

Comments on The Grapes of Wrath
by William Howard
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“...I am not writing a satisfying story. I've done my damndest to rip a reader's nerves to rags, I don't want him satisfied” - Steinbeck

Provided an endless choice of subjects from The Grapes of Wrath, I've decided to skip many obvious ones assuming you've already discovered them. Instead, I'll focus on ideas learned primarily from sources outside the novel.

Part 1 - Purpose and thesis

Steinbeck didn't write The Grapes of Wrath to entertain. Primarily, he aims to inform, to call to action, to indict. In Steinbeck's words:

"I'm trying to write history while it is happening, and I don't want it to be wrong. [I]t is a mean, nasty book and if I could make it nastier I would ... the book has a definite job to do ... I want to put a tag of shame on the greedy bastards who are responsible for this." (Letters)

What then, is Steinbeck trying to prove? My summary is this:

“Man is individual (I), part of community (we), and member of humanity (all). His actions are influenced or driven by history and environment. He can be fully understood only through this complexity. “Emergence” is social understanding followed by action. Fear, and hopelessness result from the actions of selfish men blinded by wealth. Oppression as a means of control is ultimately futile. Rather, oppression is the anlage or seed of The Grapes of Wrath - suffering leading to anger, empowerment and revolt of the oppressed.

I think Steinbeck uses his “five layers” to support this thesis.

Part 2 - The five layers

Steinbeck wrote to his friend and editor “Pat” Covici :

“what...[the reader]...takes from...[the novel]... will be scaled entirely on his own depth of shallowness. There are five layers in this book, a reader will find as many as he can and he won't find more than he has in himself.” (Letters, p 178)

Steinbeck never explained the five layers or his cryptic phrases. I found utility in one published hypothesis that I'll use and expand.

Setting layer five aside for a moment, the first four layers are parallels to, or influence by, Ed Rickett's “four approaches” to ecology also referred to as four “methods of awareness”(Shillinglaw, p9-10) . Ricketts was the marine biologist and close friend with

whom Steinbeck made his journey to the Sea of Cortez. Ricketts is the model for Jim Casy, Doc in Cannery Row and others. Ricketts stated:

“Ecology is the science of relationships...An ecologist has to consider the parts, each in its place, and as related to, rather than as subsidiary to the whole”. (Shillinglaw, p10).

Layer 1

Approach 1 in Rickett's system is observing, describing, dissecting and cataloging members of the species.

The parallel Layer 1 is Steinbeck's depiction of individuals and plot.

Layer 1 is obvious. However, characters and plot are neither neglected nor superficial. Consider the masterful depictions of people we find ridiculous, loathsome, endearing: Rose of Sharon, Ma with iron will and jack handle, the religiously tyrannical Mrs. Sandy, Uncle John paralyzed with guilt. A favorite is the colorful, good-hearted, but belligerent rascal Grandpa:

“Sons-a-bitches won't let a ol' fella sleep. When you bastards get dry behin' the ears, you'll maybe learn to let an ol' fella sleep.”. His furious fingers managed to flip open the only two buttons on his fly that had been buttoned. And his hand forgot what it had been trying to do ... reached in and contentedly scratched under the testicles.

“... by God, they's grapes out there, just a-hangin' over into the road. Know what I'm a-gonna do? I'm gonna pick me a wash tub full a grapes, an I'm gonna set in 'em, an' scroooge around', an' let the juice run down my pants.” (The Grapes of Wrath, p 95)

Layer 2

Method 2 in Rickett's system is the study of interactions between what he termed “loose aggregations of several species, or associations into which animals band themselves.” (Shillinglaw , p10). In the corresponding Layer 2, Steinbeck describes the bonding of individuals, and communities in a continual progression from “I” to “we”. The 12 Joad disciples spiritually led by Jim Casy are joined by the Wilsons. The tent cities that sprout along Route 66, Weedpatch, Hoovervilles. In contrast, the novel also depicts menacing groups like the Farmers Association.

Method 2 and Layer 2 have hidden depth.

Ricketts was heavily influenced by professor Warden Allee. Allee applied ecological concepts to animal behavior and interdependence in books such as “The Social Life of Animals”. Allee argued that, in addition to the Darwinian struggle for existence, there was:

“an underlying pervasive element of unconscious cooperation, or automatic tendency towards mutual aid among animals” (Beyond the outer shores, page 9).

In “Argument of Phalanx” Steinbeck explored the relationship between individual and group. He argued the collective had properties that don’t belong to the individual.

“It is quite easy for the group, acting under stimuli to viciousness, to eliminate the kindly natures of its units. When acting as a group, men do not partake of their ordinary natures at all.” (Letters, page 75)

and

“The coral insect working with hundreds of billions of others, eventually creates a strange and beautiful plant-like formation”. (Letters, page 75)

Steinbeck saw propensity for good or evil when groups were formed. The Associated Farmers contrasts with welcoming committees and Okies who sacrifice repeatedly for each other.

