

A Study on The Pictures of The Great Depression in The Grapes of Wrath

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ABSTRACT: The Grapes of Wrath, as one of John Steinbeck's masterpieces, is a novel that deeply reveals the many problems of American society during the Great Depression, especially the increasing gap between the rich and the poor, the plight of the working class, and the worrying state of survival of farmers. Taking The Grapes of Wrath as the object of study, this paper explores through textual analysis the ecological picture of the natural and social environments intertwined in the work, focusing on how this picture reflects the depressed atmosphere of the Great Depression era. In addition, with the help of literary criticism theory, this paper analyses how Steinbeck shows the resistance and hope of the underclass people under oppression through delicate description and emotional rendering. In conclusion, this study argues that The Grapes of Wrath is not only a realistic portrayal of American society during the Great Depression, but also a profound reflection on the plight of human existence, and that the people at the ordinary people also have the power to change the world..

KEYWORDS: John Steinbeck; the Great Depression; survival dilemma; The Grapes of Wrath

I. INTRODUCTION

As John Steinbeck's masterpiece, The Grapes of Wrath is considered to have "reasserted the close connection between history and literature" (Salloom, 2024, p. 20), presents vivid pictures of hardship, resilience, and the complex interactions between human and environmental forces. By interweaving the personal struggles of the Joad family with the wider social and ecological context, the novel not only reveals the plight of the individual, but also reflects deeply on the systemic issues of class, labour and environmental degradation of the era.

The Grapes of Wrath is closely tied to environmental issues, delving into the ecological conditions that exacerbate the suffering of displaced people. The dust storms of the Great Plains, which destroy land and force farmers from their homes, serve as a powerful symbol of the catastrophe caused by a combination of human greed and natural fury. Steinbeck explores the ecological consequences of unsustainable agricultural practices, which, combined with a severe drought, create an environment that is unforgiving of the Joads and other migrants. This environmental destruction is not only a backdrop on a physical level, but also a symbol of fading hope and human dignity. The land that once nurtured them now harms them in turn.

Steinbeck creates a stark metaphor for the shattering of the American dream by depicting the migration of the Joad family from the Dust Bowl-ravaged plains of Oklahoma to the hopeful state of California. The Great Depression serves as the backdrop for this migration, highlighting the disillusionment experienced by many who once believed the country could bring prosperity. The novel overflows with social upheaval, revealing the widening gulf between the wealthy elite and the poor working class. By portraying these social tensions, Steinbeck not only reveals the gap between rich and poor, but also offers a sharp critique of the capitalist system that perpetuates this injustice. Migrant workers who lose their dignity and are forced to leave their homes become a symbol of the failure of a society — a society that neglects the most vulnerable and which, in their eyes, seems incapable of offering any hope.

The vivid narratives in The Grapes of Wrath are not only a testament to history, but also a profound commentary across time and space. This paper will explore the picture of the Great Depression in the United States as depicted in the novel from literary, social and ecological perspectives. Through analysing the fates of the characters, social injustices and environmental destruction in the novel, it aims to reveal the deep contradictions and dilemmas of American society during the Great Depression.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath (1939) offers a compelling, multifaceted portrayal of life during the Great Depression, shedding light on the harsh realities faced by displaced farmers grappling with both economic and environmental turmoil. Over the years, scholars have approached the novel from a variety of angles. Some have delved into critiques of the American Dream and the stark social inequalities of the time, while others have explored its themes through the lenses of ecocriticism and Marxism.

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Barry's (1995) foundational reading of *The Grapes of Wrath* emphasises the fact that literary works are not merely independent artistic creations, but are products of historical and social contexts. This perspective helps us to understand how Steinbeck critiques the socio-economic system of his time through the experiences of his characters. Building on this, scholars such as Tatiana Konrad (2021) and Angela Kroes (2021) further explore the theme of mobility in the novel. Konrad highlights the dual symbolism of the car and the road, which both represent the freedom of mobile workers and reveal the dehumanisation they encounter. Kroes, meanwhile, focuses on how the journey westward strips migrants of their identities, symbolising the erosion of self-consciousness under the homogenising forces of capitalism. Both analyses contribute to a deeper understanding of Steinbeck's reflections on the socio-political forces that shape American society.

