The Impact of Poverty on Individual Identity in John Steinbeck’s: The Grapes of Wrath

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Abstract

John Steinbeck’s novel: The Grapes of Wrath is a novel where a family “the Joad” is compelled to leave Oklahoma, a city touched by the Great Depression of the thirties and destroyed by a natural phenomenon known as the: Dust Bowl. Those fictional characters sought to fulfill their dreams by going to California, the supposedly rich earth that would provide them a secure and cozy shelter. Instead of that, those immigrants found themselves living in precarious conditions, dispossessed and unable to satisfy quintessential needs such as eating or even sleeping in suitable houses. I will show that during hard times, human beings connect together and the individual’s self-identity is transformed into group solidarity. The only way to succeed to overcome everyday life’s difficulties is the union of people who unite their efforts to obtain what they long for: “if we all get jobs an’ all work-maybe we can get one of them little white houses.” (The Grapes of Wrath: 93) Here we see Karl Marx’s influence on John Steinbeck’s novel; a single person cannot achieve his goal by himself, the endeavors must be united because for him unity makes strength. What about the individual’s identity as an independent being? I will show that John Steinbeck draws a pessimistic image of people struggling with their bad conditions alone. In most cases, those lonely persons are doomed to die or stay forever in their extremely poor conditions. Hence, it is important and even compulsory to be part of a family or group in order to exist. In any group there must be leaders who would guide the tribe. When someone is destitute and alone, he lacks the means that could help him to overcome life’s difficulties and assert his singularity.

Keywords: class struggle, identity, Great Depression, dust bowl, capitalism, migration.
Introduction

*The Grapes of Wrath* by John Ernst Steinbeck (1902-1968) is one of American literature’s greatest novels. It was first published in The United States in 1939 and Steinbeck was awarded with the Pulitzer Prize and a noble prize in 1962 for writing such an outstanding fiction. The novel is set during the harsh economic period of the thirties and its main concern is sociological because the story is about the difficult path undertaken by citizens from Oklahoma, called pejoratively: “The Okies” to find a better life in California, after losing everything they possessed in their native town. The focus is made on a family: the Joads who were compelled to leave their farm as many other families in the same situation. Throughout the narration we discover the misery in which lived those poor migrant. In the present paper, I will start by presenting this harsh period known as the great depression which engendered numerous poor families on American soils. Secondly, I will deal with what is known as the dust bowl, a natural phenomenon that ravaged and destroyed crops, pushing small farmers to lose all their possessions and pushing them to migrate in bad conditions with the dream of ameliorating their critical situations. Afterwards, I will show the consequences of being destitute and badly off, on one’s identity, distinguishing individual identity from group identity.

I) Poverty during the thirties in John Steinbeck’s: *The Grapes of Wrath*

A) The Great Depression

During the thirties, The United States of America had to face its worst economic crisis which is what we call: the Great Depression. It is defined by Christina D. Romer as being an economic crisis that lasted about ten years, from 1929 to 1939. The starting point of this unfathomable crisis is the United States of America and it spread like wildfire in industrialized countries such as France, United Kingdom etc.:

Although the Depression originated in the United States, it resulted in drastic declines in output, severe unemployment, and acute deflation in almost every country of the globe. But its social and cultural effects were no less staggering, especially in the United States, where the Great Depression ranks second only to the Civil War as the gravest crisis in American history.

Deflation is when consumerism drops drastically obliging industrial producers to decrease their prices in order to sell their goods. These drops of prices with a badly managed economic policy engendered the stock market crash of October 1929, also known as “Black Thursday.” Hence, fewer profits were made by companies that ended up in most cases indebted, leading them to bankruptcy.

