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John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*:
sociopolitical perspectives

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ABSTRACT / RESUMEN

Abstract: The main aim of this essay is the analysis of the sociopolitical context of the Great Depression as it is portrayed in John Steinbeck's novel, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). This work is based on the tenant workers' forced migration to California and presented from the Joad family's perspective. Its social content is a faithful depiction of the historical circumstances of the strongest crisis in the United States' history and, for this reason, it is worth studying it from a sociopolitical approach.

Key words: John Steinbeck, The Great Depression, New Deal, Politics, Economy.

Resumen: El principal objetivo que persigue este trabajo es el análisis del contexto sociopolítico de la época de la Gran Depresión estadounidense tal y como está reflejado en la novela de John Steinbeck *Las uvas de la ira* (1939). Dicha obra está basada en la emigración forzada de los campesinos hacia California en busca de trabajo y presentada a través de la perspectiva de la familia Joad. Su contenido social es un fiel reflejo de las circunstancias históricas vividas durante la mayor crisis de la historia de los Estados Unidos y por ello es digno de estudio desde este enfoque sociopolítico.

Palabras clave: John Steinbeck, La Gran Depresión, New Deal, Política, Economía.

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1 – INTRODUCTION

John Steinbeck wrote one of his most celebrated novels, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), during the Great Depression, the greatest crisis in the United States' history. 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.

The Grapes of Wrath is one of the most representative works of this period. It is probably the best novel of the Great Depression: its realism and exposure of social injustice have always captivated critics and common readers with its powerful descriptions and vividness. The portrayal of the workers' exodus westwards is, at the same time, realistic and harsh. Steinbeck's mastery allows the reader to identify with the characters and share their suffering, provoked by the terrible conditions of the sociopolitical situation.

Steinbeck's novel is, consequently, a very appropriate work to be analyzed as a realistic and naturalistic text and also to study the historical and social atmosphere of the US at that time. Therefore, this essay focuses on the social, economic and political characteristics of the Great Depression as depicted in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

The structure of the essay is articulated in two main blocks: the first one is specifically concerned with the sociopolitical context of the period and the second one analyzes this particular context as it is reflected by Steinbeck's novel. This distribution is itself subdivided into more specific sections, each of them concerning one particular aspect of the United States history: The Great Depression, Herbert Hoover's presidency and the New Deal. The critical framework used to write the essay mainly

comes from historians and sociologists. However, literary criticism has also been employed

2 – HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 – Antecedents

The Industrial Revolution's success meant a period of imperial expansion for the United States during the last years of the 19th century and its subsequent role in the First World War. However, as historian W.P. Adams points out, that success was obtained at the expense of a strong social and economic suffering from the working industrial and farming classes. In 1904, between 10 and 20 million US citizens were already living in poverty (215-217). Furthermore, the nation's acquired level of industrialization did not really matter for an important part of the industrial working class since the unemployment rates always constituted a high percentage of the totality: In 1894 a 17% workforce was unemployed, progressively rising to a 21% in 1921 and even higher numbers during the Great Depression (24.9% in 1933). (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics)

Working class' protests became a reality during the decade of 1890 when several waves of agitation took place. They vindicated a series of rights in order to fight exploitation. For example, the eight hours workday was reclaimed and, even so, in 1920 every working week was still composed of 60 hours, 12 hours every five days. (Adams 215-217). The Industrial Revolution had meant economic growth. However, social assistance resources and measures concerning not only the material situation but also the dignity of the working class had not developed in the same way as economy because politicians did not really care about working conditions. Instead, the main goal was to get economic profit from every situation. This behaviour persisted and, thus, during the decades preceding the economic collapse, the Federal Government chose the side of business owners instead of that of the labourers in every conflict. (215-218). This

struggling panorama lasted for the next years. Social injustice continued being a reality for the working classes, which is reflected in the plot of *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939).

2.2 – The Great Depression

Adams argues that the the situation of the United States after the First World War changed to the extent that government's policies focused specially on economic matters. The US had won the war without suffering it in their own territory and, thus, the decade following its ending (the twenties) was an age of economic prosperity. During the 1920s, the United States became the first consumer society. This happened because of a structural change in the economic system which brought prosperity. The first bases for contemporary capitalism were established. New measures such as mass production were adopted to cover the massive scale consumption that the new society required (257).

