CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION

Literature is a powerful instrument to usher in not only socio-economic change in society, but it acts as effective tool to the individual against chasing chimera in such of fabulous wealth without forethought.

The Grapes of Wrath (1939) of American Novelist, John Steinbeck (1902-1968), a Nobel laureate, is the case in point which is as eye opener in Indian context where hoards of youth recklessly migrate to the West and Gulf region in search of prosperity regardless of the fact that migration is fraught with the danger of racial discrimination and economic exploitation by the local lords and managers.

The ideology propagated by the novel, The Grapes of Wrath is still particularly relevant in our country even today. Its analysis and study would stand to educate the unemployed youth to look forward to their career in totality of the socio-economic political phenomena of the country where they wish to go in pursuit of their economic dream.

The protagonist of The Grapes of Wrath, Joads migrated from Oklahoma to California in search of their dream. They convince themselves that the whole bunch of the grapes awaits them in California on reaching there to find a
lot of wealth on the platter. Little did they realize that they were unconsciously chasing chimera which ended up their total devastation. The novel concludes with the depiction that Joads are left “scattered, homeless, penniless, and without food or hope for the future... Steinbeck has smashed the notions of the American Dream”. Every aspect of the Joads’ dream was crushed and they were left with no financial security or even simple necessities.

In order to appreciate the literary values of John Steinbeck in socio-economic political perspective, a look at his birth and literary contribution to American Literature merits to be alluded in brief. John Steinbeck with thirty books of fiction, sixteen novels, drama, film scripts and nonfictional prose to his credit was born to a family headed by his father, John Ernst Steinbeck (1862-1935), Monterey County treasurer. His mother, Olive Hamilton Steinbeck (1867-1954), a former school teacher shared his passion for reading and writing. The literary test of his parents and especially of his wife, Carol Henning Steinbeck has manifested itself in the creative fervour of John Steinbeck whose perspicacity into socio-economic and political order of the time gave its vent to all of his books of enduring importance.

John Steinbeck is rated to be a polar star in the firmament of the American Literature. It is expedient to give a glance over American Literature
to find his place in the string of American Literary World. Like other national literatures, American literature was shaped by the history of the country. It was merely a group of colonies scattered along the eastern seaboard of the North American continent. It traces the history of American poetry, drama, fiction and social and literary criticism from the early 17th century to the late 20th century. Steinbeck’s career began with a historical novel, Cup of Gold (1929), a swashbuckling historical romance based on the life of seventeenth-century Welsh buccaneer Henry Morgan, in which he voiced a distrust of society and glorified the anarchistic individualist typical of the rebellious 1920s. He showed his affinity for colourful outcasts, such as the paisanos of the Monterey area. His comic novels, Tortilla Flat (1935), and Cannery Row (1945), the multi-generation epic East of Eden (1952), and the novellas Of Mice and Men (1937) and The Red Pony (1937). Steinbeck populated his stories with struggling character; his works examined the lives of the working class and migrant workers during the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression. He began to write a series of "California novels" and Dust Bowl fiction, set among common people during the Great Depression. These included In Dubious Battle (1936), Of Mice and Men (1937) and The Grapes of Wrath (1939). The latter, a protest novel punctuated by prose-poem interludes, tells the story of the migration of the Joads, an Oklahoma Dust Bowl family, to California. He
also wrote an article series called The Harvest Gypsies for the San Francisco News about the plight of the migrant worker. During their almost biblical journey, they learn the necessity for collective action among the poor and downtrodden to prevent them from being destroyed individually.

The Grapes of Wrath won the 1940 Pulitzer Prize, eventually became the cornerstone of his 1962 Nobel Prize award, and proved itself to be among the most enduring works of fiction by any American author, past or present. In spite of the flaws its critics perceive frequently sentimentality, flat characterizations, heavy-handed symbolism, and unconvincing dialogue. The Grapes of Wrath has entered both the American consciousness and its conscience. If a literary classic can be defined as a book that speaks directly to reader’s concerns in successive historical eras, surely The Grapes of Wrath is such a work.

Steinbeck followed this wave of success with The Grapes of Wrath (1939), based on newspaper articles about migrant agricultural workers that he had written in San Francisco. It is commonly considered Steinbeck's masterpiece and part of the American literary canon. According to The New York Times, it was the best-selling book of 1939 and 430,000 copies had been printed by February 1940. In that month, it won the National Book Award, favourite fiction book of 1939, voted by members of the American Booksellers
The book has also had a charmed life on screen and stage. Steinbeck sold the novel’s film rights for $75,000 to producer Darryl F. Zanuck. The Nunnally Johnson scripted a truncated film version, which was nonetheless memorably paced, photographed, and acted under the direction of John Ford in 1940. Recently, Frank Galati faithfully adapted the novel for his Chicago-based Steppenwolf Company, whose Broadway production won a Tony Award as Best Play in 1990. The Grapes of Wrath has been translated into nearly thirty languages. It seems that Steinbeck’s words continue, in Warren French’s apt phrase, “the education of the heart”.

On June 18, 1983, a little more than three weeks after starting The Grapes of Wrath, John Steinbeck confided in his daily journal:

If I could do this book properly it would be one of the really fine books and a truly American book. But I am assailed with my own ignorance and inability. I’ll just have to work from a background of these. Honesty. If I can keep an honesty it is all I can expect of my poor brain.... If I can do that it will be all my lack of genius can produce. For no one else knows my lack of ability the way I do. I am pushing against it all the time.

