

John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*: A Literary Portrayal of Historical Truth

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Abstract

John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath (1939) is one of the American classics that record a socio-political climate of the American history in 1930s. It succeeds in representing the harshness of the Great Depression, the dust bowl and the subsequent tribulations of West American people and more specifically, the Okies. Retelling the struggles of migrant farmworkers and the severity they encountered throughout their journey from Oklahoma to California, the novel, despite its plethora of areas of investigation, provokes critical awareness when viewed through the lens of New Historical perspectives. As a well-acclaimed literary theory, New Historicism pays considerable attention to the historical period, in which the literary text was created, bearing in mind that the literary work is a reflection of its socio-political context as well as the author's historical consciousness. With regard to the intertextuality between history and literature, the present study seeks to present a panoramic account of the historical accounts of America in the 1930s and the people's miserable migration as they are thoughtfully reinterpreted in Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath.

Keywords: John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, New Historicism, the Great Depression and the Okies.

Introduction

"There ain't no sin and there ain't no virtue. There's just stuff people do." "And the little screaming fact that sounds through all history: repression works only to strengthen and knit the repressed."

— (Steinbeck, *GW*, 285)¹

Regarding the relationship between history and literary texts, Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* exemplifies a significant account for the historical events that shaped the American scene in the 1930s. The novel aims to reinterpret the American history from that period and reflect Steinbeck's historical consciousness. As a product of its social and historical contexts, the novel also exerts a positive influence on history, authenticating the related sociopolitical anxieties. It chronicled the miserable immigration of American southern farmers represented by those from Oklahoma. This study utilizes the New Historicism as a theoretical basis to explore the relation between history and texts, adopting, more specifically, Louis Montrose's two interconnected concepts of "textuality of history" and "historicity of texts." (Venturino, 2013, np) It aims to prove that *The Grapes of Wrath* is a historical record of America during 1930s, documenting the facts that many people suffered from poverty, joblessness and the irritating social conflicts during the Great Depression. The study also incorporates Steinbeck's reinterpretation of history. Belonging to a group of writers known as the Lost Generation and as a writer with a remarkable sense of historical consciousness and social accountability; Steinbeck exposed ferocity of industrialization, disappointment of the American dream and the failure of the western myth, factors that exerted a great influence on American society at that time (Khoudi, 2011, p. 37, 38).

Within the apparent interconnectedness between history and the literary text, Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* should be examined through New Historical theoretical perceptions. Unlike Old Historicism, which "relegates history to mere background and context" that is certain and stable, New Historicism investigates the reciprocal relation and the mutual influences between history and literature. Old Historians articulate an accurate, consistent and unified view of what really occurred for a group of people in certain period of time. New Historicists, on the other hand, assert that history is subjective, written by people whose personal biases affect their representation of the past (Parker, 2019, np). New Historicism emerged as early as 1980s as a promising school of literary theory that holds an interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary orientation of historical and cultural studies. The term was first casually coined by one of its profound thinkers, Steven Greenblatt who later prefers the term "cultural poetics" to appeal to the structuralist common sense of poetics. New Historicists confirm that "a particular cultural moment or phenomenon can best be understood through examination of multiple factors, including economic, political, literary, religious, and aesthetic beliefs and practices" (Klages, 2012, p. 58). These components are inseparable elements that participate in the creation of any literary text. History does not

¹ John Steinbeck. (1972). *The Grapes of Wrath*. New York: Penguin Book Ltd. All subsequent references to the novel within the context of the paper is to this edition and will be abbreviated as (*GW* and page number)

