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Agrarianism and Land Ethic: a Study of Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*

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Abstract

A discussion of the agrarianism in *The Grapes of Wrath* does not pretend to serve as an interpretation of the entire novel. Nevertheless, it is the researcher's conviction that this doctrine is no less important than the other ideologies with what was apparently one of the primary motives for writing the book, the desire to protest against the harsh inequities of the financial industrial system that had brought chaos to America in the thirties. At this Steinbeck, with his curious combination of humanism and mysticism, seems to propose the substitution of agrarianism for industrialism as an antidote for what ailed the country.

In this paper, researcher aims at highlighting the agrarian sensibility of John Steinbeck. How the author expressed his concern for the farmers and for land in America in 1930s. During the disastrous thirties there were others who saw flaws in our economic system and had a similar solution. This period was also the growth of the back to the farm movement.

The researcher here does not think that Steinbeck was influenced by the southerners or anyone else, but only that in this period of crumbling faiths many men turned to agrarianism as others turned to the Townsend Plan. Naturally, the men in the agrarian group had much in common, and certainly all of them drew upon Jeffersonian agrarianism.

Key Words- *Agrarianism, Mysticism, Humanism, Subjugation, Liberation.*

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In this paper, researcher aims at highlighting the agrarian sensibility of john Steinbeck. How the author expressed his concern for the farmers and for land in America in 1930s. During the disastrous thirties there were others who saw flaws in our economic system and had a similar solution. The manner, almost purposefulness, with which a financial-industrial society had encouraged moral and cultural aridity, even when successful in terms of production, prompted twelve southerners to publish in 1930 *I'll take my stand*, a clarion call issued on a shepherd's pipe, summoning us back to the land and the somewhat feudal and gentlemanly traditions of the plantation days. In short, the southern agrarians were offering a positive program to place over against finance capitalism even before the full effects of the depression had been felt, and they continued their agitation in *the American review*, a journal that flourished in this decade. This period was also the growth of the back to the farm movement and the proliferation of books guaranteeing independence, and even security, on five acres.

The researcher here does not suggest that Steinbeck was influenced by the southerners or anyone else, but only that in this period of crumbling faiths many men turned to agrarianism as others turned to the Townsend Plan. Naturally, the men in the agrarian group had much in common, and certainly all of them drew upon Jeffersonian agrarianism. Because he had faith in the common man and thus gave his thinking a broad popular basis, Steinbeck was closer to Jeffersonianism than were southern agrarians, who sought to resurrect not only an agricultural way of life but also the traditional cultural values of Europe. Steinbeck was

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concerned with democracy, and looked upon agrarianism as a way of life that would enable us to realize the full potentialities of the creed, Jefferson, of course, held the same belief.

In order to clarify the full impact of Jeffersonian thought on Steinbeck, it is necessary at least to adumbrate the nature of eighteenth century agrarianism in America. This was a doctrine informed by the spirit and principles of Jefferson. Basic to it is the belief that landed property held in freehold must be available to everyone. Jefferson took seriously his middle class heritage from Locke, placing great faith in property and the property holder. To him equalitarian democracy meant a country made up of small farmers, and in fighting for the abolition of entail and primogeniture in Virginia he tried to achieve a common wealth dominated by precisely this group. Although Jefferson himself never went so far, many Jeffersonian agreed that if a man could not get legal title to landed property, he could claim ownership to land he occupied and tilled by virtue of a natural right. Possession of his own land gave the small farmer control of the means of production. It followed therefore that such a man could be economically independent, for he would be obligated to no man, he could reap what he sowed, and his agricultural way of life would make for a relatively high degree of self-sufficiency. It also followed that such a man that such a man would be politically independent, inasmuch as no one held a coercive power over him; no part of his way of life or his security was threatened by an outside force. The independent freehold farmer was a complete individualist, so the Jeffersonian myth goes, who acted in accordance with this own instincts or desires and rose or fell by virtue of his own efforts. Mostly he rose because he was a moral man; God had made his breast "his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue." History does not record the corruption of an agricultural people. In other words, agrarianism has a sprinkling of primitivism. Close contact with nature and with God makes and keeps men pure. By contrast the city is a cesspool of evil. Immorality thrives there, alongside of business and finance. These latter rob the common man of economic and political independence and destroy the dominant position of the farmer in the affairs of the state. Jeffersonian agrarianism, then, was essentially democratic; it insisted on the widespread

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ownership of property, on political and economic independence, on individualism; it created a society in which every individual had status; it make the dignity of man something more than a political slogan.

