 THEME AND SYMBOLISM IN STEINBECK’S
THE GRAPES OF WRATH

Abstract. John Steinbeck aims to express the American political and social system as the reflection on characterization, plot, and symbols in The Grapes of Wrath. Steinbeck’s characters struggle desperately against forces beyond their understanding or control. Many of those characters suffer tragic fates, yet they almost always marriage to exhibit bravery and retain a sense of dignity throughout their struggles. 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. 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. “The Turtle” is an excerpt from the opening pages of this novel, which won the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. The book aroused public sympathy for the plight of migratory farm workers and established Steinbeck as one of the most highly regarded writers of his day. Steinbeck’s belief in social justice, and in the human ability to learn from and rise above suffering, infused all his work.

Key words: symbol, grapes, wrath, destiny, refuge, dire poverty, survival, agony.

1 Loncar.mirjana@gmail.com
2 Andrejevic003@gmail.com
No writer captures more vividly than John Steinbeck what it was like to live through the Great Depression of the 1930s. His stories and novels, many of which are set in the agriculture region of northern California where he grew up, capture the poverty, desperation, and social injustice experienced by many working-class Americans during the bleak period in American national history. As in the works of naturalist writers like Stephen Crane and Jack London, Steinbeck’s characters struggle desperately against forces beyond their understanding or control. Many of those characters suffer tragic fates, yet they almost always marriage to exhibit bravery and retain a sense of dignity throughout their struggles. 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.

Tom Joad hitch-hikes home after spending four years in prison for killing a man in a drunken fight. On his way he meets Jim Casy, an ex-preacher, whom he knows. Casy accompanies Tom to the Joads’ house but they find it deserted and damaged. Mulcy Graves explains that the landowners forced the tenant-farmers to leave and that the Joads are staying at Uncle John’s house prior to their departure for California. Casy and Tom eat with Muley and next morning join the family at Uncle John’s. The family agrees to take Casy to California with them. They sell or destroy the possessions which they cannot take with them, load up the truck, and prepare to leave. Grampa suddenly decides that he will not go, so Pa, Ma, and Tom decide to dope him and take him. The intercalary chapters (or interchapters, that is those chapters which are not part of the narrative of the Joad family) deal with the drought in Oklahoma (1st chapter), a turtle crossing a highway (3rd chapter), the landowners and tractors forcing people off the land (5th chapter), second hand car dealers (7th chapter), and the selling of possessions and preparation for the journey (9th chapter). The Joads travel on Route 66 and on the first night of their journey meet the Wilsons, another migrant family Grampa dies in the Wilsons’ tent and the family buries him. Tom and Al repair the Wilsons’ car and the families continue the journey together. When the Wilsons’ car breaks down again Tom and Al repair it after buying a spare part and some tools cheaply from a one-eyed wrecking-yard assistant. Before they cross the Californian desert Noah leaves I hem and walks off beside a river. The Wilsons also stay behind because Sairy is too ill to travel any further The Joads leave food and money for the Wilsons and continue their journey. During the crossing Granma dies, but Ma says nothing because she fears that the family might stop and then not get across. The intercalary chapters deal with the derelict houses of the former tenant-farmers (11th chapter), Highway 66 (12th chapter), the potential for political and social change inherent in the migrants’ problems (14th chapter), the roadside cafes (15th chapter), and the roadside camps established each night by the migrants (17th chapter).
The Joads stop at a Hooverville, the name for any camp for migrants on the outskirts of a town, and inquire about work. Here they confront the reality of conditions in California. A labour contractor and a Deputy Sheriff arrive, and when the Deputy arrests a young man on a false charge Tom trips the Deputy and Casy knocks him unconscious. Casy makes Tom hide and when more Deputies arrive Casy gives himself up. The Joads leave the Hooverville, but without Connie who has deserted Rose of Sharon. They fortunately find a place in the government camp at Weedpatch.

They enjoy life in this camp which the migrants run successfully, but only Tom finds a little work and the family must eventually leave. They find work picking peaches and unwittingly become strike-breakers. When Tom slips out of the Hooper Ranch he meets Casy who leads the strike. Deputies attack and kill Casy and Tom kills a Deputy, but Tom also receives a bad facial wound. The Joads hide Tom in their truck and leave. They find work picking cotton and Tom hides out in a cave in nearby bushes until Ruthie tells a girl that her brother killed a man. Tom leaves so as not to endanger the family. He tells Ma that he will take over Casy’s work for the people. When the cotton-picking season finishes it rains heavily and the Joads and other families living in the box-cars build an embankment to prevent the water from flooding them. A fallen tree breaks the embankment and water floods the box-cars. Rose of Sharon gives birth to a stillborn child; and eventually Ma insists that they seek a dry place. Al stays with his proposed wife, Aggie Wainright, and the other Joads find a barn in which to shelter There they discover a boy and a starving man whom Rose of Sharon breastfeeds.

The intercalary chapters deal with land ownership in California (19th chapter), resentment and repression of the migrants (21st chapter), the migrants’ leisure activities (23rd chapter), the human skills which produce abundant harvests which are then wasted (25th chapter), cotton-picking (27th chapter), and the problems encountered by the migrants during the prolonged rains (29th chapter).

In Oklahoma the spring rain accelerates the growth of the corn and the whole country looks green. Then a drought occurs. The earth becomes so dry that every moving thing stirs up dust. The hot sun and the wind destroy the corn, and the wind blows clouds of dust into the air. The dust takes two days to settle, and then the people emerge from their houses and inspect the ruined corn. The women and children watch the men’s reaction, and the men retain an unbroken spirit. This assures the women and children that everything will be all right.