move in a linear fashion, nor is solely about unbiased facts. Similarly, the literary text is not totally fictional. Klages also proclaims that "... all forms of discourse interact with all other forms of discourse... [and] all institutional and individual practices are informed by discourse and ideology (p. 58). According to Greenblatt Old Historicists are monological concerned with discovering a single political vision; whereas, New Historicists see literature as "a circulation of social energy," that aims to explore all kinds of mundane historical features, turning them into a reading of a literary text (Venturino, 2013, np). Significantly, Louis Montrose, an outstanding New Historicist, puts forward two concepts: "textuality of history" and "historicity of texts," signifying that history is a kind of text purposefully narrated by historians and the text is the product of social and historical context. Moreover, in his book, *The New Historicism* (1989), Aram Veesser proposes that the New Historicists have granted the literary researchers new opportunities to dismantle the dichotomies between history, art, anthropology, politics, and literature, asserting the New Historicist's notion that literary history is not separated from other historical forces (p. 10). John Brannigan (1998) also asserts that "for new historicism... the object of study is not the text and its context, not literature and history, but rather literature in history." (P.3)

Moving against the New Criticism's appeal of the autotelic nature of the literary text that could be approached through close reading of its intrinsic elements; such as form, style, diction, tone, etc., the New Historicism believes that these elements are insufficient to give a comprehensive view of the text, assuring that the text emulates the history of its time. Therefore, the aim of the New Historicism is to approach literary texts as fundamentally intertwined with history, a history that is itself made up of texts of all kinds. Through literature, the more challenging and even enigmatic aspects of history are thoughtfully investigated. Greenblatt likes the notion of "contextualizing the literary works with anecdotes," because they offer a realistic sense to the author's work and life (Venturino, 2013, np).

Steinbeck: Voice of the American Experience

Reaffirming the interconnectedness between history and literature, Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* surveys the devastating breakdown of the Great Depression that hit the American scene in 1920s and its acrimonious consequences in 1930s. He became more involved with the situation of the migrant workers and displaced social groups, making frequent visits to the areas of migrated farmers in California so as he can be an authentic witness for their confounded struggle. This coincided with his rising position as a well-established writer and fully-matured thinker. During this stage of his life, Steinbeck came into association with the Leftist and Socialistic advocates; among them, Francis Whitaker, a member of a Communist Party. He also spent time with the radical writer Lincoln Steffens and his wife Ella Winter who introduced him to George West, a San Francisco News editor. This, in turn, leads to his appointment to write a series of newspaper articles about the living conditions of California migrant workers (Schultz and Li, 2005, p. 8-9).

Steinbeck was also inspired by Edward F. Ricketts, a significant intellectual companion who shared with him philosophical issues, regarding the individual versus the collective and the language of fishermen. In 1932, Steinbeck's Monterey expanded to include the mythologist and cultural scholar Joseph Campbell who added remarkable impact on Steinbeck's writings (Schultz and Li, 2005, p. 6). He also met several social reformers, among them the union leader Cicil McKiddy who became an inspiration for Tom's character in *The Grapes of Wrath* (Bloom, 2005, p. 11). Steinbeck was deeply influenced by the American novelist John Dos Passos (1896-1970) and his innovating techniques that is reflected through his trilogy U.S.A, a disjointed style with a sense of disconnectedness in history to portray characters as separated, chaotic, and out of control, recounting the fragmented and divided America (Khoudi, 2011, p.75). It is noticeable that Steinbeck meticulously considers all of those social, political and intellectual thinkers and they have inspired him to launch writing his seminal and the full length novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Throughout his usual tour in Salinas, California, his birthplace, Steinbeck encountered the beat-up cars of the increasing migrants from Oklahoma towards the proposed prosperity awaiting them in California, he told his wife that "There's a novel here somewhere" (Schultz and Li, 2005, p. 15). Imitating Passos trilogy, Steinbeck wrote the so-called Labor Trilogy, which encompasses *In Dubious Battle*, *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath* is the last one, culminating his interest in the common workingmen and their endless struggle just as it proves his consciousness towards the historical events of his time. The novel stemmed from Steinbeck's experience among migrant workers and stirred up his concern for social justice (Schultz and Li, 2005, p. 90); he writes "I wrote *The Grapes of Wrath* in 100 days, but many years of preparation preceded it. It took a long time to get started. The actual writing is the last process" (cited in Chilton <https://www.telegraph.co.uk>). This historical interest echoes Greenblatt's new historicist curiosities and his assertion that the literary work "comes not only from individual authors but also from the cultural controversies of an age, with the controversies provoking the literature and the literature interpreting the controversies, in a continuous cycle of exchange and influence" (Paker, 2019, np)

