
J. STEINBECK'S CONCERNS ABOUT THE STRUGGLE OF THE AMERICAN WORKING CLASS (IN DUBIOUS BATTLE, THE GRAPES OF WRATH, AND CANNERY RAW)

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ABSTRACT

John Steinbeck was unquestionably an author greatly concerned with the struggle of the American working class. His many novels are considered the proletarian novel, which is motivated by didactic aims. The examination of John Steinbeck as a radical novelist encompasses decades of evolution for both America as well as for the author himself. By examining three of Steinbeck's most left bound novels it becomes clear that his works not only adopt leftist principles, but also exhibit an ongoing struggle for Steinbeck to define his own philosophical and political views, which happen to share several common themes with Marxism.

Keywords: *proletarian novel, Marxism, the proletariat, the phalanx, the group-man, Dust Bowl migrants, collective identity.*

ANNOTATSIYA

Adabiyot bo'yicha Nobel mukofoti sovrindori Jon Steynbek, shubhasiz, Amerika ishchilar sinfining ayanchli hayoti va ularning keskin kurashlarini chuqur yoritgan mohir yozuvchidir. Shu sababli, uning ko'plab romanlari didaktik maqsadlarga asoslangan proletar romani hisoblanadi. Yozuvchining eng radikal deb hisoblangan mazkur uchta asarining tahlili shuni ko'rsatadiki, bu asarlar nafaqat Amerika jamiyati uchun yot bo'lgan sotsialistik tamoyillar asosida yozilgan, balki bu asarlar Steynbekning Marksizm oqimi tamoyillari bilan mos keluvchi falsafiy va siyosiy qarashlarini ham namoyon qilgan.

Kalit so'zlar: *proletar romani, marksizm, proletariat, falanga, guruh-odam, Buyuk Chang bo'ronlari migrantlari, kollektiv birlik.*

INTRODUCTION

There are few artists that could truly capture the spirit of America in all of her unique, complicated phases. Literary giants from the twentieth century find themselves classified into their own elaborate, specific genres such as modernism, pre-war and post-war texts, postmodernism, realism, Southern gothic, etc. Few authors transcend these categories; some have even attempted to rid themselves of this literary branding. One canonized author in particular who has managed to evade

a literary niche and highlight his talents beyond the confines of stylistic classification or content is John Steinbeck. Several critics mention Steinbeck's separation from literary-isms and highlight his transgression of conventional limitations. For example, literary criticism places Steinbeck outside the confines of modernism,

He was a modernist outside the traditional boundaries of modernism, his prose shaped by myth; his sentences honed, like Hemingway's, to the essential; his visionary characters as thoroughly deflated as Fitzgerald's [...] He refused to be pigeonholed as a realist, a writer of fiction, a committed social critic, a regional writer. This fierce independence is one of his most salient features as a writer (1, pp 2-3).

Evident by the multifarious genres and subjects explored throughout his lifetime, Steinbeck escapes formal categorization and exists as a rogue American author, untameable by normative literary restrictions.

MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

The researcher used Marxist criticism to do this study. The Marxist theorist is committed to the interrelationship of word and world, of theory and practice, and to exposing and challenging the inequities of the capitalist system in its various forms. Marxist literary theories, like feminism and postcolonialism, those theories, which also define themselves as both a theoretical and political practice, continue to ask the most challenging questions within the discipline of literary study: what is the relation between literature and society? does literary value exist and if so in what? what is the relation between my study and the lives of others outside of the academy? Marxism argues that all viewpoints are socially determined, but that does not entail that all viewpoints are equal in value. A prisoner is more likely to recognize the oppressive nature of a particular juridical system than a judge. (In classical Marxist terms, the working classes will recognize the injustices of capitalism rather than the capitalists.) All Marxist theories continue to assert that certain inequities, such as class exploitation and poverty, will always be 'wrong', and Marxist literary theories continue to assert that these issues are not unrelated to literature. Marxist commentators warn that we are in danger of forgetting not just how to act but how to think in resistance to capitalism.