In addition, T.V. Nasalevych and Yu.V. Pchela (2019) provide a useful analysis of the symbolic contrast between the "tractor man" and the "land man". This dichotomy highlights how modernisation has transformed American society through technological progress and economic transformation. Similarly, Brian Philips and David Hopson (2003) contextualised Steinbeck's portrayal of immigrant suffering, pointing to its social commentary on capitalist exploitation during the Great Depression. The study dovetails with Scott Pugh (2006), who argues that Steinbeck forces readers to confront uncomfortable truths about the social order by subverting traditional narrative structures and employing the novel's unexpected and often ambiguous endings.

From a New Historicist perspective, Aida Thamer Salloom (2024) sees *The Grapes of Wrath* as a combination of literary and historical document, emphasising that the effects of the Great Depression cannot be understood in isolation from the socio-political context that led to it all. Salom's view echoes Steinbeck's delicate portrayal of environmental destruction, noting that the environment is not only the backdrop to human suffering, it is also part of a profound critique of capitalist exploitation.

While existing scholarship offers a wealth of interpretations, there are some notable gaps. For example, while many scholars have emphasised the novel's critique of capitalist exploitation, less attention has been paid to the dynamics within the migrant family, such as how gender roles, intergenerational conflict and family structures change in response to external pressures. Moreover, while mobility is often seen as a symbol of freedom and oppression, there is room for more research on the intertwined representation of physical movement and psychological and emotional displacement in the novel. Finally, while scholars like Salloom have succeeded in connecting the novel to its historical context, the links between Steinbeck's social critique and contemporary socio-political issues could also be explored in greater depth, particularly in relation to labour rights and environmental justice.

In conclusion, while the scholarship associated with *The Grapes of Wrath* has provided valuable perspectives on its social, economic, and historical critiques, it has sometimes missed opportunities to further explore the psychological complexity of the novel's characters and the far-reaching implications of its ecological themes. Scholarship has tended to focus more on macro-analyses, neglecting the exploration of individual agency, which has contributed to the lack of a deeper understanding of the human condition during the Great Depression.

III. THE BACKGROUND AND IMPACT OF THE GREAT DEPRESSION

Barry (1995) believed that literary theory is not only about the text itself, but also about the complex relationship between literature and society, in order to study *The Grapes of Wrath*, we have to start with specific history

The Great Depression marked the worst and most widespread recession in modern history. This catastrophic economic crisis has reverberated across the globe, with far-reaching consequences for the United States in particular. GDP shrank by nearly a third between 1930 and 1933, and unemployment climbed to 25 percent, while farmers were 40 percent.

One of the most immediate effects of the Great Depression was widespread unemployment. Because of the closure of factories and companies millions of workers lost their jobs, many people have fallen into poverty and their standard of living has fallen sharply. At the same time, the Great Depression hit the agricultural sector the hardest. The agricultural regions of the United States, especially the Midwest and South, face extremely difficult situations. Excess agricultural production and declining market demand led to a sharp drop in the price of agricultural products, a sharp drop in farmers' incomes, and many people were unable to pay loans and taxes, eventually losing their land. Even more unfortunate that the sandstorms exacerbated the plight of farmers, prolonged droughts and strong storms have blown the fertile soil away, causing large-scale desertification of the land, with crops almost no crops and many farmlands turned into "dead land". These hardships have forced millions of farmers to migrate to western states like California in search of work, and these so-called "western immigrant" often face difficult living conditions and become migrant workers.