(Robert De Mott 5)
Despite Steinbeck’s doubts, which were constant during its tumultuous process of composition, The Grapes of Wrath turned out to be not only a fine book, but the greatest of his seventeen novels. Steinbeck’s aggressive mixture of native philosophy, common-sense politics, blue-collar radicalism, working class characters, folk-wisdom, and home-spun literary form—all set to a bold, rhythmic style and nervy, raw dialogue—qualified the novel as the “American book” he had set out to write. The novel’s title—from Julia Ward Howe’s “Battle Hymn of the Republic”—was clearly in the American grain: “I like it because it is a march and this book is a kind of march—because it is in our own revolutionary tradition and because in reference to this book it has a large meaning.” (Elizabeth Otis)

After his arduous march of composition, The Grapes of Wrath passed from his wife’s typescript to published novel in a scant four months. In March 1939, when Steinbeck received copies from one of three advance printings, he told Pascal Covici, his editor at The Viking Press, that he was “immensely pleased with them”. The novel’s impressive physical and aesthetic appearance was the result of its imposing length. And true to Steinbeck’s insistence that The Grapes of Wrath be “keyed into the American from the beginning”, Covici had insured that Viking Press printed words and music from the “Battle
Given the drastic plight of the migrant labour situation in California, Steinbeck refused to write a popular book or court commercial success. It was ironic, then, that shortly after its official publication date on April 14, 1939, fuelled by the nearly ninety reviews-mostly positive-that appeared in newspapers, magazines and literary journals between April and June, The Grapes of Wrath climbed to the top of the best-seller lists for most of the year, selling 4,28,900 copies in hardcover at $2.75 each. The Grapes of Wrath won the 1940 Pulitzer Prize, eventually became the cornerstone of his 1962 Nobel Prize award, and proved itself to be among the most enduring works of fiction by any American author, past or present. In spite of the flaws its critics perceive frequently sentimentality, flat characterizations, heavy-handed symbolism, and unconvincing dialogue. The Grapes of Wrath has entered both the American consciousness and its conscience.

Although Steinbeck could not have predicted this success in the half century, The Grapes of Wrath has sold more than 14 million copies. Many of them end up in the hands of schools and colleges where the novel is taught in literature and history classes at every level from junior high to doctoral
seminars. The book has also had a charmed life on screen and stage. Steinbeck sold the novel’s film rights for $75,000 to producer Darryl F. Zanuck. The Nunnally Johnson scripted a truncated film version, which was nonetheless memorably paced, photographed, and acted under the direction of John Ford in 1940. Recently, Frank Galati faithfully adapted the novel for his Chicago-based Steppenwolf Company, whose Broadways production won a Tony Award as Best Play in 1990. The Grapes of Wrath has been translated into nearly thirty languages. It seems that Steinbeck’s words continue, in Warren French’s apt phrase, “the education of the heart”.

Every strong novel redefines our conception of the genre’s dimensions and reorders our awareness of its possibilities. Like other products of rough-hewn American genius—Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Mark Twain’s Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, and Alice Walker’s The Color Purple—The Grapes of Wrath gas a home-grown quality: part naturalistic epic, part jeremiad, part captivity narrative, part road novel, part transcendental gospel.

Many American authors manage to forge their own way by synthesizing their personal vision and experience with a variety of cultural forms and literary styles. Steinbeck was no exception. To execute The Grapes of Wrath
he drew on the jump-cut technique of John Dos Passo’s USA trilogy (1937), the narrative tempo of Pare Lorentz’s radio drama Ecce Homo! and the sequential quality of such Lorentz films as The Plow That Broke the Plains (1936) and The River (1937), the stark visual effects of Dorothea Lange’s photographs of Dust Bowl Oklahoma and California migrant life, the timbre of the Greek epics, the rhythms of the King James Bible, the refrains of American folk music, and the biological impetus of his and Edward F. Ricketts’s ecological phalanx, or group-man, theory. Steinbeck’s imagination transformed these resources into his own holistic structure, his own individual signature. Malcolm Cowley’s claim that a whole literature is summarized in this book and much of it is carried to a new level of excellence is especially accurate.

In early July 1938, Steinbeck told literary critic Harry T Moore that he was improvising what was for him a “new method” of fictional technique: one which combined a suitably elastic form and elevated style to express the far-reaching tragedy of the migrant drama. In The Grapes of Wrath he devised a contrapuntal structure, which alternates short lyrical chapters of exposition and background pertinent to the migrants as a group with the long narrative chapters of the Joad family’s dramatic exodus to California. Just as in Moby-Dick Melville created intensity and prolonged suspense by alternating between the temporal chapters of Ahab’s driven quest for the white whale and Ishmael’s
numinous chapters on cetology, so Steinbeck structured his novel by juxtaposition. His particulars chapters are the slow-paced and lengthy narrative chapters that embody traditional characterisation and advance the dramatic plot, while jazzy, rapid-fire “interchapters” work at another level of recognition by expressing and a temporal, universal, synoptic view of the migrant condition. Steinbeck reminded himself that for maximum effect, “I want the reader to be able to keep separate in his mind”. In fact, his general or intercalary chapters were expressly designed to hit the reader below the belt.

With the rhythms and symbols of poetry one can get into a reader – open him up and while he is open introduce things on a intellectual level which he would not or could not receive unless he were opened up, Steinbeck revealed to Columbia undergraduate Herbert Sturz in 1953.

