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*The Grapes of Wrath* Has It All

John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* is a traditional western. There are many aspects that are similar between this novel and other westerns. There is the want, need and fight for land. This is a common theme amongst many westerns. People often want the land for one of two reasons. It either holds their only means of survival or it holds much power. Either way in many westerns there seems to always be two sides opposing fighting each other over land. Also, there is racism brought up throughout the book. Because segregation was the normal back in this era racism is very strong and prevalent in many westerns.

Along with this there are many other similarities between *The Grapes of Wrath* and westerns. There is the portion of the novel where the family lives in a boxcar, this brought the railroad into the story. Along with that there were parts such as the preacher, Casy, taking the blame for hitting someone which brings up the idea of a hero. There is always a hero in a good traditional western. There is also rebels and guns, drunkenness, robbing, and helping others. Then, there is the idea of leaving to go West. People in the novel and in other traditional westerns always discussed going West in order to make things better. Along with this idea of going West there comes the idea of hope present in westerns.

The discussion of land is a hot topic in many westerns. The idea of owning land was held with very high regard during this time. Westerns often bring in the possession of land and powerfulness it holds into the story in some way. There always seems to be two common ways

the land's importance is brought up, either through the need to survive or how the ownership held immense power over those who did not own any land. In the *Grapes of Wrath* there was a portion Steinbeck wrote that showed this strong notion, "We measured it and broke it up. We were born on it, and got killed on it, died on it. Even if it's no good, it's still ours. That's what makes it ours- being born on it, working it, dying on it. That makes ownership, not a paper with numbers on it." (Steinbeck, 34) There also seemed to be a few common difficult hurdles westerners were confronted with.

A main theme in many traditional westerns such as Limerick's *The Legacy of Conquest* is how the land does not cooperate with the people. Throughout the western ideal the land held both power and the hurdles the owners had to overcome all in one package. There was a portion in *The Legacy of Conquest* where the author stated, "They had trusted nature, and when nature behaved according to its own rules and not theirs, they felt betrayed." (Limerick, 42) The hurdles of mother nature can be seen conflicting with the ownership of land in Limerick's book. In the *Grape of Wrath* this is often the case throughout the whole novel. It comes up again and again. In the beginning the land is not producing enough so people are kicked off and when the families are constantly looking for work the land's production is often called into question along with the weather which greatly affects the land.

Besides hurdles coming in the form of weather affecting the land there are other hurdles common in both the Joad's story and other westerns. Racism always seems to be a struggle for one group in westerns. The often thought of group that must deal with this struggle the most is the Native Americans. In the film, "*Stagecoach*," the Native Americans were the bad guys. They

were portrayed as attempting to kill everyone, including women. Although there is no mention of Native Americans in the Steinbeck's novel there is racism present throughout the novel.

The Joad's encountered this through the ideas in the minds of the people of their new location in the form of Okies. The natives of the land regarded the immigrants as less than them and although this is often brought up by Steinbeck, he summed it up well here, "And they had hoped to find a home, and they found only hatred." (Steinbeck, 245) As it often goes in traditional westerns, immigrants are thought of as lower than land owners and often worked as slaves. Although they are not portrayed in the traditional sense of a slave being of African American decent immigrants work for less in lower jobs moving from places that have work to another when that work runs out. Along with that idea comes the idea of immigrants not knowing what to do with higher value things. People of other races were often thought of as being incompetent.

The majority race thought they were helping the minority races by allowing them to do certain things. In westerns such as "Bonanza," this can be seen when the Caucasian people are allowing races such as the Chinese to work for them. It is a form a slavery, but it is looked at as a lesser evil because although they required them to work for lower wages, doing "lower" jobs, they were still allowing the minority race the chance to work. Steinbeck also brings this up in his novel. In Chapter nineteen this is discussed in depth, "They imported slaves, although they did not call them slaves: Chinese, Japanese, Mexicans, Filipinos. They live on rice and beans, the business men said. They don't need much. They wouldn't know what to do with good wages." (Steinbeck, 244) Here and in other traditional westerns one group, often of the

Caucasian race, take the responsibility and well being of a different race into their hands, thinking they are helping when indeed it is segregation. The segregation ideal of their thoughts leads to the racism pouring out through their actions and words. Although everyone in America is essentially an immigrant, the majority race seemed to be established by the one race in the area that could remain settled down. The race or races that had to remain in constant motion seemed to be the ones that became hated.

The need to be constantly in motion is another commonality amongst traditional westerns. Often, transportation becoming mechanical in some way is how this is brought up and portrayed. The railroads seem to be another important western topic because of the huge role it played in the Western era. In the film, "*Stagecoach*," this was seen when everyone was loaded up in the stagecoach being pulled by the horses. In the *Grapes of Wrath*, this is shown with the tractors taking the place of the men's work. It can also be seen when the Joad's are constantly in motion and having to deal with their truck. It is another hurdle they must overcome on a regular basis. Steinbeck brings up the importance of the railroad toward the end of his novel. When the rain started to come down the family found a camp where they could live in a railroad car. The railroad car became an important life saving item. In the novel Pa Joad said, "You been aroun. You know what chancet we got a gettin' a dry place to stay." (Steinbeck, 460) Pa Joad said this in response to the men of the railroad car camp thinking about leaving when the rain started coming down hard and it started to flood.

Pa Joad was the hero in this portion of the book, or at least he attempted to be in that moment. When the waters were getting higher, he led the men of the camp to build a barrier to

the railroad car to try and hold off the water. In every western there is always a hero present. There is always one man willing to take a risk in order to save or help others. Although there are small parts in the novel where different heroes emerge, the main hero was Casy. After the fight broke out at one of the Hoovserville's the Joads camped at, and a woman's hand was shot off, Tom proceeded to assault the deputy who caused the commotion. Being that Tom was on parole Casy suggested to take the fall here, "Casy grinned at him. Somebody got to take the blame. I got no kids. They'll jus' put me in jail, an I ain't doin nothin but set around." (Steinbeck, 279) Casy prominently emerges as the hero, taking the fall so Tom can remain with his family.

