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**AN EXPERIMENT IN ETHICS:  
JOHN STEINBECK'S *THE GRAPES OF WRATH***

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**Abstract:** *What is John Steinbeck's philosophy in the *The Grapes of Wrath*? The meaning of the book is to be found in the minds of its readers who are invited to construct their own vision of their future, discover new possibilities of life, and imagine a new sort of "people".* Steinbeck's approach – what he calls non-teleological thinking – is resolutely immanent.

**Key words:** *chance, ethics, immanence, interpretation, people, teleology*

## **1. Introduction**

Among other problems, John Steinbeck's 1939 masterpiece *The Grapes of Wrath* raises the question of the way the novel should be read. Perhaps a better manner of putting it could be: who are its readers? The answer we will give to this question has important implications. One thing at least is perfectly clear. The book describes the trials undergone by migrants who fled the South Western plains at the time of the Dust Bowl. A lot of them went to California and were there given the pejorative label of "Okies" owing to the fact that a number of them originated from Oklahoma, as indeed did the fictitious Joad family to which about half of the book is devoted. Did John Steinbeck write for these "Okies"? Maybe we could summarize our point by saying that everything depends on the way we construe the preposition "for". The novelist never imagined that his readership would be found among families of agricultural workers in California, or elsewhere for that matter. Migrants were barely able to read and write. Indeed the only book they usually had in their homes was a Bible. One anonymous family in the novel is an exception as they also (symbolically) possess a copy of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. John Steinbeck wrote "about" these migrants for a different sort of readers who had to be made aware of the intolerable situation that had arisen in California. It may however be also argued that in another way the writer wrote "for" the "Okies". In other words, he lent them his pen as they could not write themselves, let alone be published. To some extent, he became their voice. Such indeed could be one of the main functions of literature: speak "for" a people. (It will remain to define more precisely what is meant by the word "people".)

## 2. Audience and meaning

There is no doubt that Steinbeck could only conceive his novel for educated people who had both time and money to read it. He wrote to convince readers who hopefully would then – after having read the book – perform certain actions. We reach here, however, the limits of our study, that is the pragmatic dimension of fiction. Only an extremely minute fraction of Steinbeck's actual readers probably translated into reality some of the insights they discovered in the book. It is, of course, obvious that very few of them were in a position to wield some sort of political power. In addition, real readers are human beings and all human beings are different from each other. To simplify, let us say that we are all strange mixtures of singularities both good and evil, of liberalism and conservatism, etc. Consciously or unconsciously, some readers accepted fully or partially the very abstract moral and political implications of what happens in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Others did not. We will never know and, accordingly, the investigation that follows mainly concerns Steinbeck's book.

What is the meaning of the novel? Actually, the question has to be rephrased if we wish to determine what that meaning consists in. Where is the meaning of the book? It is unquestionably in the novel, as without the book, the question of its meaning would be irrelevant. The meaning, whatever it is, will have to be produced from the thousands of small details that make up *The Grapes of Wrath*, from their arrangements and the links we can establish between them, as well as from the implications we can derive from them. There is therefore a second answer to the question of where the meaning of the book is situated. As Gadamer indicated in *Truth and Method* (1975), it is in the minds of the readers who produce it, starting from the actual words of the book, selecting or neglecting details, undergoing the influence of their moral and political choices and prejudices. Readers, of course, have to reconstruct the plot of the novel. They also have to devise values, produce systems of oppositions, and discover implications. More generally, readers have to generalize, something that is all the more true in the case of Steinbeck's novel as 16 out of its 30 chapters do not concern the Joad family. These so-called "intercalary" chapters oblige us to consider that the book is not about a single family, but that we are dealing with a more general social and political problem. Can we go a little further? Our minds never stop producing abstractions: at a more general level, the problems addressed in the book concern America as a whole and its other groups of underdogs, such as the Indians (alluded to in the novel and victimized among others by... the Joads), African Americans, Jews,

Hispanics, etc. The novel provides us with intellectual grids and systems of values that are conceivably relevant in a great many contexts Steinbeck probably never suspected. *The Grapes of Wrath* still has readers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; they live in America, but also in Europe, Asia, Africa, etc. Transferring Steinbeck's ideas to the contexts with which these new readers are familiar certainly makes sense to them. That is the central question this paper will be concerned with: what does John Steinbeck tell us about ethics as well as about politics, since, as we will see, our ethical principles cannot be separated from underlying political choices?

