

JOHN STEINBECK, “THE GRAPES OF WRATH” AND “THIRTIES”

Nino Davitashvili,

A Doctor of Education,

Associate Professor of Gori State University,

Chavchavadze st., N53, Gori, 1400, Georgia,

+995955208902, miss.davitashili@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-1282-3625>**Abstract**

John Steinbeck was born in Salinas, California, in 1902 and he grew up in a valley about twenty-five miles away from the Pacific Coast. This place became a scene of acting in his novels. It was 1919 when he went to Stanford University. However, he left the University without a degree in 1925. He served as a laborer, journalist in New York City and then as a caretaker for a Lake Tahoe estate. His first novel was “Cup of Gold” published in 1929. After his marriage he moved to Pacific Grove and published two California fictions. They were “The Pastures of Heaven” in 1932 and “To a God Unknown” (1933), and worked on short stories called in the “Long Valley” in 1938.

Steinbeck’s popular novels were focused in the California laboring class. They were: “In Dubious Battle” (1936), “Of Mice and Men” (1937) and “The Grapes of Wrath” (1939) which is considered to be one of his greatest masterpieces.

Then in the 1940s John Steinbeck became a filmmaker.

War topic was widely spread in his novels. They include: “Bombs Away” (1942) and “The Moon is Down” (1942). He won a Nobile Prize in 1962 and died after some years, in 1968.

“The Grapes of Wrath” is a novel by John Steinbeck. It was first published in 1939. This novel won the National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize for fiction and this novel played a great role in awarding John Steinbeck with the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1962.

Key Words: America, American literature, John Steinbeck, “The Grapes of Wrath”, “thirties”.

Introduction

The economic collapse of 1929 changed the confident and happy life of America. It happened in the “Jazz Age” twenties. Millions of Americans were left without their jobs and this fact caused the nation’s depression. A new period of American self-criticism started. American writers turned to a new type of social realism and naturalism. “In the early thirties, the first reaction to the depression was a literature of social protest” (High, 2000:161). One of the writers whose writing career started in this period was John Steinbeck (1902-1968).

John Steinbeck was born in Salinas, California, in 1902 and he grew up in a valley about twenty-five miles away from the Pacific Coast. This place became a scene of acting in many his novels. It was 1919 when he went to Stanford University. However, he left the University without a degree in 1925. He served as a laborer, journalist in New York City and then as a caretaker for a Lake Tahoe estate. His first novel was “Cup of Gold” published in 1929. After his marriage he moved to Pacific Grove and published two California fictions. They were “The Pastures of Heaven” in 1932 and “To a God Unknown” (1933), and worked on short stories called in the “Long Valley” in 1938.

Methods

The method applied in this article is *literature review method*. The discussed topic is studied by some critics. High (2000) and Grey (2012) are among them and their works have a great value for our work. The article analyses John Steinbeck’s works, one of his novels “The Grapes of Wrath” and American “thirties”. The article analyses the literature and gives valuable conclusions.

Results

- The economic collapse of 1929 changed the confident and happy life of America;
- A new period of American self-criticism started;
- American writers turned to a new type of social realism and naturalism;
- In the early thirties, the first reaction to the depression was a literature of social protest;
- One of the writers whose writing career started in this period was John Steinbeck (1902-1968).
- Steinbeck's popular novels were focused in the California laboring class;
- John Steinbeck tries to write the spirit of his century down;
- John Steinbeck's first novel "The Grapes of Wrath" tells a story of a genuine and great national tragedy.

