

Steinbeck's concern for migrant laborers in their struggle for social and economic equity

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Abstrak

ABSTRACT

"Thus they changed their social life - changed as in the whole universe only man can change. They were not farm men any more, but migrant men. And the thought, the planning, the long staring silence that had gone out to the fields, went now to the roads, to the distance, to the West. That man whose mind had been bound which acres lived with narrow concrete miles. And his thought and his worry were not any more with rainfall, with wind and dust, with the thrust of the crops."

With these words John Steinbeck described the farmers who lost their properties. They were forced away from Oklahoma to the West, so they decided to go to California seeking work, food, and a better life. This is a reflection of the developing dynamics of the dispossessed, which demanded a change of an entire system of values to achieve a betterment that became their dream.

John Steinbeck, the novelist of the Depression era was working for social justice and human rights in an effort to free the poor from the scourge of hatred and anger due to economic disasters, and the catastrophe of the drought.

Outstanding among Steinbeck's many influential books and articles was *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). The background of the story is the economic depression of the 1930s. People were unemployed, had no place to live, were hungry; many people were on the breadline and were poorly dressed.

They were facing the years of extreme drought and high winds which ruined the crops, and they were facing landless, ness too as the farmers were forced to give up their lands to the bank-companies. This situation made life unbearable for farmers in the "Dust Bowl," an area centering on eastern Colorado and New Mexico and the panhandles of Texas and Oklahoma.

This was greatly different from the 1920s, which was considered a patriotic, prosperous, very wealthy period with so many luxuries; people seeking pleasure continuously, money being very easy to make, and the people able to achieve everything they wanted in their daily life.

The 1930s were called "The wounded Thirties", due to poverty, starvation, economic disorganization, insecurity, the absence of love and mercy.

Steinbeck, a literary critic, was interested in history, in "the usable past". He thought: ""How can we use the past to improve the problems of nowadays?" For him the past is useful today.

Steinbeck by nature and by great talent went out from the field to the impoverished Hooverilles, the itinerant workers camps, where he was called "migrant John" who moved in the presence of human suffering on a grassroots basis, listening to the aspiration of sharecroppers, the Joad family, the Okies who were filthy and ignorant.

Steinbeck spoke for a need to help the poor, the hungry, and the tenant farmers in general "the forgotten men". He called for reconciliation and brotherhood to replace the raging conflict between the rich and the poor, between the big landowners and the dispossessed.

Steinbeck saw in the facts of life, tragedies. He was much concerned about hardships and the burdens of family, due to the shortage of food and money. He felt sympathy with the children of the poor grew up rachitic and suffering from pellagra due to inadequate diet. He was much concerned with the migrants who were hungry and almost starving who streamed over the mountains and got no place to live. Like ants they were scurrying for food and shelter.

Steinbeck is highly significant on account of his moral consciousness of the basic necessities of each human being, and this has been one of my principal interests, and for that reason I have been greatly concerned with his work.

It is he who gives us the most encouraging view of human nature in his Okies, rude, filthy, full of lice, and crude in outward show; struggling desperately with natural catastrophes and economic exploitation, deprived of all artificial aids to a decent life, and in his time made homeless, but carrying with them the positive traditions: communal life, cooperative endeavor, loyalty, hard work, and charity.