However, although the capitalist system enjoyed some years of prosperity, historians R.R Palmer and Joel Colton signal that it was not stable at all and any minor perturbation could alter the functioning of the whole structure (542). In this way, a combination of factors motivated the economic collapse that would manifest in 1929, generating the Great Depression. Firstly, it should be highlighted that, to a great extent, 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. The production power had augmented because of the new economic dynamics previously mentioned but, since the purchasing power was not strong to regulate the economy, a state of overproduction occurred. There were plenty of products but consumption was eventually reducing. Consequently, the surplus lost its value and a lot of companies had to declare bankruptcy. (Palmer and Colton 543-544).

All of these factors converged with the influence of speculation, which had been a central element of US economy since a lot of stock market investment had been done because of economic prosperity. In this way a huge amount of shareholders were ruined since their investments were lost when the enterprises declared bankruptcy. Adams also adds that other crisis agents were the companies' focus and concerns; they chose the side of the stockholders as their preferred profit beneficiaries instead of their workers. In this way, they favoured an unequal economic distribution which reinforced a contraction of the market; trade unions were weak and the amount of potential consumers was reduced when production had exponentially risen (290).

This crisis in the financial market (reaching its peak in the Wall Street Crash of 1929) passed into industry and agriculture. It brought poverty and unemployment to these sectors, consequently initiating the economic crisis that would eventually be known as the Great Depression (Palmer and Colton 544-555). The Great Depression was the United States' greatest economic crisis of their history. After the banking system finally collapsed, every social and economic indicator reflected a progressive deterioration. In 1932 the Gross Domestic Product had decreased almost a 50% and the unemployment rate had increased from a 2,3% (900.000 unemployed workers) in 1919 to a 24,9% (13 million unemployed workers) in 1933 (Adams 292-293).

The rural environment was one of the most affected one by crisis. The economic situation was such that the sharecroppers' incomes decreased a 70%. The 1920s overproduction meant that the goods needed to be sold to a lower price. Capitalism damaged the owners of farms or little amounts of land who were forced in many cases to sell their properties. Big owners took advantage of the situation since they could both acquire the dispossessed land (many times the banks took it as well) and benefit from

unemployment by offering a lot of working positions but with reduced salaries. (Adams 296)

The Great Depression was also aggravated by a phenomenon known as The Dust Bowl. McLeman and other geographers explain that 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 especially common and severe. The following decades of drought and dust storms can also be defined as Dust Bowl. (419)

Both natural and human factors motivated the existence of these storms. Concerning the natural ones, it should be highlighted that an enduring drought in the Southern Great Plains lasted for several years. The combination of wind and the erosion provoked by the severe aridity was responsible for the dust storms that meant the abandonment of many farms and homes in the area and its consequent emigration. Human reasons had influence since, according to Lee (dept. of geosciences TTU) and Gill (dept. of Geological science, UTEP), there was an important lack of knowledge of regionally-appropriate tillage practices. The farmers' methods were not efficient to control erosion (1).

This mixture of drought and economic depression meant a huge social recession in the area (Lee and Gill 1). Paula W. Dail, researcher in Iowa State University, asserts that families and farmers from the rural areas in which this natural disaster took place suffered health problems, lost their livelihoods and their homes. This dispossession meant the massive exodus towards the West. By 1940 2.5 million people from the different Dust Bowl states had been forced to leave their homes. Furthermore, their

desires and ambitions to get a job and better lives were, in most of the cases, truncated. Farmers' economic independence was lost and they were obliged to leave their homes looking for work that did not already exist by the time they reached the so-called "Promised Land" (79).

The fact that the Dust Bowl forced a lot of families out of business meant that their farm products' supply was reduced drastically. This cutback meant that the amount of available food in the receiver cities was not enough at all. The emigrants swelled the cities' population while the basic goods had diminished. (Vidal 3).

2.3 – Hoover's Presidency.

