

Josephine Ortiz

HIST 413

Paper #3 (Steinbeck)

When it comes to books, movies, etc being considered western it must have components that make it western. Now of course for something to be considered Western it needs to be set in the West, but I also think that the time frame is important too. A western is usually from the late 19th century sometimes a little earlier than that. Not all western movies have to have the typical cowboy and the tribe of Indians in order for it to be western. One of the main components of a classic western is the migration to the West. People migrating West is an idea that the book is considered a Western, whether it be white settlers, Indians, or just workers looking for work. When migrating West these typical Westerns have a natural theme to them such as hope and opportunity. They migrate West in hopes for land, money, work, etc, to better their lives and have advantages that they could only get in the West. Also, with a classic western comes the idea of some kind of battle or fight of a sort. This could play out to be many different types of things, a physical fight over land, food resources, or a battle against mother nature. Either way, there is always an idea of some sort of battle that goes on within a classic western. The last thing that I think that classifies as a western is the idea of a struggle in the West. The West is known for having great opportunities and is a land of hopes for people, but they must struggle in some kind of way in order to get to that final goal they're searching for.

The book, *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck is considered a traditional Western because it has many of the same concepts of a traditional western. The time and place of the book is completely accurate and appropriate for it to be a western novel. They are in Oklahoma

then migrate West further to California which keeps the setting of the overall book in the West. It is a book that revolves around the continuing migration of the Joad family to find work so that they can have a better opportunity to live off of. They had to deal with the struggles of the camps and the unfortunate situation of them getting pushed off their land. The book explains a lot of accurate events that were happening in the West at the time and what the Joad family was having to deal with. This book may not have the normal cowboys and shoot outs that one might expect when thinking of a Western, but it definitely has the aspects of a traditional western overall.

A big component of a traditional western is the migration to the West. In this book, the Joad family had to move from their farm in Oklahoma to California in search for decent work to live off of. Steinbeck states, “in the little houses the tenant people sifted their belongings and the belongings of their fathers and of their grandfathers. Picked over the possessions for the journey to the west.” (86). The people were getting pushed off of the lands that they have been in for years and years due to the invention of new tractors that could do work more easily and efficiently. Which left them homeless with no money, which left them no choice but to go West to California where they were told there would be work. According to Steinbeck, “and when the owner men told us to go, that’s us; and when the tractor hit the house, that’s us until we’re dead. To California or any place—every one a drum major leading a parade of hurts, marching with our bitterness.” (87-88). They had to deal with the struggle of not having a stable home anymore and having to become accustomed to this life of uncertainty. But with this uncertainty came hopes for better opportunity, which is something that is a common theme that plays in the West. They were told that in California there would be plenty of work with pretty decent pay, so although they were “bitter” over losing almost everything they knew, they still had the hopes that the further West they went that there lied a better life for them anyway.

When it comes to the battles that they faced during this time it was the battle between themselves and mother nature. Other than being pushed out due to the tractors, this was the time of the Dust Bowl. This horrible event led to the land being very dry and ruined, which meant that they could no longer grow crops in their farms. According to Steinbeck, "...the dirt crust broke and the dust formed. Every morning thing lifted the dust into the air: a walking man lifted a thin layer as high as his waist" (2). The dust was just getting worse and worse and soon left the people in the Dust Bowl with nothing to live off of. This weather left them in a drought that they could not come back from on their own, which was also a reason for the migration West. With no crops to make money off of or have to feed their families the Joads and many other people like them were left to starve to move to look for work to support themselves. The very high winds during this Dust Bowl didn't help the living conditions either, many people left on account that they couldn't handle the conditions. Steinbeck stated "the people came out of their houses and smelled the hot stinging air and covered their noses from it. And the children came out of the houses, but they did not run or shout as they would have done after a rain. Men stood by their fences and looked at the ruined corn, drying fast now..." (3). The dust bowl during this time was a battle for the people that lived through it and gave them many struggles to deal with for the aftermath.

The people having nothing left to do but to just migrate further West for more work were faced with many struggles along the way. Not only was the travel from Oklahoma to California very challenging due to lack of food and resources. But the Joads and many others were having to travel to multiple camps looking for good work with a stable place to stay and on top of that having to get paid lower wages than what they were originally told. According to Steinbeck, "the fields were fruitful, and starving men moved on the roads. The granaries were full and the

children of the poor grew up rachitic and the pustules of pellagra swelled on their sides. The great companies did not know that the line between hunger and anger is a thin line.” (284). This was a problem in the West that was happening to a lot of people, they were picking the fruit and basically handling food all day every day, but they went home starving. Most days they didn’t even make enough money to buy a decent size meal to feed their family. This issue of starving while under orange trees and other fruit trees was only a problem specific to the West. Steinbeck also describes, “and the smell of rot fills the country. Burn coffee for fuel in the ships. Burn corn to keep warm, it makes a hot fire. Dump potatoes in the rivers and place guards along the banks to keep the hungry people from fishing them out. Slaughter the pigs and bury them...” (349). The companies would rather have the workers and the people starve than to give what leftovers they had to the hungry. When it came to work, what was happening was that the migrant workers (Joads) were told that they would get 5 cents per box of peaches in California, but once more people came to work the wages dropped. Steinbeck stated, “we come to work there. They says it’s gonna be fi’ cents. They was a hell of a lot of us. We got there an’ they says they’re payin’ two an’ a half cents. A fella can’t even eat on that, an’ if he got kids...” (383). These migrant workers and the Joads were having to endure a lot of struggles and hardships that came with the hope of a better opportunity that seemed like it would never come.

Although the bigger companies were careless and wanted the hard-working people of the West to struggle, they themselves always seemed to come together and unite. When they all struggle together it creates a sense of family and common ground for them all. Steinbeck stated, “In the evening a strange thing happened: the twenty families became one family, the children were the children of all. The loss of home became one loss, and the golden time in the West was one dream.” (193). They all took care of one another and made sure that everyone around them

was fed, or at least tried to. These people were much like an Indian tribe of any other traditional western, they function together as a community. When one person or child was sick then it was a sad time for everyone around them, if they lost a person then it was a loss for them all. This was something that is present in the West and traditional westerns, people uniting and becoming one big unit. Steinbeck wrote, “learnin’ it all a time, ever’ day. If you’re in trouble or hurt or need—go to poor people. They’re the only ones that’ll help—the only ones.” (376). The poor people are more willing to give and help because they have been in the situation where they needed the same help, so they don’t mind. It’s a big community where you can take but you also need to help and put in too. It’s a sense of that none of the big companies are going to care about them, so they need to care for each other! This idea of unity is a common theme in the traditional westerns, no matter who it is between.

Overall, this book classifies as a traditional western in many of its aspects. The story and the accurate information in the in between chapters really pulled together to make this book come across as a western. From the migration West and the steady setting of the West, to the time in place it took part in. This book had concepts of a western like a typical battle that needed to be faced as well as struggles that came along with that. And the fact that migrating West was a sense of opportunity and hope for these people in this western book, like any other western. There was also the sense of unity in this book that has been proven to be present in the west and in the western books and movies.