Furthermore, *The Grapes of Wrath* reflects a historical narrative of specific time in America, which harmonizes Greenblatt's preference of adding anecdotes to the literary text. It tells the devastated breakdown happened in October 1929, when Wall Street, the center of finance in the United States, crashed, announcing the start of the Great Depression, the greatest crisis in the United States' history, which lasted through 1930s (Pinilla, 2019, p. 1). Although the capitalist system enjoyed some years of prosperity, the American citizens suffered a decade of economic and social recession. Poverty, unemployment and ecological disasters brought by the Dust Bowl coexisted, forcing people to leave their land and homes in order to look for new opportunities. Miguel Pinilla (2019) assures that "the economic expansion was financed with loans and credits. This means that the masses' purchasing power was not real but relative to a particular debt," (p. 4) consequently, stock prices dropped, businesses and banks failed and wiped out the savings of many families. Unemployment rates reached 25%. Farmers were 40%, the price of the crop went very low

and people stopped buying unnecessary items. The banking system finally collapsed; every social and economic indicator reflected a progressive deterioration (Pinilla, 2019, p. 5).

Geographically speaking, The Great Depression was intensified by a phenomenon known as The Dust Bowl. The term was first coined to describe a huge dust storm that drifted across Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas in 1935. The phrase was eventually adopted in a wider sense as a term to describe the area of the Southern Plains where dust storms and soil erosion were common and severe. The following decades of drought can also be defined as Dust Bowl. It causes the migration of the sharecroppers for optimistic lands, yet, they settled in migration camps, facing different kinds of humiliation and hardness (Schultz and Li, 2005, p. 276).

Tragically enough, the governmental authorities failed to contain the crisis and left people to face their dilemma, proclaiming Hoovervilles, a term coined from the name of Herbert Hoover who served as the 31st President of the United States from 1929 to 1933. The term refers to shanty camps in which the evicted families had lived for some periods of time. These camps became marginal ghettos in the main focal points of emigration, the cities. Millions of people lived there in the most absolute poverty, inhabiting houses of tinplate and cardboard lacking basic hygiene conditions. Historians blame Herbert Hoover for his liberal policies that grant people the right to deal with crisis; Hoover argued that

Economic depression cannot be cured by legislative action or executive pronouncement. Economic wounds must be healed by the action of the cells of the economic body– the producers and consumers themselves" (quoted in Pinilla, 2019, p. 7).

Considering the individual's responsibility of welfare, Hoover omitted social measures and decreased the social assistance provided by the government, a matter that increased the hardship of the poor and eventually enlarged the social gaps. The rich people kept coexisting with the poorest sectors of society (Pinilla, 2019, p. 8).

The Okies: in the midst of the hardship

Having its historical connection that proves the historicity of the novel, Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* considers the historical and cultural connection of a group of men called the Okies who share the same source of their being in Oklahoma. Significantly, the immigrant folks in Oklahoma were scornfully called Okies. In the Great Depression and its consequent difficulties, the Okies are left with little means. In his article "On the Okies and Isolation," Edwin T. Bowden states that *The Grapes of Wrath* is "about a special, often grotesque group of men, the Okies, the dispossessed of the dust bowl, the new itinerant farm laborers of California" (cited in Bloom, 2005, p. 71). Their escape from Oklahoma is the only start for their struggle, realizing that life in California is not as uncomplicated as they are led to believe. Exemplifying the way people tackled the Okies, Steinbeck argues that the service-station boy on Route 66 describes them:

Them goddamn Okies got no sense and no feeling. 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, *GW*, 239).