Herbert Hoover served as the 31st President of the United States from 1929 to 1933. Historian Peter Clements mentions that Hoover understood the gravity of the Depression, which became a central issue during his presidency. However, he committed one big mistake. His ideas were too liberal, believing that each person should be responsible for his own welfare: "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", (Forbes Quotes) Hoover argued. His policies were not far-reaching enough to address the whole scale of the Depression, since the purchasing power was very poor and, hence, individuals were not able to regulate the economy by themselves, without any federal intervention. Thus, ironically, the shanty camps in which the dispossessed families had lived for some periods of time were called "Hooverilles". These camps became marginal ghettos in the main focal points of emigration, the cities. Millions of people lived there in the most absolute poverty, habiting houses of tinfoil and cardboard lacking basic hygiene conditions (Schlesinger 245).

Moreover, Hoover's programme omitted social measures. The social assistance provided by the government was completely ineffective (the unemployed only received 27 dollars a year). The social gap remained strongly during the Depression and rich people kept coexisting with the poorest sectors of society.

2.4 – The New Deal

Hoover's non interventionist political decisions came to an end when, in 1932, Franklin Delano Roosevelt won the elections. As it is pointed out by Sagredo (UNED), Roosevelt political programme and his set of measures to recover from the economic crisis was called the New Deal. (6) It was a combination of social assistance and progressive legislation. Congress created an important number of new political measures: financial help to the unemployed and a huge programme of public works so as to create new job opportunities. Roosevelt's New Deal's measures in the way of economic recovery tried to apply a greater degree of state control over the economy and fight liberalism, labelled by Kinder and Hilgemann as an uncontrolled system. (205)

The measures of the New Deal were aimed at reducing the unemployment rate, encouraging public work, improving social assistance and enhancing working conditions. The first two aims are directly linked since Roosevelt's main solution for the huge amount of unemployed workers was the creation of the *Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC)*. This organism offered public jobs to young unemployed workers in different nature conservation camps and building roads or bridges. Roosevelt saved in this way more than four million workers from unemployment (Sagredo 306). Concerning the social help, Adams highlights that almost 5 million people received state money in 1934 whereas only 1.5 was getting it one year before (308). These different measures combined improved the workers' situation and the fact that they

received salaries and economic help that did not exist in the previous years meant that their purchasing ability grew. In this way, even when economic deficit was needed to fight unemployment and generate stronger social assistance, the system would finance itself with its progressive functioning (Colton and Palmer 554).

However, although poor people found an improvement, Burkhead argues that this does not mean that their situation completely changed. (64) Concerning the novel's rural environment, although the procedures implanted in agriculture as part of the New Deal appeared to be successful, various problems emerged as a result of AAA's (Agricultural Adjustment Act) functioning: "At a local level this law was usually run by county committees and so tended to be dominated by the most powerful landowners". (Clements 172)

3 – *THE GRAPES OF WRATH*

3.1 – The novel in context: plot, meaning and impact

The Grapes of Wrath was published in 1939, right after the worst consequences of the Great Depression had been suffered. It still remains the most important social literature piece of work on the depression for most of the critics. Some other relevant works of this same category written in the same age deserve mentioning as well: John Dos Passos's *The Big Money* (1936), Edmund Wilson's *The American Jitters* (1932) or James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941).

However, even when it can be asserted in general terms that Steinbeck's work belongs to the category defined by the Encyclopaedia Britannica as social problem novel, *The Grapes of Wrath's* particular categorization is more complex. According to Moore, the novel does not fit into a single literary genre. It can be classified as a convergence of Naturalism, prose epic, *Bildungsroman*, and historical fiction. Each genre's traits are present in the novel (11-12).

A *Bildungsroman* is based on the growing up experience and the personal evolution of its main character. Tom Joad is the novel's protagonist and thus, since the exodus means the broadening of his reality (he had only experienced the restricted worlds of the farm and the jail) and his consequent evolution, the novel could be also included within this genre.

The classical epic poems narrated and celebrated the deeds of heroes that represented the values of their people and who sacrificed themselves for the common good. In this novel, the Joad family can be taken to represent the heroic figure; they fight against oppression as representatives of thousands of other dispossessed families.

They are heroes fighting fear and ruin. This is the basic essence of the epic spirit. However, Steinbeck reverses this convention to the extent that the characters normally lose again at the forces of history while classical heroes were able to win. This helplessness is present because of Steinbeck's naturalistic approach.