His novel, Cup of Gold, a swashbuckling historical romance based on the life of seventeenth century Welsh buccaneer Henry Morgan, gave no indication that Steinbeck would eventually be capable of producing a graphic novel with the startling originality, magnitude, compassion, and power of The Grapes of Wrath. What transpired in those ten years is as arresting an example of determined, self-willed artistic growth as we have in American letters, for in the nine volumes of prose he produced in the 1930s. Steinbeck simply got stronger and stronger as a novelist. His achievement is especially moving
because he rarely thought of himself as a natural genius and rarely believed he had ever arrived as a writer. This typical self-assessment is recorded in Working Days: “I was not made for success. I find myself with a growing reputation. In many ways it is a terrible thing....Among other things I feel that I have put something over. That this little success of mine is cheating.” (Robert DeMott)

Steinbeck augmented his talent with plain hard work and repeated practice. Where his characters use tools to elevate work to a dignified level, Steinbeck turned to his “comfortable and comforting” pen, an instrument that became an extension of the best part of himself: “Work is the only good think,” he claimed in Working Days. Writing was a kind of textual habitation for Steinbeck. He wrote books methodically the way other people built houses—word by word, sentence by sentence. His act of writing was to fulfilling his dream of finding a home in the architectural spaces created by his imagination.

In fact, this creative and interior level of engagement is the elusive, unacknowledged fifth layer of Steinbeck’s novel. Although Steinbeck insisted on effacing his own presence in The Grapes of Wrath, the fact remains that it is a very personal book, rooted in his own compulsion. The plodding pace of Steinbeck’s writing schedule informed the slow, crawling movement of the
Joads’ journey, while the harried beat of his own life gave the proper feel and tone to his beleaguered characters.

The Grapes of Wrath’s communal vision began in the fire of Steinbeck’s own labour, but the flames were fanned by numerous people, especially Carol Steinbeck and Tom Collins. Carol Steinbeck (1906-1983), his outgoing first wife, actively supported northern California’s local fugitive agricultural labour movement before he did. Carol was an energetic, talented person in her own right, who agreed to relinquish a possible career in favour of helping to manage his. Their partnership and marriage was smoother and more egalitarian in the struggling years of Steinbeck’s career; with the enormous success-and pressures- brought first by Of Mice and Men (1937), and then by The Grapes of Wrath, their situation became more tenuous and volatile. Carol was an extremely strong-willed, demonstrative person, and she was often frustrated, resentful and sometimes jealous; John was frequently beleaguered, confused and demanding. In the late 1930s, whenever John was writing daily, Carol handled most of the routine domestic duties. She also shielded her husband as much as possible from unwarranted disruptions and intrusions, and she oversaw some of the financial arrangements between Steinbeck and his literary agents.
Carol also served as his cultural envoy and stand-in. In January 1938, on a trip to New York City, she met with documentary film-maker Pare Lorentz (1905-1992), arranging between them his first visit to Los Gatos to discuss a joint Steinbeck-Lorentz movie version of *In Dubious Battle* and a private showing of *The River* and *The Plow That Broke the Plains*. These pioneering documentary films, which Lorentz made for President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal-inspired Resettlement Administration, dealt with human displacement and natural erosion caused by the Dust Bowl and Mississippi Valley floods. After their initial meeting, Lorentz became an increasingly important figure in the novelist’s life.

The *Grapes of Wrath* is an engaged novel with a partisan posture, many complex voices and passionate prose styles. Peter Lisca believes, “no other American novel succeeded in forgoing and making instrumental so many prose style.” Except for its unflinching treatment of the Great Depression’s climate, social and economic conditions, and those interchapters that serve to halt the emotional slide toward sentimentality, there is nothing cynically distanced about it, nothing coolly modernist, in the way we have come to understand the elite literary implications of that term in the past seventy-five years. The *Grapes of Wrath* is in some ways an old-fashioned novel, even down to its curious avoidance of human sexuality. It is not narrated from the first-person
point of view, yet the language has a consistently catchy eyewitness quality about it, and its vivid biblical, empirical, poetical, cinematic, and folk styles demonstrate the remarkable tonal and visual acuity of Steinbeck’s ear and eye.

Steinbeck told Merle Armitage on Feb 17, 1919, that in “composition, in movement, in tone and in scope,” The Grapes of Wrath was ‘symphonic’. Indeed, his fusion of intimate narrative and panoramic editorial chapters enforces this dialogic concert. Chapters, styles, voices all speak to each other, set up resonances, send echoes back and forth – point and counterpoint, strophe and antistrophe – as in a huge symphony whose total impression far surpasses the sum of its discrete and sometimes dissonant parts. Steinbeck’s novel belongs to that vital class of fictions whose shape issues not from an ideal blueprint of aesthetic propriety but from the generative urgency of its author’s experience. Steinbeck’s direct involvement with the plight of America’s Dust Bowl migrants in the latter half of the 1930s created his obsessive urge to tell their story honestly but also movingly. “This must be a good book,” he wrote in Working Days on June 10, 1938. “It simply must. I have not any choice. It must be far away the best thing I have ever attempted – slow but sure, piling detail on detail until a picture and an experience emerge. Until the whole throbbing thing emerges.” (Ibid)
In his letter to Pascal Covici on Jan 16, 1939: “I am not writing a satisfying story”, he remarked:

I’ve done my damndest to rip a reader’s nerves to rags, I don’t want him satisfied.... I tried 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.

(Ibid 9)

Steinbeck’s participatory aesthetic was based on a circle of complicity that linked “the trinity” of writer, text, and reader to ensure maximum affective impact. He kept his eyes steadily on target: “Today’s work is the overtone of the tractors, the men who run them, the men they displace, the sound of them, the smell of them. I’ve got to get this over. Got to because this one’s tone is very important – this is the eviction sound and the tonal reason for movement. Must do it well.” (GW 39)

Steinbeck conceived his novel on simultaneous levels of existence, ranging from socio-economic determinism to transcendent spirituality. Louis
Owens explains how biblical parallels in The Grapes of Wrath illuminate four of Steinbeck’s layers:

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 the 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.