Having its genesis in a series of seven pieces, which Steinbeck had written for the News entitled "The Harvest Gypsies," *The Grapes of Wrath*, is meant to unravel his compassion for the poor workers; namely the Okies. Approximating them to the Okies, the third person omniscient narrator traces the journey of the Joads, an Oklahoma family, which seeks a better living in California after being crashed with political and environmental difficulties. Their journey starts with Tom Joad who is recently released from prison for a sentence of assassination. Along the way to his parents' home, Tom meets Jim Casy, a preacher and close friend to the Joads. Tom hears that his family has been forced to leave their farm and consequently they make their decision to drive to California. Heading out along Route 66, the migrants encounter many obstacles, and bitterly informed that the jobs they strive for in California are illusory. In their long and tiring trip, Grampa and Granma Joad die, and their elder brother, Noah, abandons them in an early stage. Connie, the husband of Tom's pregnant sister, Rosasharn also abandons and the latter will end the novel with stillborn baby, feeding a starving man, instead (Schultz and Li, 2005, pp. 92-93).

Supporting the authentic historicity with literary craft and to condense the history within a textual frame, Steinbeck writes *The Grapes of Wrath* with an unconventional structure, juxtaposing narrative chapters, which bring about the suffering of the Okies, the union of the family members, the difficulties of survival, helplessness, poverty, and fear of the itinerant American migrants, with intercalary chapters, including general remarks or information. In this sense, Steinbeck's asserts that the structure of the novel was carefully built up, presenting cross-reference details, intertwined symbols, and provide commentary on historical events, blending together the two types of chapters, and unifying the communal and humanist themes of the novel. Describing this technical deftness, Khoudi (2019) states that the interchapters

...are short one to three page chapters organized in two or three long and exhaustive paragraphs with no dialogue among the characters. The narrator stands as a 'stream of consciousness' story teller of the modern insanities. He acts as an 'intensifier' of the reader's focus on the cruel realities of the Joad family (p. 75).

Steinbeck utilizes three specific literary devices to maintain the fluidity of the ideas, decrease disruption and gather the two components of the novel. These are dramatization, juxtaposition, and diversity in prose styles (Schultz and Li, 2005, pp. 92-93).

Beyond Human Instincts

The historical implications of the novel endowed the text with close examination of the naturalist dispositions of human beings. It scrutinizes the natural laws and the socio-political circumstances that challenge the Joad family in their hard journey towards California. In this sense, the novel is seen as a remarkable demonstration of Naturalism, a literary movement that has its premises in France in 1870s with the writings of Emile Zola, aiming to replicate the everyday reality of human beings who are rendered to be governed by their heredity and environment (Bartáková, 2010, p. 7). Steinbeck records the

consequences that are "shining on the red earth" and influence the "weary and frightened" people (Steinbeck, *GW*, 92 and 97). Their attempt to avoid the harsh natural and financial conditions of their homeland worsens their social state (Bloom, 2005, p. 4). However, the strength of the natural drives transcends the corporeal state of the Joads who:

...stand still and watch the potatoes float by, listen to the screaming pigs being killed in a ditch and covered with quick-lime, watch the mountains of oranges slop down to a putrefying ooze; and in the eyes of the people there is the failure; and 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, growing heavy for the vintage (Steinbeck, *GW*, 390)

Within the framework of *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck confirms his hypothesis that endowed the social group with superior level over the individual. The desire for endurance and the sharing sense of tolerance that the Joads experience with the Wilson, the government camps, and the Wainwrights, prove the preference of the group concept over individuals whatever the cost is. This is notably reflected in the case of Jim Casy, the priest, who had "no soul that was his" (Steinbeck, *GW*, 478). As an individual within the social group, Casy is part of a collective human spirit. When the group is an essential part in their pursuit of existence, the individual identity is reinforced. Though, in another sense, the Christ-like figure and religious symbol, Casy undermines the "naturalistic vision that assumes there is no sovereign God in the world (Timmerman, 1990, p. 278, quoted in Cherubini, 1993, p. 4). Bloom (2005) also confirms that:

Casy's radical and naturalistic humanism has clear sources in Ralph Waldo Emerson's vision of the Oversoul and in Walt Whitman's love of the democratic masses, yet its darker overtones derive from the tragic Preacher of Ecclesiastes. When Jim Casy declares the holiness of human sexuality or of breakfast, he does not rely upon God as his authority, and Tom Joad does not become an outcast prophet in the name of a Lord who is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored. Tom Joad, American in his self-reliance, will stamp them out for himself, and for those dispossessed with him. (p. 7)

This triumph of the collective over the individual interest is straightforwardly reflected in the overall tone of the book. The light-hearted, flowery words and phrases tell that the author is particularly happy or positive about the tale of the Joad. It reflects Steinbeck optimistic view towards the solidarity of those poor people in the hardest times of their life. However; angry, biting words tell something related to a sense of dissatisfaction and disappointment with those in charge for their indifferent reaction towards social and economic crisis. The sympathetic mood aroused from the realistic picture that Steinbeck drew aims to stir the emotion of the reader (Bloom, 2005, p. 23-24). Furthermore, the close examination of the textual and stylistic presentation of Steinbeck's epic novel reveals his interest in much of the contemporary writings, adopting the realistic and naturalistic traditions of dialogue throughout. It captures the patterns of natural speech and demonstrating the impact of natural forces on the lower levels of society (Bartáková, 2010, p. 8).

Within Steinbeck's enthusiastic representation of the Joad's collective self-denial, the enraged and exasperated mood is symbolically delivered, deconstructing the irresponsible conduct of the people in charge. Starting from thought-evoking title of the novel, the protesting and complaining voice is clearly heard. The narrator assures that:

The great companies did now know that the line between hunger and anger is a thin line," the narrator says. "On the highways the people moved like ants and searched for work, for food. And the anger began to ferment. (Steinbeck, *GW*, 365)

The Function of Symbolism

Although written with meticulous realism and expressed historical facts, *The Grapes of Wrath* is ornamented with a colorful amount of symbols that are frequently employed to reflect Steinbeck's consciousness towards the tribulations of the migrants. Starting with the title, which mainly symbolizes the growing anger of the helpless wanderers; the traumatized voice cannot go unnoticed. Harold Bloom (2005) suggested that the image of the wine made from grapes signifies the title of the novel. Like the anger of the migrants, it turns into something powerful and much more potent (p. 34).

Steinbeck borrows the title from a verse by Julia Ward Howe (1819-1910) "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," which reads, "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." The title originally was a suggestion of Steinbeck's wife and Steinbeck commented, "I like the song because it is a kind of a march and this book is a kind of a march" (cited in Chilton, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk>).

The critic Peter Lisca, further, proposes that the imagery of the wine presented in the title and in other passages of the novel reveal the increasing ferment of the migrants. It "allude[s] to Deuteronomy, Jeremiah, and Revelation, as for example, 'And 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'" (qtd. in Bloom, 2005, p. 35). The suffering that the migrants are dealing with is causing anger to grow within them. Yet, this anger supports their potentials and provides the energy that will unite them to fight against oppression and injustice. Tom, Ma, and Casy, for instance, feel this wrath and use it for the benefit of the community (Schultz and Li, 2005, p. 104).

The religious connotation of the title is further supported by a range of symbols and symbolic actions that pervade the novel. The hardship journey of Joad family stands as a representation of the Biblical Exodus journey. Moreover, the division of the novel into three main parts; the drought in Oklahoma, the Joad's journey to California and their experience as migrant workers in California, the supposed Promised Land (Jasim, 2008, p. 14). Peter Lisca has noted that *The Grapes of Wrath* starts in famine and ends in flood which signifies that the story is a replication of the three parts of the Old Testament Exodus account, including captivity, journey, and the Promised Land (cited in Jasim, 2008, p.14). Steinbeck implies this idea with the first set of the journey:

Pa said, "Ma, you an' Granmaset in with Al for a while. We'll change aroun' so it's easier, but you start out that way." They got into the cab, and then the rest swarmed up on top of the load, Connie and Rose of Sharon, Pa and Uncle John, Ruthie and Winfield, Tom and the preacher. Noah stood on the ground, looking up at the great load of them sitting on top of the truck (Steinbeck, *GW*, 115).