The Grapes of Wrath can thus be considered a naturalistic because the portrayal of reality is faithful but the narrative foregrounds the forces of a sociological determinism that rules society: the weak are destroyed and the strong survive in a world where struggle always favours the oppressors. Anders Österling, secretary of the Swedish Academy, mentioned that "Steinbeck holds his position as an independent expounder of the truth with an unbiased instinct" ("Nobel Prize Award ceremony speech"). Even when this could be seen as a paradox, a pure realistic approach does not seem coherent if it is determined by major forces, Steinbeck's exposure of injustice counted with this deterministic factor because the oppressed social reality supported this dynamic. A great amount of abuses were committed against the low classes. This means a factual evidence of the unfairness of the world. Even if the readers are not able to picture it in this deterministic way, oppressed people lose as if the class struggle were actually determined by superior forces. Their circumstance was in fact that poor that dispossessed people were always doomed in their fight against injustice. Steinbeck is, thus, able to be at the same time realistic and deterministic. This is also the reason why *The Grapes of Wrath* can be considered historical fiction. Steinbeck was not writing about the past (*The Grapes of Wrath's* environment was almost coetaneous to the writing time) but, since his work presented the historical development of events in a journalistic way, posterior analysis can perfectly fit this novel into this category.

Concerning the novel's plot, *The Grapes of Wrath* is the account of the emigration movement to California which was forced upon a group of people from

Oklahoma through unemployment, bad weather conditions, and abuse of power. This tragic episode in the social history of the United States motivated Steinbeck to produce this harsh description of the experiences of one particular family, the Joads, during their endless, heartbreaking journey westwards. The family is composed of twelve members plus Jim Casy, a former preacher who accompanies them. The most important characters are Tom, the story's protagonist, and Ma Joad, his mother and leader of the family. *The Grapes of Wrath* is based on a biblical exodus. The Joad family's journey towards the Promised Land (California) can be compared with that experienced by the children of Israel from Egypt (Burkhead 11). They shared the same harshness, both during the trip and once in the destination.

Once their particular odyssey is over, the family realizes that reaching the West is not the end of their struggle. They soon discover that jobs are scanty, available pay is poor, and families are starving to death. The oppression by both the working companies and the law enforcement agencies is total in California and the family grows, in this way, both disillusioned and enraged. Wrath thus becomes an important element for them and, as a consequence, Tom kills an officer who struck and killed Casy. He needs to go hiding and becomes a clandestine labour organizer. The family's last job in a cotton plantation comes to an end in a dramatic way. The available work is over after a few days and endless rains cause flooding, which forces the family to leave the camp where they are living. The ending is powerfully significant: Rosasharn (Tom's younger sister), who was pregnant, is about to give birth. However, her baby is a stillborn and, consequently, since she will not need to feed her child, she uses her breast milk to feed a man who, without her generosity, would have died of starvation.

The narrative structure of the novel can be divided into three parts: the preparations to leave Oklahoma, the journey, and the struggle to survive in California.

Scholar Robert DeMott signals the most important device that links these three parts, the interchapters or double narrative. Sixteen of the thirty chapters are general descriptions of the environment, the social situations, the characters' functioning, etc. They alternate with those that concern the family's story and role in the plot (xii). Harold Bloom, highlights the juxtaposition since every interchapter has a special degree of relevance in relationship with its adjacent chapter, either the previous or the following one (40).

The Grapes of Wrath had a very good reception both among critics and common readers. It is one of the most discussed novels in criticism, reviews, and academic contexts of 20th-century American literature (Heavilin 126). Brian Cordyack defines Steinbeck's novel's reception as a huge influence. It was published during the country's greatest crisis ever and, consequently, its sharp criticism upon that social reality became controversial and at the same time conveys a popular message. In this way, the book was prohibited, burned by citizens or debated on the radio and, at the same time, became the best-selling book of 1939 and won several awards, the Pulitzer Prize being the most important one. Steinbeck was attacked as a propagandist and a socialist from both the left and the right side of the political spectrum. ("20th-Century American Bestsellers: John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*")

3.2 – The Great Depression

Burkhead explains that Steinbeck himself lived in the same environment as his characters and experienced similar events. He wrote several reports about the working class' exploitation, being able in this way to feel the effects of the Great Depression firsthand (63-65). He felt that the oppressed characters should be the main focus of his

writing and, in this way, the representation of poverty, central element in *The Grapes of Wrath*, was embodied by the Joad family in their role of framing the whole tenant community. The first description of poverty in the novel takes place right at the beginning of the story, when Tom has just left the Oklahoma State Penitentiary, McAlester:

“How they treat you in McAlester?” Casy asked.