Discussion

"Tortilla Flat" in 1935 was followed by his success and financial welfare. "It was Tortilla Flat (1935), a vivid portrait of life among the poor in Monterey, that brought Steinbeck to prominence. And it was *In Dubious Battle* (1936), the story of a strike among migratory workers in the California fruit orchards, that brought a new political edge to his work. With *Of Mice and Men* (1937) Steinbeck firmly established himself as the novelist of the rural poor. It is the tale of two itinerant farm workers, drawn into a brotherhood of suffering with each other, who yearn to find a home. With the Depression wreaking economic havoc and drought turning vast swathes of agricultural land into a Dust Bowl, farmers and their families were reduced to absolute poverty, forced out of their homes and buildings. As they traveled across America in search of work, they needed to find a voice, someone to make the nation aware of their suffering. And they found it in Steinbeck, particularly with the publication of his most famous novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, in 1939" (Grey, 2011: 225).

Steinbeck's popular novels were focused in the California laboring class. They were: "In Dubious Battle" (1936), "Of Mice and Men" (1937) and "The Grapes of Wrath" (1939) which is considered to be one of his greatest masterpieces.

Then in the 1940s John Steinbeck became a filmmaker.

War topic was widely spread in his many novels. They include: "Bombs Away" (1942) and "The Moon is Down" (1942). He won a Nobel Prize in 1962 and died after some years, in 1968.

"The Grapes of Wrath" is a novel by John Steinbeck. It is his first novel and it was first published in 1939. This novel won the National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize for fiction and this novel played a great role in awarding John Steinbeck with the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1962.

One of the publications of his well-known novel- "The Grapes of Wrath", which was published by Bantam Books in 1964, has some words about this novel published in different magazines in the USA:

➤ "The way of life it describes is more, but this book still lives on, as it always will-the epic chronicle of man's struggle against injustice and inhumanity. With this passage of the years, the story it tells of the Joads and their journey to "the golden land" is not so much just the story of one family and one time, but the story of the courage and passion of all men throughout history. Great... impassioned and exciting. It is Steinbeck's best novel, his toughest and tenderest, his roughest written and his most mellifluous, his most melodramatic, his angriest and most idyllic" (Time Magazine).

➤ "Violent, compassionate, gentle, harrowing, beautiful " (New York Herald Tribune).

➤ "The epitome of everything Steinbeck has given us. It has the humor, and earthiness of TORTILLA FLAT, the social consciousness of IN DUBIOUS BATTLE, the passionate concern for the homeless and uprooted of OF MICE AND MEN" (Saturday Review).

➤ "A tremendously moving piece of work... a powerful novel, a rough novel... the book for which everything else that Steinbeck has written was an exercise of preparation. This is the fully symphony, Steinbeck's declamation of faith" (San Francisco Chronicle).

John Steinbeck's first novel "The Grapes of Wrath" tells a story of a genuine and great national tragedy.

John Steinbeck tries to write the spirit of his century down. "Like some other writers in the thirties (Dos Passos and Thomas Wolfe, for example) Steinbeck often tries to paint large portraits of the "national spirit". To do this he combined myth with his naturalism. To him, "westerling" (the movement to the American west) had great significance as an American myth" (High, 2000: 163).

According to Grey (2011) “Steinbeck decided to turn fact into fiction to gain maximum impact: to tell a story that would enable his readers to experience the suffering he had seen. So, he invented the Joad family, Oklahoma farmers who are driven off their land by soil erosion, and who drive to California hoping to take advantage of what they imagine to be a land of plenty. The migration of the Joad family is punctuated by interchapters, written in lyrical prose, that generalize the experience of the family, and force us to see what happens to them as representative of what was happening to all the rural poor of the time. Steinbeck plays cunningly with different mythical structures, too, to add resonance and representativeness to his story. The journey of the Joads recalls many other earlier, epic migrations: notably, the biblical journey to the Promised Land and the westward movement that helped shape the history of the American nation. What the Joad family find when they reach California, however, is no land of promise. For these Western adventurers, there is no realization of a dream of freedom. There is only more poverty and pain” (Grey, 2011: 225).

John Steinbeck's character were “naturalistic” in the “thirties”. They are victims of fear, hunger, the disasters of nature. “In all his novels, Steinbeck combines a naturalistic way of looking at things with a deep sympathy for people and the human condition. We feel that he really does love humanity. Steinbeck's books search for elements in human nature which are common to all people” (High, 2000: 163).