If we are to believe a famous pronouncement, the author was perfectly aware that reading is undeniably a very complex process and he seems to allude to the ancient art of hermeneutics which goes back at the very least to the Middle Ages. He said that "five layers" can be found in the novel. (Steinbeck, 1975) He also added that the reader "won't find more than he has in himself," which seems to suggest that ultimately what really matters is the way each reader individually relates to what he or she discovers when he or she reads the book. If one prefers, the true meaning of *The Grapes of Wrath* is to be found in the conjunction of the details of the book and of my true self. Steinbeck doesn't enlarge on what those five levels exactly represent. Maybe we should return to the old medieval hermeneutic techniques which classically distinguished only four levels. Read in this way, the novel can be considered in ascending order: (i) *literally*, as a book about a particular family, the Joads, and the way they react to their victimization in Oklahoma, on route 66, and finally in California; (ii) *allegorically* (a word that probably could be replaced by 'intertextually' in modern English), as a book that repeats Biblical patterns, such as for instance the Exodus out of Egypt, which give it a more universal meaning; (iii) *morally* (and we'd like to add politically, since, unlike our pre-Renaissance ancestors, we no longer live in a world in which history doesn't seem to exist) as a book about America as a whole, its fundamental values, what's wrong with them, what new attitudes could be promoted, and, more generally, its past and its possible future; (iv) *anagogically*: this non religious book admittedly is not about the ultimate Christian problem of the salvation of our soul, but we could probably adapt the category and consider that it is about problems of identity and that it raises the age-old question of what it means to be a human being. This fourth "layer" is consequently more general than the others as it certainly concerns not only American people but also all kinds of readers across the globe. If finally one insists on a "fifth" level, as Steinbeck apparently suggests, we will propose that the book is also about me, that is to say about what is most specific about the thousands of ways I am different from the others, and also about

what my possible relationship to the others could and should be. That is the way I have decided to interpret the quotation by Steinbeck who indeed leaves a large possibility of choice. It is thus our belief that the novel is mainly about ethics.

In Chapter 13, the writer seems to address the problem again when he has Jim Casy say, "It means more than the words says". (1939:97) Casy is referring to a line from a poem – presumably by William Blake – he has just quoted. The problem is important. In that particular chapter, the Joad family buries Grampa by the side of the road. They try to find a quotation from the Bible and they hesitate between three verses before deciding upon one that "might's well mean somepin" (96). Their problem here is to find something true to say about Grampa. In both cases, the meaning is not to be found in the poem or in the Biblical passage. In other words, the problem is not to read a quotation correctly (supposing that that were possible), but to read ourselves. We have to look upon it as a problem of implications: what can these words tell us about Grampa and ourselves? We know that the funeral is not a religious funeral. Indeed there is nothing Christian about it as Casy is no longer a regular preacher. Words, language, cultural and religious references are only important in so far as they offer us an insight about our situation and the possibilities that our future holds for us.

That is the way I propose to read *The Grapes of Wrath*. Possibly the book could be classified in the old tradition of the Jeremiad, so well illustrated in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by the Puritans. Something has happened to America, an intolerable situation has developed, traditional morality has been betrayed, and therefore we must re-establish the dignity of our people. Obviously, Steinbeck is not advocating going back to the values defended by the Puritans – or even to the ideas of Thomas Jefferson, or even Karl Marx, but he is clearly telling his fellow-citizens that America has reached a dead end and that the country has to change its priorities. Put it differently, the novel can be read as a mixture of present and future. The present is what is described. It is what is unbearable. On the other hand, the future is not described. What will Tom Joad and his sister Rose of Sharon do after the novel ends? We will never know. All we know is that, according to the author, it will have to be different from the present. More specifically, it is not described because it is not yet written. Tom and Rose of Sharon are still part of the present, even if they have begun to invent a different sort of future. By definition, the real future concerns the novel's readers. We have to recognize that we are moral and political agents in our communities, in the United States or abroad, in 1939, but also today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Such seems to be John Steinbeck's conception of art. Art and literature can be characterized as what resists. They resist evil, slavery, humiliation, etc.