A. The Causes of the Great Depression

Many would argue that the Great Depression began with the stock market crash in October 1929. While it is true that the crash marked the beginning of the economic downturn, this interpretation oversimplifies the situation and confuses cause and effect. Economists generally agree that the Great Depression did follow the crash, but the crash was not the primary cause. In fact, the U.S. economy was already in a fragile state before the market crash, and there were several underlying factors that contributed to the onset of the Depression.

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One of the key factors that triggered the Great Depression was excessive speculation in the stock and property markets in the U.S. During the 1920s, stock prices rose on the back of rampant speculation, which was supported by excessive credit. Investors rushed to buy stocks by borrowing money from banks, usually with a small down payment, in what became known as “margin buying”. This practice of borrowing money to invest was touted as a sound investment, leading to the rapid expansion of the stock market bubble. At the same time, banks provided more and more loans to property investors, which further fuelled the expansion of the property market. Regrettably, however, this speculative boom was barely regulated, and the over-reliance on lending ultimately led to the formation of a bubble in the market, which was bound to burst sooner or later.

In addition to speculation, another significant cause of the Great Depression was the structural imbalances in the U.S. economy, especially in terms of industrial production and agriculture. On one hand, the mechanization of industry brought about significant advances in productivity, but this progress also created a double-edged sword. While industrial output surged, the economy was simultaneously facing overcapacity—industries were producing more goods than could be consumed. The imbalance between production and demand meant that many factories faced stagnation, leading to job losses and a slow-down in industrial growth.

The agricultural sector, in particular, had its own set of problems. “The overwhelming impact of the modern economic system on the traditional tenant farmer economy is the root cause of the Great Depression” (Xie, 2023, p. 169). During World War I, the U.S. increased its agricultural production to supply both domestic and international markets. To meet the demands of the war, farmers were encouraged to invest in expensive mechanized farming equipment, which many could not afford. As a result, many farmers were saddled with significant debt. After the war, however, the situation changed drastically. European agriculture began to recover, and the demand for U.S. agricultural products fell. Simultaneously, the U.S. was experiencing an oversupply of goods, which led to falling prices for agricultural products. As a result, many farmers could no longer afford to pay off their debts and were forced to sell their land, often to banks. This created a vicious cycle of economic hardship for rural communities, with many farmers losing their livelihoods and forced into urban areas to seek employment in already-struggling industries.

The industrial sector faced its own challenges. In the early 1920s, heavy industries in the United States, such as steel and manufacturing, expanded rapidly to meet domestic demand as well as the needs of post-war reconstruction in Europe. However, as the reconstruction process in Europe slowed down in the latter part of the decade, the demand for raw materials such as steel began to fall, leading to a glut of commodities in the market, which led to a significant decline in the profitability of these industries. By 1929, the steel industry was already facing serious overproduction problems and the industry began to struggle as there was no suitable market capable of absorbing this excess product. This overproduction and lack of demand further exacerbated mass unemployment and economic contraction, ultimately triggering the Great Depression.

A confluence of these factors—excessive speculation, overproduction and debt - combined to create the economic turmoil of the late 1920s. While the stock market crash of 1929 directly marked the beginning of the Great Depression, the roots of the crisis were much deeper and more complex. The stock market crash was merely the trigger that exposed the vulnerability of the United States economy. In retrospect, it is easy to see that the economic instability that led to the Great Depression was in fact due to the interplay of a number of factors, notably disorderly speculation, industrial overproduction and the broader distress faced by the agricultural sector. It was these imbalances, which failed to be effectively regulated and were further exacerbated, that eventually created a perfect storm that plunged the United States - and the world - into one of the worst recessions in history.

B. The Crises America Facing

The Great Depression was not just a financial crisis, it exacerbated the deterioration of the ecological environment, forming a complex system of interactions. During this period, especially in the Midwest of the United States, overproduction and poor agricultural practices led to severe environmental degradation. In the process, ecological crises and social problems have intertwined, causing even greater suffering.