(Louis Owens 29)

Thus Steinbeck pushed back the accepted boundaries of traditional mimetic fiction and redefined the proletarian form. Like all truly significant American novels, The Grapes of Wrath does not offer codified solutions. Even though it treats with privilege a particular section of the migrant labour scene (Steinbeck ignores the problems of nonwhite migrant workers – Filipions, Chinese, Japanese and Mexicans – who made up a significant percentage of California’s agricultural labour force, according to Carey McWilliams), his book still speaks to the universal experience of human disenfranchisement, still holds out hope for human advancement. At every level The Grapes of Wrath
enacts the process of its author’s belief and embodies the shape of his faith, as in this ringing synthesis from Chapter 14.

The last clear definite function of man - muscles aching to work, minds aching to create beyond the single need - this is man. To build a wall, to build a house, a dam, and in the wall and house and dam to put something of Manself, and to Manself take back something of the wall, the house, the dam; to take hard muscles from the lifting, to take the clear lines and form from conceiving. For man, unlike any other organic or inorganic in the universe, grows beyond his work, walks up the stairs of his concepts, emerges ahead of his accomplishments. (GW 156-57)

The Grapes of Wrath was the product of his increasing immersion in the migrant material, which proved to be a Pandora’s Box. It required an extended odyssey before he discovered the proper focus and style to do the topic justice. In one way or another, from August 1936, when Steinbeck discovered a subject “like nothing in the world”, through October 1939, when he resolved in Working Days to put behind him “that part of my life that made the Grapes”, the migrant issue, which has wounded him deeply, remained his central preoccupation. He produced a seven part series of newspaper articles, “The
Harvest Gypsies”, an unfinished novel, “The Oklahomans”, a completed but destroyed satire, “L’Affaire Lettuceberg”, and “The Grapes of Wrath”. Each version shared a fixed core of elements: on one side, the entrenched power, wealth, authority, and consequent tyranny of California’s industrialized agricultural system which produced flagrant violations of the migrants; civil and human rights and ensured their continuing peonage, their loss of dignity, through threats, reprisals, and violence; on the other side, the powerlessness, poverty, victimization, and fear of the nomadic American migrants whose willingness to work, desire to retain their dignity, and enduring wish to settle land of their own were kept alive by their inmate resilience and resourcefulness and by the democratic benefits of the government camps. He had no doubt that the presence of the migrants would change the fabric of California life, though he had little foresight about what his own role in that change would be. His concern was humanitarian: “Every effort I can bring to bear is and has been at the call of the common working people to the end that they may eat what they raise, use what they produce, and in every way and in completeness share in the works of their hands and their heads”, he declared unequivocally to San Francisco News columnist John Barry.

The Harvest Gypsies formed the foundation of Steinbeck’s concern for a long time to come, raised issues and initiated forces, gave him a working
vocabulary with which to understand current events, and furthered his position as a reliable interpreter. This stage resulted from the notoriety caused by his recently published strike novel, *In Dubious Battle*, after which Steinbeck found that he was fat being considered a sympathetic spokesman for the contemporary agricultural labor situation in a state that was *In Dubious Battle* exposed the capitalist dynamics of corporate farming, it took no side for or against labor, preferring instead to see the fruit strike as a symbol of “man’s eternal, bitter warfare with himself.”

The final stage of writing culminated in *The Grapes of Wrath*. His conscience squared, his integrity restored, Steinbeck quickly embarked on the longest sustained writing job of his early career. He told, “It is a nice thing to be working and believing in my work again. I hope I can keep the drive.... I only feel whole and well when it is the way”. (Otis – 31) Naturally, his partnership for the workers and his sense of indignation at California’s labor situation carried over, but they were given a more articulated and directed shape.

*The Grapes of Wrath* is arguably the most significant indictment ever made the myth of California as a Promised Land. As John Steinbeck composed this novel that extolled a social group’s capacity for survival in a hostile world,
he was himself so unravelled in the process that the angle of vision, the vital 
signature, the moral indignation that made his art exemplary in the first place, 
could never be repeated with the same integrated force. Once his name became 
inseparably linked with the title of his most famous novel, Steinbeck could 
ever escape the influence of his earlier life. Wherever human beings dream of 
a dignified and free society in which they can harvest the fruits of their own 
labour, The Grapes of Wrath’s radical voice of protest can still be heard. As a 
tale of dashed illusions, thwarted desires, inhuman suffering, and betrayal 
promises-all strung on a shimmering thread of hope-The Grapes of Wrath not 
only summed up the Depression era’s socially conscious art but beyond that- 
for emotional urgency, evocative power, and sustained drama-last few peers in 
American fiction.

John Steinbeck’s work The Grapes of Wrath, Peter Lisca ends an 
introductory paragraph as follows:

Although thus associated with this class of social-protest fiction 
The Grapes of Wrath continues to be read, not as a piece of 
literary or social history, but with a sense of emotional 
involvement and aesthetic discovery. More than any other 
American novel, it successfully embodies a contemporary social 
problem of national scope in an artistically viable expression. It is
unquestionably John Steinbeck’s finest achievement, a work of literary genius. (Peter Lisca 2)

Lisca conveys the spirit about The Grapes of Wrath. The novel is clearly Steinbeck’s best work; it is an important and influential novel, as Lisca claims, “a work of literary genius.” And yet one who approaches it for the first time, may not readily understand why it is important in modern literature courses suggests that contemporary readers with a grasp of Richard Brautigan, Hunter S. Thompson, and Thomas Pynchon are not necessarily prepared to read Steinbeck. Why? Can The Grapes of Wrath be difficult? To think of it in that way is startling. Yet just as Lionel Trilling found it necessary to explain the “difficulties” of William Dean Howells, so now readers may need to be introduced to the “difficulties” of The Grapes of Wrath. That is, they may need to retrieve the sensibility for reading it well in a way that did not seem necessary only a short time ago.