The drought precipitates the eviction of the tenant-farmers from the land and so leads to their migration to California. The men overcome their initial bewilderment at the mystery of such vast natural disaster and they adopt a defiant attitude. Determination and a strong will to survive distinguish these people. Several details in the description of the environment deepen our understanding of their resistance.
“Firstly, they confront the sun’s destructiveness: it ‘flared down’, and the ‘sharp sun
struck day after day’, and the ‘sun shone more fiercely’. Secondly, the wind digs
‘cunningly’ at the roots of the corn, and the personification of the wind by the use
of ‘cunningly’ and ‘prying’ suggests a force acting consciously against the people.
However, the people do not weary and surrender as the corn must. Thirdly, the in-
creasing paleness of the sky and earth suggest the land’s progressive loss of vitality.
The red and grey soil becomes pink and white. The green vegetation turns
brown and the earth becomes dust. The word ‘dust’ appears many times, and stands
‘not only for the land itself, but also for the basic situation out of which the novel’s
action develops.” (Lisca, 1958: p. 158)

Whilst a truck-driver talks to a waitress in a roadside cafe, a hitch-hiker
stops beside his truck although its windshield has a No Riders sticker. The man re-
quests a lift because ‘sometimes a guy will be a good guy even if some rich bastard
makes him carry a sticker’. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 13) The driver takes the hitch-hik-
er, and by asking questions the driver discovers that the man is returning home to
his father’s small farm. The driver notices the condition of the man’s hands and
guesses that he has recently worked with a pick, axe, or sledge. The driver declares
his pride in his powers of observation. The questions irritate the hitch-hiker but he
says that he will tell the driver anything. He introduces himself as Tom willing to
show people the reality of the migrants’ plight.

On the other side the Joads and the Wainrights construct platforms in (he
box car so that they can keep above the rising water but eventually Ma decides that
her family must seek better shelter. Al stays with Aggie and the other Joads leave.
They find a dry barn, and there Rose of Sharon breastfeeds a starving man.

When Ma thanks Mrs Wainright for her help she also expresses her realiza-
tion that in their present plight the people must help not only their own family but
everyone: “Use’ ta be the fambly was fust. It ain’t so now. It’s anybody. Worse off
we get, the more we got to do.” (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 470) In this she now thinks
similarly to Tom and Casy. Rose of Sharon also displays this general concern for
the people when she breastfeeds the starving man. This compassionate act affirms
I he continuity of life and the people.

When The Grapes of Wrath appeared in 1939 it attracted wide critical ac-
claim and won the Pulitzer Prize but it also generated a storm of protest. In the
United States Congress Lyle Boren of Oklahoma called it “a lie, a black, infernal
creation of a twisted, distorted mind”, and whilst some libraries burned copies of
it, the Kansas City Board of Education banned it. Much argument concentrated on
whether the events described in the book were true or false, which meant that it was
discussed as a social document rather than as a work of fiction. For many years crit-
ics argued intensely about whether the book should be considered as propaganda
or art.
Some critics attacked Steinbeck for propagating Communist ideas in the book but such accusations can no longer be taken seriously. Carpenter argues that The Grapes of Wrath includes ideas which derive from Americans, such as Emerson and Whitman (for example, “Whitman’s religion of the love of all men and his mass democracy), and he also suggests that it is a ‘novel of the American dream’. He writes that the American dream ‘includes the ideal of progress and of a struggle to the heights’ (Carpenter, 1957) It also involves the pioneering spirit which takes man beyond established frontiers in search of land, independence, and success, and it includes a faith in democratic principles.

The book undoubtedly achieved much of its initial success because it became an influential, and controversial novel about a pressing contemporary social issue, and it deserved the praise it received as one of the finest proletarian novels. (Joseph W. Beach explains ‘proletarian novel’ as a ‘somewhat loose term to designate the type of novel that deals primarily with the life of the working classes or with any social or industrial problem from the point of view of labor’.) However, the book’s enduring success suggests that its achievement extends beyond this. The book not only deals with the particular issues centered on the migrant people in California but in a more general way it depicts man’s ancient search for the promised land and examines the light for life, the instinct of the living organism for survival, and the aspirations of people who must re-define their lives.

The Grapes of Wrath has an unusual structure. It consists of fourteen chapters which narrate the experiences of the Joad family and sixteen short intercalary chapters which never mention by name any of the characters introduced in the main narrative. These intercalary chapters provide general comments about the conditions experienced by the migrants and in this way show that the Joad family represents numerous other families. Steinbeck provides a detailed and sympathetic account of the Joads in order to bring his reader to a concern for and understanding of the plight of all the people who have lost their farms and migrated to California. This migration or journey forms a central part of the novel’s structure and involves a process of learning for characters like Tom, Ma, and Rose of Sharon. They confront new experiences and adapt their beliefs. Each comes to acknowledge a responsibility to all people rather than simply to themselves or their family.

Incidents described in the chapters on the Joads often recur in the intercalary chapters and this repetition helps to unify the novel. For example, intercalary Chapter 7 describes the sale of old cars, and in Chapter 8 Tom sees Pa working on the Joads’ recently purchased truck. Then in Chapter 10 Al explains why he chose this particular vehicle and he points out that before they bought it he ensured that the gearbox and differential had no sawdust in them. These were tricks used by the salesmen in Chapter 7. The intercalary chapters are very varied and provide many details of the social, historical, and political context in which the Joads live. In this
way they broaden and enrich our comprehension of the migrants’ journey. Furthermore, as Lisca suggests, the ‘individuality of subject matter, prose style, and technique’ in the intercalary chapters serve to ‘keep the novel from falling into two parts, and to keep the reader from feeling that he is now reading “the other part”’. (Lisca, 1958: p. 165)

The novel can be divided into three sections. Firstly, Chapters 1 to 10 deal with the drought in Oklahoma, secondly, Chapters 11 to 18 describe the journey to California, and thirdly, Chapters 19 to 30 describe the migrants’ struggle to establish a new life in California. This structure corresponds to the biblical account of the exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt, and Lisca argues that the “novel’s three sections correspond to the oppression in Egypt, the exodus, and the sojourn in the land of Canaan”. (Lisca, 1958: p. 169)

This relationship between *The Grapes of Wrath* and Exodus fundamentally influences our interpretation of the events that befall the Joads. The correspondence with Exodus provides a depth and a seriousness to Steinbeck’s novel and generalizes the action so that it no longer depicts only the experience of individuals at a particular moment in history but also suggests a way in which it is not limited to a particular time. The biblical parallel provides a sense of the past and suggests that the novel’s themes relate to a larger context than the United States in the 1930s. The Grapes of Wrath offers insight into specific social and economic problems and at the same time yields ideas about life which apply to all ages.

