

Grapes of wrath – theme of journey essay



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The Journey Theme in The Grapes of Wrath

As a major literary figure since the 1930s, Steinbeck displays in his writing a characteristic respect for the poor and oppressed. In many of his novels, his characters show signs of a quiet dignity and courage for which Steinbeck has a great admiration. For instance, in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck describes the unrelenting struggle of the people who depend on the soil for their livelihood. One element helping give this novel an added touch of harmony is Steinbeck's ability to bind these two ideas into one story: the never ending struggle to survive and primacy of the family.

The journey of the Joads serves as a suitable vehicle for the delivery of Steinbeck's message and theme on three levels. The first is literal: he uses the journey and its ever-changing environment to put the Joads through many situations. The second level is general: the journey of the Joads can be seen as the same that forced farmers to become migrants from the dust bowl westward or of any mass migration since the beginning of time. The third level is the symbolic level: Steinbeck's novel can be analyzed by the commonly used mathematics principle of fractals. This relates to *The Grapes of Wrath* by enlightening the reader of the fact that many things are identical at different levels.

The first level, the literal, is simply to describe the events the Joads witness and experience. Steinbeck uses the journey to place his characters in a range of dilemmas. He is then able to draw reactions from them. As each character involved in the situation reacts, we are able to see Steinbeck's respect for the poor shining through. Steinbeck stresses the evolutionary

idea that man must adapt to changing conditions. Among the worst offenses he feels one man can commit against another is that of inhibiting the process of adaptation or of causing another to revert to a former state in self-defense (French 324). The 'never say die' efforts of Uncle John to stop the rising flood water is one example of Steinbeck's unremitting struggle theme (Steinbeck 567). The constant effort of the entire Joad family to find work, although poor, oppressed, and hungry, shows that Steinbeck wants to show their tremendous courage and dignity. In this way, Steinbeck is able to use the journey structure to describe these fine qualities he sees and respects in the poverty-stricken masses of his time.

If one reads more deeply into *The Grapes of Wrath*, the reader may find that the journey of the Joads mirrors the journeys of other Okies and other forced migrations in history. The journey of the Joads has its ups and downs. Migrants are not always received with open arms; they are commonly persecuted and looked upon as subhuman. For them the promised land becomes the land of despair and suffering. While exposing the ordeal of their poverty, Steinbeck also seeks to affirm the sanctity of life and the unifying, clarifying forces inherent in human suffering (Wilson 529). In many ways, the journey of the Africans to America as slaves is similar to the dust bowl migrations. Both are forced from the land that they love by seemingly non-human forces. They were taken to the land of riches where they were poor. The slaves were however taken by force but the Okies were seduced by the lure of work and prosperity in California and the West.

This similarity to other journeys and quests throughout time is also a prime example of Steinbeck's use of archetypal themes and plot. The theme of the

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journey has appeared in some form in almost every modern literary work, either physically or internally. Physical journeys are the primary focus of *The Grapes of Wrath* when interpreting the work on the literal level. When examining the internal journeys such as Jim Casy's religious enlightenment and Tom's personal development one can easily notice even more common archetypes.

To help understand a third and perhaps deepest level of reading, the reader can apply a mathematical idea, the Fractal Idea of Sameness, which states that things are identical at different levels. In his concluding *Chronicle of Narnia, The Last Battle*, C. S. Lewis described heaven as an onion with the inside bigger than the outside, so that with each ring you peel off, you seem to go further in but also further out into a new series of visions and understandings (Timmerman 102). If this principle is applied to the novel, one can see that the journey of Tom is identical to that of the other Joads which is the same as that of all humanity which is the same as that of the turtle of chapter three. Each of these journeys has its ups and downs, setbacks and positives. Each starts doing something and ends up doing something else, but all are moving forward. One theme which Steinbeck presents is shown here: that humanity is on a journey, and for better or for worse we continue to move forward, and in this case, further away from the plague of man's inhumanity to man. This is why the journey structure is so suitable in itself as a theme. The journey of the Joads is the same as the haphazard progress of the human race toward a goal, whether it is a scientific achievement, universal justice at last, or, in the case of the Joads, simply avoiding or preparing for more disappointment (Lechteihn 1). This

naive progress appears throughout Steinbeck's work, for example, the turtle in intercalary chapter three is also constantly moving, never knowing the outcome till it gets there. Still it plods on with peace of mind and the hopeful confidence that it will be successful in any and all endeavors it attempts.

All in all, Steinbeck's choice of the journey structure to dramatize his multiple themes has enabled him to relate *The Grapes of Wrath* to life's realities. Steinbeck is able to show us the virtue of the poor by trapping his characters in an unfair world of persecution and downfalls, yet they remain sympathetic and heroic if defeated. Through the journey, he is able to show readers that life has its ups and downs. This structure provides for a greater understanding of the theme. By reaching the general theme of humanity's journey, his novel attains the status of a classic, for humanity will always be on a journey. This makes *The Grapes of Wrath* not only a classic work of literature, but a timeless one as well.

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