They also resist repetition, the repetition of status quos in particular. At the same time as they help invent values for the future, they also invent their own form. *The Grapes of Wrath* is not just a realistic novel about the plight of a family. It is an extremely original work of art that unites the story of a family and the fate of a whole community. In other words, it is not just about individuals. It is a social and political pronouncement. In his book, Steinbeck repeatedly uses the word "people". *The Grapes of Wrath* is about the invention of a new people. And, in the same way as the book represents the creation of a new form, it also heralds for Steinbeck the rejection of old, outdated frames of reference such as puritanism, capitalism, jeffersonism, communism, etc. The book is thus an invitation for us to write a different and better future. One consequence of this is that we have to accept that John Steinbeck was a thinker, almost a philosopher, something a great many of his critics since 1939 have seemed not to be aware of. I also propose to take Steinbeck's ideas very seriously.

John Steinbeck's way of thinking is first and foremost perceptible at the level of the plot, more precisely when we observe in what particular manner the characters' attitudes to the family evolve. People change, they learn, at least some of them... Roughly speaking, we can distinguish three successive stages and readers are invited to evolve in their minds with the characters. Of course, it is only an invitation, not an obligation. The novel reveals possibilities we are free to follow depending on our conscious and unconscious choices. Besides, only a few of the novel's characters go the whole way to the end of the third stage.

Stage one could be called selfishness. Literally, characters are only interested in their own selves, as if the others and the outside world did not really matter. At the beginning of the book, Tom Joad offers an excellent example of this stage. He is only concerned with two things: alcohol and prostitutes. He meets Jim Casy, who drinks some of his whiskey and confesses that for him too sex with women was an absolute necessity. Casy has started to change though. He has given up his activity as a preacher, which implies that he has also renounced sex. (After each religious meeting he held, he used to systematically sleep with one of the women attending). Tom's educational process will start later. For the moment, as he says, "I'm still layin' my dogs down one at a time" (117). His life is a pure present revolving around himself. His sister, Rose of Sharon, is characterized by the unrealistic dreams of middle class comforts she has discovered in the magazines she has been able to lay her hands on. For the moment, she doesn't seem to have an identity of her own. She identifies with a number of objects that she (mistakenly) believes would make her happy: a small

apartment for herself, her husband and the baby when it is born, an icebox, etc.

Stage two coincides with the recognition that family is essential. Family here means the sort of extended family the Joads constitute, not the small nuclear unit Rose of Sharon keeps dreaming about. Uncle John is included, as is Jim Casy. For most of the book, once the Joads have left their farm, the car becomes synonymous with that new enlarged family. Ma indeed knows how difficult and also necessary it is to keep the family together and to fight back its enemies: natural enemies such as death that kills the dog and then the grand-parents the moment they leave the farm, but also human enemies: alcohol, sex, and money when these things are considered in an individualistic manner. Tom stops drinking, but Uncle John doesn't and he becomes a potential danger for the group; Tom and Al give up girls, though for different reason (Tom will become some sort of prophet, whereas Al gets married and starts a family of his own with Aggie); curiously enough, money is also a danger for the unity of the family and Ma gets extremely angry when some of the members suggest staying behind on Route 66 in order to make some money and catch up with the group later. Admittedly some people like Connie or Noah desert the family for various reasons (and Uncle John is often tempted to do the same), but the Joads keep moving forward. Indeed the family opens itself, including, as it does at one time, the Wilsons on Route 66, then the Wainwrights whose daughter Al marries at the end.