Banks were not trusted anymore and people started to hate those financial institutions, a resentment which is mentioned in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Small farmers are the most penalized by this capitalist system which Steinbeck metaphorically compares to a monster: “But the monster’s sick. Something’s happened to the
monster.” (The Grapes of Wrath: 34) Through this remark Steinbeck denounces the collapse of an entire system. Banks are the enemies and for Steinbeck those institutions, the rotten fruit of capitalist system must die. Banks are personified and Oklahoma’s citizens fantasize on killing them: “Maybe we can kill banks.” (35)

The great depression led to a decrease of employment, it was very hard to find a job. Small farmers were the most penalized by this crisis because they lost almost everything they possessed:

“The little farmers watched debt creep upon them like the tide. They sprayed the trees and sold no crop, they pruned and grafted and sold no crop, they pruned and grafted and could not pick the crop. And the men of knowledge have worked, have considered, and the fruit is nothing on the ground, and the decaying mash in the wine vat is poisoning the air. And taste the wine-no grape flavor at all, just sulphur and tannic acid and alcohol. (GW: 384)

Even nature was not mild with them and worsens their situation. The earth dried and crops were spoiled. This is what is commonly known as the dust bowl.

B) The Dust Bowl

Oklahoma City which is the initial setting of The Grapes of Wrath is one of the American States concerned by what is called the Dust Bowl. The main characteristic of this phenomenon is dryness and a hostile setting. An interesting website devoted to topics related to “Farming in the 1930’s” gives us an idea about it:

The Dust Bowl got its name after Black Sunday, April 14, 1935. More and more dust storms had been blowing up in the years leading up to that day. In 1932, 14 dust storms were recorded on the Plains. In 1933, there were 38 storms. By 1934, it was estimated that 100 million acres of farmland had lost all or most of the topsoil to the winds. By April 1935, there had been weeks of dust storms, but the cloud that appeared on the horizon that Sunday was the worst.

From the first pages of the novel we are introduced to a gloomy atmosphere, where people find it difficult to breathe. It is clear that characters evolving in Oklahoma are suffering from this arid and hostile atmosphere: “Men and women huddled in their houses, and they tied handkerchiefs over their noses when they went out, and wore goggles to protect their eyes.” (The Grapes of Wrath: 3)

Oklahoma is described as a desert, a hell on earth. Nature is angry and this is obvious through the description of this dusty setting in many passages in the novel: “a cloud of dust boiled up.” (The Grapes of Wrath: 16); “The sun was hot, and no wind stirred the sifted dust.” (The Grapes of Wrath: 17) So nature becomes harmful, the sun burns reminiscent of God’s punishments. The reader can hardly imagine human beings living in such conditions. And that is confirmed, when the main character of the novel Tom Joad is on his way to his home after being imprisoned for killing a man during a fight. In his route, he meets an old man, Jim Casy a former preacher who foreshadows that Tom is not going to find his family because most people left Oklahoma to California which is characterized by a fertile and
abundant earth: Casey: “Somepin’s happening. I went up an’ I looked, an’ the houses is all empty, an’ the lan’ is empty, an’ this whole country is empty.” (101)

Casey’s prophecy turns to be true and it is a deserted house that Tom finds out.

In the neighborhood, he meets Muley who explains to him that the town is empty city because of the dust bowl that destroyed families financially letting them no other options than leaving Oklahoma in order to have a brighter future:

“Oh! They talked pretty about it. You know what kinda years we been havin’. Dust comin’ up an’ spoilin’ ever’thing so a man didn’t get enough crop to plug up an ant’s ass. An’ ever’body got bills at the grocery. You know how it is. Well, the folks that owns the lan’ says, ‘We can’t afford to keep no tenants.’ An’ they says, ‘The share a tenant gets is just’ the margin a profit we can’t afford to lose.’ An’ they says, ‘The share a tenant gets is jus’ the margin a profit we can’t afford to lose.’ An they says, ‘If we putt all our lan’ in one piece we can jus’ hardly make her pay.’ So they tractorred all the tenants off a the lan’ All ‘cept me, an’ by God I ain’t goin’. Tommy, you know me. You knewed me all your life.” (The Grapes of Wrath: 50)

Thus, Muley has been abandoned by his wife and children who left him to satisfy their quintessential needs: “My wife an’ the kids an’ her brother all took an’ went to California. They wasn’t nothin’ to eat. They wasn’t as mad as me, so they went. They wasn’t nothin’ to eat here. (51) Muley lives in such harsh conditions that he is obliged to eat animals he catches and this is reminiscent of primitive men: “For a while I et frogs an’ squirrels an’ prairie dogs sometimes.” (51) Tom Joad and Casey carry on their way to find Tom’s family who are at Uncle John’s house preparing them to go to California. A family composed of grandparents, parents and their children: “In the late afternoon the truck came back, bumping and rattling through the dust, and there was a layer of dust in the bed, and the hood was covered with dust, and the headlights were obscured with a red flour.” (102). The family finally reaches California, the land of their dreams where they are confronted to poverty, famine and very poor conditions of living. Even children found themselves obliged to work with their parents in the field. The dream is transformed into a nightmare; California’s inhabitants did not accept those migrant workers who are perceived as a threat on their nation. The Joads ended up living in different camps like gypsies.