Jim Casy with initials (J C), for instance, is an identical figure to Jesus Christ whose sacrifice for the sake of other humans is a vast example of religious implications of the novel. Another symbolic representation of religious dimension is the dead infant in an apple box of Rose of Sharon's stillborn baby, a symbol that refers to the religious story of Moses, the infant who is bitterly placed in a basket and thrown in a river. It also serves as an exemplification of the inhumanity the migrant laborers must endure in their unjust course of life. It is worthy mentioned that as Uncle John sends the baby's remains in the flood waters, hoping that all that see the little corpse recognize it as a symbol of the suffering and unjustified oppression that deprived the migrants from living a happy life (Jasim, 2008, p. 15).

The symbolic relational influence is deeply brought about by animal imagery that Steinbeck employs to mitigate the harsh reality of the Joad Family. The turtle, for instance, exemplifies a remarkable identification with the Joads. The life potency that pushes the turtle and the toughness that stirs it to survive the cruel predators, the nature efficiency that uses the turtle to carry the seeds are qualities of the Joads to overcome their dilemma. Like the turtle, The Joads carry their house, the truck, to survive natural calamity, facing both kindness and intimidation (Lahdenranta, 2020, p. 22).

They were in flight out of Oklahoma and across Texas. The land turtles crawled through the dust and the sun whipped the earth, and in the evening the heat went out of the sky and the earth sent up a wave of heat from itself (Steinbeck, *GW*, 171).

This anticipates the survival of the Joads, who will manage another journey along a road, emerging like the turtle from incredible hardships surrounded by symbols of fertility. However, the narrator also states that "A land turtle crawled, turning aside for nothing" (Steinbeck, *GW*, 13). However, Tom and Ma Joad, follow the land turtle approach differently. For Ma, this enables her to stand against hardship. For Tom this attitude prevents him from having a broader vision. He, eventually, breaks out the land turtle approach when he sees people belong to one immense soul (Bloom, 2005, p. 21). Significantly, the Rattlesnake is another animal symbol that stands as an emblem of Tom's moral maturation. At early part of the story, he keeps killing a rattlesnake on the road, but later on, he warns Al, his brother against swerving over to hit a snake.

Steinbeck's animal imagery presents foreshadowing purposes. The death of the dog symbolically prefigures the tragedies that the family will face. The dogs' run over near highways all the time signifies the inevitability of the Joads misery. The gas station owner states: "A dog jus' don' last no time near a highway" (Steinbeck, *WG*, 133). With their

poverty, difficulty and lack of work, the Joads are subjects to a dangerous situation. Tragedies for them are just as inevitable as a dog being run over on the highway (Lahdenranta, 2020, p. 23).

Another significant symbol is that of the Bank Monster. Brian E. Railsback states that "this epic novel demonstrates the range of Darwin's theory, including the essential aspects of evolution: the struggle for existence and the process of natural selection (Quoted in Bloom, 2005, p. 51). The Bank monster is a symbolic representation of the Bank system and other big businesses that keep making more profits to survive. All people are really the slaves of the monster, dedicated to providing it with more profits; Steinbeck asserts that "the bank-the monster has to have profits all the time. It can't wait. It'll die. No, taxes go on (Steinbeck, *WG*, 31).

In California, the policy of the monster also exists, in a way that large farmers keep working for the monster and attract large number of the "migrants than are necessary for the jobs available so as they can keep wages down, keep prices up, and create more and more profits" (Bloom, 2005, pp. 50-51).

Gender Relations

In establishing the main responsibility of man in dealing with crisis like that faced by the Joads, Steinbeck writes:

Man, unlike any other thing organic or inorganic in the universe, grows beyond his work, walks up the stairs of his concepts, and emerges ahead of his accomplishments (Steinbeck, *GW*, 156).