"Oh, awright. You eat regular, an' get clean clothes, and there's places to take a bath. It's pretty nice some ways. Makes it hard not havin' no women." Suddenly he laughed. "They was a guy paroled," he said. "'Bout a month he's back for breakin' parole. A guy ast him why he bust his parole. 'Well, hell,' he says. 'They got no conveniences at my old man's place. Got no 'lectric lights, got no shower baths. There ain't no books, an' the food's lousy.' Says he come back where they got a few conveniences an' he eats regular. He says it makes him feel lonesome out there in the open havin' to think what to do next. So he stole a car an' come back". (28)

Steinbeck is ironic by his use of humour when trying to reflect a harsh social reality. The fact that a character comes back to jail voluntarily is quite absurd. However, he does it in order to escape poverty. The point here is that the people's lives were so miserable that being incarcerated was a better option than being free and keeping the same poor living conditions. Furthermore, the reference to quotidian necessity goods such as lights, baths or food increases the effect since the reader gets to know that the characters' most basic needs were not met.

The Grapes of Wrath's atmosphere mirrors that of the Great Depression during the whole novel. Steinbeck represented every social issue within this frame and

arranged them around the notion of poverty. In this way, its consequences can be exemplified by a lot of different passages. One of the strongest and clearest depictions occurs when Ma Joad feeds some hungry children in the Hooverville with part of the family's meal. The mother of one of the boys gets angry instead of thanking Ma Joad's generous action. This happens because they are so poor they cannot afford to eat meat: "My little fella come back smellin' of stew. You give it to 'im. He tol' me. Don' you go a-boastin' an' a-braggin' 'bout havin' stew. Don' you do it. I got 'nuf troubles 'thout that. Come in ta me, he did, an' says, 'Whyn't we have stew?'" Her voice shook with fury" (270).

Besides highlighting the organic value of *The Grapes of Wrath*, this passage also points towards another concept: the workers' solidarity and pride. Even during those harsh times of scarcity, poor people were willing to help each other and share their limited possessions. At the same time, their pride was so strong they were not pleased to receive any help if they considered it to be charity, a behaviour code which seems hard to follow when one is totally dispossessed.

Poverty is also directly associated with the functioning of capitalism. A young worker explains it to Tom before they work for the peach company. By these words, both Tom and the reader realize the unfairness of the system:

S'pose you got a job a work, an' there's jus' one fella wants the job. You got to pay 'im what he asts. But s'pose they's a hunderd men [...] S'pose them men got kids, an' them kids is hungry. S'pose a lousy dime'll buy a box a mush for them kids. S'pose a nickel'll buy at leas' somepin for them kids. An' you got a hunderd men. Jus' offer 'em a nickel—why, they'll kill each other fightin' for that nickel. (257)

As observed here, poverty was strongly motivated and perpetuated by the system. Within this atmosphere, one of *The Grapes of Wrath*'s more important roles is that of warning against greed, injustice and inhumanity (Heavilin 83). Human selfishness was behind the system that forced people to work in inhuman conditions just in order not to starve. The great owners' ethical sense is strongly questioned.

The sources of poverty pointed out in this section, human selfishness and the capitalist system, are perfectly summarized by Heavilin: "He (Steinbeck) describes the destruction of food [...] with hungry people watching, helplessly. While this rotting food assures a profit, children die from malnutrition" (82).

Another element that is linked with poverty is the Dust Bowl. Alexander and Nugent point out that this ecological disaster had a lot of different cultural responses because of its huge influence over society. It is, in this way, present in many cultural artefacts, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* possibly being the most relevant of them (2). It is developed in the introductory chapters. Steinbeck firstly presents it when Tom arrives at his home after being released from jail: "The road was cut with furrows where dust had slid and settled back into the wheel tracks. Joad took a few steps, and the flourlike dust spurted up in front of his new yellow shoes, and the yellowness was disappearing under gray dust". (19)

This is a reference to the presence of the dust storms as a consequence of the droughts. The gray dust covers the colorful crops. Yellow is the colour of wheat, corn and other different farm products that were destroyed during the Dust Bowl storms. With this combination of colours and image-creating verbs Steinbeck manages to portray the dramatic death of the land's life and fertility.