II) Consequences of being destitute on one’s Identity

While the Joads headed to California, they left behind them Muley. He resisted the temptation of going to this Eden like or Promised Land, California with his peers but as a consequence we feel that this character is dehumanized, he is transformed into a kind of beast who would eat anything he finds in order to survive. The reader imagines a tragic end for this homeless and penniless character. For Steinbeck, people need to unite their strength in order to survive and overcome the encountered difficulties and in this we see Karl Marx’s influence on his writings. Poverty arouses people’s anger who rebel against the system organizing strikes to protest against the government, the capitalist system, the police etc.:

“in the eyes of the people there is the failure; and in the eyes of the hungry there is a growing wrath. In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage. (The Grapes of Wrath: 385)
But it is not that kind of complicity that Steinbeck celebrates in his novels but it is beyond that. There are two kinds of unions but the one that encourages Steinbeck is solidarity. People must share what they have in their possession even if it is scarce. It is a pity for Steinbeck that children starve to death while producers destroy the surplus of their productions in order to make profit: “There is a crime here that goes beyond denunciation. There is sorrow here that weeping cannot symbolize. There is a failure here that topples all our success. The fertile earth, the straight tree rows, the sturdy trunks, and the ripe fruit. And children dying of pellagra must die because a profit cannot be taken from an orange. And coroners must fill in certificate – died of malnutrition – because the food must rot, must be forced to rot.” (The Grapes of Wrath: 385)

Agriculture became during the thirties a real industry which must be productive and valuable. Those who are unable to follow that tendency lost their holdings to banks that thanks to their wealth could use modern tools to make profitable the lands they took from families such as the Joads.

Chapter five of The Grapes of Wrath is about the appropriation by banks of the small farmers’ lands. Machines were brought to transform the soil; they are compared to invading animals:

THE TRACTORS came over the roads and into the fields, great crawlers moving like insects, having the incredible strength of insects. They crawled over the ground, laying the track and rolling on it and picking it up. Diesel tractors, puttering while they stood idle; they thundered when they moved, and then settled down to a droning roar. Snubnosed monsters, raising the dust and sticking their snouts into it, straight down the country, across the country, through fences, through dooryards, in and out of gullies in straight lines. (36)

There is the impression that those machines are living creatures who are assaulting, harming the earth. Paradoxically, the driver of the tractor is dehumanized: “The man sitting in the iron seat did not look like a man.” (37) We have the feeling that the man driving the machine is controlled by it:

A twitch at the controls could swerve the cat, but the driver’s hands could not twitch because the monster that built the tractors, the monster that sent the tractor out, had somehow got into the driver’s hands, into his brain and muscle, had goggled him and muzzled him – goggled his mind, muzzled his speech, goggled his perception, muzzled his protest. (37)

He is dispossessed of his identity, being described as a robot mechanically applying what he has been ordered to do. He is evicting from their homes people from his own community without any mercy or compassion. This tractor driver has a family that he has to take care of; hence he is obliged to put aside his feelings and become heartless in order to fulfil the job he is assigned to do. Joe Davis’s son is paid $3 per day for his work and that is all which matters for him. The driver is like a man who has sold his soul to the devil. He does not feel for those people: “But the machine man, driving a dead tractor on land he does not know and love, understands only chemistry; and he is contemptuous of the land and of himself. When the corrugated iron doors are shut, he goes home, and his home is not the land.” (126)
While the driver becomes an object, banks are personified in *The Grapes of Wrath* by Okies. Banks are personified and people want to get rid of them: “Maybe we can kill banks.” (35)

Hence, the capitalist system is a one which pushes people to individualism. Everybody thinks about his own interests. We can take the example of the Californian owners who profited from the dust bowl to have cheap manual labour. Since they pay low salaries to their employees, it is clear that they do so to make more personal profits. Loek Halman, highly inspired by Bellah, introduces individualism in his article: “Individualism in individualized society” Results from the European Values Surveys”. He gives as evidence two kinds of individualism; the first one is utilitarian:

