarded as the most versatile artists of contemporary American Fiction. He is a writer worthy to be compared with Chekov and Anatole France. The present paper addresses the unfulfilled dreams of Joad family who started their journey from Oklahoma putting everything they own into a truck to California. A family of tenant farmers drove by rainless years turning all South west America into Dust Bowl and also by Financial crisis, the start of the Great Depression. The journey to California is a nightmare and the dream of better life and better employability left unfulfilled. The dream of Joad family is not a dream of one family but it's a dream of millions of Americans. The dream is a mirage for them. It's an unattainable dream.

Key Words: Farm Tenantry – Migratory Labour – The American Dream – Destitution – Ambiguous.

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Every age has its representative writer, whose career follows its major interests, whose voice is its voice. In him we can see the moods, if not the actual events of his time, most clearly reflected and its strongest drives most forcefully crystallized.

John Steinbeck is one of the few American writers who can be discussed in relation to the past as well as the present. He is generally regarded as the most versatile artists of contemporary American fiction. As Joseph Warren Beach rightly put it "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",¹ and that was John Steinbeck.

The greatest literary event of the year 1939 was the publication of his classic novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. It won the Pulitzer Prize in the year 1940 and also brought him the Nobel Prize for literature in 1962. Steinbeck has written nothing else so successful as this novel. The two basic impulses of 1930s towards escape and towards social consciousness found their sharpest expression in the writing of John Steinbeck, whose work represents the temperament of an angry decade more faithfully than any of his contemporaries. 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.

The Grapes of Wrath like the *Odessey*, *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Robinson Crusoe* is formulated as a journey. It has been greeted enthusiastically by critics as one of the most important books of the time. It is being loudly trumpeted as the great American novel. Vigorously sympathetic to the "open" society, the novel skillfully communicates attitudes of a relatively inarticulate group or type. It enthusiastically bridges the gap amongst art, politics and ethics. A milestone in American fiction, it is an attempted prose epic, a summation of national experience at a given time.

Properly speaking *The Grapes of Wrath* is not a regional novel, but it has a regional significance, it raises regional problems—economic collapse, farm tenantry, migratory labour are not regional problems, they are national or international in scope. *The Grapes of Wrath* is a novel, not a tract-art, not sociology or philosophy. As an artist Steinbeck is concerned with depicting, not prescribing man's behaviour. He feels that if people develop the proper attitude they will be able to govern themselves. He tries to help them to see themselves as they are but he is not a law-giver. Today he is remembered because he told real stories about real people. He understood the idea of "the American dream", but he knew that it was not possible for everyone.

The American Dream according to James Truslow Adams, is that "Dream of land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement...It is not a dream of motor cars or high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position."²

In October 1929, Wall Street, the center of finance in the United States, crashed. This was the start of the Great Depression, which lasted through

the 1930s. During those years, there was less business activity and there was high unemployment. By 1933, sixteen million people were unemployed. Across the country, banks were closed down and people lost their savings.

In many places, people who became poor and homeless lived together in camps. These camps were called Hoovervilles because a lot of people blamed President Hoover for the Depression. In the Hoovervilles some people lived in boxes and others in cars or tents. At the same time, the southwestern states (including Oklahoma, Kansas, and Arkansas) were hit by years without rain. In these places, the land dried up and turned to dust. These states were called the Dust Bowl. Feeling the economic pressure, the banks were unable to save the land. They forced the tenant farmers off their farms. Hundreds of thousands of people left the Dust Bowl and headed west to California. These people heard that California was the golden state—the land of jobs, green hills, and valleys of fruit trees. They drove thousands of miles in search of jobs and a better life for their families.

Putting everything they own into a truck, the Joad family leaves Oklahoma for California. They have been tenant farmers for many years. Although they were never rich, they were never paupers—until now. The Joads need to learn a new way of life on the road with little money. They share camps with strangers and are often forced to leave by local sheriffs. Ma and Pa are the heads of the Joad family. Their son, Tom, has been freed from prison and is on parole. Their eldest son, Noah, has always been slow and quiet. Their teenage son, Al, is more interested in girls than anything else. But he has learned about cars and this is useful for the family. Their daughter, Rosasharn, recently married Connie Rivers and is now expecting her baby. The youngest Joad children, Ruthie and Winfield, are too young to understand everything that is happening. For them, this new life is a big adventure. Other members of the Joad family also travel to California: Grandma, Grandpa, and Uncle John. The family is joined by Casy, who used to be a preacher. On the road to California, the family struggles with illness and death. They meet people who say that the life in

California is hard and that people there are dying of hunger. But their hopes for jobs and better lives keep them going.

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the migrants thought that the American Dream was such a simple concept: go west, get a job, and become rich. However, they did not realize that an ideal life was nearly impossible and it corrupted the minds of those in search of it. John Steinbeck emphasized the unattainable nature of the American Dream of economic stability in *The Grapes of Wrath* through the Joads' cross country migration, their constant and unpredictable changes in employment, and their eventual failure to find success in California.