Bracher explains how Steinbeck’s interest in ‘the ecology of marine organisms’ influenced his perception of man. When he collected these organisms from the tide pools Steinbeck found “life in a lusty, primitive form, yet clearly related to the life of that larger organism, man, who… incomparably more complex and potential, is nevertheless formed of the same kinds of living cells, subject to the same primitive drives, and a part of an ecological pattern as determinate as that of the tide pool, though infinitely more complicated”. (Bracher, 1948: pp. 14,29) Steinbeck does not equate man with animals but comparisons between animal and human behaviour appear frequently in his novels. In Chapter 4 of *The Grapes of Wrath* Casy compares the turtle’s persistence with his own restless probing of the Gospels, and in Chapter 3 the turtle’s actions represent the migrants’ struggle for survival.

In *The Sea of Cortez* Steinbeck writes that ‘there would seem to be only one commandment for living things: Survive!’ Survival depends upon a complex interaction between various living organisms. All are involved in the cycle of life and death. Although the turtle kills the red ant it also plants the seeds of the wild oat head and enables new life to begin Ma states her faith in her people’s capacity to survive when she declares that “Ever’thing we do—seems to me is aimed right at goin’ on. Seems that way to me. Even gettin’ hungry—even bein’ sick; some die,
but the rest is tougher”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 448) Nimitz argues that in Ma’s comment Steinbeck’s “recognition of the group selection principle merges with affirmation of the principal discovery of the theory of evolution: that organismic life is a continuum”. (Nimitz, 1970: p. 165)

Steinbeck explains this concept in *The Sea of Cortez*: ‘Non-teleological thinking concerns itself primarily not with what should be, or could be, or might be, but rather with what actually “is”—attempting at most to answer the already sufficiently difficult questions what or how, instead of why.’ Casy provides an example of the influence of such thinking when Grampa dies. The Joads will break the law if they bury Grampa themselves but Casy advises them not to worry about that: “Law changes … but “got to’s” go on. You got the right to do what you got to do”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 149) Casy adopts a pragmatic approach to events and decides on a course of action without searching for moral justification. Similarly, when he says a few words over Grampa’s grave, he dismisses concern about whether Grampa was a good or bad man: “This here ol’ man jus’ lived a life an’ jus’ died out of it. I don’t know whether he was good or bad, but that don’t matter much. He was alive, an’ that’s what matters. An’ now he’s dead, an’ that don’t matter. Heard a fella tell a poem one time, an’ he says: “All that lives is holy””. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 154)

Casy is presented as a leader of the people. In Chapter 4 when Casy explains his new philosophy of life to Tom he says, “I got the call to lead the people, an’ no place to lead ’em”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 26)

He seeks a new direction for his life and during the novel he discovers the effectiveness of people acting together in a group. Casy accompanies the Joads to California because he wants to be with people and to help them, although he does not yet know how he can act usefully on their behalf. During the journey he perceives the potential for social change which exists in the mass migration: “They’s gonna come somepin outa all these folks goin’ wes’—outa all their farms lef lone-ly. They’s gonna come a thing that’s gonna change the whole country”. (Steinbeck, 1967: pp. 184–185)

Casy fulfills his commitment to help the Joads when he gives himself up to the Deputies at the Hooverville in order to protect Tom from arrest. Casy goes to jail; and as he later explains to Tom he learns in jail that men must unite and work together in order to promote social change. Chapter 14 states that social change and revolution begin with this movement “from I to ‘we’”, and it also suggests that man’s willingness to “suffer and die for a concept … is the foundation of Manself, and this one quality is man, distinctive in the universe”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 160) Casy acknowledges that by leading the strike he must accept the possible sacrifice of his own life and he believes in the naturalness of this. He cites examples from history which show that people often turn against the leaders of revolution, but he
maintains faith that the progress accomplished can never be completely destroyed because “ever time they’s a little step fo’ward, she may slip back a little, but she never slips clear back”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 407) When the Deputies murder Casy his words echo those of Jesus at Calvary. Casy says: “You fellas don’ know what you’re doin’. You’re helpin’ to starve kids”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 408) Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they do”. (Luke XXIII.34) Like Jesus, Casy preaches a religion of love. Casy believes in a philosophy based upon love of people. He tells Tom “I don’t know nobody name Jesus. I know a bunch of stories, but I only love people”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 28) His belief’s contrast with those of a ‘deep down Jesus-lover’ like Mrs Sandry who shows no love of people, and his attitudes clearly differ from those of the Salvation Army and from those of characters like the young garage attendants in Chapter 18 who despise the migrants because “they ain’t human. A human being wouldn’t live like they do. A human being couldn’t stand it to be so dirty and miserable. They ain’t a hell of a lot better than gorillas”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 235) This superficial and mistaken judgment displays a lack of understanding. Casy never condemns the migrants for the squalor and the wretched conditions in which they are forced to live. He acts with genuine feeling and humanitarianism and always maintains his respect for the migrants. The migrants face a struggle to preserve their dignity because, as Tom argues, the police are ‘a-workin’ away at our spirits. They’re a-tryin’ to make us cringe an’ crawl like a whipped bitch. They tryin’ to break us. Why, Jesus Christ, Ma, they comes a time when the on’y way a fella can keep his decency is by takin’ a sock at a cop They’re workin’ on our decency”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 296) Throughout the novel the Joads struggle to retain their spirit, and whereas they appreciate the sympathy of Casy, Tom in particular resents charity and preaching. Tom tells Casy about the Christmas when the Salvation Army visited McAlester prison and played three hours of music to which the prisoners were forced to listen. Tom resented this and the example enables him to explain his notion of preaching: “Preachin’s a kinda tone a voice, an’ preachin’s a way a lookin’ at things. Preachin’s bein’ good to folks when they wanna kill ya for it”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 102) Similar resentment appears in Annie Littlechild, a member of the Ladies Committee at the Weedpatch camp. Her family sought help from the Salvation Army when they were desperate: “We was hungry—they made us crawl for our dinner. They took our dignity … I ain’t never seen my man beat before, but them—they Salvation Army done it to ’im”. (Steinbeck, 1967: pp. 335–336)