Layer 3

Method 3 is the consideration of history. According to Ricketts:

“If you know the ... complete life history of the beasts...you can ...understand just how and even why it occurs in a certain place at a given period in its life history - to what ...associations it belongs” (Shillinglaw, 10)

Layer 3, in *Grapes of Wrath* is the historical context of migration, dust bowl, floods, foreclosures. Steinbeck takes the additional step - not applicable to competing marine species - of assigning responsibility, right, wrong.

Layer 4

Ricketts’s 4th “method of awareness” was innovative when he pioneered it. He organized marine biology and his book “*Between Pacific Tides*” by ecological niches: “The Protected Outer Coast”, “Bays and Estuaries” instead of by species: mollusks, crabs. Niche thinking was revolutionary, but Ricketts expanded this by adding universality.

“These three aspects of habitat - wave shock, type of bottom, and tidal level - ...tremendously influence the types of animals that occur....The observer possessing this information should be able to identify most of the animals he is likely to find...” (Between Pacific Tides, p5).

Layer 4 is Steinbeck’s universal plight and power struggle. Joads and Wilsons are just examples of the larger migration. Further, he traces the repeated migrations of Mexicans, Japanese, Malays, etc., demonstrating that similar social forces result in similar alignments of power and want. The cycle repeats, is universal.

Steinbeck makes universality more explicit in Chapter 14:

“If you who own the things people must have could understand this, you might preserve yourself. If you could separate causes from results, if you could know that Paine, Marx, Jefferson, Lenin, were results, not causes, you might survive. But that you cannot know. For the quality of owning freezes you forever into “I”, and cuts you off forever from the “we”.

Muley says his family has been here 50 years, placing their arrival exactly when the white settlers pushed out the Indians who were displaced from their original homelands 50 years before that. Muley's family has been displaced, but they were once the displacers.

Summary Layers 1-4

If it seems improbable that Ricketts and Steinbeck would see such explicit parallels between marine biology and human behavior, and that this inspired Steinbeck, consider their writings:

Ricketts:

“Who would see a replica of man's social structure has only to examine the ... tide pools, where miniature communal societies wage dubious battle against equally potent societies in which the individual is paramount” (Shillinglaw, page 81)

Steinbeck:

“We have looked into the tide pools and seen the little animals feeding and reproducing and killingbut we do not objectively observe our own species as a species ...If we used the same smug observation on ourselves ...we would be forced to say “ ... that groups ...are periodically infected with a feverish nervousness which causes the individual to turn on and destroy, not only his own kind, but the works of his own kind.” (Cortez, page 15).

Layer 5

Layer 5 is an amalgamation of concepts influenced, not by Rickett's marine methods, but rather by his philosophy. Rickett's transcendental concept of “Emerging” seen in Jim Casy's and Tom's epiphanies, the expansion of “I” and “we” to “all”, the “whole thing” or the “one soul”. Emerson who inspired Ricketts said:

“We live... in division, in parts.... Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related, the eternal ONE.” (Wikipedia article)

Steinbeck argues for social awareness and activism. Jim Casy - man of words and thoughts is transformed by understanding and compelled to defend, organize, strike.

Returning to Steinbeck's letter to Pat Covici:

“...what he takes from it will be scaled entirely on his own depth of shallowness.”

“...a reader will find as many [layers] as he can and he won't find more than he has in himself.”

To Steinbeck, the most shallow man is selfish and understands only layer 1 of “I” and “me”. Those who see man as communal will decypher level 2. The most socially aware will see in succession, history and context, universality, and the need for action. That is, discovery of the levels demands certain characteristics in ourselves..

Conclusion

The novel's ending can portend more suffering or hope and triumph. But what does history say happen to the Okies? They weren't saved by unionizing or a revolution. One could conclude that Steinbeck was wrong and the plight of migrant workers continues. The Okies were saved from destitution by WW II when worker surplus transformed into shortage. Migrants adapted, laid down their hoes and picked up welding torches for well-paying defense jobs. So, maybe Steinbeck did get it right:

“We ain't gonna die out. People is goin' on--changin' a little, maybe, but goin' right on.”

Sources

Shillinglaw = On Reading the Grapes of Wrath, book, Susan Shillinglaw, 2014

Cortez = The log from the Sea of Cortez, book, Steinbeck

Between Pacific Tides = Between Pacific Tides, 5th Edition, book, by Edward Ricketts and Jack Calvin, 1992

Beyond the Outer Shores = Beyond the Outer Shores: The untold odyssey of Ed Ricketts, the pioneering ecologist who inspired John Steinbeck, book, by Eric Tamm, 2004

Letters = Steinbeck: A life in Letters by John Steinbeck. book edited by Elaine Steinbeck and Robert Wallsten, 2001.