The issue that led up to Casy arising as a hero was the man that came to the camp asking if anyone wanted to work for him. Floyd began to question the man which upset him. The questions came because Floyd had negative experiences gaining low wages when he jumped on a job. Floyd continued to agitate the man by stating, "I'll go mister. You're a contractor, an you got a license. You just show your license, an then you give us an order to go to work, an where, an when, an how much we'll get, an you gin that, an we'll all go." (Steinbeck, 275) In many westerns there are rebels trying to fight the "bad guy." In the *Grapes of Wrath*, the bad guy was the land owners because they were asking so many men to go work which lowered the working men's wages. Because of the issues they could not seem to overcome no matter what solutions they threw at it the people of the West had to face, there seems to be one that is commonly brought up in many traditional westerns, alcohol.

In the "*Stagecoach*," there was a gentleman who made alcohol in the stagecoach and a gentleman who used to be a doctor but now drank a lot. Throughout the novel the presence of

alcohol is often brought up with the character of Uncle John. In both examples along with other westerns alcohol and the notion of it getting rid of pain is often brought up. In the film the doctor lost his job as a doctor, so he turned to alcohol to numb that pain. It helped in forget his troubles in that area of his life. In the novel, Uncle John discusses why he drinks in different parts of the story. He talks about his sins and the main one being the loss of his wife. In a few different spots in Steinbeck's novel Uncle John recalls that night. He discusses how they ate a lot and he attributed her stomach pains to that fact. After his wife died that same night, he blamed himself for not doing more. He talks to Ma and Pa Joad about the need to drink even when they did not have the funds to support it. At one-point Tom goes to find Uncle John after he let the family know he was going to get drunk because he could not deal with all of his sins.

Another reason contributing to the stress the Joad family is experiencing in the story is the need for work in order to buy food. Turning to a traditional western such as "*Bonanza*," there always seems to be a robbery of some sort present. In this western series there are constant robberies being shown involving bandits hunting down a stagecoach for the money held on it. Even though this exact scene is not mentioned in Steinbeck's story a form of it did emerge. The author points out how many families during this time period experienced the robbing of food.

As the Joad's were, many families were starving during this time and willing to work for food if nothing else. The wealthier land owners were willing to rob these families of food if they could not make their money on the food they had grown. Steinbeck points this out here, "And men with hoses squirt kerosene on the oranges, and they are angry at the crime, angry at the people who have come to take the fruit," and "The fertile earth, the straight tee rows, the sturdy

trunks, and the ripe fruit. And children dying of pellagra must die because a profit cannot be taken from an orange.” (Steinbeck, 367) So, the land owners felt they were being robbed because they could not get the money, they thought they should for their crops, and the people were being robbed of the food because the land owners were willing to go to extreme lengths to ensure the people did not eat their food.

In many instances throughout the story, the Joad's are giving food to others. Limerick discussed being victims and who they really were in her book. In Steinbeck's story when the Joad's enter the tent camp the children come running up because they see and smell Ma Joad making stew. Ma Joad felt bad because the children had said they only ate fried dough and were hungry. Ma Joad proceeded to feed her family but also wanted to help the starving children. She told them they could have what was left of the stew, but as she went into their tent, she said she did not know if she was helping or hurting those children. Here it can be seen that both authors held the same idea of questioning who the victims were. In the novel, Ma Joad always falls back on the idea of the importance of helping others. She seems to have passed this on to her family because in the end Rose of Sharon is willing to breastfeed a dying starving man. In the “*Stagecoach*” film John Wayne helped the different people present in the stagecoach during their trip. Helping others is always present in traditional westerns.

Helping others seems to become important due to the need to be in constant motion. People throughout the West always seemed to be on the move. The West presented the idea of a better life to those not living there. This idea is strong in almost every Western. Steinbeck first brings this up by stating, “Lots of families in the East would like to own a piece of

land.” (Steinbeck, 34) When families were presented with issues such as getting kicked off their land, as in the Joads case, one of the first solutions to the problem was to go west. To show this was an immediate solution the author wrote, “Why don’t you go on west to California? There’s work there, and it never gets cold. Why, you can reach out anywhere and pick an orange. Why, there’s always some kind of crop to work in.” (Steinbeck, 35)

Along with this idea of going West came the strong presence of hope. In traditional westerns hope is very present. In *Stagecoach*, John Wayne created hope in cases such as inviting the lady to go live on his ranch when she had nothing left and got kicked out of the town. In *Grapes of Wrath*, Ma Joad is constantly pushing hope on the family. She discusses it with Tom regarding his parole, Rose of Sharon when it came to her pregnancy, and the family’s new life in California. When the family first gets kicked off their land, she talks about how they will get work, so they can buy a home with a nice fence. Ma Joad holds onto the idea of hope throughout the whole story, so she can pass it on to her family.

Along with the strong idea of hope present in John Steinbeck’s story of the Joad family there are many other commonalities present between this story and traditional westerns. Although the robbing took a different form in the story it was still brought to the forefront. Food being burned by land owners in order to keep people who could not afford it from getting their hands on it was a form of this robbery. The Joads constantly being subjected to the term Okies in a derogatory form showed a strong sense of racism. The discussion Steinbeck brought into the story regarding different races immigrating can be seen in any western in some form. Other ideas such as land, and the fighting for ultimate ownership and control over it, drunkenness, and

helping others are all things that make a western a western. All of those were brought up in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, adding it to the list of traditional westerns.