The beginning of the twentieth-century found the United States recovering from both war and economic depression, and across the country American workers were struggling. The literature of the 1930's embodied an interest in the plight of the laborer, as authors began to become more intimately concerned with the struggles of the proletariat. Some may argue that this literary movement to the left was spawned

by the popularity of communist beliefs reaching an all time high in the American populace, but to do so would be to give Party members far more credit than they deserve. In his analysis of American literary communism, entitled *Writers on the Left*, Daniel Aaron suggests that, “for the majority of writers who were associated in some way or another with the movement, it was the times, not the party, that made them radicals. The party attracted them because it alone seemed to have a correct diagnosis of America’s social sickness and a remedy for it” (2, p. 160). This broad appreciation for leftist politics resulted in a mishmash of radical literature wildly varied concerning both content and intention.

The more customary “radical tradition” was limited by guidelines intended to produce a homogenous message, but the general shift to the left that was taking place resulted in an abundance of texts by a wide range of authors concerned with the struggle of the proletariat and the oppressive force of capitalism.

In Dubious Battle was published in 1936 and illustrates Steinbeck’s disagreement with the communist movement of the period. The novel demonstrates the burgeoning of Steinbeck’s interest in the phalanx, and analyses the group-man phenomenon in relation to the labour organizations of the 1930’s. *The Grapes of Wrath*, published in 1939, illustrates the blending of radical sub-genres and other mediums of the period, as well as the evolution of Steinbeck’s communal vision. The Joads illustrate the continuation of Steinbeck’s philosophy of the phalanx, and serve as the space in which he works out these beliefs from multiple perspectives. *Cannery Row*, published in 1945 as WWII came to a close, displays a more fully developed vision of communal existence that exemplifies Steinbeck’s own leftist beliefs. The denizens of *Cannery Row* provide Steinbeck with the means to treat a small group as representative of his anti-capitalistic communal vision for society as a whole.

Each novel contains a character or characters seemingly in tune with Steinbeck’s own leftist beliefs, and an analysis of these characters yields a thorough depiction of Steinbeck’s own political and philosophical development.

The transition that takes place brings Steinbeck from texts like *In Dubious Battle* that allow him to work with the idea of the group-man as part of their narrative, to texts like *Cannery Row* that are designed with the philosophy of the phalanx at the forefront. This evolution of Steinbeck’s concern with the phalanx, or the group-man phenomenon, will form the core of this argument. This is the most important point of consideration, and the analysis of Steinbeck’s Marxist content and the use of mouthpieces will revolve around this discussion of the group-man concept. This philosophy of the phalanx forms the heart of Steinbeck’s radical vision. Steinbeck’s

preoccupation with collectivity is also what serves to set him apart from many of the other radically concerned authors writing in the same period, as well as what places him in a closer proximity to a more collectively concerned organic communism.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The concept of the group-man that permeates through John Steinbeck's writings of the 1930's and 1940's is an analysis of collective existence, and the notion that like any organism, the sum of a phalanx's parts are not equal to the whole. Steinbeck's preoccupation with group-man was heavily influenced by the farm labour organization movements taking place in California during the 1930's, as this period, "brought not only the Depression, but, increasingly, severe labour strife as well – general strikes, marches, riots, and vigilante action" (3, p.198). These labour disputes provided the background for many of the novels that helped to form the radical tradition as a whole, and while Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle* is following suit, the novel is more complex than the simple narrative of a strike. On the surface *In Dubious Battle* tells the story of an apple pickers strike organized by two communist labour leaders, the experienced Mac and the neophyte Jim. The novel focuses on the methods of the strike leaders, and their treatment of the mob they help to form.

The strikers of *In Dubious Battle* achieve the mob mentality, but a mob becomes more of a type of group-man than an example of the overall phenomenon. In 1933, John Steinbeck wrote to Carlton Sheffield, "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" (4, p.75).

The back drop for *The Grapes of Wrath* is the tale of how farming became industry, and farm families were driven from the land as the dust storms of the 1930's added to the suffocating pressures of the depression. These uprooted farmers set out to seek greener pastures, and found them in California, only to discover they were not welcome. The Joad family is the means Steinbeck uses to convey the horror of these events, and the atrocities committed in the name of the bottom line. Mimi Gladstien says, "the Joads gain much of their literary cachet from the similarities of the problems suffered by immigrants everywhere. The experience is universal" (5, p.134), and this is the effect Steinbeck was hoping for. This novel was not simply about the Okie migration, but about the treatment of one group of humans by another.

