CHAPTER - III

CRITICAL ESTIMATE OF ETHOS, EMPATHY AND VISION
WOVEN INTO THE TEXTURE OF THE GRAPES OF WARTH

True to visionary writer, The Grapes of Wrath at once evoked vitriolic criticism from the critics close to capitalist and favourable appreciation against the backdrop of cultural ethos and economic depression hitting the working classes hard in social order tilted in favour of bourgeois class. It aims at exploring the contemporary novels and documents with an intent to discover a pattern governing the relation between workers and capitalist with sincere endeavour to look for solution of socio-economic inequality among the people.

Here he reveals the role and ethos of a writer/persona/seer who not only holds the mirror reflecting the social, spiritual, and economic woes of the present but also sees into the future and prophetically warns against “what may come” if there is no reform, no redemption, no reconciliation, no restoration of the humane and human ties that have been hastily, brutally severed.

John Steinbeck defends the artistic merit of the final tableau in The Grapes of Wrath, in a letter to his editor, Pascal Covici, on January 16, 1939, a scene in which Rose of Sharon-her baby dead, placed in an apple box by uncle John, and sent down stream as a mute testimony to tell the tragic story of
dispossession-nurses a starving old man in a deserted barn. In the process he sets forth his intentionality not only in thus ending The Grapes of Wrath as some critics complain, inconclusively, but also in creating a story with the affective power “to rip a reader’s nerves to rags.” Concerning the reader, Steinbeck further asserts: “I don’t want him satisfied”. Refusing to change this ending, he insists that the “design and balance” are there and that readers must discover the implied climax for themselves:

The reader must bring the implication to it. If he does not, it was not a book for him to read. Throughout I have tried to make the reader participate in the actuality, what he takes from it will be scaled entirely on his 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. (Robert Wallsten 178-79)

By implication at least, this letter takes into consideration, delineates and prescribes the relationship among writer, critic, text and the literary and social context.

Steinbeck himself models the behaviour of the writer as the creator of the fictional world, as one who must maintain artistic integrity if the work is to be well envisioned, well grounded, and well made. On this ground of integrity,
then, when Pascal Covici objects to such an “abrupt” ending, suggesting that “the incident needs leading up to, so that the meeting with the starving man is not so much an accident or chance encounter, but more an integral part of the saga,” Steinbeck insists that he cannot change this ending: “To built this stranger into the structure of the book would be to warp the whole meaning of the book”. (Ibid 177-78)

His concern for meaning here is classical; importing from Aristotle the persuasion that poetry is truer than history deals in facts whereas the poetic arts deal in universals. Integrity demands, therefore, that the text remain “true” to the artistic vision of the human condition- with the ultimate purpose that the reader “participates in the actuality”.

Steinbeck’s role is at once idealistic and pragmatic, and it places him squarely in a persona of the bardic tradition in his relationship to text and reader. In this role he is the one who sees and understands the heritage of the past- both good and bad- the turmoil of the present, the bleak hope for a better future. His voice is that of a Merlin who tries to advice and adolescent Arthur, here an Every American, whose dream of and search for Camelot/Eden/Paradise is now tarnished and forever flawed.
As Merlin is to Arthur, then so Steinbeck is peering over shoulders in the interchapters, guiding responses, assuring an empathic, participatory involvement with “the actuality.” He states bluntly and a bit gruffly of the reader who does not want to participate: “It wasn’t a book for him to read.” In this Merlin-like role, too, he is part companion or fellow-traveller; part guide, or authority figure; part prophet/bard/preacher. And this bardic persona is very much present in GW, his ethos permeating and pervading, especially in the interchapter but also, on occasion, in his characters, one of them so real and so much an alter ego that, as Robert DeMott points out, “he imagined that Tim Joad actually entered the novelist’s work space, the private chamber of his room: ‘Tom! Tom! Tom!’ I know. It wasn’t him. Yes, I think I can go on now. In fact, I feel stronger. Much stronger. Funny where the energy comes from. Now to work, only no it isn’t work anymore;’ he recorded in his journal on 20 October. (John Steinbeck 186)

Steinbeck is himself a participant, held by the evocative power of this own story. He is compelled to tell it and intends to compel the reader to hear and understand it not only with the intellect but with the heart as well. Perhaps it is the bard-like voice or the closeness and intimacy of this writer/reader/test hug dance that has led some critics to label and to dismiss this novel on the basis of sentimentality—a most damaging, even though undeserving, assessment,
especially in the view of the coolly detached American critic who may not wish to be drawn into a story in which a strong empathic involvement is demanded as essential to the right reading. Steinbeck has provided critics and readers with both the literary ingredients that are in his novel and those that are not there. Some of these points may overlap, but it is instructive to consider each, beginning with those characteristics of GW that are either explicit or implicit:

- The Grapes of Wrath has a “Casual” ending that Steinbeck maintains he “cannot change.”
- If there is a symbol in the final tableau, “it is a survival symbol, not a love symbol.”
- The ending must have “an accident” and “a stranger,” and “it must be quick.”
- It has a “meaning” that would be warped if the stranger were not built into the structure.
- The “emphasis” is on “the fact that the Joads don’t know him, don’t care about him, and have no ties to him.”
- It has the “design and balance” that Steinbeck intends for it to have.
• “Every incident has been... carefully chosen and its weight judged and fitted.”

• It has a strong empathic element, designed to leave the reader dissatisfied, “to rip...nerve to rags.”

• It is written “the way lives are being lives.”

• “A strong deep climax” is there by “implications only.”

• The reader is integral to the text and “must bring the implication to it.”

• “The reader must participate in the actuality.”

• Further, this book is entrenched in this “actuality.” For it foreshadows a larger social context than the plight of dispossessed “Okies” in California in 1939 and the inexorable forces against which they have no weapons – setting forth also a long-range concern for the American psyche and its penchant for greed and materialism.

• What readers discover will depend on their “own depth or hollowness.”

• It has “five layers.” A reader will not “find more than he has in himself.”

• And to underscore and emphasize his strong sense of purpose and design, Steinbeck has provided as well the ingredients that are not present in GW because they neither fit into its “design” nor contribute to its “balance”:

• “There is no fruity climax.”
• The climax “is not more important than any other part of the book.”
• The stranger cannot be built into the book’s structure.
• “The giving of the breast has not more sentiment than the giving of a piece of bread.”
• The story is not “new” because “there are no new stories.”
• It is not intended to be “a satisfying story.”
• It is not written “the way books are written.”
• It does not have the usual “strong deep climax.”
• The test is not autonomous, standing alone in the making of meaning.

“Steinbeck has seen clearly, felt intensely, and written passionately. As a result, the reader is absorbed, shakes, and convinced.”—Charles Lee in a 1939 review for The Boston Herald

“Steinbeck’s participatory, aesthetic, based on a circle of complicity which linked ‘the trinity’ of writer, text, and reader to ensure maximum affective impact, helps explain the book’s runaway popularity—each reader had a stake in it, each reader feels somehow that the book belongs to him or her.”—Robert Demott in his 1996 Steinbeck’s Typewriter.

In “Suggestions for an Interview with Joseph Henry Jackson,” a journalist of the San Francisco Chronicle, Steinbeck provides a paradigm for a
professional relationship between writer and critic, one that centres on the text. His suggested questions for an interview, therefore, involve thematic issues; human concerns for “comfort,” “Security,” and relationships; the evolution of American literature; and “the material the writer deals in.” Steinbeck’s own “materials” include his admiration of “the struggling poor,” especially the migrants of his day (Lisca, Hearle 541).

Although Steinbeck’s statement of his purpose in writing The Grapes of Wrath and this paradigm of his view of the relationship among writer, critic, and text were not available for earlier reviewers and critics, they nevertheless provide a convenient means of discussing this relationship and considering the critical response across time to the artistic merits of The Grapes of Wrath.

In “Editors’ Introduction: The Pattern of Criticism” in their 1997 “The Grapes of Wrath”. Test and Criticism, editors Peter Lisca and Kevin Hearle point out that “one of the most striking aspects of critical writing about The Grapes of Wrath in its first fifteen years was its assertive nature,” that “there was little analysis or detailed explication” (GM 548). This very assertiveness, however, frequently lends itself to an analysis of another kind—not textual, but one that reveals reviewers and critics responding to The Grapes of Wrath in the
light of its affective powers, that is, more in the light of what it does rather than what it is.

Charles Lee writes two 1939 reviews of GW for The Boston Herald, one is April and the other in June. The titles of both assert the novel’s dramatic impact: “The Grapes of Wrath: The Tragedy of the American Sharecropper” and “The Grapes of Wrath” Tops Year’s Tales in Heart and Art, “both of which attest to the novel’s persuasive power to draw a reader, even though unwillingly, into the story:

The ordinary reader, like myself... cannot help believing that things must be as Steinbeck has painted them. The fact that he does not want to believe and does demonstrates the emotional power of the book. Steinbeck has seen clearly, felt intensely, written passionately. As a result, the reader is absorbed, shaken and convinced.(MA 7)

There is here a strong sense not only of the reader’s compelled involvement with the text but also of the pervading ethos of the persona, the authoritative narrator, who does not permit readers “to miss the point. It is sledged home in...burst of indignation, hymns almost, of hate against those ‘who own the things people must have.’” (7) Recognising the involvement of
Every American in this novel, Lee hopes that the story will be read by “every congress man...and everybody in America who loves his country and fellowmen”. And in June he again reminds readers that “Steinbeck’s novel is one of the few perfectly articulated soarings of genius of which American literature can boast”. (9)

The 1939 Greensboro reviewer, Fritz Raley Simmons, writes of The Grapes of Wrath and of Steinbeck similarly in accolades and superlatives, with the assertiveness and lack of analytical explications that Lisca has pointed out:

• “It is terrific writing that makes one think and think hard.”
• “It is a vivid, living story.”
• “There is no doubt left that John Steinbeck is one of the ablest if not the ablest writer on the present scene.”
• “His characterizations are superb.”
• “There is majesty in the alternate chapters of this book.”