In comparison with Casy’s love and sympathy the other preachers in the novel, and also the fanatical Mrs Sandry, appear to be aggressive and unsympathetic. Chapter 23 ends with a brief description of a preacher who exploits people’s fear. He “paced like a tiger, whipping the people with his voice”, and this has negative implications. The words suggest the preacher’s ferocious attitude towards the
people as well as a sense of his cruelty: “He calculated them, gauged them, played on them”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 349) The description also mocks the preacher by the use of irony and humor. Irony exists in the references to ‘great strength’, ‘the master’, and ‘he prayed that all men might grovel and whine on the Ground’. The preacher might really believe that people’s spiritual salvation can be better assured if they whine and grovel before him, but a reader might impugn his motives since this assault on people’s dignity bolsters the preacher’s sense of himself as ‘the-master’. Is he concerned with the people or with himself? The references to ‘master’ and ‘great strength’ describe the preacher in terms which a reader could think inappropriate. Humor exists in the children’s reaction. One child says “We been saved. We won’t sin no more’, and another replies: ‘Wisht I knowed what all the sins was, so I could do ‘em”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 350) The preacher stimulates the children’s desire to sin, and their ignorance makes fun of his work. The preacher presents a concept of sin about which the children appear to have no knowledge and their attitude recalls Casey’s belief that there “ain’t no sin and there ain’t no virtue”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 28) Preachers work to change the children’s attitude. This preacher also calls to mind the preacher whom Mrs Sandry quotes in Chapter 22: “He says: ‘They’s wicketness in that camp … The poor is tryin’ to be rich … Ever’body that ain’t here is a black sinner’, he says. I tell you it made a person feel purty good to hear ‘im. An’ we knowed we was safe. We ain’t danced”. (Steinbeck, 1967: pp. 339–340) The migrants really seek to avoid starvation rather than to become rich and the preacher’s lack of compassion renders him odious. Fanatical followers like Mrs Sandry only lower him further in our esteem. She displays a smugness and complacency when she says that she felt good listening to the preacher. Casey’s presence in the novel and the sympathetic treatment of his ideas and actions provide a context which reinforces the negative response to the preachers and Mrs Sandry. The destinies of other characters make the picture of this analysis undoubtedly complete.

When Tom arrives home Grampa and Granma run across the yard to greet him and Granma heralds their appearance with her characteristic shout ‘Pu-raise Gawd fur vittory’ whilst Grampa fumbles equally characteristically with the fly-buttons on his trousers. Steinbeck succinctly described their characters. Grampa had a ‘cantankerous, complaining, mischievous, laughing face. He fought and argued, told dirty stories. He was as lecherous as always. Vicious and cruel and impatient, like a frantic child, and the whole structure overlaid with amusement’; and behind him came Granma ’who had survived only because she was as mean as her husband. She had held her own with a shrill ferocious religiosity that was as lecherous and as savage as anything Grampa could offer’. (Steinbeck, 1967: pp. 84–85) Grampa remains the ‘titular head’ of the family but no longer rules, and when they
gather around the truck to discuss their departure he has the right to make the first comment.

Grampa talks about how he will sit in a wash-tub full of grapes in California but when the moment to leave arrives he suddenly announces that: “This here’s my country. I b’long here … I ain’t a-goin”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 120) Tom and Ma drug him with medicine and they take him with them, and when he dies on the first evening of the journey they bury him in a field beside the road. Casy points out that Grampa was ‘jus’ stayin’ with the Lan’. He couldn’ leave it’ An indissoluble spiritual link existed between Grampa and the land and Casy explains that in fact “Grampa died the minute you took ’im off that place”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 156)

The ‘shrill ferocious religiosity’ of Granma is the kind rejected by Casy. She believes fervently and during the grace which Casy delivers she interrupts with ‘Amens’. When Grampa is dying she orders Casy to ‘Pray, Goddamn you’. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 147) Granma herself dies whilst the family cross the Californian desert, and Ma regrets that neither Granma nor Grampa lived to see the fertile Californian valleys. Tom explains that they “was too old … They would’ of saw nothin’ that’s here. Grampa would a been a-seein’ the Injuns an’ the prairie country when he was a young fella. An’ Granma would a remembered an’ seen the first home she lived in. They was too ol’. Who’s really seein’ it is Ruthie an’ Winfield”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 244) Tom realises that at their age Grampa and Granma lack the capacity to confront this new experience.

Pa loses his identity when his life as a farmer is disrupted, and he never fully adapts to the new circumstances which face him. He looks to the past and tells Ma: “I ain’t no good any more. Spen’ all my time a-thinkin’ how it use’ ta be”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 447) He cannot detach himself from his past and the land which he has cultivated, and he acknowledges that he has forfeited his traditional authority over the family: “Funny! Woman takin’ over the fambly. Woman sayin’ we’ll do this here, an’ we’ll go there. An’ I don’ even care’. Sadness appears here, and Ma, who adapts her responses to the demands of a situation, replies with warmth and compassion: ‘Woman can change better’n a man … Woman got all her life in her arms. Man got it all in his head. Don’ you mind”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 448)

When necessary she criticizes Pa and goads him into anger in order to keep up his spirit. She explains this to Tom: “Take a man, he can get worried an’ worried, an’ it eats out his liver, an’ purty soon he’ll jus’ lay down and die with his heart et out. But if you can take an’ make ’im mad, why, he’ll be awright”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 372) Pa is a good man who willingly works hard but events overwhelm him. Unlike Ma and Tom he never shows any real perception of the social implications of what Casy says and does.