This variant stresses personal interest, material success, personal responsibility, accomplishment, property, work, earning and saving money. Furthermore, this individualism advocates the Darwinistic stance that only the best and the strongest can survive. Solidarity is thus not encouraged by this form of individualism, for everybody should take care of himself, and each individual is personally responsible for his acts. (1)

In this case, people’s aim in life is to increase their benefits and focus on their “self-interest”. As already mentioned, the Californian farmers abused the immigrant population coming from Oklahoma for instance. Numerous pamphlets were distributed, promising the destitute Okies good opportunities of work. Since many people applied for the jobs they were offering, those farmers acted selfishly with those people they hired. In *The Grapes of Wrath* we are even more shocked by such individualistic behaviour because even children as mentioned previously and old people are obliged to work in those farms in harsh conditions. Those poor people are not even able to satisfy primary needs such as eating in order to survive. Children are unable to control themselves when they see food and are described as savage animals. They are fed with fried dough which is not really beneficial to their growth. The dramatic consequence of this utilitarian individualism is of course the tragic death of many children and adults when everyone thought only about himself. There is another kind of individualism which is known as expressive or “qualitative” (Schnabel: 1983):

This form of individualism refers to individual autonomy, creativity and the uniqueness of the individual. Originality and self-realization are important features of this form of individualism (Elchardus and Heyvaert, 1991) which is associated with pleasure, passion, authenticity, hedonism, and intense expressions of personal feelings. Both forms of individualism are aptly summarized by Bellah et al. as follows: "one is moral, ultimately grounded in religion, according to which life is sacred and each person is unique, irreplaceable, and priceless; the other is rational and utilitarian, in which the social good is whatever best satisfies the preferences of individual actors” (Bellah et al., 1992: 114-115).

Rose of Sharon, Tom Joad’s sister gives birth to a still born baby who never breathed. Steinbeck wants to use this unborn baby to denounce the horror of such a system where human beings live like cattle in awful conditions. Rose of Sharon lost her baby because of the bad conditions she is living in: “On a newspaper lay a blue shriveled little mummy. “Never breathed,” said Mrs. Wainwright softly. Never was alive.” (*The Grapes of Wrath*: 489)
Rose of Sharon’s pregnancy was doomed to have such tragic issue, because the woman did not even have suitable clothes to warm her: “The girl shivered violently.” (The Grapes Of Wrath: 476). Instead of burying the corpse of Rose of Sharon’s deceased baby, her Uncle John decides to throw him, and by this act, he denounces the despair those people are living in:

“Go down an’ tell ‘em. Go down in the street an’ rot an’ tell ‘em that way. That’s the way you can talk. Don’t even know if you was a boy or a girl. Ain’t gonna find out. Go on down now, an’ lay in the street. Maybe they’ll know then.” He guided the box gently out into the current and let it go.” (The Grapes of Wrath: 494)

However, Steinbeck does not end his fiction on such a pessimistic tone, because he uses Rose of Sharon to show that even in despair there is hope.

Rose of Sharon loosened one side of the blanket and bared her breast. “You got to,” she said. She squirmed closer and pulled his head close. “There!” she said. “There.” Her hand moved behind his head and supported it. Her fingers moved gently in her hair. She looked up and across the barn, and her lips came together and smiled mysteriously.” (The Grapes Of Wrath: 502)

This is a great act of generosity; Rose of Sharon gives her own milk to breastfeed an anonymous man she finds out in a dry place. The young man is starving to death but with her gesture we believe that his life is spared and hope is revived thanks to this unity:

**Conclusion**

To conclude, during the thirties poverty was induced after several crises that the United States had to face which are the great depression and the dust bowl. Many families found themselves destitute however something evolved in those people’s behavior. They moved from an individualistic prospective to a group identity. Poverty’s aftermath on those migrant country people is to bind together, ending up, forming a single unity to improve their human condition and to face every day life’s difficulties. People’s only hope of preserving their dignity is to unite. Unity makes people’s strength, it is better to be part of a group instead of facing lonely a harsh world.
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