In a sense, these accolades do, however, analyse an aspect of The Grapes of Wrath that matters a great deal to Steinbeck—the interaction between reader and text. This particular reader/reviewer has not only thought “hard” about this story, but he has also entered into its pages, participated in its story, and come away with something “vivid” and “living.” And when Simmons compares his
initial reading of The Grapes of Wrath to listening to a sonata, he approaches an analysis of its affective domain, by analogy making the abstract experience more concrete:

When we started reading the book somebody was playing piano sonata over the radio. We couldn’t identify the music, but the soft, insistent notes kept falling into the pool of silence with a cumulative effect that built up into a climax that was as powerful as it was subdued. And that is the first chapter of “Grapes of Wrath.” Is it a sonata in a minor key. It gets you. (6)

Like Lee and Simmons, other 1939 reviewers attest to the novel’s evocative power. John Selby, for instance, maintains that “the reader is lifted into the stream which flows from the author, and goes with it gladly. This is not novel reading, but experience at living, and details do not matter.” (FL 10)

“The American’s Book Shelf” in Waterbury American also attests that The Grapes of Wrath “is a powerful voice rising against injustice and will leave a burning memory. And David H. Appel in “Books” for the Cleveland News declares that “there are moments of tenderness, pathos and even harshness that are done with such burning intensity that one is left breathless in the wake of such power. Although these one is left offer “little analysis or
detailed explication “that centers on the text itself, therefore, they do offer a
glimpse of the process of the readers’ own “education of the heart,” to borrow
French’s depiction of the Joads’ experience.

As Lisca maintains, the novel in negative terms are also assertive in
nature. Describing it as “amorphous in construction, loose in style and
nauseating in matter” and condemning it as “a prolonged scream from page 1
to page 619,” in “The Book of the Day” Bartlett Randolph to illustrate, writes
that “the reader finds himself in the position of the bird hypnotized by the
snake—he hates it but he cannot tear himself away from it. Perhaps the most
damaging criticisms of the novel are by those who find fault with its structure
and characterization; assessments not well supported but, on occasion,
delivered with a vehemence that reveals more about the emotional response of
the critic that the aesthetic value of the text, For instance in his April 17
review, “But... Not... Ferdinand,” Newsweek’s Rascoe Burton declares that
“the book has beautiful and even magnificent passages in it; but it is not
organized—an assessment he amends on May 1, to castigate GW more fully as
“silly propaganda, superficial observation, careless infidelity to the proper use
of idiom, tasteless pornographical and scatological talk” and to apologize to his
readers “for hedging too much about a bad book”.

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Henry Thornton Moore’s 1939 book, The Novels of John Steinbeck: A First Study is more impressionistic than substantive. Moore complains about a lack of organic unity in its structure, a “lack of force in the center of the story,” a lack of “proportioned and intensified drama, “and of vital conflict” (68-69). “No conflict is created,” Moore states, “because these trampled people don’t fight back”. Thus guided by his own expectations for a rousing good story line, looking for a satisfactory “rounding off,” or a resolution of “the issues that have been raised,” he finds the ending too quiet. But Moore reveals more about his own means of measuring literary merit than he does about GW itself.

The long study of Steinbeck’s novels, Moore begins to grasp what Toni Morrison calls “unspeakable thing unspoken” as he sees a national psyche beginning to unfold: “The incidents seems...part of a vast mythos” (68). And when he describes the impact of the scene in which Tom encounter a one-eyed man, he affirms the affective impact of GW: “The whole scene floats in the mind like a piece of an epic” (71). Further, in grappling “with meanings that may be partly understood in terms of his previous tendencies.” Moore perceives also that in this novel “there are new beginnings which may lead to future developments” by this writer who is becoming “the poet of our disposed”.
In all of these 1939 views of GW, Steinbeck achieves a vital part of his intentions whether the assessment is negative or positive, each critic has in a sense been involved with the actuality—some of them “absorbed, shaken and convinced” and others trapped, as though “hypnotized”, unable to “tear... away from it.” In 194, Frederic I. Carpenter in “The Philosophical Joads” also acknowledges the narrative power of the book and the vivid reality of its characters (563). He does not dwell on its affective powers but offers a “theory of art” by which to evaluate GW against the backdrop of great writers of American history. He defines art as a moving picture that offers a criticism of life and a clearly suggested... abstract idea of life- a world view(563).

Carpenter observes that GW goes beyond the dark Calvinist world view of sin and evil, “the revolt of ‘natural individual’ against ‘civilization’” and the denunciations of “the narrow conventions of society...to preach a positive philosophy of life and to damn that blind conservatism which fears ideas” (563). In this depiction, he moves away from what GW does carefully positioning it against a theory of art and against a backdrop of the works of Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, Sinclair Lewis, and Emerson. In going beyond these other world views with their themes of sin, or corruption, or individualism, or transcendental mysticism, GW strikes out into new territory with a more positive, optimistic tone of voice that unites “the mystical
transcendental of Emerson,...the...democracy of Whitman, and the pragmatic instrumentalism of William James and John Dewey”(Lisca/Hearle 563). In as much as this novel “preaches ... and develops a new kind of Christianity... earthly and active,” (571) it places Steinbeck’s persona in its Merlin-like, prophetic role with the implied obligation to act on it. Even though Carpenter has engaged The Grapes of Wrath on an intellectual as well as affective level and has thus given a new dimension to its criticism.

In 1947, Chester E. Eisinger’s “Jeffersonian Agrarianism in The Grapes of Wrath”26 expands Carpenter’s thesis that Steinbeck’s ideas are essentially American- an amalgam of transcendental, democratic and pragmatic philosophies- to include “Jeffersonian agrarianism”. While Eisinger too discusses his thesis and GW analytically and persuasively, he too enters into its affective domain, going beyond Carpenter too speak in the first person, as a representative American preaching that “new kind of Christianity” that Carpenter suggests: “We must seek another road to the independence and security and dignity that we expect from democracy”(154).

In his 1949” John Steinbeck: naturalism’s Priest,”Woodburn R. Ross looks beyond the art to its creator and his personal in the test. Ross surveys the role of an empathic, paradoxical Steinbeck persona who is actively, intuitively,
and emotionally involved in “the world” of his text and analyzes this pervading ethos: “Steinbeck...is both rational and irrational: he accepts all that reason can tell him and permits his intuition and affections to add what they will to the world created by reason and to determine his position toward the universe as it then appears”. Ross recognizes the mythical and the mystical in the text, and, hence, the “message” of the text, and also the persona’s priestly relationship with readers/critics, who take the layman’s place as the Every American.

George F. Whicher’s discussion of Steinbeck in “Proletarian Leanings” in Arthur Hobson Quinn’s 1951 The Literature of the American People: An Historical and Critical Survey, to illustrate, up to a point reads like a gathering of accolades: “In Ma Joad we encounter one of the great authentic people of fiction... There is brilliant writing in The Grapes of Wrath, memorable description, episodes of moving power, forceful expression of social justice” (960). What whichever gives with one hand, however, with the other he takes away with vehemence. Of the characters other than Ma Joad, he writes, “The rest are puppets with differentiating traits.” And in his conclusions concerning the novel’s merits, he writes: “Yet on reflection the final impression... is not of the author’s indignation so much as his cleverness as a contriver of effects...The reader can hardly avoid feeling let down”. (960) The uneasiness, even depression that Whicher reveals here attests to the fulfilment of
Steinbeck’s desire to leave the reader dissatisfied. But his “final impression” also serves to negate his overall appraisal, leaving in Limbo the questions of design, balance, artistic merit—a negation which some more recent critics also use.

The Powerful affective domain of The Grapes of Wrath only partially gives way over time to more analytical approaches that center on the novel as art. But this empathic aspect is intentionally a part of the novel’s “design,” it is considered alongside Steinbeck’s careful “design and balance” in its more formal aspects of structure, characterization, and language. In 1957, to illustrate, Lisca’s “The Grapes of Wrath as Fiction” addresses characterization, style, and structure. As an aside, he also discusses “The characters are so absorbed into the novel’s basic situation that goes beyond sympathy for individuals to moral indignation about their social condition. This is precisely Steinbeck’s intentions” (Lisca/Hearle 578). In his conclusion, Lisca again melds analytical concerns “Steinbeck’s art encompasses but transcends its “materials,” creating “a well-made and emotionally compelling novel out of materials which in most other hands have resulted in sentimental propaganda”(587).
Similarly, one of the points of comparison between Steinbeck and Hemingway in Lisca’s 1969 “Steinbeck and Hemingway: Suggestions for a comparative study is that “both writers are notable for the depth of esthetic feeling touched by this Nature and their great ability to express it”. Here by implication, one of the criteria by which art may be judged is the power of the “esthetic” to generate emotion and “feeling,” to involve the mind and the heart so that they coalesce in that admiration similar to the Romantic concept of the sublime.