The Joads' migration from Oklahoma to California destroyed the existence of an economically secure life. Before the Joad family headed west, they had a home, land, and money. Migrating to California meant starting all over again. The Joads decided to leave their old life in hopes of beginning a new, successful one. And many more migrants in search of the American Dream were headed west, as well. The Joads did not think about the repercussions that occurred from this move. Never once did they doubt that "there's work there, and never gets cold"³. They were drawn to the rumors that insisted "you can reach out anywhere and pick an orange"³. Exotic descriptions like this, from an unheard-of land, propelled the Joads and other migrants towards an unknown paradise.

Eventually in *The Grapes of Wrath*, some of the characters came to the realization that they were indeed chasing a dream. The Joads were going down "something of a problematic golden road—a path of escape from destitution to an ambiguous Californian deliverance"⁴(Spangler). It can be inferred that "when the only option becomes putting the family on the road to a strange and unknown destination, problems are compounded"⁴, and the Joads did face many problems. Some of the Joads chose to trade in that hope of an unattainable dream for the concrete reality of life. Connie realized that chasing after the notion of the American Dream was a waste of time, and although he did run away from the realities of financial insecurity by leaving his wife and baby, he was

simply doing what was realistic and instead followed a future that would provide for him. While the Joads were on a never-ending journey in search for the American Dream, they did not find jobs that suited their hope of a financial lifestyle.

The Grapes of Wrath depicted the impossibility of the American Dream and defined the harsh reality of the dirty, corrupted, and greedy nightmare that it truly was. The Joads, and other migrants, learned that not all Americans shared hospitality, kindness, or appreciation. The Joads' experience showed that the world was full of greedy individuals who fended for themselves. No one wanted the Joads or any migrant families to encroach upon their land, steal their jobs, and consume their food. The treatment the Joads received was nothing like the American Dream they imagined. They wanted to feel welcomed and immediately gain wealth. However, their lives were slowly deteriorating to nothing. The Joads' constant failure to find lasting and supportive jobs led to financial decline, lessening the possibility that the American Dream would come to fruition. All migrants had hopes of finding a better life for their children; however, *The Grapes of Wrath* defined the limits set forth for achieving prosperity. Regardless of the Joads' hope for prosperity, they were grouped with the underprivileged migrants and fought for every job offer they found, if any. Employers did not trust the migrants, and lines were set between the rich and the poor. Tom soon realized that he and his family can never be treated the same as these inhabitants; they would always be outsiders. When Tom picked a fight with an officer while staying in a government camp, Jim Casey fended him off and then took the blame for Tom and was sent to prison. This affected the Joad family's stability to settle down and ascertain proper jobs; they were always on the move because of Tom and his short temper.

Their hardships and reality of life, from staying in dismal government camps, to losing family members, to not attaining work, showed that California and the road to it were not what they thought it would be. As stated earlier, the Joads were not the only family on the road; competition from other migrants limited the ability for employment. As seen in *The Grapes of Wrath*,

California was not as it was perceived to be. The American Dream depicted California as a paradisiacal land; in reality, migrants were thrown into poverty and were forced to survive, contrary to what the American Dream envisioned. By the end of the novel, any iota of hope the Joads had for the American Dream was long forgotten.

All the events leading to the conclusion of *The Grapes of Wrath* provided grounds for the eventual failure of the Joads' American Dream and any thought of success in California. The Joads knew that the trip to California would be a long and possibly disastrous one, full of poverty and hopelessness. However, they convinced themselves that upon reaching California there would be "...a whole bunch of grapes [to pick] off a bush, or whatever, an' squash 'em on my face an' let 'em run offen my chin"³, and they would immediately become wealthy. If there were one piece of advice that the Joads needed to know, it would be that this was not the case. Aside from Noah Joad, Connie, and Tom Joad, no other characters came to that realization.

"The immigrant's dream is often unrealistic, and extravagant expectations can lead to bitter disappointment"⁵. This was exactly the case. The Joads built up a fantastic future in their minds, full of high expectations, which stemmed as "the family's certainties develop[ed] from an ironically hopeful innocence..."⁶ to thoughts that were quickly shattered as they faced reality head on. "The human reality of California life is a living death"⁶. The Joads learned this, as Granpa Joad first died, then Granma Joad, and finally Rose of Sharon's baby. Even the new generation would not survive in California, despite the wonderful life imagined there. "Steinbeck wanted to end with a powerful symbol of human life persisting despite the hostility of social forms of nature, which resulted in a destructive storm, a still-born child, destitution, and starvation"⁷. And though the American Dream proved impossible in *The Grapes of Wrath*, the Joad family, led by Ma Joad's will, continued into the future with their heads held high. A possible explanation for the immediate failure could be what the Joads tied to them during their journey.

Whether the Joads realized it or not, they carried their pasts with them; even when they believed they are moving forward and starting a new life, their pasts caused trouble for them along the road. In the end, the Joads are left "scattered, homeless, penniless, and without food or hope for the future...Steinbeck has smashed the notions of the American Dream" (Spangler); the concept was lost. Every aspect of the Joads' dream was crushed and they were left with no financial security, or even simple necessities. This had also happened with other migrants who once had hope.

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