

Thematic Pattern in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*

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Abstract

John Ernst Steinbeck was an American writer and Nobel laureate. His novels show the constant struggle of people who depend on the soil for their livelihood. Steinbeck's most widely known work is *The Grapes of Wrath*. It describes the stark account of a family from the impoverished Oklahoma Dust Bowl migrating to California during the economic depression of the 1930s. The novel received the great acclaim not only as realistic fiction but as a moving document of social protest. Steinbeck relates his fictional characters to plants and animals. He seems to see similarity of man in nature as represented especially by Emerson and Thoreau. It offers an almost spiritual comfort and encourages an earth-founded optimism. The present paper focuses on the thematic pattern in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

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The Grapes of Wrath is usually described as a novel of social protest, for it exposes the desperate conditions under which one group of American workers, the migratory farm families, was forced to live during the 1930's. These were the people who in the depths of the greatest economic depression had to abandon their homes and their livelihoods. They were uprooted and set adrift because tractors were rapidly industrializing the Southern cotton fields and because erosion and drought were creating the Dust Bowl in wide areas of Kansas, Colorado, New Mexico, Texas, and Oklahoma. Many of these families moved only short distances; but over one hundred and fifty thousand others migrated to California, Steinbeck's home, where their presence caused acute social stresses. Although the migrants were eager to obtain work, many landed proprietors took advantage of their poverty and distress them by hiring at starvation wages, treating them with great brutality, and denying them even the most elementary human and civil rights. It was not until 1937 that some of them were able to form a union for self-protection. Even then, the union grew slowly; but it did hold promise of an eventual improvement in working conditions - a promise that remained unfulfilled, ironically, until World War II began to draw thousands of Americans into national defense plants. Such, in brief were the contemporary events upon which Steinbeck based his most famous novel, and he reported them accurately, realistically, and sympathetically. The idea for *The Grapes of Wrath* undoubtedly grew out of a series of articles on California's migrant labor camps, which Steinbeck had been commissioned to write for the San Francisco News. He later gained first-hand knowledge by living in migrant camps and by travelling Route 66 between Oklahoma and California.

These experiences may help to explain the power which Steinbeck displays in *The Grapes of Wrath*, both in the epic scope of his narrative and the deep sympathy with which he treats the misery, suffering, and degradation of the Joad family during their long journey from the exhausted Dust Bowl to the fertile valleys of California. Yet the bitterness and anger he feels is equally strong, for Steinbeck makes it clear that the plight of the Joad family and of thousands of other families was, in his view, a man-made evil and that, as a man-made evil, it could be remedied by man. Of all the social novels that came out of the great depression very few have condemned man's inhumanity to man with the persistence, forcefulness, and intermittent vividness as Steinbeck's epic work displays. The 1930's comprised a decade of crisis, moral as well as economic, in which the initial financial panic was followed first by depression and then by paralysis. In response to the national crisis, American novelists returned, by and large, to naturalism as the mode of literary composition best fitted to evoke their new sense of reality. In general, naturalism takes the form of a study of the gradual degeneration of a man under the impact of his heredity or environment. The classic examples of naturalism examine that degeneration from either a biological point of view, which derives from Darwin, or from an economic point of view, which derives from Karl Marx. What all these naturalistic novels have in common, though, is their pessimism the philosophy of naturalism does not sustain the belief that the individual can govern or control his own fate. Steinbeck emphasizes the close relationship between animal and human nature and shows a great interest in what critics have called the biology of human affairs.