Stage three takes us beyond the family. Ma realizes that the family as it is, is not sufficient. ("The family was fust..." (306)). When in the boxcar she pulls down the blanket separating them from the Wainwrights, she invents a new name to describe what matters first and foremost: it used to be family, now it is "anybody". "Anybody" is the exact contrary of selfishness. Caring for your own family was still selfish as Ma discovered very early in the Hooverville where they first stopped when they arrived in California: she cannot not share the stew she has been cooking with all the unknown children that suddenly surround her. In the novel, "anybody" usually means first of all a question of food and hospitality towards people you don't know. It is a duty, one could almost say the new Law. The Joads invited the Wilsons on the road, Tom is offered breakfast by people he comes across by chance at the Weedpatch government camp, etc. You establish a new link and that link is essential, it is synonymous with caring for the other. In other words, identity is no longer defined by your vertical link with a piece of land as was the case in the popular sort of Jeffersonism prevalent at the beginning of the book. The new link is horizontal with the stranger you encounter on the road.



Is it absolutely necessary to pinpoint the origins of Steinbeck's philosophical convictions? He was a man who was extremely curious in an intellectual sense and he had certainly read a lot. Let us recognize that the ideas he put forward in *The Grapes of Wrath* are sufficiently general not to need a former proprietor... Emerson is certainly an obvious influence as he is present in the book through Casy's allusions to him and his concept of the Oversoul. However, rather than Emerson whose beliefs were mainly aimed at individual fulfilment, it would be more relevant to mention Walt Whitman, probably Emerson's greatest disciple. With Whitman, the Oversoul unquestionably acquires a political dimension. Steinbeck just like Whitman certainly believed very strongly in equality and democracy and more specifically in the need to refuse any form of exclusion. (Equality actually begins inside the Joad family with the collapse of the old patriarchal principles: Grampa dies the moment he leaves his land and in the last chapter Pa is the one who symbolically is now in charge of food.) We may also remember Tom's allusions to *Ecclesiastes* in chapter 28: "Two are better than one. (...) A three-fold cord is not quickly broken," etc. (288) In fact, the whole novel can be seen as a necessary shift from "I" to "we".

### **3. Endings and beginnings**

The novel has two successive denouements as far as the Joad family is concerned: chapter 28 is devoted to Tom and chapter 30 to Rose of Sharon. To some extent, the two siblings turn into heroes or at the very least prophets. The novel certainly makes no attempt at being realistic as Tom and Rose become more than just human beings. Besides, we don't know what happens to them once the book is finished. Tom just says he will metamorphose himself into some sort of ubiquitous "soul". In their last scenes, both Tom and his sister undergo a re-birth process before going "beyond" ordinary humanity. (As we will see further down, "beyond" is a key word – almost a concept – for John Steinbeck.)

Tom goes into a cave through a narrow tunnel before leaving it for ever and consuming the final separation from his mother. There is here clearly no need to insist on the re-birth process. Besides, as we know that he has been wounded, Tom enters the world as a new man with a new face. In his last conversation with Ma, Tom explains that there is something wrong with "one fella with a million acres, while a hundred thousan' good farmers is starvin'." (288) That is the first difference between Tom's message and Rose's. It is political. (We said that if we are good followers of Whitman, there should be no differences between men and women, but it would appear that at the end of the 30's it wasn't conceivable for a woman to play



a political role. Not in a novel by Steinbeck.) We immediately note that there is no difference between morality and politics: if you are rich, you have a duty towards those less well-off than you are and you should help them get the food they need, and probably also contribute to their happiness. It is interesting to look more closely at Tom's agenda. In the speech he delivers in front of Ma, we can distinguish two parts: first, as could be expected, he stresses the notion of protest against social injustice. He then moves into what looks like a different dimension, stressing the fact that protest is not sufficient. Man has to go beyond resentment which remains negative. Through Tom's mouth, Steinbeck promotes positive values: hungry children who get their dinner and men building a new house. In other words, food, life, and home (and, one supposes, love) are what really matters and what the future should be like. In addition, Tom stresses the fact that it will be present "ever'where – wherever you look (...) I'll be there." (289) The passage is important. Tom doesn't choose; everybody, anybody is concerned without any exclusions or divisions between human beings. Rich people are not superior and have no special rights. We could perhaps resort to the term "utopia" to describe Tom's vision, except that Tom (and presumably Steinbeck himself) believes that such a state is possible in the (near) future.