As a realistic writer, John Steinbeck starts his novel _ “The Grapes of Wrath” describing reality. He tries to describe every detail to make his writing more impressive:

“In the last part of May the sky grew pale and the clouds that had hung in high puffs for so long in the spring were dissipated. The sun flared down on the growing corn day after day until a line of brown spread along the edge of each green bayonet. The clouds appeared, and went away, and in a while, they did not try any more” (Steinbeck, 1964: 1).

The disaster of the heroes started with winds which are described at the beginning of the novel and this description is so realistic that a reader may even feel the blowing winds:

“When June was half done, the big clouds moved up out men in the fields looked up at the clouds and sniffed at them and held wet fingers up to sense the wind. And horses were nervous while the clouds were up... A gentle wind followed the rain clouds, driving them on northward, a wind that softly clashed the drying corn. A day went by and the wind increased, steady, unbroken by gusts... Now the wind grew strong and hard and it worked at the rain crust in the corn fields. Little by little the sky was darkened by the mixing dust, and the wind felt over the earth, loosened the dust, and carried it away. The wind grew stronger... The wind grew stronger, whisked under stones, carried up straws and old leaves, and even little clods, making its course as it sailed across the fields” (Steinbeck, 1964: 1-2).

Another impressive scene describes the people's faces and actions identifying the danger:

“The people came out of their houses and smelled the hot stinging air and covered their noses from it. And the children came out of the houses, but they did not run or shout as they would have done after a rain. Men stood by their fences and looked at the ruined corn, drying fast now, only a little green showing through the film of dust. The men were silent and they did not move often. And the women came out of their houses to stand beside their men-to feel whether this time the men would break... After a while the faces of the watching men list their bemused perplexity and became hard and angry and resistant” (Steinbeck, 1964: 3).

“What'll we do? And the man replied, I don't know” (Steinbeck, 1964: 3). These were the words which expressed the desperate mood of the characters. As for the plot of the novel “The Grapes of Wrath”, it is a story of a great national tragedy of one family. The Joads are farmers and they have to leave Oklahoma because of the great disaster. After destroying their land by terrible winds, they have to move to California and work as fruit pickers. Then their terrible life starts there. They experience the violence of the Californian landowners.

The novel gathers attractive characters. The main heroes are: Ma Joad, Tom Joad and Jim Casy.

Ma Joad is a symbol of unwavering strength and resilience and a heart and soul of the Joad family. She usually tries to keep her family together. She presents the idea of enduring strength.

Ma Joad is the heart of the Joads. She “was heavy but not fat; thick with child-bearing and work...her full face was not soft; it was controlled, kindly. Her hazel eyes seemed to have experienced all possible tragedy and to have mounted pain and suffering like steps into high calm and superhuman understanding” (Steinbeck, 1964: 64).

Ma is considered to be the true leader as soon as the family faces the difficulties. She is the strong woman who never breaks down. She knows that she has to be strong enough to carry all the difficulties of the family. She understood that like the cathedral of the family she had to take a strong place. Tom and her children would feel no fear next to her:

“She seemed to know that if she swayed the family shook, and if she ever really deeply wavered or despaired the family would fall, the family will to function would be gone” (Steinbeck, 1964: 64).

Tom Joad is a protagonist and a complex character. His sense of justice makes him protect his family and other migrants. He is transformed from an individual who tries to serve and help his family to a man who fights for social justice. Finally, he turns into a man seeking social welfare for the migrant people.

Tom was not thirty. “His eyes were very dark brown and there was a hint of brown pigment in his eyeballs. His cheek bones were high and wide, and strong deep lines cut down his cheeks, in curves beside his mouth. His upper lip was long and since his teeth protruded, the lips stretched to cover them for this man kept his lips closed. His hands were hard, with broad fingers and nails as thick and ridged as little calm shells. The space between the thumb and forefinger and the hams of his hands were shiny with callus” (Steinbeck, 1964: 4).