The Grapes of Wrath stands the middle distance of American literary history. It is the recognition that it runs counter to one of the main developments in twentieth-century American Literature—modernist fiction. From the belated “discovery” of Moby-Dick in the early part of this century to
recent experiments, there has been a strong revisionist and experimental tradition in American writing, producing fiction as diverse as that of John Dos Passos, William Faulkner, and Thomas Pynchon—fiction that often appears to erode settled novelistic practices to discover new literary forms. This tradition by its rejection of the authority of the past, its willingness to experiment with genre, its belief in multiplicity of meaning, and its rejection of romantic sentiment. The Grapes of Wrath, as Warren French has noted, stands apart from all this, having no serious quarrel with the past, no especially innovative or experimental form, no obsession with multiplicity or ambiguity, and no fear of sentiment. Accordingly, a reader may judge Steinbeck’s novel to be optimistic about society and affirmative about the human spirit in depicting the Joad family’s successful struggle to cross the country, Tom Joad’s and Jim Casy’s meditation on the social and spiritual changes around them, and Rose of Sharon’s impulse to nurse a starving world. It is not because they belong to another era and are irrelevant to ours, but because they are foreign to the critical idiom that dominates the twentieth century. They do not show the influence of modernism.

On this account, from 1939 to 1954, during what Peter Lisca calls the “hysterical reaction” to the novel, many readers tended to classify The Grapes
of Wrath as a social document with only marginal literary status. Malcolm Cowley and Joseph Warren Beach defended the novel’s integrity, proclaiming it an achievement of artistic vision; but Kenneth Burke, Edmund Wilson, and Frederic J. Hoffman saw in it a dishonest novel—a novel propagandistic in its appeal. Alfred Kazin—uniquely taking both sides—called it “the most influential social novel of the period,” but simultaneously complained of a lack of realism in its characters. In the view of many, the migration from Oklahoma and the trials of those who left their homes were presented too directly. It is true that very little was known about the inward patternings of the novel during this period, but it was roundly condemned nonetheless.

Interpretation of The Grapes of Wrath became somewhat sounder in the period from 1954 to 1969, when critics began to examine its structure. Although Northrop Frye pronounced, dismissively, that its “plot exists primarily to illustrate the migratory labour...,” many in this period were discovering new perspectives. Particularly instructive in this connection was Warren French’s analysis of the narrative. The triviality and simplicity of the novel’s plot, French showed that the novel was romantic quest motif: an exodus from a blighted land (Oklahoma) to a promised land (California). Noting French’s references to the Biblical flight from Egypt, other critics argued that Tom Joad and Jim Casy were in fact Biblical types, leaders in a journey out of
exile, like Moses and Christ. Similarly, Rose of Sharon’s milk, given to the starving man at the end of the novel, was seen to be a kind of manna ordained to sustain those not yet home from wandering, a gift of renewal to humankind. Such connections were elaborated gradually into complex systems of Biblical correlation and mythical interpretations. In its first period a strictly social document, commonplace and oversimple, The Grapes of Wrath emerged as a fiction richly connected to tradition and complex in its play of symbols and Biblical motifs.

The novel’s interchapters explicitly take a macrocosmic view of the Joad’s dilemma and even proposed and sort through solutions to social, economic and spiritual problems. Since they also draw moral from segments of the action, they encourage the misconception that the novel is a complex, illustrated lesson - a didactic exercise presenting Steinbeck’s ideas about human nature and social change. Lisca argues the interchapters guide the novel thematically in a way that actually intensifies that drama of the Joads’ journey.

During this second wave of response, criticism turns from mere attack and defense to concentrate on fundamental issues of interpretation. In an extremely perceptive essay, George Bluestone discusses Edmund Wilson’s view that the novel shows a “sentimental symbolism” and a “preoccupation
with biology,” arguing that it moves in a very different direction – toward political radicalism and a truly sexual appreciation of nature. In particular, Bluestone establishes that Tom Joad’s status as a proletarian hero consists in part of a romantic tendency to merge an appreciation of the tillable earth with an appreciation of feminine “breasts, hips,(and) pelvis.” Later assessments by J. Paul Hunter and R.W.B. Lewis on the effect of sentiment in the novel come to opposite conclusions. In its deployments of Biblical symbols, Hunter sees a genuine sense of “reaffirmation” and hope in an otherwise inhospitable modern world. On the other hand, Lewis attributes to the intensity of its sentimental vein a destructive blurring of characterization- characters conceived not individually but as a corporate body. By Edwin Bowden, another attempt to assess the book finds it a traditional story of American people isolated from their community and groups isolated from humanity, and necessarily producing characters who are grotesques- misshapen and displaced types. The most formalistic study during this period is an essay by Robert J. Griffin and William A. Freedman treating Steinbeck’s animal and mechanical imagery and showing how it helps to bind together the Joad chapters with those which generalize the meaning that the Joads’ story illustrates.

It is evident that the Joads move in an environment in which climatological, economic, and cultural forces have turned against them. The
land has been depleted, the banks are mismanaged, and the people suffering from these misfortunes do not recognize their need to establish a “true” community. Besides adversity in the Joads’ world there is a natural receptivity to human purpose, even sympathy for human designs. Conditions at present are unbearable, but these conditions are bringing about a spiritual and psychological change that, later, after more suffering, will be part of a new and better world. The narrative voice of the interchapters testifies to the fact that, in spite of appearances to the contrary, suffering is meaningful that the Joads’ deep affinity with the natural world in impregnable, and that in time it will subdue the adversity of the moment. The family’s unique power to “endure” derives from the same natural world that afflicts them. Thus, Steinbeck suggests repeatedly that adverse circumstances may be the agents of a “fortunate fall” and that after a period of desperate wandering and confusion, at a time projected into the ideal “future” the novel adumbrates, the wandering will end and the truly just community will exists. Implicit in every passage of the novel, in other words, particularly in the way Tom and Rose of Sharon are transformed in the novel’s conclusion.