From an environmental perspective, in the early 20th century, American farmers overcultivated and overgrazed in order to increase agricultural yields, neglecting the sustainability of the land. This practice does produce a good harvest in the short term, but in the long term, it leads to severe soil erosion. During the “frenzied farming” period before the Great Depression, large numbers of farmers over-cultivated grasslands and forests in defiance of the natural environment, leading to the depletion of the land. In the process, soils in many places have lost their original fertility and become unsuitable for growing crops due to the lack of proper land management and conservation practices. Chronic overcultivation and drought on farmland in the areas such as Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas eventually led to widespread sandstorms and crop failures. These dust storms not only cause large-scale crop losses, but also leave land further desolate and difficult to recover. At the same time, the social impact is equally severe. Due to the surplus of agricultural production and the deterioration of the environment, many farmers are unable to continue to make ends meet, forcing them to abandon their land and move to cities or other areas in search of work. In this disaster, people finally realized that “humans are not the masters of nature. Unscrupulous exploitation of nature would eventually come back to mankind” (Zhou, 2023, p. 26). However, the cities of the Great Depression did not provide enough jobs for these displaced farmers, and many fell into even greater poverty. These farmers have lost their homes, land, and livelihoods, and have become urban poor, with urban infrastructure and social services struggling to cope with the influx of people. As the economy collapsed,

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the gap between social classes deepened. The wealth and resources of the wealthy class enable them to maintain a better standard of living, while the poorer classes, especially rural workers who depend on agriculture for their livelihoods, face survival difficulties.

This interplay between ecological and social crises creates a vicious circle. In this context, poverty makes it more difficult for people to cope with environmental changes. Farmers and workers do not have enough resources to protect themselves from environmental degradation, and environmental problems aggravate their poverty. Interactively, poverty prevent them from accessing education and technical training and participating in the process of land rehabilitation and economic reconstruction.

IV. THE PICTURES OF THE GREAT DEPRESSION IN THE GRAPES OF WRATH

Every dust of the times falls on a person as a mountain, John Steinbeck honestly depicted the survival of the small fry in the macro history, showing the poverty, displacement and difficult struggles of the Great Depression, and profoundly portraying the plight faced by ordinary Americans in that era. The Joad family was forced to leave their hometown and embark on the journey west, symbolizing the desperation and helplessness of the large number of landless farmers and laborers. This arduous journey was not only the fate of the Joad family, but also the epitome of countless migrant workers during the Great Depression who ran from place to place in search of survival and longing for a better life.

Abandoned farms and crowded labor camps reveal the harsh realities brought about by the economic collapse. Those once promising fields are now empty and desolate, witnessing the tragic sight of farmers going bankrupt and land forced to circulate. In the labour camps, living conditions are poor, unequal and exploitative, and this is the great divide between social classes. In these gloomy, barren scenes, Steinbeck depicted the struggles and struggles of those at the bottom of society in poverty, who still yearn for dignity and hope in the face of extreme hardship.

Through puny pictures, Steinbeck not only showed the collapse and injustice of American society during the Great Depression, but also highlighted how working people united and survived under enormous economic pressure and social oppression. Through the tragedy of the Joad family, he revealed the destruction of humanity in the whole society under the economic crisis, as well as the hope and humanitarianism contained in those silent resistance. These pictures are part of the history of the Great Depression, but not just part of history.

A. The Severity of Natural Environment

During the Great Depression, a cruel and relentless drought gripped the heart of America, particularly in the vast stretches of farmland across the Midwest and South. The skies, once full of promise, seemed to turn against the land, withholding the life-giving rain that had nurtured crops for generations. With each passing season, the earth grew thirstier, and the once fertile fields, starved of water, could no longer bear the weight of the farmer's hopes.

This land was once heavily infested by over-cultivation and endless livestock grazing, and gradually lost its original vitality. The protective layer of vegetation that once gently covered the earth has also been stripped away, leaving the land bare and vulnerable. Without the natural balance maintained by healthy vegetation, the soil slowly begins to degrade and is eventually consumed by the forces of desertification and degradation.