Bengoetxea points out that intensive agriculture practices and the farming industrialization mentioned in the novel are also associated with poverty (1194). The owners explain their own perspective in chapter five: "The tenant system won't work anymore. One man on a tractor can take the place of twelve or fourteen families. Pay him a wage and take all the crop. We have to do it". (35).

Intensive agricultural systems are harmful for the tenant workers. The tractor is a symbol of the industrialization that took the workers' jobs away and led them and their families to poverty. They are presented in some passages as mechanic monsters, emphasizing in this way their damaging role.

The oppressors are pictured as detached from the land in chapter 11, one of those presented by the voice of the narrator in order to explain the environment: "But the machine man, driving a dead tractor on land he does not know and love, understands only chemistry; and he is contemptuous of the land and of himself. When the corrugated iron doors are shut, he goes home, and his home is not the land." (121)

This issue has a lot to do with the concept of class conflict. This is a Marxist concept based on the antagonism and tension between the high and the low classes of society. *The Grapes of Wrath* has a Marxist perspective to the extent that supports the rejection of capitalism and stands up for the class conflict just as it is presented in the previous fragment. (Selyandita et al. 58). According to Burkhead, Steinbeck portrays these detached people as both foreign from the land and class outsiders. They cannot understand kinship and, thus, they break the community as long as they can obtain their own benefits (75). This is exemplified by the argument that a tenant keeps with the worker that kicked him out of his land:

"Why, you're Joe Davis's boy!"

"Sure," the driver said.

"Well, what you doing this kind of work for—against your own people?"

"Three dollars a day. I got damn sick of creeping for my dinner—and not getting it. I got a wife and kids. We got to eat. Three dollars a day, and it comes every day."

"That's right," the tenant said. "But for your three dollars a day fifteen or twenty families can't eat at all". (39)

The fact that a local, working class person is doing a harmful job for the rest of the community only for his own benefit is a huge shock and disappointment to the characters that have a communitarian feeling.

The Joad family lost the farm and, as a lot of other families, their ambitions to reconstruct their lives by heading West were not successful at all. They serve as a representative of the whole. The family's obliged rural exodus is portrayed as a dramatic experience and is best represented by Grampa Joad, who expresses his feelings before leaving in this way:

"Me—I'm stayin'. I give her a goin'-over all night mos'ly. This here's my country. I b'long here. An' I don't give a goddamn if they's oranges an' grapes crowdin' a fella outa bed even. I ain't a-goin'. This country ain't no good, but it's my country. No, you all go ahead. I'll jus' stay right here where I b'long." (116)

This fragment is very symbolic. He is the oldest character and leaving his land would mean a dramatic rejection of his past and his familiar roots. He needs to be dragged into the track by his family since he would not leave otherwise. He dies shortly after initiating the trip. His death is a strong metaphor of the Great Depression trauma that

was experienced by lots of families when they were forced to leave their lives behind. From a trauma studies approach, the crisis is an example of collective trauma.

3.3 – Hoover’s Presidency

One of the crisis’ agents was the change in the economic dynamics, the modus operandi supported by the United States president, Herbert Hoover. The negative effects of capitalism after the prosperity of the 1920s became a source of suffering for the workers. Steinbeck explained the situation in this way: people who were in charge of taking the relevant decisions (both in economy and in politics) chose economic instead of social growth; they chose the side of the companies, prioritising their benefit instead of their workers’. *The Grapes of Wrath* portrays this fact in its own agricultural environment: capitalist companies and banks are represented as being just interested in getting profit from agriculture and do not care about the farmers’ living conditions. The government agreement with the big companies’ functioning can be observed in *The Grapes of Wrath* since their actions were legitimised and supported by the law enforcement agencies, organizations that were dependent on the political rulers. Steinbeck presents it before the Joad family is forced to leave their Oklahoma farm:

“The tenants cried, Grampa killed Indians, Pa killed snakes for the land. Maybe we can kill banks—they're worse than Indians and snakes. Maybe we got to fight to keep our land, like Pa and Grampa did.