George Bluestone’s essay focuses on these highly romantic assumptions. He shows that there is a kind of unspoken collusion between human beings and nature. And in his discussion of the place of political radicalism in the book
and in his interpretation of the “apotheosis of the... natural Madonna” at the end of the novel, he establishes beyond doubt that this is a form of fiction. Wherein human purpose is reflected in the will of nature and cannot be separated from a nature understood to be benevolent. In taking this view, and novel reflects what Rene Wellek calls the “great endeavour to overcome the split between subject and object the self and the world” and associates its vision unmistakably with that of romance—the nearest of all literary forms, as Northrop Frye explains, “to the wish-fulfilment dream,“.

Reflections of nature’s benevolence may be glimpsed also in other major episodes. In the famous chapter three, a tortoise makes an unheroic trek across a highway and unwittingly helps an oat seed to make the same trip. The brief scene presents a succession of random acts, at the conclusion of which the oat seed is planted. En route to the planting, language and imagery draw a moral about a life force that can and will work through all available means. The novel stages a parallel drama in Jim, Casy, who unwittingly carries a seed of thought and inspiration from Oklahoma to California. His Pelagian attitude toward human freedom germinates in California and becomes an intense belief in labor organization. When Jim Casy is killed, his belief takes root firmly in Tom Joad, who dedicates himself to union work. Tom’s life becomes the
product of the impulse carried from Oklahoma. In short, despite adversity, a promise has been fulfilled.

At a higher level of abstraction, a romance of ideas is expressed vividly when specific material conditions in the Oklahoma dust bowl of the 1930s and in the Great Depression set in motion changes in the Joads’ familiar relations. Pa Joad is emasculated; the Joad grandparents, painfully uprooted, withdraw and die; Ma Joad reluctantly becomes head of the family. These changes occur as the Joads, pushed off their land, are forced to re-examine the relationship between human needs and the right of private ownership. As the disintegrating family moves closer to California, its remaining members, especially Ma Joad, are forced to acknowledge ties with the entire “human” community that replace the predominantly familial bonds of the old life in Oklahoma. These material developments in turn, create the substance of Jim Casy’s and Tom Joad’s new awareness of social responsibility. At the end of this causal chain, Tom Joad—now awakened to economic needs—works to transform adverse conditions much like those that drove the Joads from Oklahoma in the first place. Here again, adversity is a disguised promise of benevolence that is one its way to fulfilment.
The same romantic tendency is expressed in what may seem an unlikely place. The novel elaborates specific ties between people and objects an expresses a definite attitude toward work. For example, on the Joads’ trip to California their car breaks down—its engine has “blown” a “con-rod.” In this elaborate sequence, after purchasing car parts in a wrecking yard, Tom Joad fixes the car with Al Joad’s and Jim Casy’s help. Steinbeck’s description of the final few steps shows an almost obsessional concern with accurate details:

Casy knelt down and took the flashlight. He kept the beam on the working hands as they patted the gasket gently in place and lined the holes with the pan bolts. The two men strained at the weight of the pan, caught the end bolts, and then set in the others; and when they were all engaged, Tom took them up little by little until the pan settled evenly in against the gasket, and he tightened hard against the nuts.

“I guess that’s her,” Tom said, he tightened the oil tap, looked carefully up at the pan, and took the light and searched the ground.

“There she is. Let’s get the oil back in her.”

They crawled out and poured the bucket of oil back in the crank case. Tom inspected the gasket for leaks.

“O.K., Al. Turn her over,” he said. (GW 363)
The emphasis of the scene falls on the characteristics of car parts and on the “true” process of fixing the engine—exactly as both might be described in nonfictional prose. Yet the apparent realism is in fact highly specialized, for implicit in the structure of the scene is an insistence that “objects” may signify a predetermined human purpose, Careful elaboration of the repair process directs the reader to affirm that a connecting rod means a connecting rod, a functioning part of an engine. A wrench means only a Wrench, and so on. That is, the clarity of this scene is produced by a one-to-one correspondence of “con-rod” (as signifier) and its purely functional meaning (as signified). The exclusive meaning of the scene, furthermore, is that the disabled car gets fixed by the three men.

The function of such “objects” in early twentieth-century novels indicates by contrast how truly unusual Steinbeck’s “object” realism is. In Theodore Dreiser’s Sister Carrie (1900), universally pronounced a highly realistic novel, objects bristle with economic, social, and moral significance. Carrie’s clothes, the rocking chair she sits in, the buildings she walks around, the machines she works at—all speak articulately of Carrie and her social and economic world. Objects in Dreiser—never mere things—have indeterminate social and economic implications. Likewise, in Henry James’s The Ambassadors (1903), objects become mysterious hieroglyphs: each balustrade,
Parisian street and landscape implies something about human relationships. In Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence* (1920), even the fold of a dress, the position of a platform on a beach, the facade of an apartment—all serve to indicate social placements. In virtually any sampling of American novels before 1939, physical objects signify the presence of complex fictional relationships.