Interestingly, in his 1963 John Steinbeck: An Introduction and Interpretation, Joseph Fontenrose concludes with a literal survey of events that takes up where GW ends, with Hitler’s invasion of Poland and the resulting jobs or military roles for “Okies and Arkies...(who) found houses to live in, settled down, and remained employed when the war was over.” He points out, that “Mexicans and Orientals once more harvested California’s crops, and ‘wetbacks‘ became a problem.” Then Fontenrose moves from depicting the status quo to an emotional involvement with his report as he notes that “disquieting reports have been coming from the fields: “more Americans are now employed in migratory farm labour than a few years ago, pay is low, and conditions are bad. Perhaps the story has not ended yet” (83). It is again left dissatisfied and disquieted because of a novel that seems to have no end that
has mythic roots that burrow deeply into the very fiber of the national psyche-a curious, oxymoronic mixture of greed and fortitude, of prejudice and brotherhood/sisterhood, of hatred and redeeming love, liberty and oppression.

Such positive, heartfelt participation in GW, however, is not always the case even with the distancing of time. For some critics are still so passionate in their denial of the merits of GW that Lisca dubs their responses “hysterical”. William Fuller Taylor’s 1959 “The Grapes of Wrath” Reconsidered,” is particularly vitriolic in its dismissal not only of Steinbeck, but also who have written studies of Christian symbolism and traditional American thought in The Grapes of Wrath.

Harold Bloom’s introduction to the 1988 Modern Critical Interpretations: John Steinbeck’s “The Grapes of Wrath” disparages Steinbeck scholars as well as Steinbeck’s work labelling them “liberal middlebrows, both in this country and abroad. He finds it “a very problematic work, and very difficult to judge.” He does not hesitate to judge, and very harshly- maintaining that Steinbeck “aspired beyond his aesthetic means” and that “he fell into bathos in everything he wrote”(4).

Similarly, Leslie 1990 “Looking Back after Fifty Years” in San Jose Studies echoes Bloom as he labels Steinbeck critics as “second-rank academics
whose ‘subject’ is Steinbeck” and The Grapes of Wrath itself as “middlebrow,” a term he reiterates and underscores in a conclusion that at once declares its ending as “blessedly out of control” and as an “archetypal scene”:

Mysterious”... a confession on Steinbeck’s part... that he does not understand where his story, here blessedly out of control, has taken him. Redeem at the last possible moment the inert stereotypes, the easy pathos, the ersatz transcendentalism, and the doctrinaire optimism which elsewhere flaw this problematical, middlebrow book. (GW 60-61)

In the preface to Agnes McNeil Donohue’s 1968 A Casebook on “The Grapes of Wrath,” she also acknowledges GW’s emotional pull: Reactions to the novel at the time it was published (1939) and now are rarely temperate”. Like Lisca, she recognizes its evocative power and the continuing “assertive” nature of the critical response to GW, especially in regards to its standing as art. Impressionistic “reactions,” then, often govern the critical assessments of the novel’s aesthetic and canonical standing.

In the preface to the 1969 edition of Steinbeck and His Critics: A Record of Twenty-five Years, E.W. Tedlock, Jr. Wrestles finding himself left “with a feeling of pathos and, perhaps one insight”. In both of these responses the
cognitive, intellectual faculty is left on hold. In the “feeling of pathos,” he draws on what has recently been discusses as “emotional intelligence”: “Our times have no patience with good intentions or old-fashioned positions. The new perspectives being forced upon us may bring moral advances, but revolution is destructive of art, which requires a special love and tolerance.”

John H. Timmerman’s 1989 “The Squatter’s Circle in The Grapes of Wrath” exemplifies a close reading of a text that is at once analytical and participatory. Timmerman enters into the story, experiencing, feeling with the Joads in their distress. Pa Joad must have felt as he becomes more and more helpless, gradually relinquishing authority to Ma:

In the California camp, the collection of men remains simply that: a collection. No cohesive unity cements their spirits together. The disruption in the Joad family is poignantly encapsulated in one sharp portrait where Ma fries potatoes over a hissing fire and “Pa Sat nearby hugging his knees” almost as if Pa, in a degraded stance of the Squatters’ posture, clings futilely to a position now much diminished. (Ibid 208)
Steinbeck’s underlying design in depicting changes in traditional male-female roles, it reveals as well quite “poignantly” and plaintively Pa’s suffering and his increasing helplessness.

Studs Terkel’s 1989 “We Still See Their Faces” the introduction to Viking’s 1989 anniversary publication of GW acknowledges Steinbeck’s bardic, prophetic persona, pointing out that he was “driven” by “an almost messianic urgency” in telling this story of his “people.” Terkel recognizes as well the two-fold nature of this persona: an authoritative, “messianic” figure who is at the same time a “constant companion”.

Robert Murray Davis’s 1990 “The World of John Steinbeck’s Joads” (in this volume) takes a leisurely tour of Joad country in and around Sallisaw, Oklahoma, in a documentary meditation on the verisimilitude of Steinbeck’s portrayal of the land and the efficacy of a more poetic portrayal that builds “characters and their world from the inside out.” He concludes with a humanistic reflection that lauds the empathic power of The Grapes of Wrath:

Steinbeck understood and presented extraordinarily well certain kinds of process, from the way a good mechanic fixes a car to the way a people adapt physically and socially to new situations. That makes almost all of his novels unusually readable paragraph by
paragraph. More important, he could show the kinetic satisfaction and the cultural and spiritual value inherent in process, building characters and their world from the inside out. From the first, his novels also dealt with the necessity of human beings to adapt in order to survive. Because The Grapes of Wrath does so most thoroughly and tellingly, readers all over the world have a clearer feeling not just for what it means to be an Oklahoman but for what it means to be human. (Ibid 404)

Stephen Railton’s 1990 “Pilgrim’s Politics: Steinbeck’s Art of Conversion” compares GW to John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress—another text in which “homelessness and suffering become the occasion of spiritual growth”. Railton recognizes the Steinbeck persona’s bardic role and argues convincingly that “The Grapes of Wrath” is a novel about conversion” and that “thematicaly Route 66 and the various state highways in California that the Joads travel along all run parallel to the road to Damascus that Saul takes in Acts, or to the Way taken by Bunyan’t Christian in Pilgrims’s Progress”. Steinbeck’s method of achieving the affective impact essential to the novel’s message is to structure it “as a series of inevitabilities... Again and again what will happen next is made narratively inescapable.” As a result,” the narrative enacts its own kind of oppression, it words strategically to arouse us toward
action to change the status quo” (32). Railton, then, goes beyond the discussion of what Steinbeck does— that is, his empathic design “to rip a reader’s nerves to rags”— to show what the novel is and how he uses the classic rhetorical concept of necessity to achieve his intentions.

Robert DeMott’s 1996 “This Book Is My Life: Creating The Grapes of Wrath” in Steinbeck’s Typewriter: Essays on His Art reveals the extent of Steinbeck’s involvement with the text and also the source of his bardic, prophetic persona. DeMott suggests that the “creative, interior, or architectual level of engagement is the elusive and heretofore unacknowledged fifth layer of Steinbeck’s novel” (183). Steinbeck’s own “internal bruise,” DeMott maintains, “opened the floodgates of his affection, created The Grapes of Wrath compelling justification, provided its haunting spiritual urgency, and rooted it in the deepest wellsprings of democratic fellow-feeling” (185). As a result of Steinbeck’s own empathic wounding, his suffering with the dispossessed and impoverished, he creates a persona from this combination of the empathic, spiritual, and fraternal. There is something that borders on the sacramental here, for as DeMott suggests, the Steinbeck persona himself interacts and mediates between text and reader—going beyond the usual relationship among author, text, and reader to enter into the text itself not only
as its creator but also as a participant, not unlike the role of Christ at the Last Supper, or the first communion.

“He has gone farther than any other American writer towards being the poet of our dispossessed.”

Harry Thornton Moore in his 1939 The Novels of John Steinbeck: A First Study

Is the Grapes of Wrath a popular but inferior novel, or is it truly a work of art, a great books?”

Agnes McNeill Donohue in her 1968 A Casebook on “The Grapes of Wrath”

“The dance of an open mind when it engages another equally open on … occurs most naturally, most often in the reading/writing world we live in”

Toni Morrison in The Dancing Mind
On 6 November 1996, in her acceptance speech for the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, Toni Morrison speaks of a “Peace” that results from “the dance of an open mind naturally, most often in the reading/writing world we live in” (7). As Lisca attests, in its “first fifteen years there appeared in literary journals fewer than half a dozen essays devoted to a critical analysis of The Grapes of Wrath” (Lisca/Hearle 548)—certainly a dearth of that dancing of open minds around the topic of The Grapes of Wrath and its artistic merit or lack thereof. Ironically, this dearth may result from the fulfilment of the author’s intention to engage readers and critics empathically, an engagement that is essential to understanding but one that can backfire when a reader or critic does not want to be drawn into the story as a participant, wishing to remain coolly, aloofly objective. Since, as Lisca points out, “the current standing of a piece of literature is indicated to a large extent by its ability to sustain a dialogue among critics”—or to engage in what Morrison calls the “dance” of “open minds”—both the scantiness of early criticism of GW and the extent of negative criticism has served on occasion to bring into question its standing as a work of art despite its continuing popular appeal (547).

This question of the aesthetic standing of GW, therefore, has become a critical commonplace. Donahue’s 1968 on GW, poses the question of its merit,
issuing an invitation to students and readers to formulate their own “criteria for a great book” and to subject The Grapes of Wrath to their own “critical scrutiny”. To an extent at least, those works that address this question of the novel’s standing as a work of art do so by setting forth either a theory or a direct or implied definition of literary art by which to measure. When accompanied by a close an empathic reading, such theoretical approaches have served across time to elevate its reputations, if not Steinbeck’s among academicians and critics.