And now the owner men grew angry. You'll have to go.

But it's ours, the tenant men cried. We—

No. The bank, the monster owns it. You'll have to go.

We'll get our guns, like Grampa when the Indians came. What then?

Well—first the sheriff, and then the troops. You'll be stealing if you try to stay, you'll be murderers if you kill to stay. The monster isn't men, but it can make men do what it wants.” (36)

The presence of both the sheriff of the state and the federal troops means that not only each state's administration but also the central government supported the banks and the corporations when they were dispossessing people of their land instead of defending the tenants' rights.

The most relevant symbol that represents Hoover's term in the novel is the presence of the *Hoovervilles*, the shanty towns inhabited by the poor people who were suffering the depression consequences aggravated by, among other different factors such as speculation, Hoover's decisions. Naming them after the President was an ironic way to blame Hoover and criticise his actions. Steinbeck's use of this term was, consequently, a strong tool in order to show his disapproval and rejection of the President. The living conditions were terrible in these camps and the novel depicts them in the same, faithful way:

The man drove his family in and became a citizen of Hooverville—always they were called Hooverville. The man put up his own tent as near to water as he could get; or if he had no tent, he went to the city dump and brought back cartons and built a house of corrugated paper. And when the rains came the house melted and washed away. (245)

This is the first presentation of the Hoovervilles and their nature. It is done in a very explicit way. The process of fabrication of the shanty town shacks is described here and, even if it might seem exaggerated, Steinbeck is just illustrating reality: workers had been expelled from their homes and therefore had to build their new houses with pieces from the city dump because they could not afford anything better.

It is also important to remark that these camps and their inhabitants had two natural enemies: the oppressive authority forces (Police, Sheriff Department, etc. playing the same government supporting role) that eventually burned the camps and the damaging action of the environment elements (Burkhead 65). Nature is a two-faced element: it is benevolent and the tenants' way of life when working the land but, at the same time, harsh and able to become a perpetrator of tragedy. These natural elements become harmful for the camps especially in the final chapters since a flood is the last source of suffering for the workers in the story. As can be observed, Steinbeck already introduces this dangerous side of nature as a kind of prolepsis, as if the omniscient narrator were prophesising the closing tragedy.

The different descriptions of the Hooverville conditions throughout the novel go in this way, remarking the fact that workers did not count here with basic goods such as a decent house, a place to cook or furniture. The lack of other important elements such as water or sanitation is also pointed out.

There was no order in the camp; little gray tents, shacks, cars were scattered about at random. The first house was nondescript. The south wall was made of three sheets of rusty corrugated iron, the east wall a square of moldy carpet tacked between two boards, the north wall a strip of roofing paper and a strip of tattered canvas, and the west wall six pieces of gunny sacking. [...] A five-gallon kerosene can served for a stove. [...] And a collection of boxes lay about, boxes to sit on, to eat on. (252)

As a conclusion it can be asserted that the negative elements of Hoover's presidency are foregrounded in the novel: the big companies and banks benefits were guaranteed while social help for the workers was not; Hoover's measures to fight crisis were useless and

poor workers had to suffer miserable living conditions in shanty towns. Steinbeck strongly denounces the President and his policies by the exposure of this situation.

3.4 – The New Deal

Roosevelt's measures notably improved the workers' situation, improving their social help and fighting unemployment. This panorama is symbolized in *The Grapes of Wrath* by the Weedpatch camp. David Peck defines it as a government-run camp located in Bakersfield, California. The camp was founded by the Works Progress Administration, one of New Deal's organisms, in order to accommodate migrant workers (1). Bengoetxea explains that the Joad family and the rest of the camp members find here decent living conditions. They may count with everything they lacked when living in Hooverville: available toilet and washing facilities, showers, food, etc. Weedpatch is a symbol of the shift from the individual to the collective since the whole camp community works as a single organism. Every inhabitant cares about the rest of them since they all find themselves in the same situation of poverty and dispossession. This camp is an example of welfare solidarity and union among the migrants, who get their dignity back. This dignity is kept mainly because what workers find in the camp is not charity which, as was pointed before, would be a shameful way to survive for the migrants (1203). This situation is exemplified when the toilet paper of one of the living unit disappears. Mrs. Joyce (inhabitant of the camp) confesses that she took it since her children were suffering from diarrhoea. The rest of the women who run the camp committee suggest to her going and buying some food for the girls. This act is never interpreted as an act of charity but as solidarity:

“We ain't never took no charity,” Mrs. Joyce said.

