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HIST 413

Steinbeck Essay

John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath" is the greatest example of a western story set in the modern world. Steinbeck's novel may not play on the classic western tropes of 'cowboys vs. Indians' or a nameless hero saving a troubled town from an evil land baron that plague the western genre in Hollywood but it does follow many of the same themes and conflicts that many a pioneer faced through the true story of the West. Just like the settlers of the West before them, the Joad family decide to leave their home in Oklahoma and travel West in the hopes of building a new life and find their fortune in California. Their journey is fret with danger and loss and they ultimately learn that the reality of moving west is harsh and nothing like what they had dreamed of at their outset. *Something to compare the Joads as Okies so mentioning Joads also refers to Okies?*

Patricia Nelson Limerick's "Legacy of Conquest" reveals the similarities between the Joad's dreams of California and that of the Americans that settled the West in the 1800s. One such comparison can be made with the attitudes of the settlers on work and independence. The Americans that settled the West did so for two large reasons; to better their lives and live independent from government and corporate institutions. In support Limerick wrote, "The laborer was to be self-employed; and the status of laborer was to be temporary, left behind when profits made escape possible" (Limerick, 97). The settlers would take wage earning jobs to

survive but their ultimate goal was to eventually become rich enough that they no longer needed to work for businesses. This showcases one of the greatest hopes that the Joads have at the beginning of the novel. The Joads may have had their land taken from them by the banks, but they did not stay and try to rebuild their lives in Oklahoma. Instead, they moved west in the hopes of escaping the greedy institutions in place, just as the settlers before them. So strong was their distrust of institutions that Steinbeck refers to them as “the monster.” Describing the banks’ greed, Steinbeck writes, “those creatures don’t breath air, don’t eat side-meat. They breathe profits; they eat the interest on money. If they don’t get it, they die,” (Steinbeck, 32) Feeling deprived of opportunity at home by banks and greedy businessmen, the Joads and other Okies pack up everything they own not only to build their fortune, but to escape ‘the monster.’

As stated, the Joads also headed packed up and left their homes for the same reason as many a hopeful miner had in 1849; to build their fortune in California. During the 1800s, the West was often advertised as a place of new beginning where anyone could become rich if only they worked hard enough. Grandpa Joad at one point shows this most declaring that when he gets to California he’ll, “Gonna get me a whole big bunch a grapes off a bush, or whatever, an I’m gonna squash em on my face an’ let ‘em runoffen my chin,” (Steinbeck, 83). Much of this is brought out the Joads discovery of a handbill promoting the need for workers in California. While the actual occurrence of this type of promoting is debated, there is evidence that this type of thing did happen during the 1930s, prompting many Okies to head to California. However, just as many of the settlers, the Joads move to California would turn out to be nothing but a bitter hope unlike any of the promoting.