In Chapter six of Joseph Pontenrose’s 1963 “The Grapes of Wrath” in John Steinbeck: An Introduction and Interpretations, he studies the aesthetics of Steinbeck’s style, by implication at least, in the light of the standard of decorum in classical rhetoric, that is, that the style be suited and fitted to the content and declares that “some of these interchapters are masterpieces in themselves”(69). He notes the synaesthesia result of Steinbeck’s skill in creating an occasion that at once serves to evoke imagery, tone, and ethos, all working together do draw the reader into the experience by participating in “a feeling tone”: As Lisca has pointed out, Steinbeck uses a variety of prose styles in these interchapter. In these short sketches he could experiment, endeavouring in each to evoke both a vivid picture of something that happened and a feeling tone”(60).
In addition to this classical measure of decorum, Fontenrose further discusses the Steinbeck style in the light of “the Psalms of Whitman or perhaps Sandburg,” by such comparison placing him in the ranks of poets any mystics. Demonstrating as well a participation in that critical milieu that Lisca describes as a sustained “critical dialogue” and that Morrison, more poetically, calls the “dancing of open minds,” Fontenrose cites and expands of previous discussions of “the mythical side” of GW and finds that “the biological and mythical strands fit... neatly together... Each theme—organismic, ecological, mythical; and each phase of the mythical: Exodus, Messiah, Leviathan, ritual sequence—builds up to a single conclusion: the unity of all mankind”(82).

Collin G. Matton’s 1970 “Water Imagery and the Conclusion to The Grapes of Wrath” goes into the realm of archetype and myth, by implication placing Steinbeck among those writers who not only work in the realm of known myth but who also themselves become a part of the myth making. He examines “the water and flood archetype.. to open a new interpretation to the conclusion of the novel”: “No longer associated with destruction, the water image becomes a symbol of birth and regeneration, the water image becomes a symbol of birth and regeneration...Steinbeck extends the regenerative pattern from man’s creations to Gods’ creation, Nature”(44, 47).
Chapter 4, “The Fully Matured Art: The Grapes of Wrath” in Howard Levant’s 1974 The Novels of John Steinbeck: A Critical Study views GW as “an attempted prose epic, a summation of national experience at a given time” (93). Discussing “the relationship of the novel’s structure to its materials,” Levant states that Steinbeck’s “Central artistic problem is to present the universal and epical in terms of the individual and particular” (95, 98). On this basis he finds the first three quarters of the novel “masterful”, the last quarter less effective, primarily because he believes that Steinbeck finally reduces his materials to allegory. But Levant does not consider whether the last quarter of the novel descents into “the overwhelming artificiality that results from extreme dependence on allegory” (129) or whether the “individual and particular” in the last quarter of the novel ascent into the mythic and universal, an appropriate ending for “an attempted prose epic.”

In a return to what Lisca has called the assertive and hysterical in criticism, in his 1977 “Flat Wine from The Grapes of Wrath,” Floyd C. Searches through GW in search of factual inaccuracies, questioning the cultural veracity of the presentation of its characters and the accuracy of Steinbeck’s depiction of everything from flora and fauna to the price of cotton. Not content to stop with treating fictional work of art as though it were an
encyclopaedia or a dictionary, he maintains further that in GW Steinbeck “belittles” Christians and Christianity.

In contrast, Robert J. Griffin and William A. Freeman in their 1963 “Machines and Animals: Pervasive Motifs in The Grapes of Wrath” study Steinbeck’s use of the recurring and crucially important motifs of machines and animas which contribute considerably to structure and thematic content. This discussion can,” they hope, “contribute to a fuller understanding of Steinbeck’s novel as a consummate complex work of art”. Evidently, as the Watkins, Griffin and Freeman studies illustrate, conclusion concerning GW’s aesthetic merit, or lack thereof, are to an extent dependent upon the critic’s intentions and the efficacy of the chosen artistic measure.

Ray Lewis White regards his 1983 “The Grapes of Wrath and the Critics of 1939” as “essential to all students of John Steinbeck, of American fiction, and of enumerative bibliography”(135). White has documented, annotated, and arranged in chronological order” 108 America reviews...from 1939.” These “annotations,” he explains, “are actually quotations from the reviews- the seminal paragraphs of evaluation and judgment –here longer than most such excerpts because the debate about The Grapes of Wrath elicited extensive commentary”. This gathering of the diverse voices of the 1939 reviewers is a
valuable addition to the scholarly paraphernalia of GW, providing a means by which to “find and measure the genesis, growth, and decline of authors’ reputations amid the intellectual and social corrects of their times”. Although White suggests here a “decline” in Steinbeck’s reputation, Roy Simmonds, foresees a different outcome: “His work will date neither as rapidly nor with such finality as the work of some of his more stylistically daring and currently more highly regarded contemporaries.”

George Henderson’s 1989 “Steinbeck’s Spatial Imagination in The Grapes of Wrath: A Critical Essay” enters into that dance of minds wherein the criticism itself becomes an extension of as well as a response to the novelist’s art. A graduate student in the doctoral program in geography at the University of California at Berkeley, Henderson writes an intriguing and persuasive cross-disciplinary discussion, acknowledging that GW did fulfil a role as a regionalist and social realist interpretive text" but maintaining that “nonetheless, more can be asked of it”(212) . This “more” as it is approached in this essay takes GW out of the realm of social documentation into the realm of art. Reading from the perspective of his discipline, he finds that Steinbeck sets up “a problem... of that recurrent human condition ... that ... is shaped by historical and social contingencies” in which these contingencies work together so that” it is from social and geographical relationships that meaning
radiates, rather than from an individual character or action” (212). Along with his insightful view of “how meaning is produced, controlled, and disseminated with regard to social and workaday space,” Henderson provides valuable interpretations of character couched in memorable prose. “Ma Joad,” for example, “rose from the ashes of a burnt-out household, the vehicle for Steinbeck to expose the pitfalls of patriarchy” (221).

In their “Dialogic Structure and Levels of Discourse in Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath,” Louis Owens and Hector Torres discuss “the... complex dialogic structure and levels of discourse in The Grapes of Wrath” (75). They conclude that “the narrative must both move within time and remain timeless, and there is no way to reconcile these two narrative impulses... Thus the dialectical structure of The Grapes of Wrath, with its dialogic infrastructure and style (the various dialogic voices and syntax) effectively resists closure.” They further indicate the extent to which such an ending involves actively responsive reader’s requiring their participation. Readers must “approach the novel with the same ability to resist (emphasis mine) ideological closure, with no ultimate voice of authority, no transcendent teleology, no final scapegoat” (92-93).
While Barry Maine’s study of “Steinbeck’s Debt to Dos Passos reveals some commonalities between Steinbeck and Don Passos—for example, Dos Passos’s “Camera Eye” sections in U.S.A and Steinbeck’s interchapters in GW—differences in structure, characterization, tone, style and vision bear the preponderance of the weight. He finds that The Grapes of Wrath is a testament to the power of the human spirit to endure and prevail over history, whereas U.S.A is a testament to the power of history to triumph over Man. It was Marcel Proust who wrote that “style for the writer, no less than colour for the painter, is a question not of technique but of vision.” As much as it is form it is vision that separates and distinguishes these two writers of the Depression era” (26).

Critics such as Henderson, Owens, and Torres give evidence of at least a partial fulfilment of Tetsumaro Hayashi’s hopes as stated in the preface to this 1990 Steinbeck’s “The Grapes of Wrath”: Essays in Criticism: “May our new generation of Steinbeck students and scholars, blessed with more primary and secondary published sources, more critical and biographical materials, and more published research materials, find a greater enjoyment in reading, discussing, and writing about Steinbeck’s enigmatic literature, appreciating and understanding his magic as an artist and craftsman”. The publication of such scholarly collections of essay together with the availability of biographical and
bibliographical materials indicates that critics and scholars are now engaging in a sustained critical dialog—a dialog that, as Lisca has pointed out, is missing during GW’s first eighteen years while “its merits were debated as social documentation rather than fiction” (Lisca/Hearle 572). All of these advances bear evidence of Steinbeck’s aesthetic achievements in The Grapes of Wrath.

In her 1992 “Poor Whites: Joads and Snopeses,” Abby H.P. Werlock compares Steinbeck’s depiction of the Joads family to Faulkner’s portrayal of the Snopeses, maintaining that they “have come to signify different literary archetypes and divergent views of Christianity.” In Jackson Benson’s words, the Joads are an “idealized view of common man” but, Werlock states, “In The Hamlet... the narrator seems to approve the view of Snopeses not merely as inhuman, but as varmints, animals, reptiles” (64-65). She points out, however, that “both authors successfully employ their chosen “families” to make a similar point: Steinbeck and Faulkner articulate a resounding “No” to exploitation and totalitarianism and an emphatic “Yea” to the rights and dignity of the ordinary individual” (71).

Tetsumaro Hayashi and Beverly K. Simpson have edited and compiled the 1994 John Steinbeck Dissertation Abstracts and Research Opportunities, an attempt “to anthologize all known, American Steinbeck-related dissertation
abstracts from 1946 to 1993”. Timmerman’s introduction points out the extent of this collection: “This volume includes 102 dissertation abstracts on Steinbeck and a variety of indexes—author, chronology, subject, title, university—that simplify the research process... The collection itself reveals trends and new directions in Steinbeck scholarship.” Even a brief perusal of the titles of a few of those dissertations dealing with GW affirms Timmerman’s observation that “here one finds a fascinating history of both ideas and methodologies.