"This ain't charity, an' you know it," Jessie raged. "We had all that out. They ain't no charity in this here camp. We won't have no charity.

Mrs. Joyce said timidly, "S'pose we can't never pay? We ain't had work for a long time."

"You'll pay if you can. If you can't, that ain't none of our business, an' it ain't your business. [...] You ain't got the right to let your girls git hungry in this here camp." (330-331)

Besides the living conditions and the communal nature, the most remarkable aspect of is self-government. The camp is federal and, thus, ruled by its occupants. Some oppressive organisms mentioned before like the Californian administration or their police don't have any power or legal authority over the camp. The Camp Committee runners explain this functioning to the Joad family when they arrive: "Well, the Association don't like the government camps. Can't get a deputy in there. The people make their own laws, I hear, and you can't arrest a man without a warrant". (309)

As can be seen, proletarian control was not liked by the great owners of the Farmers' Association and, since they were supported by the police, they tried to provoke fights from within just to create instability in order to break the workers' organization. Tom Joad explains it retrospectively at the novel's ending, with a mixture of nostalgia and rage:

"I been thinkin' how it was in that gov'ment camp, how our folks took care a theirselves, an' if they was a fight they fixed it theirself; an' they wasn't no cops wagglin' their guns, but they was better order than them cops ever give. I been a-wonderin' why we can't do that all over. Throw out the cops that ain't our people. All work together for our own thing—all farm our own lan' ". (417)

Tom thinks that Weedpatch's communal functioning is the way to obtain a fair system and, thus, after all his efforts and suffering, decides to become a labour organizer.

As a conclusion for this block, the fact that Weedpatch is a utopian element is quite relevant. The presence of this camp is vital in the novel but very short-lived, which suggests that the working class' fate is not successful. The Joad family are finally forced to leave the camp since they are not able to find any job. Joy is just momentary for the oppressed since the system is much more powerful than them (Bengoetxea 1203). This kind of determinism is a naturalistic trait and it is central in Steinbeck's literary career.

4 – CONCLUSION

This essay has analyzed the United States' historical background of the decade of the 1930s as reflected in *The Grapes of Wrath*. This novel is extremely suitable to be analyzed from a sociopolitical perspective mainly because of its faithful depiction of reality. Steinbeck was able to report the social and economic situation of that period in a realistic way and, for this reason, the main sociopolitical issues of those years can be found within the novel's plot. Some of the topics that can be emphasized in a special way are the representation of the rural exodus motivated by both the crisis and the Dust Bowl, human selfishness behind the failures of the capitalist system or the workers' improvement because of Roosevelt's action, symbolized in *The Grapes of Wrath's* plot by the Weedpatch camp.

The fact that the readers experience every event through the Joad family's perspective allows them to identify with the suffering of those farmers and workers who had to leave their land and go West. They are masterfully portrayed and, consequently, their suffering is also ours. The readers' close identification with the novel's characters is also a good way to create and transmit political ideas in a rather accessible way. *The Grapes of Wrath* is an extremely didactical work. It has the power to reach a wide readership in this sense. The fact that a broad audience is able to identify with the characters' situation means that an important amount of readers will be able to comprehend and analyze their sociopolitical situation in a more accessible way than when reading political or economic essays, which are generally more complex and tedious.

Finally, I would like to highlight *The Grapes of Wrath's* contemporary value since, eighty years after its publication, Steinbeck's portrayal of human nature prefigures many aspects present in 21st-century society. Selfishness, greed, exploitation,

and the capitalist system still perpetuate poverty, and migrations are, in the same way, a dramatic experience for many people all over the world. In many ways, the Joads' family story brings to mind other exiled and marginal groups who are suffering similar experiences of oppression nowadays. In the United States, Trump's policies against emigrants constitute a clear example: his project of building a wall between the Mexicans and the US is perhaps the most shocking measure.

5 – WORKS CITED

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