

Title: Steinbeck's Blakean Vision in *The Grapes of Wrath*
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[(essay date summer-fall 1975) *In the following essay, Carr uses Jim Casy's speech at Grandpa Joad's graveside as a starting point to analyze instances of allusion to the poetry of William Blake in The Grapes of Wrath.*]

Steinbeck criticism has come a long way since Edmund Wilson's early judgment of *The Grapes of Wrath* as principally about animals, not humans,¹ and Stanley Edgar Hyman's rather harsh judgment of Steinbeck as interested only in the study of ecology.² Three critics in particular--Peter Lisca, Warren French, and Joseph Fontenrose--have demonstrated Steinbeck's interest in the growth of the individual man from self-centered isolation to involvement in the human community,³ and Fontenrose notes that "Steinbeck is an heir of the Romantic movement," not the Naturalistic.⁴ I would like to place Steinbeck even more firmly in the Romantic tradition by demonstrating his close affinity to the poet William Blake.

Steinbeck's interest throughout his writing career in Blake's themes, as well as in the actual poetry, is evident from his first published novel, *Cup of Gold*, a title taken from Blake's "The Mental Traveller." The novel deals with innocence and experience, and Steinbeck describes the gold cup as containing a distorted Blakean illustration: "around its outer edge four grotesque lambs chased each other, and inside, on the bottom, a naked girl lifted her arms in sensual ecstasy."⁵ The Blakean influence is also seen in the 1950 play-novelette, *Burning Bright*, which takes its title from "The Tyger." In this work, Steinbeck attempts to deal with the themes of that poem and quotes the first stanza as an introduction. The most important allusion to Blake, however, is contained in a highly significant scene in Steinbeck's most famous novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*. When asked to pray at Grampa Joad's graveside, Jim Casy says this: "Heard a fella tell a poem one time, an' he says 'All that lives is holy.' Got to thinkin', an' purty soon it means more than the words says."⁶ The line, only slightly misquoted--"Everything that lives is holy"--concludes Blake's much anthologized *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, a work Steinbeck could easily have known.⁷ In the context of Casy's graveside prayer, Blake's words reinforce the notion that one's chief concern should be with the living, not the dead. This concern leads to Casy's development and contributes to the larger Blakean themes of the interdependence of all men and the movement of individual man from innocence to experience to a higher innocence. Thus, I believe that an examination and comparison of *The Grapes of Wrath* with those Blake texts most accessible to the non-scholar will reveal a similar treatment of these themes.

The innocence to experience and to higher innocence theme is central to Blake's poetry and begins with *Songs of Innocence* wherein the children are joyful, instinctive, and under the protection of an earthly mother, a spiritual father, or both. In these poems Christ is the lamb and the shepherd: "He is watchful while they are in peace, / For they know when their Shepherd is nigh" (p. 118). But there is a hint that all is not joy, however, particularly in "The Chimney Sweeper" and "Holy Thursday." In "Night" we are told directly that childhood innocence ends: "Farewell, green field and happy groves, / Where flocks have took delight" (p. 119). And "The Echoing Green" which opens as "The Sun does arise," ends with the sun descending "On the darkening Green" (p. 116).

From Innocence, the child emerges into Experience: "I wander thro' each charter'd street, / Near where the charter'd Thames does flow, / And mark in every face I meet / Marks of weakness, marks of woe" (p. 216). Throughout the *Songs of Experience*, the former innocent is introduced to aspects of the human condition unknown in his earlier state--cruelty, selfishness, fear, hypocrisy, deceit, poverty, and hunger. In *Songs of Innocence*, "Mercy has a human heart, / Pity a human face, / And Love, the human form divine, / And Peace, the human dress" (p. 117). But in *Songs of Experience*, we learn that "Pity would be no more / If we did not make somebody Poor; / And Mercy no more could be / If all were as happy as we. / And mutual fear brings peace, / Till the selfish loves increase" (p. 217).

Experience, however, is absolutely essential for Blake, for it leads man not only to an awareness of these negative human attributes, but also to self-knowledge of his own divinity. That is, if he allows his divinely given Imagination to function, he comes to realize that he is, indeed, a part of the "Divine Image," and he partakes of, and participates in universal love as well

as the Mutual Forgiveness of Christ. In this way, man can achieve the higher innocence.

If man does not allow his Imagination to lift him beyond both innocence and experience to a participation in the Divine Image, he simply becomes corrupted and "builds a Hell in Heaven's respite," or he refuses experience altogether to retreat into ignorance. This is what happens in *The Book of Thel*. There Blake asserts the interdependence of all life. The little Cloud's transient existence is justified because it unites with the dew, "bearing food to all our tender flowers" (p. 128). The Lilly, in turn, "doth nourish the innocent lamb" and tends "her numerous charge among the verdant grass" (p. 128). The Cloud tells Thel, "Everything that lives / Lives not alone for itself" (p. 129). But Thel, "the Virgin," refuses the conditions of life--self-sacrifice and death, and she flees "back unhinder'd till she came into the vales of Har," a refuge for sterile innocence (p. 130).

While this summary of Blake's vision is admittedly simplified, I believe it will lead us into a more fruitful reading of *The Grapes of Wrath*, for in that novel, Steinbeck moves his principal characters from the innocence of the Oklahoma chapters, to the experience of the highway and California episodes, to the higher innocence of the closing scenes of the novel.