However, the destruction is not only a consequence of the lack of rainfall. Land that was once teeming with life is now the victim of a vicious cycle that cannot be broken. The wind began to grow fiercer and fiercer, swirling the parched, lifeless soil with malicious fury, creating huge sandstorms as darkness blotted out the sky. These storms, like the venting of nature's rage, not only exacerbated the destruction of the soil, but also left deep scars on the earth, so eroded as to be almost unrecognisable. What was once a rich land is now a barren wasteland, and what was once hope seems to have become as remote as the sky was once as high.

The Dusty Horizon: Nature's Destructive Force: To the red country and part of the gray country of Oklahoma, where the Joad family lives, "the last rains came gently, and they did not cut the scarred earth" (Steinbeck, 2018, p. 5), and this is where the story takes place.

At that time, the land was torn apart by drought and storms, and vast farmland in the Midwest and South became deserts. The barrenness of the land and the merciless wind and sand seem to be the punishment of heaven for the sins of mankind. What was once lush fields is now cracked and wilted, and farmers are unable to revive the land despite all their efforts. With the arrival of dust storms, the land that once carried livelihoods was constantly blown away, and the fertility of the land was carried away by the wind, forming a vast sandy wasteland.

The abandonment of this land is not just the result of environmental neglect, but a profound mapping of the turbulent relationship between humans and nature, a relationship that has been harmed by endless industrialisation and the obsessive pursuit of progress. The imbalance in vegetation cover, coupled with mankind's unbridled development ambitions, has led to a profound disconnect from the natural world. What was once a place of interdependence and harmony between wind and sand has now become a tool of retribution for human arrogance. As Xu insightfully points out, technological civilisation has "for the first time disrupted the harmony between humans and nature and exacerbated the conflict and antagonism between humans and nature" (2018, p. 198). This cold reality reveals that mankind's endless quest for progress has come at a cost to the natural environment that supports life.

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In this changing natural landscape, farming families, like the Joads, symbolise the extreme of this struggle for survival. For them, the land is more than a guarantee of survival; it is more profoundly tied to their identity, heritage, and survival. When land is taken away by external forces, it means not only the loss of livelihoods, but also the disintegration of family bonds and social structures. The relentless encroachment of sandstorms has transformed once-fertile lands into barren deserts, destroying any hope of recovery. In such a barren land, where drought rages and the land is barren, a heavy reality looms: farmers like the Joads must struggle against this ruinous backdrop, trying to retain their humanity in the midst of despair.

Furthermore, the novel introduces “a compelling opposition between two archetypes—the tractor man, symbolizing the man of iron, and the farmer, representing the man of the land” (Nasalevych & Pchela, 2019, p. 107). This dichotomy not only reveals the evolution of individual identity in times of change, but also explores how different forces shape human existence. “Those in positions of power wield machines to assert dominance over the subjugated, including the natural world itself” (Konrad, 2021, p.145). The tractor man represents the mechanised, apathetic attitude of modern industry, which seeks to ruthlessly control and exploit the land, transforming it into a mere commodity, and he is devoid of basic emotions. They only “care about grabbing the land and the surplus value of the tenant farmers greedily, but ignore the emotional and natural value of the tenant farmers and the land” (Zi, 2023, p. 19). In contrast, farmers are deeply rooted in the land and work hard to cultivate and nurture rather than exploit. This dichotomy reveals the tension between industrial progress and agrarian values, and also delves into the evolving nature of human identity against the backdrop of rapid technological advances.

When the Joads face the wrath of nature, they are not only fighting against the destruction of their environment, but also against a society that is increasingly inclined to mechanisation and neglect of humanity. The sandstorm became a metaphor for the conflict that arises when the insatiable appetite for progress clashes with the values of self-sufficiency, sustainability and community. In this endless struggle between man and nature, we see a mapping of the broader existential crisis of humankind, where the conflict between the desire for prosperity and the realities of an ecologically imbalanced and fragile existence becomes ever more acute.