In his autobiography of Steinbeck, Jackson Benson reports, "[Tom] Collins apparently fancied himself a social scientist", and provided Steinbeck with a great "stack of material" regarding the lifestyles of the migrant workers in the government camp Collins managed. This information was used to help shape the characters and

incidents in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Steinbeck did not have to rely predominantly on third party information the way he did for *In Dubious Battle*, because “The family Steinbeck was writing about was actually a composite of several families he had encountered in visiting one squatters “camp after another” (6, p.334). This supposed attention to detail was met with some uncertainty, as many critics thought, “Most of the nineteenth and early twentieth-century attempts to deal with the „poor but honest“ workingman as a „prince in disguise“ failed to convince, because the writers themselves were temperamentally and culturally too far removed from the proletarian’s world. Their books were more often than not merely well-intended slumming expeditions from which they returned exalted or depressed” (7, p.206). Steinbeck was intimately concerned with the struggles of these workers though, and spent vast amounts of time visiting itinerant worker camps, and government camps throughout the late 1930’s, especially during 1938 while he was writing this novel. In fact, his attention to detail spared so little that, *The Grapes of Wrath* crafted a portrait that many former Dust Bowl migrants have long regarded as demeaning, in turn, *The Grapes of Wrath*, for all its good intentions, ironically helped to solidify some of the unfortunate images, which Californians already associated with the newcomers from that region. However, both the white washing of his characters and the unforgiving portrayal of the Okies, served to create a more powerful piece of social commentary. In addition, these visits to worker camps allowed Steinbeck to witness the point of group-man’s formation.

While Steinbeck was one of the leftist authors that would not sacrifice aesthetic for didacticism, *The Grapes of Wrath* was a novel that Steinbeck intended as something pointedly concerned with itinerant farm workers. This novel was designed from the onset to be a social commentary, meant to convey Steinbeck’s own moral and political philosophy to the reader. In the journal he kept while he was writing this book, he wrote, “This must be a good book. It simply must. I haven’t any choice”, and that he must struggle to make it so, “until the whole throbbing thing emerges” (8, p.25). Steinbeck felt passionately about *The Grapes of Wrath* because he was concerned about the itinerant workers suffering all over California, while the creation of this text also gave him an opportunity to further expound upon his own leftist beliefs and the nature of the phalanx. Perhaps the amount of passion that went into the crafting of this particular novel is the reason Joseph Beach said, “*The Grapes of Wrath* is probably the finest example produced in the United States of what in the thirties was called the proletarian novel” (9, p.259).

As for dealing with the lowest members of society, Steinbeck has done a fine job of ensuring that the reader understands the place of the itinerant farm worker. They have no place. Steinbeck does less to illustrate the decay of the middle class in the Joad narrative, but he does elsewhere. As Rideout says, “Not only is the grim life of the workers in the mill, saloon, and slum depicted with thorough exactness, but also the pleasanter existence of the owners”, and the intercalary chapters help to provide this perspective so that the Joad narrative can continue uninterrupted. He proceeds, “Such passages also serve to universalize the story for the reader; by being placed in historical context, the Joads become part of our own story” (10, pp.106-107), and these chapters combined with the amalgamation of forms certainly suggest that Steinbeck was attempting to force the reader into participating within his narrative.

The next novel that Steinbeck’s reputation as a proletariat writer sets on, *Cannery Row* does not have a particularly formal narrative construction. The reader is presented with a series of events involving Doc, Mack and the boys, and some of the other more colourful residents of Monterey. The driving force behind much of the action is Mack and the boys’ desire to throw a party for Doc, and when they mess up, the rest of the book is about trying again. The depth of the novel comes not from the plot but from the richness of Steinbeck’s depiction of his characters, and the communal existence that allows them to so easily make their way through a rather hostile environment. The rough non-fictional quality of the text may drive some critics away as well, but within this text a scrutinizing reader can see the final formation taken by Steinbeck’s radical philosophy. This is the point at which his interest in the phalanx and his alignment with leftist politics intertwine entirely, as group-man becomes an alternative to life within the capitalistic class system.