When Casy asks Tom to explain the strike to the people working in the Hooper Ranch, Tom asks: “Think Pa’s gonna give up his meat on account a other
fellas?” (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 406) They both know that Pa will not, because although Pa can recognize that there is “change a-comin” and a ‘res’less feelin”, he will not be active in bringing about the change.

Ma carries great responsibility as ‘the citadel of the family, the strong place that could not be taken’ (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 81) and she knows that the family depends upon her strength. Levant accurately describes her as “the psychological and moral center of the family”. (Levant, 974: p. 105) Ma possesses a stronger personality than Pa. She acts with kindness and generosity but also has great determination and will-power. When Pa doubts whether they can afford to take Casy to California, Ma rebukes him and says: “It ain’t kin we? It’s will we?” (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 110) During the novel she becomes increasingly influential in the decision-making and acts with authority. Her eminence also derives from an acquired wisdom: “Her hazel eyes seemed to have experienced all possible tragedy and to have mounted pain and suffering like steps into a high calm and a superhuman understanding”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 80)

In her relations with the family she gives ample evidence of her wisdom for she more than anyone else understands the unique qualities of each member of the family and she can provide an appropriate response to each one.

Ma dedicates herself to protecting the family’s unity and preserving its spirit. If she feels that anyone threatens the family then she can become angry and menacing. When the Wilsons’ car breaks down and the family considers travelling on separately Ma refuses to allow this. She threatens Pa with a jack-handle until he submits to her will. At their riverside camp in Chapter 18 she threatens to hit a Deputy with an iron skillet. Her concern for the family also prompts her not to tell them about Granma’s death until they are safely across the desert, and this remarkable act draws the admiration of Casy: “All night long an’ she was alone … there’s a woman so great with love--she scares me. Makes me afraid an’ mean”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 244)

Ma sees Casy and Tom as somehow set apart from other people. After Casy’s grace she looks at him intently and “her eyes were questioning, probing and understanding. She watched him as though he were suddenly a spirit, not human any more, a voice out of the ground”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 89) She senses that Tom is destined for some special calling: “They’s some folks that’s just theirs’n an’ nothin’ more… Ever’thing you do is more’n you. When they sent you up to prison I knewed it. You’re spoke for”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 373) Even if Ma does not fully understand their beliefs she does sympathize with them and she does display an awareness which in some respects can be compared with theirs. For example, early in the novel when Tom returns from prison Ma shows her recognition of the potential strength of group action. She tells him that about one hundred thousand people have lost their farms and that he cannot light the system alone, but “If we was all
mad the same way, Tommy- they wouldn’t hunt nobody down”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 84) Tom and Casy eventually seek to promote such group action. Another example occurs when Ma buys groceries at high prices in the Hooper Ranch store. The store assistant acts unpleasantly and Ma comments: “Doin’ a dirty thing like this Shames ya, don’t it? Got to act flip, huh?” (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 397) When the man belligerently defends himself by saying that a “fella got a right to eat”, Ma shows her social conscience by asking ‘What fella?” (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 397) She questions the morality of making a living by exploiting others.

Similar awareness appears in Tom’s reaction to the proprietor of the roadside camp in Chapter 16. The proprietor claims that “we all got to make a livin” and Tom replies “Yeah … On’y I wish’t they was some way to make her ‘thout taking’ her away from somebody else”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 199) However, although the Hooper Ranch store never allows credit, the man helps Ma by lending her ten cents from his own pocket and this prompts Ma’s comment: “If you’re in trouble or need-- go to poor people. They’re the only ones that’ll help”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 398) And finally, in the last chapter of the novel, Ma transcends her primary concern for the family and expresses a concern for all people: “Use’ ta be the fambly was fust. It ain’t so now. It’s anybody. Worse off we get, the more we got to do”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 470) Ma embraces the love of mankind in which Casy believes and she remains determined to help people however she can. She believes optimistically that the people will survive: “Ever’thing we do—seems to me is aimed right at goin’ on”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 448) She cannot acknowledge defeat.

Pa’s brother, Uncle John, suffers from a feeling of guilt about the death of his wife. When she was young and pregnant she developed stomach pains and Uncle John did not call a doctor because he thought that she had simply eaten too much. The next day she died of a burst appendix. Uncle John tells Casy: “I kil’t her. An’ sence then I tried to make it up—mos’ly to kids. An’ I tried to be good, an’ I can’t. I get drunk, an’ I go wild”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 238) Uncle John occasionally feels compelled to acts of fornication and drunkenness. He feels burdened by the consciousness of sin and worries whether his sins bring misfortune on the family. He asks Casy’s opinion about his wife’s death and Casy replies that “for anybody else it was a mistake, but if you think it was a sin—then it’s a sin. A fella builds his own sins right up from the groun”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 239) Uncle John says he will think about this but never resolves his problem.

He does not have a strong character and he lacks resilience and determination. In the last chapter when the mud embankment collapses and the water rushes around the men’s knees, it seems that Uncle John gives up: “Uncle John saw the water break through. In the murk he could see it. Uncontrollably his weight pulled him down. He went to his knees, and the tugging water swirled about his chest”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 467) Pa helps him back to the boxcar. Uncle John rarely shows
strong emotion but he does become angry when he places the box with Rose of Sharon’s stillborn baby on the river: “Go down an’ tell ’em. Go down in the street an’ rot an’ tell ’em that way. That’s the way you can talk”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 473)

Noah, the eldest son, fulfills a minor role in the novel. He is unobtrusive, uncommunicative, and lacking in passion. He never shows anger, has “no sexual urges”, and although not stupid he is “strange” (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 85) Pa fears that Noah’s strangeness derives from the night of his birth when Pa panicked and tried to pull and twist Noah during the delivery.