The Broken Road: The Joads' Journey into Displacement: In another of Steinbeck's novels, *Of Mice and Men*, “Curley's wife pursues the belief of land in her heart because of her yearning for freedom” (Chen, 2021, p. 19), it can also be embodiment in *The Grapes of Wrath*. As the Joad family migrated westward, there was endless desolation and depression as far as their eyes could see. Steinbeck spends a lot of time depicting the despair of this land:

The truck took the road and moved up the long hill, through the broken, rotten rock. The engine boiled very soon and Tom slowed down and took it easy. Up the long slope, winding and twisting through dead country, burned white and gray, and no hint of life in it. Once Tom stopped for a few moments to let the engine cool, and then he traveled on. They topped the pass while the sun was still up, and looked down on the desert - black cinder mountains in the distance, and the yellow sun reflected on the gray desert. The little starved bushes, sage and grease wood threw bold shadows on the sand and bits of rock. The glaring sun was straight ahead. (Steinbeck, 2018, p. 550)

During their long journey, the Joad family encounters harsh natural trials. In a desolate desert area, the scorching sun is almost suffocating. With a shortage of gas, a damaged car, and a lack of food, almost every step of the way is full of challenges. The car broke down repeatedly and had to be stopped for repairs almost every time, which cost them valuable time and energy. Even then, they can only grudgingly endure because they have no other choice. The Joad family didn't back down from the blow. California was their hope, a fabled “Promised Land” with a fertile land and a better life. However, the reality is far more brutal than they imagined.

“The highway provides freedom, but it also forces assimilation; the road strips families of their individuality and reduces them to migrants” (Kroes, 2021, p. 18). In search of a new lease of life, the Joad family threw themselves into a convoy heading west, like outlaws emerging from the catastrophe of the Great Depression, carrying a heavy burden of hope and despair. The roads were rough, the convoy was dusty, and the scene outside the windows was desolate. Whether it's the scorching sun or the occasional torrential rain, it's all hitting their tired bodies. The hardships of the journey, the lack of food, and even the shortage of water have forced every family member to persevere in the face of extreme hardship. **Level-1 Heading:** A level-1 heading must be in Small Caps, centered and numbered using uppercase Roman numerals. For example, see heading “III Page Style” of this document. The two level-1 headings which must not be numbered are “Acknowledgment” and “References”.

B. The Desolation of Social Environment

After a difficult migration, they finally arrived in California, but they faced an even more severe social environment and dilemma. The Joad family faced the greatest challenge of severe job and livelihood shortages. California was not the “paradise” of opportunities they had imagined, but instead was filled with ruthless competition and oppression. As a large number of impoverished immigrants flooded in, the labor market in California became saturated, and workers had to accept low wages and harsh working conditions in order to compete for limited job positions. Despite their tremendous efforts, the Joad family could not find a stable foothold in this society, and their dreams gradually faded.

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Furthermore, the Joad family also faced social exclusion and the indifference of interpersonal relationships. In California, local residents and other immigrant workers had a cold attitude toward them, even with hostility. Poverty, hunger, and the pressures of survival caused people to compete with each other, and there was a lack of care and support among individuals. The Joad family had hoped to rely on solidarity and mutual help to face their difficulties, but they quickly realized that in such an extreme poverty-stricken and tense social environment, relationships between people often became cold or even hostile.

In addition, the oppressive social system was another significant issue the Joad family encountered. The social structure and legal system in California did not provide adequate protection for the lower class laborers. Despite the Joad family great efforts in the labor market, they were still exploited and oppressed, even facing unemployment and instability in their lives. The upper class, by controlling resources and wealth, kept the working class in the depths of poverty, while the laws and social systems failed to effectively change this situation, instead exacerbating the oppression of the poor. To get rid of this predicament, “lies in the transformation of the capitalist system” (Wang & Yang, 2019, p. 17).