Seven books preceded *The Grapes of Wrath*, and in all of them do we have forecast of Steinbeck's predilection for physical environment. True, in *The Pastures of Heaven*, *To A God Unknown*, and *The Long Valley* he had dealt with tillers of the soil and with ranchers, but in these books he had preoccupied with psychological analysis, and the tone was mystical and nostalgic. Although dealing with agricultural workers, *In Dubious Battle* is concerned essentially with a strike and a scientist. But *Of Mice And Men* shows clearly Steinbeck's interest in physical environment, even though he is still haunted by psychological abnormality.

In this latter book we have the disenchanted and disinherited if not the dispossessed of *the grapes of wrath*. Lennie and George, migratory workers in the California fields, cherish the dream of a little farm of their own where, as Lennie's refrain has it, they can "live off the fatta the lan." George yearns for his own place where he could bring in his own crops, where he could get what comes up out of the ground. He wants the full reward of his own labor. He wants the independence that ownership can give him. Nobody could fire him if the farm were his. If someone came he didn't like, he could say. "Get the hell out, and by God he's got to do it." They would produce all they could eat, and then; "we'd just live there. We belong there... (251)"

Of mice and men, however, was a sentimental and slight book, three years later, in *the grapes of wrath*, Steinbeck was able to present a fuller exposition of his agrarian views. Early in the novel he introduces the conflict between the farmer and the financial-industry interests of the city, the truck driver remarks to Tom that the tractors are pushing the croppers off the land. The full significance of this observation is not apparent until we come to the faith chapter. Here Steinbeck makes clear that the tractors are the instruments of a mysterious financial system, just as some men represent that system. These men are deprived of will and

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personality by the system and its machine. When they must tell the croppers to get off the land, they shed their humanity and take refuge in the cold mathematics of the system. From now on there will be a tractor and a superintendent on the land, no the people. And the land will be raped methodically, without passion. It ill be productive because it yields a crop, but it will be sterile too because no one loves it and because it will bear under iron and die under iron. The sterility of machine culture is emphasized by Steinbeck's comment, much later in the book, on the languid, heat-raddled ladies, parasites of that culture, whose sexual intercourse is safe, odorless, and unproductive. Finally, Steinbeck remarks how the business men farmers, those who keep books but never follow the plow, but up the canneries in California, cut off the small farmer's market, and eventually take the property away from him. Chiefly in negative terms Steinbeck is showing us that farmer is the productive, healthy member of the society. He suggests a primitivistic conception of nature; that the farmer draws spiritual strength as well as sustenance from the soil. Antithetical to these notions is the aridity of the city-bred rich woman, the dishonest of business, and the essential inhuman and unproductive nature of the machine age.

When you are shoved off the land and can exercise neither a legal nor a natural right to possess a land, then you have lost status and your life has lost meaning. There is a king mystic exaltation in the ownership of property which the farmer experiences. The way of life normal to the farmer is the productive life. Fallow land, when men are starving, is a sin. The uniform impulse among Okies is to get hold of an acre and make something grow on it. In this way they hope to gain some slight measure of security. Unfortunately, the California land has all been "stolen by the early American settlers who took it from the Mexicans."(178). Those who were now the great owners had exercised a natural right to get the land, and now they held it, aware that "when property accumulates in too few hands it is taken away." In a dynamic American society, the feverish American who had utilized a radical doctrine to gain the land had now become the conservative, stable element while a new radical group arose, the dispossessed Okies. Now these latter want the land. The Okies are Steinbeck's protagonists in

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a kind of revolutionary social action which is as American as Jefferson's- an agrarian activist-successful efforts to abolish entail and primogeniture; and this action would yield the same results-a wider distribution of property.

The researcher thinks that Steinbeck has much in common with Jeffersonian agrarianism and that he is attracted to the doctrine because he has the same humanistic interest in democracy that Jefferson had. It remains to inquire if agrarianism, its form and substance, is the part of our tradition then we should preserve it. And we must also seek another road to the independence and security and dignity that we expect from democracy for the agrarians.

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