Tom represents a man facing extraordinary hardship. We as the readers of the novel are witnesses of hard struggle of farmers and the cruelty of the economic system. He starts his battle as a person trying to serve and he becomes a fighter against social injustice. Tom’s famous words are providing his mission in the novel:

” Wherever they’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” (Steinbeck, 1964: 374).

Jim Casy is a former preacher representing spiritual and philosophical idea. He tries to help others and in this why he sacrifices himself. He is a former preacher who becomes a symbol of social injustice and human unity. Having lost his faith in traditional religion, Jim feels guilty about his past as a preacher and is strongly sure that organized religion serves to separate people more than to unite them. He says:

” What’s this call, this sperit? An’ I says, ‘It’s love. I love people so much I’m fit to burst, sometimes’ ...I only love people... I can’t be a preacher no more because I thought it’ an’ I believe it” (Steinbeck, 1964: 19-20).

Later Jim proves that all people are part of one great soul. We read his words in the novel:

“Maybe all men got one big soul ever’body’s a part of”. Now I sat there thinkin’ it, an’ all of a sudden-I know it” (Steinbeck, 1964: 20).

Jim often tries to help others risking his comfort. He is imprisoned. After his death, Tom continues to fulfil his arms and fights for the dignity and rights of the oppressed.

One of the key characters of the novel is Rose of Sharon:

“...Rose of Sharon was pregnant and careful. Her hair, braided and wrapped around her head, made an ashblond crown. Her round soft face, which had been voluptuous and inviting a few months ago, had already put on the barrier of pregnancy, the self-sufficient smile, the knowing perfection-look; and her plump body-full soft breasts and stomach, hard hips and buttocks that had swung so freely and provocatively as to invite slapping and stroking-her whole body had become demure and serious. Her whole thought and action were directed inward on the baby. She balanced on her toes now, for the baby’s sake. And the world was pregnant to her; she thought only in terms of reproduction and of motherhood” (Steinbeck, 1964: 83).

Connie is a nineteen-year-old husband of Rose of Sharon. He seems to believe in “American dream”, but is not strong enough to struggle in the harsh reality:

“Connie, her nineteen-year-old husband, who had married a plump, passionate hoyden, was still frightened and bewildered at the change in her; for there was no more cat fights in bed, biting and scratching with muffled giggles and final tears. There was a balanced, careful, wise creature who smiled shyly but very firmly at him. Connie was proud and fearful of Rose of Sharon. Whenever he could, he put a hand on her or stood close, so that his body touched her at hip and shoulder, and he felt that this kept a relation that might be departing. He was a sharp-faced, lean young man of a Texas strain, and his pale blue eyes were sometimes dangerous and sometimes kindly, and sometimes frightened. He was a good hard worker and

would make a good husband. He drank enough, but not too much; fought when it was required of him; and never boasted” (Steinbeck, 1964: 83-84).

Pa is Tom Joad’s father. His role is important at the beginning of the novel, although he becomes less important as the story progresses. He is described in the scene where Tom arrives:

“The sleeves of his shirt were tight on his forearms, held down by the bulging powerful muscles. Stomach and hips were lean, and legs, short, heavy, and strong. His face, squared by a bristling pepper and salt beard, was all drawn down to the forceful chin, a chin thrust out and built out by the stubble beard which was not so grayed on the chin, and gave weight and force to its thrust. Over old Tom’s unwhiskered cheek bones the skin was as brown as meerschaum, and wrinkled in rays around his eyecorners from squinting. His eyes were brown, black coffee brown, and he thrust his head forward when he looked at a thing, for his bright dark eyes were failing. His lips, from which the big nails protruded, were thin and red” (Steinbeck, 1964: 62).

As for the plot of the novel – “The Grapes of Wrath” by John Steinbeck, it shows the struggles of the Joad family who are talented farmers from Oklahoma and who have to leave their home during “the Dust Bowl” and “Great Depression”. One of the main heroes Tom Joad is released from prison, returns home and finds out that his family is moving to west to California.