Steinbeck’s car repair scene, on the other hand, like many other work scenes in *The Grapes of Wrath*, locks physical objects in a single position. The connecting rod does not signify a plurality of possible associations, and the dark crankcase oil has no associations at all except as engine lubricant. Associations different from these are abruptly foreclosed by the unusual militancy of the car repair process. Rather, the scene presents objects as non-functioning signifiers, broken meanings that assert a neutral resistance, one to be overcome and defined by the three men. By thus depicting objects so that they approximate a semblance of dull matter, with only their immediate use and function to define them, the scene presents a strictly mimetic vision of work as the transformation of material into usable goods. Objects in the scene create the neutral resistance of undone work, and the one-dimensional presentation of the scene shows men bringing meaning to the objects they
touch objects that speak only of clearly articulated human ends. By restricting the associations of physical objects in this way, Steinbeck creates a linguistic guarantee that work has a predetermined meaning and is a humanly purposeful activity; for in this scene human desire is projected in the relations of people and objects as clearly as the human form of “breasts, hips, (and) pelvis” is etched in the earth beneath Tom Joad’s feet. This depiction of human desire and of its sympathetic reception in the material world leads back along a circuitous route to what Northrop Frye shows to be the substance of a “wish-fulfilment dream”—an environment separate from human beings but receptive to their desires. Here work is the mysterious link between human beings and the environment, and the channel through which human desire is guaranteed a home in the world. The romance of work, as Steinbeck abundantly demonstrates, is reflected not only in the car repair scene but also in the grand scheme of the Joads’ quest. Their work, the novel premises, will pay off.

Like most current criticism, these analyze the book as a development of the epic and romance traditions. Like J. Paul Hunter earlier, Leonard Lutwack emphasizes the theme of “affirmation,” which he relates to the heroic affirmation of the Aeneid, “Of all Steinbeck’s heroes,” he remarks, “(Tom Joad) is the only one who affirms the possibility of a hero arising out of the
anonymity of twentieth-century economic strife and still bearing the signs of an ancient dedication,". In new essays of this period, Warren French and Peter Lisca reaffirm Lutwack’s view, anticipated indeed in their own earlier studies, which trace in the novel the struggles of a benevolent life force to endure and triumph. Also in this period Mary Ellen Caldwell elaborates Lisca’s work on the effectiveness of the interchapters.

The other three studies from this last period are less sympathetic. Horst Groene sees a reconciliation in the novel of industrial and agrarian forces that makes many of the conflicts in which the Joads traditionally are thought to be suffering unreal. Through Al Joad (Groene believes), increasingly an independent and attractive figure, Steinbeck has depicted the opening of a new “frontier of opportunity” in California (the Promised Land) and drained away some of the effect of the novel’s otherwise melancholy ending. Stuart L. Burns goes further and directly questions the legitimacy of the novel’s ending; he claims that a thin veneer of affirmation conceals “a logical and inexorable movement toward tragedy or pathos.” The novel’s ending in this view exemplifies American culture’s traditional inability to reconcile the self-reliant person with the needs and wishes of society. Burns asserts the vision of apparent reconciliation in the novel’s conclusions an inappropriate and dishonest effect of melodrama.
One last area of romance, little discussed in criticism so far, is specifically sexual. For example, in the novel’s last scene Rose of Sharon turns her young body into a cradle for an old man and appears to be serving the Human (not specifically familial) community to which Tom Joad is newly dedicated. In this pose she embodies the vitalism characteristic of Steinbeck’s sensibility throughout the novel and becomes a kind of nature spirit, a goddess. The last of the novel, the following paragraph shows her apotheosis into a figure of transcendence:

For a minute of Sharon sat still in the whispering barn. Then she hoisted her tired body up drew the comfort about her. She moved slowly to the corner and stood looking down at the wasted face, into the wide, frightened eyes. Then slowly she lay down beside him. He shook his head slowly from side to side. Rose of Sharon loosened one side of the blanket and bared her breast, “You got to,” said. She squirmed closer and pulled his head close.”There!” she said. “There.” Her hand moved behind his head and supported it. Her fingers moved gently in his hair. She looked up and across the barn, and her lips came together and smiled mysteriously.

(Ibid 476)
Central here—crystallized in the Mona Lisa smile—is the assertion in a highly romantic episode of the same idealized nature spirit as is present in Steinbeck’s Salinas sagas and in the whole of his fictional world whether the Oklahoma banks or the California unions. But human desire, transcending all barriers, cannot fail in this world. This last scene epitomizes the novelist’s faith in romantic sentiment, out of which comes all familial and social change, all political organizations, and all human activity. The historical dialectic may or not operate; unions may or may not change the quality of life; but the mysterious vitalism of Rose of Sharon remains indestructible.

Yet important as women are in The Grapes of Wrath, the serious work of social revolution is man’s work. Rose of Sharon and Ma Joad make possible survival and growth, but is the men finally who must build the new community. Tom Joad draws his inspiration from Ma Joad but then goes forth “as a man” to remake the world. At the end of the novel, he, not she, is transformed into a spirit of the labor movement (like Joe Hill), a kind of Pan who will be everywhere simultaneously to comfort and to aid all working people in their struggle to organize. Joan Hedrick examines the ideological implications of this romantic sexual mythology, drawing attention to a special intensity in the novel’s mother-son relationship. Hedrick sees the quasi-incestuous tie between Tom and Ma Joad as a model of the male-female as
well as political relations in the novel. Ultimately, the novel confirms rather than undercuts the bourgeois myths that support certain sexual relations. Further, the depiction of Tom Joad as a celibate son-lover suggests a deep rejection of the familial concepts. Hedrick’s insights in this area are useful, the more so because criticism has so far yielded no other significant analysis of female roles either in this novel or in Steinbeck’s other work.