When the family reach the Colorado river and bathe there before crossing the Californian desert Noah decides to stay by the river. He lacks the will-power to continue the tough journey. He tells only Tom about his decision before leaving, and he explains: “You know how the folks are nice to me. Hut they don’t really care for me”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 221)

Tom’s extraordinary development during the novel culminates when he decides to act upon Casy’s ideas and take over his work. In Chapter 4 when Casy explains his beliefs Tom shows no real sympathy with them, but at that time he has just been released from prison and he carries fresh in his mind the disturbing nature of that experience. Tom coped with prison because, as he explains to Ma, he accepted to “Jus’ take ever’ day“ (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 98) and not look too far ahead. He thinks pragmatically. Whilst repairing the Wilsons’ car he refuses to discuss Casy’s concern over all the people moving west:

“Goddamn it! Tom cried, ‘how’d I know? I’m jus’ puttin’ one foot in front a the other. I done it at Mac for four years, just marchin’ in cell an’ out cell an’ in mess an’ out mess. Jesus Christ, I thought it’d be somepin different when I come out! Couldn’ think a nothin’ in there, else you go stir happy, an’ now can’t think a nothin’.” (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 184)

He talks similarly to Al when he declines to discuss his experience in prison: “I ruther jus’ - lay one foot down in front a the other”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 162) Tom adopts this attitude out of necessity not egocentricity, for he does show genuine concern for his family. Although he appears to have a tough and violent nature, Tom’s character also contains much kindness.

When Tom later meets Casy during the strike at the Hooper Ranch and Casy explains the importance of men standing together in order to protect themselves, Tom says little, but he thinks a good deal whilst he hides out in the cave near the box-cars and it is then that he adopts Casy’s beliefs. When Ma joins him to warn him about Ruthie’s blunder he tells her about Casy’s idea that a man “jus’ got a little piece of a great big soul” and he says “I know now a fella ain’t no good alone”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 442) He also quotes a biblical passage which Casy had taught him; it is Ecclesiastes IV, 9-12 which begins “Two are better than one” and it reinforces Tom’s belief in the strength which men can achieve through unity, “a
three-fold cord is not quickly broken”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 443) He regards the Weedpatch camp as a successful demonstration of the way in which the people can co-operate with each other, and he rejects Ma’s concern for his personal safety, since if “a fella ain’t got a soul of his own, but on’y a piece of a big one … Then it don’ matter. Then I’ll be all aroun’ in the dark. I’ll be ever’where wherever you look”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 444) Tom thinks mystically here and identifies himself with the people. He learns to love mankind. Lisca suggests that the conditions under which Tom and Ma talk are “reminiscent of the pre-natal state” (Lisca, 1958: p. 174) and that Tom’s emergence from the cave represents a rebirth. Tom has completed the re-definition of his character.

When Tom returns from prison he discovers that Rose of Sharon is married to a nineteen-year old named Connie Rivers. Rose of Sharon is pregnant and she smiles with self-satisfaction and complacency. Both she and Connie seem immature and preoccupied with themselves: “The world had drawn close around them, and they were in the centre of it, or rather Rose of Sharon was in the centre of it with Connie making a small orbit about her. Everything they said was a kind of secret”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 137) They have great hopes about their future life in California. Rose of Sharon tells Ma that they want to live in a town rather than in the country with the family, and Connie plans to study at night and obtain a home and his own store. Rose of Sharon very tactlessly suggests that perhaps Al could work for Connie and Al naturally takes offence.

Connie eventually finds the journey and the conditions too tough and regrets that he came: “If I’d of knowed it would be like this I wouldn’ of came”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 267) At the Hooverville he abandons Rose of Sharon and never returns. He lacks the psychological and moral strength to combat the difficult conditions in California. In Pa’s view he “didn’ have no guts, jus’ too big for his overalls”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 289) Connie cares little for other people and his values appear in his statement that it would “a been better maybe to stay home an’ study ’bout tractors. Three dollars a day they get, an’ pick up extra money, too”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 267) The tractor driver in Chapter 5 earns extra money by damaging a tenant family’s house. Connie does not share the values of the Joads. His desertion betrays them.

Rose of Sharon worries a lot about her baby, complains about not having milk to drink, and often mopes around. Although Ma sternly tells her to pull herself together she also explains to Tom that pregnancy can upset a woman in this way: “Ever’thing is a-shootin’ right at you when you’re gonna have a baby, an’ ever’thing anybody says is a insult, an’ everything’s against you. Don’t pay no mind. She can’ he’p it. It’s jus’ the way she feels”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 419) This suggests that Rose of Sharon’s complaining should not be judged too harshly.
In the last scenes of the novel Rose of Sharon insists on working with the family in the cotton fields and her labor begins immediately after this. She gives birth to a stillborn child which should not cause surprise in view of her under-nourished condition. Her final act when she breastfeeds the starving man displays a compassion which has not appeared in her previously and it argues strongly that the people must help each other and that they will survive.

Al Joad is sixteen years old and mainly interested in girls and cars. When the family buys a car for the journey Al chooses well for them and he feels responsible for the car during the journey. He tells Tom “I got this goddamn car on my soul”. (Steinbeck 1967: p. 241) Much as Al admires Tom he never shares Tom’s thoughts about group action by the people; and whereas the older Joads would like a farm in the country, Al seeks a different life. He wants to leave the family and work as a mechanic in a garage. Near the end of the novel he announces his intention to marry Aggie Wainright and he stays with her when the Joads leave the boxcar. Ma asks him to look after the family’s belongings until they return. Al works hard, engages actively in the family’s struggle, and he shows initiative on several occasions. He keeps petrol in the car so that when the family wants to leave Weedpatch they can; when the family leaves the Hooper Ranch and the guards ask about Tom, Al quickly provides an explanation. Al has formed the idea of building a platform in the box-car in order that they can protect their belongings from the rising water.