They travelled and experienced death, illness, poverty... Their hopes were ruined when they met other migrants and found that California was not the place they had dreamt about. It was not the land of numerous opportunities. Then their Californian adventure began. They moved from one camp to another and tried to survive. There are lots of scenes in the novel showing unbearable conditions of the migrants:

“Over the high coast mountains and over the valleys the grey clouds marched in from the ocean. The wind blew fiercely and silently, high in the air, and it swished in the brush, and it roared in the forests. The clouds came in brokenly, in puffs, in folds, in grey crags; and they piled in together and settled low over the west. And then the wind stopped and left the clouds deep and solid. The rain began with gusty showers, pauses and downpours; and then gradually it settled to a single tempo, small drops and a steady beat, rain that was gray to see though, rain that cut midday light to evening...”

In the barns, the people sat huddled together; and the terror came over them, and their faces were grey with terror. The children cried with hunger, and there was no food” (Steinbeck, 1964: 387).

Next to the hunger, terrible natural conditions, the children were ill. Everything was wet and dirty around. The people asked for help but there were no doctors available. Of course, the people died:

“Then the sickness came, pneumonia, and measles that went to the eyes and to the mastoids.

And the rain fell steadily, and the water flowed over the highways, for the culverts could not carry the water.

Then from the tents, from the crowded barns, groups of sodden men went out, their clothes slopping rags, their shoes muddy pulp...

Frantic men pounded on the doors of the doctors; and the doctors ere busy. And sad men left word at country stores for the coroner to send a car. The coroners were not too busy. The coroners’ wagons backed up through the mud and took out the dead...

In the wet hay of leaking barns babies were born to women who panted with pneumonia. And old people curled up in corners and died that way, so that the coroners could not straighten them” ... (Steinbeck, 1964: 387).

Their hard jobs and low wages were a reason of their disappointment. Jim Casy was a person who tried to help them organizing labor strikes. But he was arrested and died. And the transformation of Tom Joad began. Knowing that Jim died, he tried to become a political and spiritual leader.

The last paragraph of the novel shows a scene of trying to save a man’s life and help to survive. This positive message finishes the novel and gives the reader hope that everything will change for better.

As Grey (2011) mentions “The Grapes of Wrath” is John Stainbeck’s most powerful book. “As its title indicates, as well as its narrative drive, *The Grapes of Wrath* is an angry but also an optimistic book. Recalling “The Battle-Hymn of the Republic” with its prophecy of truth marching to victory, and recollecting an earlier triumph over another kind of oppression, that title announces what the book will

say: that the oppressors will be conquered, with a crusade to end poverty succeeding in the twentieth century, just as the crusade to end slavery triumphed in the nineteenth” (Grey, 2011: 226).

Conclusion

To conclude:

- the economic collapse of 1929 changed the confident and happy life of America;
- millions of Americans were left without their jobs and this fact caused the nation's depression;
- a new period of American self-criticism started,
- American writers turned to a new type of social realism and naturalism;
- in the early thirties, the first reaction to the depression was a literature of social protest.
- one of the writers whose writing career started in this period was John Steinbeck;
- Steinbeck's popular novels were focused in the California laboring class;
- John Steinbeck tries to write the spirit of his century down;
- John Steinbeck's first novel “The Grapes of Wrath” tells a story of a genuine and great national tragedy;
- the last paragraph of the novel shows a scene of trying to save a man's life and help to survive;
- this positive message finishes the novel and gives the reader hope that everything will change for better;
- “The Grapes of Wrath” is John Steinbeck's most powerful book.

REFERENCES

- Grey, R. (2011). *A Brief History of American Literature*. United Kingdom: A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.
- High, B. P. (2000). *An Outline of American Literature*. New York: Longman, Inc.
- Steinbeck, J. (1964). *The Grapes of Wrath*. New York: The Viking Press, Inc.