As she enters the barn after she has crossed the rain, Rose of Sharon discards her clothes and stands naked under an old blanket. Like Tom, the character is symbolically re-born, or rather undergoes a new birth as we now discover a completely different Rose of Sharon. She goes one step further than Tom who spoke of the duties of the rich. Rose of Sharon will put into practice the essential truth Ma has just discovered and expressed through her famous pronouncement: "Worse off we get, the more we got to do." (306) Indeed, the family has nothing left, no home, no car, no money, no food. Rose will give the only thing she possesses: her milk. In this passage full of paradoxes, she is reborn and at the same time as she becomes a (symbolic) mother, she at last finds the identity she has been unconsciously looking for ever since the book began. She indeed discovers the essence of motherhood with its true meaning. She gives her milk to a man who is about 50 and could be her father. This scene was harshly criticized when the novel appeared and has regularly been condemned by critics who have chosen to display very little sympathy and understanding for what we can safely reconstruct of Steinbeck's intentions. The novelist repeatedly pointed out that such an ending was rigorously logical. It is. To begin with, all the men have left the barn (apart of course from the dying man). Women have taken over, a process which started much earlier on in the novel, the moment the family abandoned their farm. Men cannot cope and they have slowly lost

their power and their authority as they have proved unable to feed their families. It certainly was a stroke of genius for Steinbeck to show a young woman – almost a teenager – who gives life to a (failed?) father figure. Here again, as with Tom, the values put forward are food, life, and undeniably love. Indeed, the three words are here strictly synonyms. It would also appear that Rose of Sharon creates a sort of home in that derelict, weather-beaten barn. Secondly, the reader notes a marked contrast between the man and the young woman. He shakes his head as if to refuse the food offered. She says a deep “Yes”, and eventually the life force wins over the attraction of death and despair. (At least one supposes that is what happens, as the novel ends there and we will know whether the man survived or not). In any case, it is the beginning of spring, the rain finally stops during the passage, suggesting that the scene could be a sort of new Mount Ararat. (They have reached that barn located at the top of a hill as the flood stops.) Besides, it is seven days since the man last had some food to eat. Are we wrong to suppose that, with Tom and Rose, Steinbeck wanted to show that it was possible for a new mankind to be born? Do we witness a new Creation?

Tom and Rose of Sharon are thus clearly no longer realistic characters. They have almost become mythical types whose function in the novel is to embody the values and ethical choices John Steinbeck is trying to promote. These choices sound extremely modern to us. One is almost tempted to ask the question whether the novelist had read Emmanuel Lévinas’s seminal *Totality and Infinity* (1979). The answer is most probably no as the book appeared in French in 1961. After all, the question is not really important. Steinbeck did not need Lévinas. Yet he was able to discover and express similar intuitions to those of the French philosopher. All the same, if one is familiar with Lévinas’s thought, it is decidedly uncanny to read *The Grapes of Wrath* afterwards. It is almost as if we were reading the same text twice.

In a famous letter, Steinbeck explained that the Joads “have” to meet the dying man by chance (1975). The meaning of the scene is indeed inseparable from the fact that the meeting is an unforeseeable event. Lévinas could have used exactly the same words. Relationships between humans are not reciprocal. We have an absolute duty towards the person we encounter by chance, the stranger, in other words, someone who is now part of my friends or a member of my family. That is what we have been saying when we dealt with the family (which of course doesn’t mean that we have no duties towards our friends and our family.) Lévinas was a deeply religious thinker, and Steinbeck most probably would not use Lévinas’s words when he said that it is the stranger that carries the trace of God – not me, but most certainly he would have concurred: the other is more important than I (who

