

"great depression" by john steinbeck essay sample



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“ Great Depression” by John Steinbeck Essay Sample

How did The Great Depression influence the works of John Steinbeck?

The purpose of this paper is to discover the role that the Great Depression played on the work of John Steinbeck.

“ I must go over to the interior valleys. There are about five thousand families starving to death over there, not just hungry but starving. The government is trying to feed them and get medical attention to them with the fascist groups of utilities and banks and huge growers sabotaging the thing all along the line and yelling for a balanced budget . . . I’ve tied into the thing from the first and I must get down there and see it and see if I can’t do something to help knock these murderers on the heads . . . I’m pretty mad about it.” -John Steinbeck (Johnson)

The Great Depression was one of the most disastrous periods in American History. It was caused mainly by the Stock Market crash of 1929, as well as the Dust Bowl, which brought a drought all over the country. For these years our economy would suffer great losses, production of the nation’s factories, mines, and utilities fell by over a half. Stock Prices would plummet, falling to one tenth of its previous value. While stocks were dropping, unemployment was skyrocketing. The Depression may have been the effect of the extremely high unemployment rate. One out of every 3 Americans were jobless, and poverty existed everywhere, in every corner of every street of every city. The depression affected everyone, while consumers were losing money to the stock market; farmers were losing crops to the drought.

These horrid images rubbed off on many authors and caused some to change to a style of realistic writing.

" People no longer covered the glorious days of the Roaring 20's and the heroic stories of the First World War. The authors of the Great Depression wrote about the daily hardships which all Americans struggled through. The literature of the Great Depression reflected the mood of the citizens of America" (Reed).

Writers wrote about what they were experiencing, the things that were going on right around them. Take the drought for example. After months of no improvement, farmers started to lose hope. Karen Hesse, a famous poet of the time, best describes the disheartening period in her poem, " Breaking the Drought." She writes, " After 70 days of wind and sun, of wind and clouds, of wind and sand, after 70 days, of wind and dust, A little rain came" (Hesse).

Its simplistic terms and form carries deep meaning and remembrance for many, much like most of the writings of the time. One of these writings, arguably the most famous novel from the time, is *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck.

John Steinbeck was born in Salinas, California, in 1902. He grew up in an agricultural valley, roughly twenty five miles from the Pacific Coast. Both the valley and the coast would later become settings for some of his best novels. In 1919 Steinbeck enrolled in Stanford, where he majored in literature and writing for 6 years, until he left in 1925 without his degree (Steinbeck).

Shortly after the Great Depression began in 1929, Steinbeck moved, like many others, to a more realistic writing style. He composed 3 novels about the period, *In Dubious Battle*, *Of Mice and Men*, and considered by many to be his finest, *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Steinbeck wanted to research material for his novel, so he embarked on a journey from Oklahoma to California. Along the way Steinbeck had seen roadside camps, diners, gas stations and used-car lots, which were eventually used in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

" This was also how he came up with the idea of writing about migrants. Steinbeck spent a month with workers in California, working with them in the fields and living in their camps, only to find that the conditions infuriated him, so he began a " protest" about the treatment and living conditions for migrant workers and the way they were treated by California ranch owners" (Johnson).

After observing as well as experiencing the conditions and struggles the people faced, " Steinbeck dove into *The Grapes of Wrath* with a passion fueled by anger, sympathy and in my opinion, a sense of morality" (Johnson). The emotions which Steinbeck is aiming to express is evident by the words he uses (Stephan). In the following excerpt from his novel, Steinbeck so passionately describes the desperation of men and women during the depression.

" And the roads were crowded with men ravenous for work, murderous for work" ... " The great companies did not know that the line between hunger and anger is a thin line. And money that might have gone to wages went for

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gas, for guns, for agents and spies, for blacklists, for drilling. On the highways people moved like ants and searched for work, for food. And the anger began to ferment" (Steinbeck 364-365).

The Grapes of Wrath not only tells of the hardships of the Joad family, driven from their farm in the interior of the country during a devastating drought in the thirties, but it also exposes the desperate conditions under which the migratory farm families of America during the 1930's lived under. This novel enlightened the emotions of every person living during the Great Depression. The impact that The Grapes of Wrath has left has been compared to Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel Uncle Tom's Cabin and it truly clarifies the burdens of living during the Great Depression.

The reality of this book caused much controversy in America. Some were overwhelmed by the honesty and realistic portrayal the book gives about the poor and homeless during the time. Oklahoma Congressman Lyle Boren said in congress that the book itself was, " a black, infernal creation of a twisted, distorted mind" (Davis 80). Others however, applauded Steinbeck's view of the common struggle of each man during the depression. Steinbeck himself wrote,

" I've done my damndest to rip a reader's nerves to rags, I don't want him satisfied.... I tried to write this book the way lives are being lived not the way books are written.... Throughout I've tried to make the reader participate in the actuality, what he takes from it will be scaled entirely on his own depth or hollowness. 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" (Steinbeck).

The layers in the novel of which Steinbeck speaks range from socio-economic determinism to transcendent spirituality (Demott xiii). Louis Owens best explains the different layers The Grapes of Wrath depicts. He says,

“ On one level it is the story of a family’s struggle for survival in the Promised Land.... On another level it is the story of a people’s struggle, the migrants’. On a third level it is the story of a nation, America. On still another level, through.... the allusions to Christ and those to Israelites and Exodus, it becomes the story of mankind’s quest for profound comprehension of his commitment to his fellow man and to the earth he inhabits” (Demott xiii).

In conclusion, Steinbeck was greatly affected by the depression. It transformed his entire style of writing, causing him to include a sense of reality in his novels, creating such powerful stories that depicted real life hardships. His novels were no longer mere stories but rather an understanding of the afflictions and adversities everyone faced throughout the years. Steinbeck once wrote, “ My whole work drive has been aimed at making people understand each other”. The Great Depression not only affected Steinbeck’s works, but his life as well. It was cause for his trek to California, and it was the reason Steinbeck decided to spend a month of his life living like the migrant workers, suffering alongside of them and facing their hardships. In a letter to Lawrence Clark Powell, Steinbeck wrote, “ I have to write this sitting in a ditch. I’m out working-may go south to pick a little cotton. Migrants are going south now and I’ll probably go along (Powell 562). Steinbeck’s involvement with the migrant workers lives enabled the rest of America to view the impact of the Great Depression and the long drought in the midwest states. Steinbeck felt readers would dislike the book <https://assignbuster.com/great-depression-by-john-steinbeck-essay-sample/>

due to his strong statements' reality, but it would turn out to be one of the most popular novels in American history.

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