The titles range from George Henry Spies, III’s “John Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath and Frederick Manfred’s The Golden Bowl: A Comparative Study,” to Carl H. De Vasto’s “The Poet of Demos: John Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath and Other Major Later Fiction,” to David Alan Hecker’s “John Steinbeck: America’s Isaiah,” to Leslie Thomas Pollard’s “The Grapes of Wrath and Native Son: Literary Criticism as Social Definition.” These comparisons between Steinbeck and other writers, connections among Steinbeck’s works, and explorations of Steinbeck’s relationship to America all promise engaging critical dialogues.

Immediately following the abstracts of dissertations, Christopher S. Busch’s “Research Opportunities” provides a chronological overview of the
dissertation research, “New Directions for Steinbeck Studies,” and “Sources for Steinbeck Research.” He suggests that

profitable work might still be done... with regard to the respective influences of realism, naturalism, and romanticism of Steinbeck’s unique aesthetic and with regard to Steinbeck’s literary ‘heritage’ that is, his thematic and stylistic relationships to writers who preceded and followed him. (154)

Busch thus extends an invitation to other scholars to participate in critical dialogue and, at the same time, offers a direction and beginning point for their study.

Along with this survey of dissertations on GW and White’s annotated bibliography of the 1939 reviews discusses above, the publication of other scholarly tools, such as Jackson J. Benson’s monumental achievement in his definitive 1984 biography, The True Adventure of John Steinbeck, Writer, Robert DeMott’s 1984 Steinbeck’s Reading: A Catalogue of Books Owned and Borrowed, and Robert B. Harmon’s 1990 “The Grapes of Wrath: A Fifty-Year Bibliographical Survey” further underscore an increasing interest in Steinbeck’s art in GW and other works—the increase itself evidence of a continuing and sustained critical dialog and, hence, of its artistic merit.
Nicholas Visser’s 1994 study, “Audience and Closure in The Grapes of Wrath,” questions “just how politically radical The Grapes of Wrath,” ultimately is “even though its” generative context is the left-wing political culture of the 1930s, and Steinbeck’s novel takes its place among the radical novels produced by that culture”. First, he explore the question of “what formal or discursive strategies” writers utilizes in “radical novels... to gain access to an audience”. He finds Steinbeck particularly adept at establishing in GW a tacit but also absolutely binding contract between author and reader that the reader can rely on the novel’s general veracity”—without which, he maintains,” novel would be almost entirely lacking in meaning”.

Second, he discusses “the other major formal challenge of the novel: how to end the narrative” (28). This aspect of effective closure he finds “somewhat less successfully handled”(28). Visser believes that successfully time, achieving a closure in line with radical politics may be mutually exclusive, that a writer may not be able to achieve both:

At issue here is the very possibility of writing a novel that both reaches a wide audience and remains politically radical... One conclusions we can draw from Steinbeck’s example is that the advice Engels gave Minna Kautsky about eschewing overtly
“tendentious writing” in order to reach the “bourgeois circles” who are the only available audience may understate the consequences of the techniques novelists may have to use to accomplish that task. Reaching that audience might entail the simultaneous (and intimately related) dilution of the novel’s politics and distortion of its form. (34)

In a note Visser cites “Stephen Railton’s important 1990 study, ‘Pilgrim’s Politics: Steinbeck’s Art of Conversion’” the conclusions of which are “strikingly different, indeed often directly opposed” to his own. As his title indicates, Railton sees The Grapes of Wrath as “a novel about conversion,” whose readers are Steinbeck’s proposed “converts”. He finds in Steinbeck’s closure

A strange but powerful tributes to Steinbeck’s faith in selflessness as the one means by which men and women can transcend their circumstances in a world that is otherwise so harshly and unjustly determined. I think it would be less powerful if it were any less strange... Steinbeck to save the nation from its sins... Can the private, spiritual birth of a New Man or a New woman - the
unrecorded “event” that the novel leaves at the center of its narrative and its vision – affect that?(44, 46)

Still, Railton, like Visser, finally questions whether “social inequalities and economic injustices” can be overcome and resolved by “the private, spiritual birth of a New Man or a New Woman— the unrecorded ‘event’ that the novel leaves at the center of its narrative and vision”(46).

Against the backdrop of Travels with Charley in Search of America and America and Americans, my 1996 “Judge, observer, Prophet: The American Cain and Steinbeck’s Shifting Perspectives” places GW in connections with East of Eden and The Winter of Our Discontent, tracing the development of an Every American in a greedy, materialistic, inhospitable Cain figure who, nevertheless, across time gains the self-knowledge, strength, and enabling virtue essential to right choices. Steinbeck fervently and optimistically (curiously, a trait that most annoys critics such as Bloom and Fiedler) believes that this Every American is capable of making these right choices:

Steinbeck foresees this Every American as an active, effective participant in world affairs, but also as one who is at the same time a light-bearer, devoted to justice and compassion. Thus recording for posterity his own philosophical and mystical
journey, he offers a panacea for the nation’s ills. Grounded in the biblical story of the Fall, the battle between good and evil, and the hatred that leads to fratricide, Steinbeck depicts his own dreams and hopes for a future in which an ancient quarrel is resolved and The American Dream of virtue is finally actualized, combining with and increasing the nation’s great strength and prowess. (240-41)

John Ditsky’s 1976 “The Ending of The Grapes of Wrath: A Further Commentary” and Robert DeMott’s 1996 “This Book Is My Life; Creating The Grapes of Wrath” in Steinbeck’s Typewriter are necessary correctives for Warren French’s final evaluation of the aesthetic value of GW in his 1994 “Steinbeck 2000” in John Steinbeck’s Fiction Revisited. French’s opening paragraphs set the tone for his discussion and mark a return to the assertive proclamations of some early reviewers and critics. There is, he maintains,” an unquestionable decline in the artistic effectiveness of his (i.e., Steinbeck’s) fiction after World War II”(132). Such as assertion is highly premature, for the issue of the artistic merit of Steinbeck’s work is far from decided even for his later works.
A highly respected Steinbeck scholar, French steps aside from positive involvement with those critics who have both evaluated and participated Steinbeck’s art and uses as a touchstone for his discussion of GW Harold Bloom’s assessment that Steinbeck is “not one of the inescapable American novelists of our century.” Following Bloom’s lead, French reduces his appreciation of this novel to a contemplation of “why one is ... compelled “to be grateful” for The Grapes of Wrath”(133). (Again, note here in passing the compelling influence of GW, even over those reluctant to acknowledge its stature.) Unfortunately, French quotes from and agrees with Bloom’s comment “that one thing that remains in Steinbeck’s work is its ‘fairly constant popularity with an immense number of liberal middlebrows, both in his own country and abroad.”

No favourable outcome is possible following such an inauspicious acceptance of Bloom’s assessment, and French finds GW “in one sense a magnificent failure” because of its attraction for “liberal middlebrows,” Steinbeck’s aesthetic intentions. French raises once more the old spectre of “sentimentality”.

There is outrage, of course, in The Grapes of Wrath, but the author here wishes to leave readers with en enticing possibility of
hope... The line between sentimentality and compassion escapes clear distinction, but if compassion is not an aesthetic value, art petrifies, so that one must discriminate carefully in this area.(136)

And, still in lockstep with Bloom, and here also with his theory of writer influence, French complains that Steinbeck does not acknowledge an indebtedness, or “kinship,” to use French’s term, with “the beat generations”

Just two of the Bloom/French assertions need to be addresses here: the questions of the aesthetic merit of GW and of Steinbeck’s supposed artistic “decline” after GW. First, only those who participate in the experience of this novel can appreciate it fully or judge it justly, and these reader/critics thus bring with them it reading an open heart as well as an open mind. Only then will the insights that signal understanding come, as if unbidden, so that the critic not only enters into the experience but the response become also an extension of its art. Although John Ditsky’s 1976 ‘The Ending of The Grapes of Wrath: A further Commentary” focuses on the ending, it fits these criteria and suggests the high overall aesthetic standing of GW as a part of the literary and mythic heritage of America. Like all truly good poetry, his conclusion speaks for itself:
The narrative of the Joads has nowhere to go after Rose of Sharon draws the camera in to focus upon that mysterious smile, then holds the pose while the camera backs away... to make it clear that she has become the world’s true center... It is Woman picking up the pieces of the American dream and holding the man-caused shards together, the seams invisible. The power to work this miracle is implied in Rose of Sharon’s Smile. It is an Eastern smile, a smile of understanding, in this ultimate Western book. She has got it all now. All the lines of narrative come to focus in her, like light, they prism in her.” (123)

Ditsky concludes with a quotation from the Magnificent of the Virgin Mary in Luke 1:48,53: “For the hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden: for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed... He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rick he hath sent empty away.” Nothing needs to follow the juxtaposition of these two achingly young women as the one fold to her bosom a child of God; and the other, the Son of Man. Here, Ditsky shows us, art and myth join hands – for those who have the eyes, and mind, and heart to see it.
Robert DeMott’s 1996 “This Book Is My Life: Creating The Grapes of Wrath” brings another poet’s eye, ear, mind, and heart to bear on the evaluation of GW as art. Like Lisca and Fontenrose, he focuses on language and style: “It is not narrated from the first person point of view, yet the language has a consistently catchy eyewitness quality about it; and the vivid biblical, empirical, poetical, cinematic, and folk styles Steinbeck employs demonstrate the tonal and visual acuity of his ear and eye.” DeMott finds that some” passages... come from a place far deeper than the intellect alone, come, rather, from the visceral center of the writer’s being, where his whole body is brought to bear on this text.” Quoting from a passage in an interchapter beginning, “There is a crime here that goes beyond denunciation,” he points out that “the tempo... indicates the importance of musical and harmonic analogies to the text.” DeMott takes this analogy and expands it resonantly, evocatively—like Ditsky’s, his own critical and poetical art becoming an extension of Steinbeck’s:

Steinbeck’s covenant was with his own radical sense of the fiction-making process, not with a well-made linear formula. Indeed his fusion of intimate narrative and panoramic editorial chapter enforces a dialogic concert. Chapters, styles, and 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 of language whose total tonal and spatial impression far surpasses the sum of its discrete and sometimes dissonant parts.(175)

A Steinbeck critic, then, need not follow Bloom’s lead when there are other choices of partners in a dance of open minds, hearts, and voices—such as those of Ditsky, DeMott, and others of their ilk.