Communities are fragmented, and the wealthy landowners exploited migrant workers. The widespread poverty, lack of opportunity, and broken family structures reflect a society in disarray. Migrant workers, represented by the Joad family, were still “struggle to survive in spite of nature’s elements and man’s inhumanity” (Yang, 2021, p. 34).

The Barren Crops: Shattered Homes and Exploited People: During the Great Depression, it wasn't just the crops that were barren. The collapse of the economy brings not only immediate unemployment and hunger, but also a profound test of human nature. When the unemployed struggle to find even an inconspicuous job, when women are forced to sell their bodies to survive, when workers endure endless oppression to keep their limited jobs, the mental state of the whole society is like that parched land of Oklahoma, with no harvest, despair and coldness.

The nightmare of economic collapse has long since eaten away people’s hopes, and the once rich land is now dry and barren, and the once-green farmland is reduced to crumbling ruins. The Joad family, who were once self-sufficient, were reduced to homeless wanderers. Having lost the right to survive, the once proud peasants became exploited and weak, forced to accept the meager wages exploited by landlords and entrepreneurs, and even endure ruthless oppression. The elderly father of the family, who has just experienced the tragic loss of land, and the mother who is becoming more and more heavy under the burden of the family, in the face of the expectations of her children and the confusion about the future, she endures the pain in her heart, and tries to use her tenacity to piece together the crumbling family again.

As the economy collapses, the cracks in social trust are like glass that suddenly disintegrates, and it is heart-wrenching. Once-warm community ties have been completely disintegrated in the crisis, and once interdependent neighbors have become apathetic, and competition between them has intensified. In Steinbeck’s work, the delicate depiction of the Joad family’s struggle with hunger and despair vividly reveals the profound changes in the relationship between individuals and groups during the Great Depression. In these challenging times, unemployed farmers have become extremely vulnerable under the pressure of life, and the sense of trust in each other is like an ethereal morning mist, which is dissipated by the wind.

During this period, peasants not only faced the fear of losing their livelihoods, but also had to endure exploitation by landlords and big business, becoming innocent victims. In order to survive, they are forced to accept meager wages and overwork, and become pawns in the hands of the capitalists who can be replaced at any time. Under these ruthless oppressions, the peasants’ blood, sweat and dignity were ruthlessly deprived, and their ideals and hopes were wiped out under the weight of reality. Their bodies were wounded, though they continued in the darkness, and the despair in their hearts made each night incomparably long.

The Joad family’s hardships are not only reflected in their economic difficulties, but also in the fragility and tension of their internal relationships. After losing their land, the originally united family faced tremendous psychological pressure. The mother of the family tried to maintain the unity and warmth of the family through perseverance, but as the predicament deepened, the conflicts between the family members were increasingly exposed, especially after the eldest son Tom returned from prison, the burden of the family became heavier, and he felt lost and tired. Not only does he have to endure pressure from the outside world, but he also has to face the test of family relationships, which undoubtedly exacerbates the tension within the family.

In these moments of despair, Oklahoma’s crops become a powerful symbol of not only the survival of farmers, but also a true reflection of their oppression and suffering. The once fertile land is now barren, and dreams of hope have turned into endless despair. While people have lost their livelihood and dignity in life, they have gradually lost their trust and care for each other, and the comfort of their souls has now been replaced by indifference and ruthlessness. The distance between people in society has become more and more apparent, and the warmth and support that could have been shared have become a luxury desire. This is not only a true reflection of the poor economic environment at that time, but also a profound exposure of the collapse of humanity within society. As Philips and Hopson (2003) say, the Steinbeck’s intention is not only to depict the suffering of migrant workers during the Great Depression, but also to sharply criticize the ruling policies that led to these sufferings.

The Grapes of Plenty: Solidarity of Workers and Resilient Hope: Families are torn apart by poverty, while laborers are treated as disposable by landowners and employers, who offer subhuman wages and brutal working conditions. The Joad family’s experience in California is a testament to how humanity can show solidarity and mutual aid in the most difficult of times. They are no longer individual beings, but symbols of the entire immigrant working class. Steinbeck shows the great side of humanity by

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depicting the collective consciousness awakening of these workers. Even in the face of oppressive capitalist forces and harsh living conditions, the Joad family did not give up hope and fought against oppression by uniting as one.