The two youngest children, Ruthie aged twelve years and Winfield ten, behave mischievously. They are both excited by the family’s decision to go to California although Ruthie understands more clearly than Winfield that “this was the great time in her life so far”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 112) When the family finally look down upon the fertile Californian valleys Tom points out that “Who’s really seein’ it is Ruthie an’ Winfiel” (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 244) They are lively children, although by the time that the family reaches the Hooper Ranch Ma begins to worry that they are growing up rather wild: “‘Winfiel’—what’s he gonna be, this-a-way? Gettin’ wild, an’ Ruthie too—like animals”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 416)

Ruthie acts aggressively when she tries to force her way into the children’s croquet game in the Weedpatch camp, and the children’s reaction demonstrates the unacceptability of her behavior in this context. This little incident re-inforces the idea of the Weedpatch camp as an ordered social structure within which people must co-operate with the group and respect each other. Winfield sides with the other children and they promise to include him in the next game.

When Ruthie reveals that Tom is hiding because he killed a man her blunder derives partly from her attitude towards other children, as Winfield points out: “If she didn’t git snotty with her Cracker Jack ‘twouldn’a happened”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 438) She deliberately eats her Cracker Jack slowly, and then she taunts...
Winfield and refuses to share it with other children. This leads to the fight and Ruthie’s blunder. She acts selfishly in this episode.

The owner of the car-sales yard displays aggression and unpleasantness in his references to other people as ‘sons of bitches’, ‘old bastard’, and ‘dumb bunny’, but the man whom he insultingly calls a ‘piker’ later becomes a ‘gentleman’ when he agrees to buy a car. The salesman talks decently to those who buy a car but someone who refuses a ‘deal’ is called a ‘bum’. The salesman acts hypocritically and egocentrically and shows no concern whatsoever for the people to whom he sells cars. He lacks any moral principles, and he tells his assistant to “take out that yard battery before you make delivery. Put in that dumb cell. Christ, what they want for six bits?” (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 69) The attempt to justify this action by the inference that ‘six bits’ is very cheap for a battery shows the perversity of his thinking. The salesman knows that his present opportunity ‘ain’t gonna last’ and so he tries to acquire the maximum profit in the tune available to him. Avarice motivates him.

The salesman skillfully manipulates his clients. When a farmer proposes to trade two mules in part exchange for a car the salesman exploits the farmer’s ignorance of ‘business’ by pretending that the mules are worthless. The insincerity of the one man opposes the sincerity of the other, and because the salesman is shrewd and experienced in these situations he can cheat the inexperienced and in this respect naive farmer. Those who return to the salesman when they discover that they have been cheated receive curt treatment: “Sure, we sold it. Guarantee? We guaranteed it to be an automobile. We didn’t guarantee to wet-nurse it”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 72) The salesman does not give written guarantees and misleads the buyers with worthless verbal guarantees. The farmers must learn that in this context only written contracts count. The migrants in California experience a similar problem with the labor contractors who make verbal promises about the wages they pay but who refuse to write out a contract. When the migrants arrive for work they usually find that the wages offered are less than they had expected.

The style of the chapter reinforces the portrait of the salesman’s ruthless behavior. Fontenrose suggests that the “quick staccato sentences reveal the salesman’s coarse and inhuman avarice.” (Fontenrose, 1963: p. 69) A sense of urgency pervades the salesman’s utterances and the chapter provides a succession of crisp, disconnected comments.

“Now listen here you—you bought a car, an’ now you’re squawkin’. I don’t give a damn if you don’t make payments. We ain’t got your paper. We turn that over to the finance company. They’ll get after you, not us. We don’t hold no paper. Yeah? Well you jus’ get tough an’ I’ll call a cop. No, we did not switch the tires. Run ‘im outa here, Joe.” (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 72)
This passage omits the comments made by the man who bought the car for it is clearly not a continuous speech by the salesman. By selecting only the words spoken by the salesman Steinbeck heightens the sense of the well-rehearsed answers which he gives; and the disconnection and impersonality of the style also convey the general and representative nature of the episode.

Muley lived near the Joads but when his family leaves for California he stubbornly (as his name suggests) stays behind. He wanders around the land rather pathetically “like a damn ol’ graveyard gos” (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 57), and Tom and Casy think that he must be a little crazy. He lives an isolated existence.

In Chapter 6 when he meets Tom and Casy he shares his food with them. His conscience dictates his decision and Casy acknowledges the importance of such selflessness: “Muley’s got a-holt of somepin, an’ it’s too big for him, an’ it’s too big for me”. (Steinbeck 1967: p. 54) Muley’s behavior contrasts with the selfishness of Willy Feeley who cares about his own family but not others. Willy’s attitude so exasperates Muley that Muley questions him about it. When Willy becomes angry, Muley considers that to be an indication of Willy’s shame.

The owner of the petrol station reacts truculently to the Joads because he fears that they may not buy anything but when they do he becomes more friendly. He frequently grumbles: “I don’ know what the country’s comin’ to”. Casy offers an explanation but the owner fails to understand and mindlessly reiterates his grumble. Tom rebukes him harshly: “You don’t want to know nothin’. Just sing yourself to sleep with a song: “What we comin’ to’.” (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 136) The owner lives in poverty and is a pathetic figure.

The one-eyed wrecking-yard assistant presents an equally sullen and negative attitude, and Tom talks very frankly to this man as well: “You got that, eye wide open. An’ ya dirty, ya stink. Ya jus’ askin’ for it. Ya like it. Lets ya feel sorry for yaself”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 191) The owner of the petrol station and the one-eyed wrecking-yard assistant both lack spirit and tenacity. They appear to be lifeless and pessimistic and without any sense of purpose, and in this way they contrast with the Joads, especially Tom. Tom’s reaction to the two men provides a valuable insight into the strength of his own character.