Chris Kocela’s 1998 “A Postmodern Steinbeck, or Rose of Sharon Meets Oedipa Mass” reassesses “a few well-studied aspects of the novel in light of some recent influential theories of postmodernist fiction”: I will argue in the first section that Steinbeck’s use of the interchapters exemplifies a postmodern strategy of “frame-breaking,” whereby differences between history and fiction are established within the text only to be problematized, alerting the reader to the difficulties of historical and political representation. In the second section I will use Deborah Madsen’s theorization of “postmodernist allegory” to examine how the problematic divide between history and fiction is further broken down by Steinbeck’s superimposing of biblical and fictional worlds on the place of the
Joad’s story.. Finally.. because I think not enough attentions has been paid to Steinbeck’s influence on, and continuity with, a later generation of American writers... I indulge in a brief comparison of The Grapes of Wrath and Pynchon’s The Crying of Lot 49.

Kocela convincingly demonstrates that what Busch ha called Steinbeck’s “Unique aesthetic” the GW is most amenable ot postmodern theoretical approaches and that the interpretive insights gained from them enrich and expand the critical dialogue as it engages in that dance of open minds about which Morrison writers. Kocela’s accompanying notes are likewise instructive, offering fresh perspectives—for instance, a suggestion that GW may have influenced the Star Wars trilogy, together with a brief discussion of points of comparison.

“The Grapes of Wrath will irritate the complacent, but excite the compassionate. I hope every congressman reads it and everybody in America who loves his country and fellowmen.”

Charles Lee in a 1939 review for The Boston Herald

“This essay... is inspired by curiosity, impatience, some anger, and a passionate love of America and the Americans.” John Steinbeck in the 1966 Foreword to America and Americans
“The Grapes of Wrath’ appearance helped change the literary and cultural geography of the United States.”

Robert DeMott in his 1996 Steinbeck’s Typewriter

On two occasions I have used GW as a text in freshman honors composition classes, teaching it alongside Jonatha Kozol’s Rachel and Her children: Homeless Families in America and Viktor Frankl’s Man’s Search for Meaning. With such an accompaniment, students have no difficulty in recognizing Steinbeck’s almost consuming love for this country and its people. In GW the ethos and prophetic voice of the Steinbeck persona in the Merlin-like narrator and in characters such as Tom are so pervasive that students can readily imagine what Steinbeck would say about America today and can see the relevance of his mythic American story for their own times. And in their adolescent, Arthurian roles in relationship to the Merlin persona, they readily and fully participate in the America of Steinbeck’s vision—bringing with them a curiously American combination of compassion and pragmatic Yankee know-how. I remember in particular the pensive conclusion of one highly privileged young man from a very conservative background: “God may not be a Republican after all.” As Simmons, 1939 reviewer for the Greensboro Daily
News, warns readers on the basis of his own experience with GW: “It gets you.”

Critics across time have responded, as these students do, to Steinbeck in his authoritative role as a American Merlin in GW, as one who not only holds the mirror for Americans to see themselves as they are but also one who sees prophetically into the future of his country, bleakly hopeful and optimistic that its people are capable of change and worth of redemption in spite of grievous faults and failures. In that this novel in uniquely American, it is also most universal; for that which is authentically true to the human condition in one culture translates well into another. In these responses, therefore, critics have expanded and broadened the reach of GW to include today and the millennium to come, as well as Americans and people of all cultures, so that this novel has joined the rank of those works of art that have become classics for all times. What, then, does Steinbeck have to say to America today? And where is Steinbeck criticism going from this point?

In order to address the first of these questions, it is necessary to consider GW in its relationship to two later novels: East of Eden and The Winter of Our Discontent. Harry Thornton Moore’s 1939 The Novels of John Steinbeck: A First Study notes astutely that “The Grapes of Wrath is packed with meaning
that may be partly understood in terms of his previous tendencies, though there are new beginnings which may lead to future developments.” These “new beginning” and “future developments” are especially pertinent to this discussion of GW and its ties to Eden and Winter, and they are addressed in my “American Cain and Steinbeck’s Shifting perspective”.

In one of the journal entries accompanying Eden, Steinbeck informs Covici that this novel is to be “the story of my country and the story of me, revealing at once a purposeful epic sweep and an intense personal involvement, Extending this epic sweep and personal involvement from Eden to include GW and Winter, the “story” of Steinbeck’s “country” broadens, in cumulative effect creating an epic structure to accompany this sweep and an implied Every American— a protagonist who is , more often than not, neither admirable nor heroic. All three of these novels are played out against a sombre biblical backdrop— itself suggestive of epic import. GW is set against the backdrop of the children of Israel’s exodus from Egypt; Eden, against the Genesis story of a lost Paradise and fratricide; and Winter, against the Easter story of Christ’s crucifixion and resurrections.

The Grapes of Wrath, then, begins en medias res in this American story, with the Oklahoma Dustbowl, an image and a condition resulting from greed
and excess. Eden continues with a movement back in time to the birth pangs of California as it is populated first by Indians, to be followed by “the hard, dry Spaniards,... greedy and realistic” and “the Americans—more greedy because there were more of them”—with each group opposing those following, pragmatically looking out for number one, holding the land for themselves, and viewing newcomers as supplanter.

Winter Concludes the epic sequence with the morally dwarfed figure of Ethan Hawley, a grocery store clerk living in the shadow of his Puritan grandfather, “Old Cap’n Howley,” or “Old Cap’n “who had been a man of high character and achievement. Steinbeck caricatures the Every American in the character of Hawley—the triviality of his life, words, and actions simultaneously heightened and made ridiculously small by the constant reminder of the biblical story of Easter and Good Friday in the background. Like T.S Eliot’s Prufrock writ large, Hawley measures out his life “with coffee spoons.”

Steinbeck’s depiction of greed and excess as defining characteristics of Every American reaches its culmination here in Ethan Hawley. In seeking financial gain and the accompanying prestige, Hawley betrays both his friend, Danny, and his employer—leading to the death of the one and the deportation
of the other. Further, the makes complex plans to rob a bank across the street from the grocery store where he works and later—in a pique of self-hatred—contemplates and comes to the verge of suicide. In Winter, as in GW, Steinbeck has designs on readers, addressing them directly in a note preceding the title page:” Readers seeking to find the fictional people and places here described would do better to inspect their own communities and search their own hearts, for this book is about a large part of America today.”

Sometimes with barely concealed anger, sometimes with a degree of objectivity, but always with hope, Steinbeck draws across and through these three novels this composite portrait and tells this “story” of his “country.” Neither the portrait now the story is complimentary, for they reveal a flawed national psyche with an oxymoronic mixture of strengths and weaknesses, a portrayal that looks nothing like the representative images of ourselves we hold dear—the staunch and starched Puritan forebears, the honest Quaker face gracing oatmeal boxes and oil cans, the spiffy image of Uncle Sam of World War II vintage, the harmonious mixture of culturally diverse faces in a Coke ad. Knowing us all too well because he is one of us, Steinbeck exposes a dark alter ego—greedy, inhospitable, materialistic, self-absorbed. Running parallel to and in relationship with this portrayal of an uncomplimentary side of an
Every American runs an evolving, Merlin-like self-definition as Steinbeck finds his own identity in the role of national bard, or seer.

Intentionally taking this bardic role, he is compelled to tell his American story. And his reader in a sense is compelled to listen—both as much captives as Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s speaker in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” who must tell his warning tale and the guest on his way to a wedding, who, in turn, must linger behind the ceremonial procession to hear it. Steinbeck has thus constructed himself, built his own identity, as a member of a national community—America, a place with which his sense of self is so intertwined that he declares it to be “the macrocosm of microcosm me.”

Steinbeck defines himself, then, in and through these three novels especially. And like Whitman, Emerson, Thoreau, and others of his literary forebears, he becomes in the process a national bard who sometimes lovingly, sometimes sadly warns his fellow Americans not to succumb to their excesses but rather to learn to recognize the sacred in the grotesque among them, as in the final scene of GW in which a very young, somewhat shallow, and hitherto self-absorbed Rose of Sharon is transformed into modern Madonna, with the starving, dispossessed man, one of God’s little ones, at her breast.
Herein perhaps lies the sources of some of the negative critical response to Steinbeck—the very closeness of this recognizable Every American, the affective power of the author’s persona as bardic seer, and the grotesque “little ones”—a closeness insisting on awareness and proclaiming the possibility of transcendence. In discussing the question of “affect” in literature, Biddy Martin cites Helence Cixous’s “astonishment” in finding that the “key” to understanding the works of “the Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector” is “live” and “attention”: “And there, there is the treasure of events: we have only to love, to be on the lookout for love, and all the riches are entrusted to us. Attention is the key”(5).