believe that I have been created in the image of God. Lévinas explains that that absolutely doesn't give me any rights over the others). Lévinas wanted here to insist on the important idea that humility is one of the most important of all the virtues. A consequence of that pronouncement is that I am the "hostage" of the other, that is to say that I am responsible for his or her welfare and happiness. To summarize what is at the heart of Lévinas's and most certainly of Steinbeck's ethics: (i) you give, you don't receive; (ii) you say "yes", never "no" to the other. In this respect, *The Grapes of Wrath* is one of the two great 20<sup>th</sup> century novels which (almost) end with a resounding "Yes". The other one is of course James Joyce's *Ulysses*. It is possible to prefer Steinbeck's book, at least from an ethical point of view. Molly Bloom's "Yes" is purely personal and one is tempted to say strictly selfish, as the character is mainly concerned with her own happiness, not to say her sexual fantasies. Rose of Sharon was probably selfish like most teenagers, she certainly enjoyed sex with Connie. (The passage when they have sexual intercourse in the car next to the dying grand-mother has caused much ink to be spilled.) At the end of the book, she has however reached a stage completely beyond that type of behaviour. She says "Yes" to life in a way about which there is absolutely nothing personal. The only thing she now cares for is life, the life of a complete stranger. She expects nothing in exchange. Thirdly, the other gives a meaning to my life. In other words, that meaning doesn't come from me, and it is not already present in me. I understand who I am and what possibilities of life lie ahead of me when I meet the stranger. That is the case for Tom whose life will acquire its meaning when he finds those unknown people who suffer and/or are happy "ever'where – wherever." It is literally the case for Rose of Sharon who finally finds herself the moment she sees the old man in the barn.

#### **4. Conclusion**

There is no denying that Steinbeck's book speaks to us today. We mentioned what sounds for us like echoes of Emmanuel Lévinas. We could also have mentioned echoes of Jacques Derrida, who voices the same ethical concerns in virtually the same terms in what is curiously and unquestionably his most political book, as if politics could not but be ethical (or ethics political?) In *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (2005:86), Derrida writes that "a discourse on human rights and on democracy remains little more than an obscene alibi so long as it tolerates the terrible plight of so many millions of human beings suffering from malnutrition, disease, and humiliation, grossly deprived of the rights of all, of everyone, of anyone. (This 'anyone' comes before any other metaphysical determination as subject, human person, or

consciousness, before any juridical determination as compeer, compatriot, kin, brother, neighbour, fellow religious follower, or fellow citizen.)” Derrida adds that, if we choose to promote democracy, “what basically has to matter for us is what Jean Paulhan called ‘le premier venu’, translated by ‘the first to happen by,’ anyone, no matter who.” (ibid) With these very simple words, Jacques Derrida says exactly the same thing as Ma when she replaced “family” with the word “anybody” to explain that there was only value which counted: hospitality, giving to those we don’t know but who cross our path.

Steinbeck’s ethical ideas have implications. It is once again pointless to ask where they come from. Had the novelist read Spinoza or Nietzsche? Had he just simply heard about them? Perhaps it would be better to suggest that the possibilities of elaborating an ethical theory are singularly limited. In other words, we have a number of choices to make at the outset and we then become part of great, ancestral traditions. When one reads *The Grapes of Wrath*, it seems certain that Steinbeck, consciously or not, chose to place himself in the continuity of men like Spinoza or Nietzsche. He probably re-discovered on his own their central intuitions, the way they problematized the world and revealed the logic behind our desires and our actions. Steinbeck did the same. He was a great thinker, he possessed more than a fair amount of genius, and his intellectual argumentation when he dealt with questions of ethics and politics proves completely convincing (provided one looks at it very closely of course).

The basic choice is between morality and ethics, two words that for a number of philosophers have come today to acquire a very precise meaning. Gilles Deleuze summarizes the opposition between the two terms in a very clear and handy manner. “Ethics, which is to say a typology of immanent modes of existence, replaces Morality, which always refers existence to transcendent values.” (1988:23) Presumably, Deleuze became interested in ethics when he read Spinoza’s *Ethics*, a book that develops a purely immanent conception of life. Steinbeck clearly possessed a deeply similar sensibility. Positing a transcendent level clearly appeared to him as too facile and especially more dishonest.

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