Portraying the characters, Steinbeck mainly explores the American political and social system as the reflection on characterization, plot and symbols in the novel. From these things the ‘grape symbolism’ appears to be permanently accepted like symbolical term in literary world.

In this novel grapes can symbolize bitterness, vengeance, and wrath, or abundance and renewal. The references to grapes often allude to the Bible and also to Julia Ward Howe’s song “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” from which Steinbeck took the title The Grapes of Wrath. Howe published her song in 1862 during the American Civil War. She wrote it for the States of the Union and it begins:
Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;
*He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored*;
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword,
His truth is marching on.

This alludes to the Bible, to Revelation XIV which states that those who
‘worship the beast and his image’ will ‘drink of the wine of the wrath of God’, and
it goes on to say that ‘the angel thrust in his sickle into the earth, and gathered the
vine of the earth, and cast it into the great winepress of the wrath of God’. Moses’
song in Deuteronomy XXXII similarly warns of God’s vengeance on those who
forsake Him: ‘For their vine is the vine of Sodom, and the fields of Gomorrah: their
grapes are grapes of gall, their clusters are bitter … To me (the Lord) belongeth
vengeance, and recompence’ (see another biblical reference in Jeremiah XXXI.30).

In The Grapes of Wrath the migrants grow angry at the conditions in Cali-
fornia and Steinbeck exploits the biblical allusions to express this: “In the eyes of
the hungry there is a growing wrath. In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath
are filling and growing heavy for the vintage”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 369) The mi-
giants will free themselves from repression and take revenge upon their oppres-
sors, and their triumph will prove to be as unavoidable as God’s judgment because
the “great owners … ran to their destruction, and used every means that in the long
run would destroy them. Every little means, every violence, every raid on a Hoo-
verville, every deputy swaggering through a ragged camp put off the day a little
and cemented the inevitability of the day”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 253) The biblical
allusions imply that in their wrath the migrants act as an agent of God’s wrath and
judgment.

In Numbers XIII grapes symbolise abundance. Moses sends men “to spy out
the land of Canaan… and bring of the fruit of the land” and they return with “a
branch with one cluster of grapes, and they bare it between two upon a staff. They
tell their people that Canaan “floweth milk and honey”. The Joads believe that Cali-
fornia will provide abundance for them and Grampa looks forward to eating “a big
bunch of grapes”. However, the expectations of the Joads are disappointed. Gram-
pa never reaches California and Tom acknowledges that it “ain’t no lan of milk an’
honey”. (Steinbeck, 1967: p. 266) For them it is not the Promised Land even
though it does provide an abundance of produce. The bad economic system makes
California such a poor place for the Joads to live.

In The Song of Solomon II. 1 the name Rose of Sharon implies Christ, and
when Rose of Sharon breastfeeds the starving man there may be biblical allusions
to The Song of Solomon VII. 7. “This thy stature is like to a palm tree, and thy
breasts to clusters of grapes”, as well as to the Gospels where Christ says: “This is
my body which is given for you”. (Luke XXII.19) Critics dispute the existence of
these allusions but Browning argues that through them the “grape symbol extends beyond the economic and philosophical to the mystical or spiritual hope of man … the grape, representing immortality, is the ultimate affirmation of the 'new religion' exemplified in Jim Casy and Tom Joad.” (Browning, 1968: p. 131)

Finally, we can conclude that the great American novel Steinbeck went on to write what is generally regarded as his finest 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. “The Turtle” is an excerpt from the opening pages of this novel, which won the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. The book aroused public sympathy for the plight of migratory farm workers and established Steinbeck as one of the most highly regarded writers of his day.

Steinbeck produced several more successful works during his later years, including Cannery Row (1945), The Pearl (1947), East of Eden (1951), and The Winter of Our Discontent (1961). In 1962, he received the Nobel Prize for Literature. In accepting that award, Steinbeck noted his belief that literature can sustain people through the hard times. He added that it is the writer’s responsibility to celebrate the human “capacity for greatness of heart and spirit- for gallantry in defeat, for courage, compassion and love. In the endless war against weakness and despair, these are the bright rally flags of hope and of emulation”. Steinbeck’s belief in social justice, and in the human ability to learn from and rise above suffering, infused all his work.

REFERENCES


Мирјана Н. Лончар Вујновић, Ана М. Андрејевић

ТЕМА И СИМБОЛИКА ШТАЈЊЕКОВОГО РОМАНА
ПЛОДОВИ ГЊЕВА3

Резиме
У роману Плодови гњева Џон Штајнбек успева да дочара атмосферу политичког и социјалног америчког друштвеног система, рефлектујући је на психолошку карактеризацију ликова, кроз потресну избегличку причу и симболику. Он успева да потпуно разголити америчку сурову реалност, одбацујући илузионистички замишљен плашт америчког сна. Штајнбекови ликови се очајнички боре за опстанак упркос силам која је уперена против свих њих и која их спутава у тежњи да остану присебни, да разумеју и контролишу своје поступке и живот. Упркос жељи да опстану, стварајући илузорни привид нормалног живота, многи ликови имају трагичне судbine.

Штајнбекова способност да мјасторски комбинује оштру критику политичког и социјалног друштвеног система у Америци са сопственим, оригиналичним, уметничким даром да сачини ликове и причу и прилагоди језик тематски актуелном друштвеном слоју, дефинитивно је ретка поjavна у америчкој књижевности.

Роман Плодови гњева је историјски аутентична прича о породици Џод. Фармери из Оклахоме су протерани са својих имања и приморани да мигрирају у Калифornију, наводно, обећану земљу до које многи не стижу, а где им, заправо, као прогнаницима следи пропадање.

У време настанка, роман доживљава велику популарност, те Штајнбек постаје један од најцењенијих писаца свог времена. Ауторова вера у социјалну правду и човекову способност да очврсне и превазиђе патњу прожима сва његова дела.

Кључне речи: симбол, плодови, гнев, судбина, избеглиштво, потпуна немаштина, опстанак, патња.