Written from the vantage point of an intervener in the “radical feminisms of the late seventies,” Cixous’s assertion is as applicable to the works of Steinbeck as it is to those of Lispector. For in the broad sweep of these three novels, there is an epic theme at once as simple and as elegant as the wrath of Achilles in Homer’s Iliad or the search for identity and home in the Odyssey: Every American—as Steinbeck insistently, persistently urges—has the capacity to transcend the national penchant for materialism and greed and to love God’s “little ones,” the grotesque and broken in the midst. Then, as a by-product of this “attention” and “love,” the every American will discover that Eden/Paradise has been there all along—in the here and now. From GW,
then, to Eden, to Winter, simply and elegantly, runs this story of Every American played out against the backdrop of seemingly simplistic, seemingly sentimental and romantic themes of love and attention—universal themes that have nevertheless invited considerable critical aspersion among some academics.

An authorial persona, the reader, and the pervasive theme of avarice that must be overcome, therefore, become intrinsically, intricately, and purposefully woven into Steinbeck’s artistic design, beginning with GW with its veritable catalogue of greed and fraud in action—vices later to be continued, sharpened, and refined but also faced, with the possibility of overcoming them, in the characters of Cal in Eden and Ethan Hawley in Winter. Although there is no evidence that Steinbeck himself thought of these three fictional works as all of one piece, considering them in relationship to one another is instructive and certainly no stranger than Toni Morrison’s trilogy of Beloved, Jazz, and Paradise in which connections are more intriguing and suggestive than obvious. Also, this backdrop serves to place GW in a broader perspective of Steinbeck’s fictional portrayal of America and Americans—to borrow the title of a concern he addressed also in a documentary meditation on this topic.
Considered together, then, these three novels address the whining self-absorption, materialism, and adolescent negativity that comprise the malaise of America in these times. But the Steinbeck view is always paradoxical, oxymoronic, so that the malaise is balanced by the hope, even optimism, that Americans will ultimately choose to grow up and to find in transcendence a corrective for this spiritual ailment. From the earliest reviews to the present time, critics have recognized Steinbeck’s portrayal of this peculiarly American paradox.

A 1939 reviewer for the Portland Evening Express writes: “The Grapes of Wrath is the most moving story of human suffering and disillusionment this reviewer ever read. Its scope is larger than at first appears, because Steinbeck is actually typing to show America is no longer America if the plight of the migrant sharecroppers is permitted to continue.” Quite perversely, in “But... Not ... Ferdinand,” Newsweek’s 1939 reviewer, Rascoe Burton, understands quite clearly the same “message” to which the Evening Express’s anonymous reviewer responds feelingly. Burton, however, complains: “I can’t quite see what the book is about, except that there are “no frontiers left and no place to go” What Burton refuses to see is the human tragedy incipient is having “no place to go.” Flippantly, he puts aside the realities of the migrant situation as it is presented in the ending of GW. There is no food or appropriate human
shelter. One of these migrants is on the verge of starvation. One is ill and exhausted from childbirth. There is no work, and winter is upon them. And one hears in Burton’s complaint an echo of Cain’s similarly flippant response when God asks him for the murdered Abel’s whereabouts: “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

Recognizing both this tendency to turn away from the suffering depicted in GW and to eschew Steinbeck’s portrayal of an American problem, another of these early reviewers, Marjorie Lloyd, foresees a similar rejection on the part of some of Steinbeck’s reader/critics: “Steinbeck will be criticized for so strongly presenting this message, but we feel that it is needed. It is no use shutting our eyes to conditions which surround us.” Edrie Ann Morse, too, finds the novel “an outraged indictment of the economic muddle America is passing through today,” and W.W. Withington similarly finds it “an education on our migrant situation.”

In “The Grapes of Wrath,” chapter six of Joseph Fontenrose’s 1963 John Steinbeck: An Introduction and Interpretation, he recognizes that the final scene is “for Steinbeck... an oracular image, forecasting in a moment of defeat and despair the final triumph of the people—a contingent forecast, for only if the people nourish sustain one another will they achieve their ends.” Here is
that Merlin/bard/prophet persona that has troubled so many critics. And, as has been noted previously, Fontenrose brings this peculiarly American, unfinished story of GW up to date—the critic, like the author, leaving in the reader’s hands the continuing problem of America’s dispossessed: “Perhaps the story has not ended yet”.

On the edge of awareness of “unspeakable things unspoken,” Donahue suggests that this particular literary “excursion” into The Grapes of Wrath is full of peril for the American reader—that the myopic national psyche finds something here too close for scrutiny—something that demands the attention of the most humane, something that tries the conscience of the most callous, something authoritative and knowing, difficult to put aside and ignore.

From the very beginning there have been those who recognize such a peril. Harry Schofield, one of the early 1939 reviewers, bears witness to the effects of this “perilous” inner journey, particularly for the American reader:

The tempo of the writing is suited to the character of the book miraculously. I found, however, the slow, ponderous deadweight of depression and suffering carried my beyond the point of vulnerability. So much pain and wracking misery is heaped up before you that... you can feel it no more. (5)
Like Schofield, Rose Loveman Brewer, another of the early reviewers, observes that this novel is a portrayal of an economic problem that “makes each reader of the book one of the dispossessed, wandering, homeless, forlorn and hungered, seeking but an acre in the rich teeming land to wrest a living for his own,... and yet feeling... that as wags our world today, there is no way out.”

Less hopeful than Steinbeck, Schofield and Brewer suggest that their “world,” that is, America in their day, may be incapable on change. Perhaps they have arrived at that perilous point that Donahue suggests—a point at which a reader/critic despairs and fears that the greedy, materialistic American psyche is irredeemable, incapable of change and that, as result, those who are dispossessed—the wounded and grotesque in the midst—must perish. But this view is not Steinbeck’s.

In “We Still See Their Faces,” the 1989 introduction to Viking Press’s deluxe anniversary edition of GW, Studs Terkel translates the America depicted in GW of 1939 into America as it might be depicted in a GW of 1989. On a 1989 trip he observes in Iowa and Minnesota “too many deserted streets that evoked too many images of too many rural hamlets of the Great Depression.” Everywhere he goes, he cannot “escape the furrowed faces and stooped frames of John Steinbeck’s people... It was a flash forward fifty
years”. Drawing analogies among GW; the music of Tchaikovsky, Stravinsky, Mozart, and Fats Waller; and Frank Lloyd Wright’s “organic” sense of architecture, Terkel underscores the novel’s aesthetic merits and at the same time highlights “the aching relevance of Steinbeck’s book. “He notes that the “mean-spiritiveness” (sic) that characterized so many Americans today “reveals itself even in our idiomatic language: Victims are defined as ‘losers,’ people for whom there is no place either at the top or the bottom, who fall into a Limbo-like’dark recess”.

In a vignette of Peggy Terry, who was schooled by The Great Depression and experienced in the life of the dispossessed, Terkel reminds us of the cherished American belief in the dignity and worth of each individual handed her a well-thumbed paperback...’And when I read Grapes of Wrath, that was like reliving my whole life. I was never so proud of poor people before as I was after I read this book.” Terkel believes that “John Steinbeck would have valued that critique as much as the Nobel Prize for Literature he won in 1962”. Functioning as an extension of Steinbeck’s ageless story of dispossession that seems to have no end, Terkel’s account, too, reminds Americans of their heritage, by implication, their responsibility as well.
Railton’s 1990 “Pilgrim’s Politics: Steinbeck’s Art of Conversion” goes beyond a vision of psychic perils to see clearly Steinbeck’s intentions to stir and awaken the American conscience:

The origins of the evils that the novel decries are... social and economic... Can anything but a social revolution change that system? ...Steinbeck wants to save the nation from its sins. Babies like Rose of Sharon’s are dying because of social inequalities and economic injustices. Can the private, spiritual birth of a New Man or a New Woman—the unrecorded “event” that the novel leaves at the center of its narrative and its vision— affect that?(36)

Events in The Grapes of Wrath may be, as Railton describes them, “narratively inescapable,” but Steinbeck’s view of Americans and humanity is not. Like Rose of Sharon, Steinbeck implies, they are capable of change, of growing up and putting aside “childish things.”

In her 1993 “California Answers The Grapes of Wrath,” Susan Shillinglaw examines “four of the most important respondents” to Steinbeck’s depiction of California landowners in The Grapes of Wrath:

Two who defended California agriculture were highly respected professional writers: Ruth Comfort Mitchell, the author of Of
Human Kindness, and Frank J. Taylor, a free-lance journalist who covered California business, farming, and recreation for the state and national press. And two were highly successful retired farmers, to use the word loosely: Marshall V. Hartranft, the Los Angeles fruit grower and real estate developer who wrote Grapes of Gladness: California's Refreshing and Inspiring Answer to John Steinbeck's “Grapes of Wrath,” and Sue Sanders, touted as the “friend of the migrant,” who wrote and published a tract called “The Real Cause of Our Migrant Problem.” (146-47)

She concludes that, on the whole, these respondents’ “faith in individual initiative” and Steinbeck’s “call for action” on behalf of America’s dispossessed—“rooted in group, not individual initiative”—are both inherently American ideals. Unfortunately, however, these ideals are irreconcilable. Nonetheless, in a concluding note Shillinglaw cites Steinbeck’s interview for the Voice of America on February 11, 1952, in which he provides an ameliorating factor that bridges such divergent ideals: “When the anger decreased these two sides, these two groups, were able to get to get to know each other and they found they didn’t dislike each other at all”. (186)
DeMott’s 1996 “This Book Is My Life” in Steinbeck’s Typewriter reveals that GW, far from the sentimentality to which some critics would reduce it, tends more towards the iconoclastic and prophetic and more towards a reality that is so true to the American psyche that it moves into the mythic. GW deprives Americans of their romantic vision of the cowboy’s forever riding off into the sunset towards some majestic mountains beyond which there are ever new horizons. Instead, DeMott shows, this novel is “a tale of dashed illusions, thwarted desires, unconscionable suffering, and betrayed promises—all strung on a gossamer thread of hope”. And it is this “hope” that, to a large extent, makes The Grapes of Wrath such a uniquely American novel, for its points towards new horizons. But from henceforth those horizons must be inner and spiritual—there is no longer anywhere else to go.