However, Steinbeck also sheds light on the social and inner changes that accompany the events of the Great Depression. The Joad family organization of themselves becomes essential to their survival. Whenever, there is a material loss, Ma Joad forsakes the patriarchal rules and stands as leading power, fulfilling more than a housewife role assigned to the women at that time and becoming an essential figure in preserving the family's integrity. The novel portrays the new social values, especially those regarding the role of women in the family, violating traditional norms of Patriarchy. The migratory movement to the west reflects the new social values and the formation of new family and member roles. When the Pa Joad has lost his control over the family during the journey, Ma shows capability in transcending the patriarchal domination, assuming a more influential position in the family (Heinz, 2011, pp. 2-4). Having a great confidence in her ability to handle difficult situations, Steinbeck assures that Ma Joad:

And from her great and humble position in the family she had taken dignity and a clean calm beauty. From her position as healer, her hands had grown sure and cool and quiet; from her position as arbiter she had become as remote and faultless in judgment as a goddess. She seemed to know that if she swayed the family shook,

and if she ever really deeply wavered or despaired the family would fall, the family will to function would be gone (Steinbeck, *GW*, 73).

Ma Joad is a symbol of the helpful and nurturing motherhood. She is always supportive, courageous and never allowed to pursue what might be the implications of female characters, such as fragility and instability (Santosa, 2015, p. 33).

Another significant female character in the novel is Rose of Sharon. Her sacrifice represents the final breakdown of old attitudes just as it climaxes the novel's themes (Bloom, 2005, p. 61). Throughout the novel, Rose of Sharon is portrayed as being selfish; her main concern is herself and her close family member (Connie and the expected child). However, after losing her personal pursuit, she realizes the necessity of her social existence and she in "giving life to the stranger (symbolically, she gives body and wine: Song of Songs 7:7—"Thy breasts [are like] to clusters of grapes"), she accepts the larger vision of Jim Casy, and her commitment fulfills the terms of salvation according to Casy's plan" (Bloom, 2005, p. 61). However humane, Rose of Sharon's final scene brings about the most controversial discussion of the novel and caused it to be banned for several years. Yet, people like the Joads could finally understand what they will have to do for themselves if society should continue to fail to recognize their humanity. They are able to transcend the familial interest into social interest:

Rose of Sharon can be said to have pointed the way; extending the Mosaic parallels of the novel, we can say that with her act, mankind has been: to the mountain to see the Promised Land—rather than the "mirage" of the Joads' first sight of California. Thus she can be said to have acquired monumentality, the quality of significant statuary" (Bloom, 2005, p. 49)

Conclusion

To sum up this analytical study, Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* is a documentary work of a critical period in the modern history of America. It exemplifies the crisis of the Okies in their struggle for survival in the Great Depression just as it reflects the author's consciousness towards the dilemmas of the minor figures and their stories within specific time period. To clarify the historical sensibility towards such tragic events, the study utilized the New Historicist viewpoints, which uphold the notion that history is no longer represented as single, cohesive, trouble-free and progressive. According to the New Historicist, there is no clear-cut separation between history and literature. Literature is the creation of its own time period and it is able to figure out and interpret the minor anecdotes that the Old Historians neglect within their claim of the unified and linear line of history. History as well is a text that encompasses cultural diversity and local narratives, which should be respected and given equal opportunities to speak up their fight against socio-political challenges. Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* depicts his literary talent to fuse historical truth with aesthetic perfection, typifying poetic technique, style and colorful symbols to portray the difficult journey of the Joads. Demonstrating his belief that literature

can put up with people in the hard times, Steinbeck asserts the writer's responsibility to rejoice the human capability of immensity of the heart and spirit. Humans, such as, the Joads can turn defeat into courage; hardness into compassion and love. In the endless fight against weakness and despair, there are glimpses of hope and social justice. Steinbeck believes that human beings can transcend and rise above suffering and hardship.

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