The phalanx Steinbeck presents to the reader in *Cannery Row* is rather unorthodox. There is no strike to pull the men together, no migration that forces them to interact; there is simply the need for the most basic human amenities and a desire for camaraderie. As Steinbeck wrote to George Albee years earlier, “From the phalanx [man] takes a fluid necessary to his life” (4, p.82), and this is what he aims to express through the depiction of Mack and the boys. There is something beautifully ironic in simultaneously suggesting that the phalanx provides an alternative to capitalism, and that the only available vehicle for depicting this point is found by using the outcasts of capitalism itself. Mack and the boys can only exist the way they do because they are already outside of the capitalistic civilization engulfing Monterey, and America as a whole. This may be why, “Steinbeck nonetheless found himself

irresistibly drawn to this throbbing little cluster that served him as a metaphor for all life” (11, p.156). Mack and the boys serve to demonstrate a far greater possibility than a couple of bums squatting in a shack.

The fact that Steinbeck consistently refers to the phalanx of *Cannery Row* as “Mack and the boys,” serves to illustrate their collective identity. However, the boys each bring a different functional quality to the mix as well, whether it be Mack’s brains, Hazel’s heart, Gay’s ability to fix machines, or Eddie’s green thumb and ability to procure booze from La Ida’s. Each member of the phalanx not only contributes independently, but they also take turns at the head of the group. Depending on what is required by a particular situation each man is ready to take charge if his individual expertise is the most applicable. As Lee Chong’s car was being fixed, “Gay was in charge” of the group, directing the phalanx as a whole to accomplish the job as quickly and efficiently as possible, much like the strikers clearing Anderson’s orchard in *In Dubious Battle*. Both scenes exemplify the power of the phalanx when they are not forced, but choose to work as a part of something greater.

Mack and the boys utilize the power of the group for both simple and complex tasks, in a manner that suggests these tasks might be utterly impossible for one man to accomplish on his own. When the boys need a stove for the Palace Flophouse and Grill, they set off together to find one. Their acquisition may require carrying the stove five miles over the course of three days, “but they camped beside it at night”, and together they were able to accomplish what would have otherwise required materials or vehicles that they did not have access to because of their economic position. In this fashion, the collective solidarity of Mack and the boys compensates for their lack of capital. What another man might need to pay to have done, Mack and the boys simply band together and accomplish themselves. When they go frog hunting for Doc, they construct an elaborate plan that would not be possible without the strength of the group. Some of the boys scare the frogs across the pond, while others keep them from crawling out along the sides, while at the end of the pool, “two men gathered them like berries”. The narrator examines the history of man versus frog concluding by saying, “how could they have anticipated Mack’s new method” (12, pp 92-93). The other methods described involve nets, lances, and guns, all of which the frogs have managed to escape, but faced with the ingenuity and strength of group-man they do not stand a chance. Mack and the boys possess almost limitless strength and determination, and yet the reason they are truly able to accomplish these takes is because the sum of their parts is far overshadowed by the whole. The

depiction of Mack and the boys illustrates the ability of man to jump out of capitalism and directly in communism without the dictatorship of the proletariat, which places Steinbeck at odds with the Marxist stages of history. The characters in *Cannery Row* do not need characters like *In Dubious Battle*'s Mac, because they have discovered the convenience of a pseudo-communist lifestyle on their own.

CONCLUSION

The philosophy of John Steinbeck that emerges during the 1930's and 1940's is deeply concerned with the isolation felt by the reified proletarian subject, and the hope that comes in the form of collectivity as expressed in Steinbeck's notion of the phalanx. The novels that have been discussed here provided Steinbeck with the opportunity to work out these ideas through the medium of fiction, until at last he was able to construct a text that was able to convey the fruition of his work on *In Dubious Battle* and *The Grapes of Wrath*. *Cannery Row* presents the reader with a trimmed narrative of the phalanx, which finally allows Steinbeck to convey his own leftist viewpoint.

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