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Reading Analysis: *Grapes of Wrath*

The novel *Grapes of Wrath*, written by John Steinbeck, is a dramatic account of the hardships endured by the farmers and migrant workers during the changing economy of the Great Depression. The story focuses on the Joads: the poor family of sharecroppers, who have to leave their home and travel to California in pursuit of employment and, ultimately, survival. While central to the novel, this story runs parallel to another important theme, which describes the changes that took place in American society and industry at the beginning of the 20th century. Market competition, falling crop prices, and mechanization of farm equipment were all factors in the shift from small farming to big agricultural conglomerates and the appearance of what is currently known as industrial agriculture. By describing the change in agricultural practices, the novel traces the important shifts in culture and society, as revealed by changes in demographics, workforce, food consumption, and value systems.

From the beginning of the story, the short unadorned sentences introduce the reader to some of the facts facing the sharecroppers of the Midwest: drought, dust, debt, and hunger. But the thing that changes their fates completely is the tractor.

There in the Middle- and Southwest had lived a simple agrarian folk who had not changed with industry, who had not formed with machines or known the power and danger of machines in private hands. They had not grown up in the paradoxes of industry. Their senses were still sharp to the ridiculousness of the industrial life. And then suddenly the machines pushed them out and they swarmed on the highways (385).

Since efficiency is a mark of progress and profit, the decision to replace sharecroppers with the tractor came easily. Influenced by the droughts and their own bank debts, the land owners decide that “The tenant system won’t work any more. One man on a tractor can take the place of twelve or fourteen families. Pay him a wage and take all the crop” (44).

So the initial result of such a deceptively minute change was the vast migration of farmers which, in turn, generated a change in the country’s demographics and workforce. Places like the West states and larger cities that could offer possibilities of employment were crowded with hundreds of thousands of migrants who settled in the Hoovervilles – or the prototypical slums – on the outskirts of the towns (319). At the same time, the growing number of unemployed migrants created high demand for scarce work, thus making the wages fall drastically.

The food- and work-starved migrants were perceived as a threat by the local residents, who feared for their own property and wellbeing. On the whole, the differences and the hostility between the locals and the Okies created a schism in society and culture (386). This divide, far from being beneficial for either side, resulted in losses for both: crop losses for the locals (475) and aggravated food deprivation and poverty for the migrants, where “for every stomachful of food available, five mouths open” (324).

The other, more lasting, outcome of the introduction of technology into farming was the disappearance of small poly-culture farms (320), and the alienation of people’s relation to crops and land. “No man had touched the seed, or lusted for the growth. Men ate what they had not raised, had no connection with the bread” (49). At the same time, the novel traces how farming morphed into industry, where farmers worked on paper

instead of on the land. The connection with the land was lost for consumers, while for producers it was replaced with profit – because the “...crops were reckoned in dollars, and land was valued by principal plus interest, and crops were bought and sold before they were planted. Then crop failure, drought, and flood were no longer little deaths within life, but simple losses of money” (316).

Additionally, the shift in the country’s economy from small family farming to large agri-businesses set off the devaluation of people’s possessions. Farm animals and equipment became useless, thus shifting the culture away from the rural and focusing instead on technology and ownership. The car salesman in the novel expressed the essence of this shift by asking “Didn’t nobody tell you this is the machine age? They don’t use mules for nothing but glue no more” (87). The simple communal pastoral life described in the first chapter got gradually replaced by the emerging counter-culture of individualism, represented effectively by the car salesman, his fast lunch with a hamburger and his race for profit from a “thousand jalopies” (89).

Food and the lack of it make for another strong theme in the book. It often serves as a divide between people, separating them socially and culturally into the hungry and the satiated, who cannot find common language and understanding. The passage on page 319 describes how a fallow field in the eyes of a hungry man is a sin against the thin children, whereas it is merely a profit for the satiated owner. As migrants become more desperate for food, the locals become more protective of their properties and more intolerant toward the newcomers, trying to repress and frighten them. However, “How can you frighten a man whose hunger is not only in his own cramped stomach but in the wretched bellies of his children? You can’t scare him – he has known a fear beyond every

other” (323). Thus, persistent hunger and unfair food allocation can act as catalysts in social and cultural crisis, inevitably resulting in yearning to change both.

Overall, the novel clearly portrays how tight the connection between food, profits, authority, and culture really is. The challenges brought forth by the shift from small farming to industrial agriculture also prove that keeping them balanced make sustainability more probable.

2. John Steinbeck’s indirect narration and unembellished style make a very effective combination in his description of the gruesome truths about the lives of the poor, repressed, and underprivileged farmers. While never overtly uncovering his own bias, the author nonetheless communicates his disapproval of the inequality and intolerance in the society. He discussed business and agriculture from the point of view of the common people who never get profit from the bank or the corporations – their very entity is not clear to the people, who regard them simply as monsters and insatiate beasts. The author also shows the manipulations of the big companies who diminish their hired seasonal workers to the state of virtual serfdom not only by making them work for a minimal wage, but also by making them purchase produce as a loan “on a slip” for prices much higher than outside of their place of employment (513). Another powerful attribute of Steinbeck’s novel is the use of chapters with dialogues where the author does not indicate which side is talking. Despite that, though, it is easy for the reader to distinguish who is the protagonist and who is the antagonist in those dialogues: for example, in the chapters on sharecropping, car sales, and Okies the language of the poor is unpretentious, whereas that of the privileged is oppressive and profit-driven. While Steinbeck’s novel is a category on its own in our readings, it describes changes in agriculture also mentioned

in Pollan's book. In comparison to Steinbeck, Pollan's stand is more neutral, as he does not adopt the point of view of any particular class of society, except, maybe, that of an environmentalist and a consumer.

3. At the same time, Steinbeck's novel strikes a common cord with quite a few of our readings by uncovering how industrial agriculture views crops more like a profit rather than nutrition. On a deeper note, the novel also implies a concern about the spiritual impoverishment of people in most ways disconnected from the source of their food – the land. In fact, the author states rather explicitly that there are two kinds of people: the "...man who is more than his elements knows the land that is more than its analysis. But the machine man, driving a dread tractor on land he does not know and love, understands only chemistry; and he is contemptuous of the land and of himself (158). Thus, based on the novel, it is plausible to conclude that humans are directly and tightly connected with their food practices. How they share, consume, and regard their food directly influences the quality of culture they create. Therefore, the analysis of the change in food production at the beginning of the century, as described in the novel, demonstrates that sustainability does not simply rely on people's awareness, crop rotation, or other farming practices, but may often depend on the race for corporate profit and lack of government regulation.