Scholars have been slow to read this novel well, perhaps because on the surface at least— as is true of much popular, romantic fiction— it appears to offer few problems. The evocation of and quarrel with the past that distinguishes many twentieth-century novels are little evident in The Grapes of Wrath. Its form is not highly innovative by modernist standards. Rather, in open defiance of the mainstream of twentieth-century literature, it establishes its own unique ties to the Anglo-American tradition, and in this role— along with much fiction by Robert Penn Warren, William Styron, Saul Bellow, Chaim Potok, and others— makes part of a continuing romantic tradition, one strongly tied to the Gothic and popular romances of the nineteenth century.

The Grapes of Wrath was widely and favourably reviewed and its fidelity to fact discussed and debated in the popular press when it was first published. It has been praised by the left as a triumph of proletarian writing,
nominated by critics and reviewers alike as “The Great American Novel,”
given historical vindication by Senator Robert M. La Follette’s inquiries into
California’s tyrannical farm labor conditions, and validated by Carey
McWilliams, whose own great work, Factories in the Fields (1939), is the
classic sociological counterpart to Steinbeck’s novel. The Grapes of Wrath was
defended on several occasions by President and Eleanor Roosevelt for its
power, integrity, and accuracy. After inspecting California migrant camps in
1940, Mrs. Roosevelt said, “I have never thought The Grapes of Wrath was
exaggerated.” Steinbeck responded gratefully: “I have been called a liar so
constantly that...I wonder whether I may not have dreamed the things I saw
and heard.” But The Grapes of Wrath has also been attacked by academic
scholars as sentimental, unconvincing, and inartistic, banned repeatedly by
school boards and libraries for its rebellious theme and frank language, and
denounced by right-wing ministers, corporate farmers, and politicians as
communist, immoral, degrading, warped, and untruthful. Oklahoma
Congressman Lyle Boren, typical of the book’s early detractors, called it “a lie,
a black, infernal creation of a twisted, distorted mind.” A Jesuit priest, Arthur
D. Spearman, called it “an embodiment of the Marxist Soviet propaganda.”
The Associated Farmers mounted a smear campaign to discredit the book and
its author. Rebuttals, designed to whitewash the Okie situation, were published
by Frank J. Taylor and by Ruth Comfort Mitchell, Stainbeck’s Los Gatos neighbour.

The Grapes of Wrath has been steadily scrutinized, studied, interrogated, and analyzed by literary critics, scholars, historians, and creative writers. It is no exaggeration to say that, during the past half century, few American novels have attracted such passionate attacks and equally passionate defences. It seems hard to believe that critics have read the same book. Philip Rahv’s complaint in the Partisan Review that “the novel is far too didactic and long-winded,” and “fails on the test of craftsmanship” should be judged against Charles Angoff’s assessment in the North American Review that it is “momentous, monumental, and memorable,” and an example of the highest art. This dialectic still characterizes the novel’s critical reception. In a 1989 speech, the prominent cultural critic Leslie Fiedler attacked the novel as “maudlin, sentimental, and overblown”; another review a month later by Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist William Kennedy praised it for standing “tall.. a mighty, mighty book.”

The past fifty years have been little consensus about the exact nature of the novel’s achievement, though most contemporary analysts now treat the book as a legitimate work of fiction rather than a propagandistic tract. A s a
result, there is a great deal of deserving attention to Steinbeck’s art and technique. Whether Grapes is viewed through a social, historical, linguistic, formal, political, ecological, psychological, mythic, metaphysical, or religious lens, the books’ textual richness, its many layers of action, language, and character, continue to repay enormous dividends. As scholar John Ditsky observed, “the Joads are still in motion, and their vehicle with them.” Intellectual theories to the contrary, reading remains a subjective act, and perhaps the only sure thing about The Grapes of Wrath is its capacity to elicit powerful responses from its audience. This was Steinbeck’s intention from the first. “I don’t think The Grapes of Wrath is obscure in what it tries to say,” he claimed in 1955. “Its structure is very carefully worked out... Just read it, don’t count it”.

As a result of shifting political emphases, the enlightened recommendations of the La Follette Committee i.e. the National Labor Relations Act include farm workers, the effects of loosened labor laws California’s discriminatory “anti-migrant” law, established in 1901, was struck down by the Supreme Court in 1941, the creation of compulsory military service, and the inevitable recruitment of migrant families into defense plant and shipyard jobs caused by the booming economy of World War II that signalled the beginning of their successful assimilation, California growers
soon complained of an acute shortage of seasonal labor, the particular set of epochal conditions that crystallized Steinbeck’s awareness in the first place passed from his view. Like other momentous American novels that embody the bitter, often tragic, transition from one way of life to another, The Grapes of Wrath possessed, among its other attributes, perfect timing. Its appearance permanently altered the literary geography of the United States.

It also changed Steinbeck permanently. The effects of writing 260000 words in a single year “finished” him, he told Lawrence Clark Powell on January 24, 1939. After his long siege with the “Matter of the Migrants”, his will to death was so strengthened that by the end of the decade he was sick of writing fiction. It was a decision many critics and reviewers held against him for the rest of his life; they wanted him to write The Grapes of Wrath over and over again, which he refused to do. “The process of writing a book is the process of outgrowing it,” he told Herbert Sturz. “Disciplinary criticism comes too late. You are not going to write that one again any way. When you start another-the horizons have receded and you are just as cold and frightened as you were with the first one.”

In a nutshell, this introduction is design to provide social background of the novel, biographical feature and faculty of mind of the novelist notably
revealed and elucidated in a number of his novels and novels in general and The Grapes of Wrath in particular. His clairvoyance to penetrate deeper into the social layers of haves and have nots with sincere endeavour to propound a theory of revolution by mobilizing critical platform to demand for equitable social order. Besides, this introductory chapter has embodied critical phenomena of the America 1940’s with its crucial impact and cultivation of particular form and style of his writing suited to proletariat section with a piece of powerful writing through his mighty pen.
References:


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