At the beginning, the Joads' primary goal was to survive, but as their journey progressed, they gradually realized that survival alone was not enough, and that the struggle of the working class was the key to their true change of destiny. Through the growth and transformation of protagonist Tom Joad, it reveals how collective consciousness can be a force for change. Tom has grown from an ordinary person who cares about the survival of his family to a fighter with a sense of social responsibility. In the process of his awakening, he realizes that he is not alone and that other workers are also fighting for their right to live. Tom eventually understood that it was only by uniting that the workers could truly fight for their dignity and future.

Through this process, Steinbeck demonstrated the greatness of the power of unity. When Tom and the other workers decided to join forces to go on strike, they were fighting not only for better wages and working conditions, but also for a just society and the basic dignity of every human being. This process reveals that the power of collective action can be the key to resisting oppression in the face of social injustice. In this process, the mutual support and support of the workers has become a symbol of the brilliance of human nature. They are no longer isolated individuals, but close-knit communities in which everyone struggles for the survival and dignity of others.

In the midst of oppression and hardship, the Joad family forged close ties with other workers, forming a new social bond. Despite the harsh realities and oppression, they were able to find strength to support each other under common goals and ideals. This community is not only materially interdependent, but also spiritually supportive and encouraging.

The Joads' interactions with the other workers show a deep sense of compassion and love in human beings. Despite living in the shadow of poverty and exploitation, they are able to share food, information and hope with each other, and this spirit of mutual aid provides them with psychological comfort and the courage to keep going. For example, the Joad family found their own survival value and sense of social responsibility through helping others. It is in this process that they understand that only by helping others can they finally find their true dignity and worth.

Even in the darkest of times, hope and light can be found in the spirit of collective strength and mutual assistance. As Steinbeck said, "strange things happen to them, some bitterly cruel and some so beautiful that the faith is refired forever." Through the awakening and struggle of the Joad family, we can get a glimpse of the greatness of human beings not only in the struggle of individuals, but also in the power of collective action and solidarity and mutual assistance.

CONCLUSIONS

"Steinbeck alter these masterplots in interesting and provocative ways" (Pugh, 2006, p. 74). He not only shows us a complex history, but also attacks the policies of the time, which are increasingly prophetic in today's artificial intelligence and algorithmic systems.

From *The Grapes of Wrath*, we see not only the tragedy of history, but also the brilliance of human nature. Through the plight of the Joad family and other poor peasants, Steinbeck shows us how in the midst of extreme hardship, human beings can find hope in despair and hold on to dignity in oppression. These vivid depictions not only reflect the economic plight of the Great Depression, but also profoundly reveal the injustice of the social structure and the indifference to the disadvantaged. Through the mirror image of history, we can more clearly reflect on the hidden dangers of the gap between the rich and the poor, social inequality, and economic crisis that still exist in contemporary society. The realities of poverty and injustice, past and present, have always crept up in some corners, and despite changes in the global economic situation and progress in economic growth in many countries, unequal distribution of wealth, the entrenchment of social stratification and indifference to the vulnerable continue to plague modern societies.

Poverty, unemployment, housing problems, and the inequitable distribution of basic public services such as health care and education remain difficult problems to be solved in today's society. In some places, especially in developing countries, the gap between rich and poor is widening, and access to social resources is becoming increasingly difficult. In developed countries, despite overall economic growth, the living conditions of people at the bottom often do not receive the attention they deserve. This phenomenon undoubtedly reminds us that many of the social problems in *The Grapes of Wrath* are not just historical wounds, they still affect the stability and progress of contemporary society. Therefore, how to better protect the basic rights and interests of vulnerable groups, and how to promote the common development of society through policy reform and fair distribution of social resources are still important issues that cannot be avoided in modern society.

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