Where does the criticism of GW go from this point? How should it be informed and educated? Essays in this thesis offer at least a partial response to these questions. While earlier studies deal with verisimilitude and classification as in the early reviews and Ross and Whicher essays, more reflective views are represented by Fontenrose’s observations on “the biological and mythical strands... in The Grapes of Wrath,” by the Matton and Timmerman studies of imagery and theme, and by the Henderson and Railsback cross-disciplinary works, the one from the vantage point of cultural geography and the other from
the perspective of Darwin and science. Evidence of abundant material on
Steinbeck’s personal, artistic, and public life, Meyer’s “Steinbeck and the
Critics: A Study in Artistic Self-Concept” explores the effect of negative
criticism on Steinbeck’s self-concept. Pointing towards a clearer vision of
Steinbeck’s aesthetic accomplishment, Kocela provides an explication
demonstrating first, that the theoretical methodologies of the postmodernists
bring fresh insights and second, that comparisons of “Steinbeck’s influence on,
and continuity with, a later generation of American writers” are worthy of
critical attentions. Meyers also provides a study of the influences of Eastern
thought and philosophy, particularly that of Lao Tze, on Steinbeck’s thought.

The Studies of Werlock and Maine, like Lisca’s earlier work on
Steinbeck and Hemingway and Kocela’s on Steinbeck and Pynchon, are
comparative, one placing Steinbeck’s Joads in perspective beside
contemporary William Faulker’s Snopeses and the other highlighting the
likenesses and differences between Steinbeck’s GW and Dos Passos’s U.S.A
Davis and Shillinglaw look at The Grapes of Wrath’s reception, its
verisimilitudes, and perspective—one form an Oklahoman and the other from a
California point of view. Owens, Torres, and Visser explore rhetorical
concerns, such as dialogic structure, levels of discourse, audience—including
the relationship between author and reader and between reader and text. Swan
shares views on the university student’s response to the text. Also, both this introduction and the article on Steinbeck’s shifting perspectives from GW, to Eden, to Winter show intriguing thematic and structural connections among these three novels that are worthy of further exploration.

Mary Brown’s 1998 “The Grapes of Wrath and the Literary Canon of American Universities in the Nineties” suggests that “it is highly possible that... the real position of The Grapes of Wrath in the American canon, indicated by how much it is read and how often it is assigned in the curriculum, may continue to decline in the 21st century.” Brown attributes this neglect of GW among educators in the colleges and universities and the public schools alike to its length, its perceived out datedness, or its perceived lack of aesthetic merit. But, she maintains, “the stream of what is taught can change directions, as indicated by the current prevalence of books like Kate Chopin’s The Awakening and Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God on college course syllabi”.(18)

There are some current trends that may contribute to this reversal of the current tendency to neglect The Grapes of Wrath in academia. One of these trends is the current interest in the self, the individual’s identity—which, paradoxically, is most often found in community, in relationships with an
“other.” Like Whitman in Song of Myself, Steinbeck has “sung” the story of himself, his country, and his fellow Americans, especially in GW, Eden, and Winter and in their nonfiction backdrops, Travels with Charley in Search of America and American and Americans. Those who want to discover an author’s identity, a writer’s aesthetic, or a philosopher’s beliefs would find as ample evidence in Steinbeck’s fiction, his journals, letters, and nonfiction as can be found for any other writer. Those who want to discover personal and national identity as Americans will find themselves in relationship to their country—including its grotesques—in these works.

Further, the current educational interest in emotional intelligence, or empathy, reveals a discovery of the obvious on the part of educators: that human beings are complex creatures who, as far as their ability to “know” and to learn is concerned, depend on heart and soul as well as intellect. That is, their empathic, emotional capacity must be engaged alongside the cognitive if they are to “know” anything other than discrete facts. For sadly, we have now learned that areas of knowledge as far apart as missiles or the human body may be misused or abused if human beings do not know what it means to be truly human and humane.
The critical response of *The Grapes of Wrath* has shown that Steinbeck knows all of his most passionately with his own bardic heart, mind, and soul. To borrow from Carpenter’s depiction of the Steinbeck aesthetic, in *GW* he has shown a “moving picture” that begins a panoramic epic sweep that clearly suggests an “abstract idea of life” in America. And Steinbeck has spoken, sometimes thunderously, in a prophetic voice that not only offers “a criticism” of this life but also a panacea: love and attention—themes no more sentimental, no more simplistic than the Homeric themes in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* or the ancient biblical stories that depict what it means to be truly human or not. As French has pointed out, the story of the Joads is a story of an “education of the heart.” The Critical responses have shown us that Steinbeck has designs that draw in readers and critics also, involving them, insisting that they engage in a participation in the “actuality” that insists, in turn, on an engagement of mind and heart.

Perhaps the tardy recognition of the essentialness of “emotional intelligences” will remove some of the stigma form Steinbeck’s insistence on empathic involvement with his text. Perhaps American critics, scholar, and professor may in time turn to Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, suspending cool objectivity and with hearts as well as minds open to its “message” that celebrates an aesthetic that tells us who we are, or who we should be.
Or perhaps a new generation of scholars is already leaving the old behind and beginning this move towards involvement with Steinbeck and his text. In his 1995 Parallel Expeditions: Charles Darwin and the Art of John Steinbeck, Railback analyzes, discusses, and dismisses the various arguments of “the novelist’s literary executioners” as “slightly baffled”. There is even a note of humour in his depiction of Leslie Fiedler’s 1989 “Keynote address at an international conference, ‘The Grapes of Wrath, 1939-1989: An Interdisciplinary Forum.” Railsback writes that

Fiedler blasted the literary reputation of the novelist in the vindictive style used by a number of critics and reviewers since the 1930s... he savoured the result of his assault... Fiedler’s damnation of Steinbeck was provoking (emphases mine).(1)

Railsback concludes, however, quite confidently and a bit pensively:

A side from his odd complaint that the novelist’s characters are not mythic enough (comparing less favourably to such heroic figures as Scarlett O’Hara, Sherlock Holmes, and Superman), the critic had little new to say (emphase mine).(1)
Like the child in the old fairy tale about the emperor’s new clothes who proclaims—to the astonishment of his elders and all the wise people of the kingdom, who had suspected as much but did not dare speak—“But he has no clothes,” Railback has pointed out the obvious.

Note, however, that Railsback writes with more assurance and optimism than did E.W. Tedlock, Jr. In the 1969 preface on the occasion of the fourth printing and paperback edition of Steinbeck and His Critics: A Records Twenty-five Years, that he had edited with then deceased C.V. Wicker:

Now I find myself left with a feeling of pathos... The pathos lies in the unequal encounter between a writer inadequately trained for it in spite of the Stanford years, and the intellectuals who, from the vantage point of dialectically supported dogmas and morally assured activism, measured him against the correct responses to a whole series of contemporary crises. Our times have no patience with good intentions or old-fashioned positions. The new perspectives being forced upon us may bring moral advances, but revolution is destructive of art, which requires a special love and tolerance. (E.W. Tedlock 17)
At the completion of a truly memorable work of scholarship, Tedlock is saddened by the “fault-finding we had to include”. Although he does not know in what direction Steinbeck criticism is headed, he evidently fears and regrets what the future may hold.

But such “pathos” is not true of the present outlook for the continued critical and scholarly interest in The Grapes of Wrath. This is not to say that there are no problems with The Grapes of Wrath or that those who find such faults are necessarily “destructive of art.” To illustrate, Visser argues persuasively that the theoretical and practical issues of audience and closure may be irreconcilable in such a novel. But Visser’s study in nonetheless a paradigm for that “special love and tolerance” that Tedlock writes about, and he argues its necessary flaws within acknowledged context of the novel’s overall excellence and aesthetic merit. And this is the point to which criticism has taken us thus far. Critics during the first fifty year of The Grapes of Wrath have laid some solid groundwork, and critics in the nineties have shown how well the scholarly art of criticism has begun to build on this groundwork, optimistically preparing for Steinbeck studies in a new millennium.

In a terse, a wealth of criticism as well as widespread admiration for his intellectual perspicacity and closure observation of the phenomena created by
the contemporary society with his unprecedented genius to adapt them into a form of novel with the aim of galvanizing them into an organic co-operation to answer the solution of their misery and agony has indeed enhanced the statute of the author even taller beyond the realm of literary firmament leading him to win noble prize in recognition of his outstanding contribution to human race with message for the urgency of egalitarian social order. Indeed, John Steinbeck would remain a source of perpetual inspiration to the people sitting on the margins of the society regardless of geographical boundaries.
References:


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