The book opens in Oklahoma, the land of innocence, with a preponderance of animals who go happily about their business unaware of the tragedy being enacted by the people around them. A typical early passage reflects this: "The cotton field scurried with waking life, the quick flutter of morning birds feeding on the ground, the scamper over the clods of disturbed rabbits" (p. 90). It is, in fact, the animals who inherit the Oklahoma land when the people abandon it. Life abounds not only among the animals, but as well among the plants that are described as "young thirsting" and the grass heads as "sleeping life waiting to be spread and dispersed" (p. 20). Even the ground throbs, and clods take on life, recalling the Fairy's words to the Poet in Blake's *Europe*: "I'll sing to you to this soft lute, and shew you all alive / The world, where every particle of dust breathes forth its joy" (p. 237). In this early section of *The Grapes of Wrath*, the people are constantly compared to animals, and those who do not grow with experience and realize themselves as parts of the "whole" of humanity, are still described in animalistic terms at the end of the novel.

To this land of innocence belong a number of static, child-like characters. Muley Graves stubbornly refuses to enter the world of experience on the highway and remains to haunt the land "like a ... graveyard ghos" (pp. 69, 151). Grampa, "vicious and cruel and impatient, like a frantic child" (p. 105), is afraid to leave, dies through sheer force of will, and is assigned by Preacher Casy a role common to the lower forms of life but nevertheless a role that Thel fled--to become "the food of worms" (p. 129). And Granma, "lecherous" and "savage" (p. 105), follows Grampa in death soon after. All three are likable in their child-like innocence, but they also represent the amoral and selfish state Blake associated with innocence, as do the children, Winfield, Ruthie, and Al, older but still childlike.

Noah Joad is the most Thel-like in that he has "little pride, no sexual urges," and "has never been angry in his life" (p. 106). It is he who deserts the family early in the journey when they pause to rest and bathe in a stream. Before he walks off through the willows beside the water, he tells Tom, "I'd like to jus' stay here. Like to lay here forever. Never get hungry an' never get sad. Lay in the water all life long ... lazy as a brood sow in the mud" (p. 278)--words that tie him to the animal imagery Steinbeck associates with his state of development and also to the water imagery reminiscent of *The Book of Thel*.

But growth of the individual from innocence to experience, and the recognition of his divinity and awareness that he is a member of the Eternal Brotherhood is Blake's message as it is Steinbeck's. Thus, some characters--Ma, Tom, Rose of Sharon, and Jim Casy do achieve an awareness and, in Ma Joad's words, become more than themselves.

In the opening pages of *The Grapes of Wrath*, Jim Casy, who formulates all the major themes of the novel, has just emerged from a sect within traditional Christianity whose name reflects its ties with an older God of vengeance, and a set of "Thou shalt not" rules. "I was a preacher," he tells Tom Joad, "Reverend Jim Casy--was a Burning Bush. ... But not no more. ... Just Jim Casy now. Ain't got the Call no more. Got a lot of sinful idears--but they seem kinda sensible" (p. 27). The "sinful idears" are of a sensual nature and Casy is no longer willing to condemn such outward manifestations of God-given energy. He sees them now, in a Blakean sense, as a necessary part of man's experience and growth as an individual. Casy clearly wants to eat of Blake's "Tree of Life" so as to discover the nature of error which has caused humanity to suffer so.

When Casy lost his earlier "call" to preach a conventional brand of Christianity, he gained another call. "The Sperit's strong in me, on'y it ain't the same," he tells Tom. "I ain't sure of a lot of things. ... Here I got the sperit sometimes an' nothin' to preach about. I got the call to lead the people, an' no place to lead 'em" (pp. 28-29). Later he finds the answer: "I says, 'What's this call, this sperit?' An' I says, 'It's love. I love people so much I'm fit to bust sometimes.'" Still later he realizes "Maybe it's all men an' all women we love; maybe that's the Holy Sperit--the human sperit" (pp. 32-33). This passage recalls Blake's lines in "The Divine Image": "And all must love the human form, / In heathen, turk, or jew; / Where Mercy, Love, & Pity dwell / There God is dwelling too" (p. 117). When asked to say grace at the Joads', Casy responds with a prayer that ends, "I can't say no grace like I use' ta say. I'm glad of the holiness of breakfast. I'm glad there's love here. That's all" (pp. 110-11). And he describes Ma to Uncle John: "There's a woman so great with love--she scares me" (p. 313). "If a thing loves it is infinite," Blake wrote, and added, "He who sees the Infinite in all things, sees God" (pp. 91, 98). Ma Joad, in turn, paraphrases Blake when she describes Casy as having "that look they call lookin' through" (p. 127). Blake had written, "I question not my Corporeal or Vegetative Eye any more than I would question a Window concerning a sight," and said, "I look thro it & not with it" (p. 617).

In the beginning of the novel, Casy goes "into the wilderness like Jesus to try to find out somepin" (p. 521). What he finds out is that "all men got one big soul ever'body's a part of," and that "a wilderness ain't no good, 'cause his little piece of soul wasn't good 'less it was with the rest, an' was whole" (p. 570). Thus, Casy's goal becomes to reunite all of "mankin" into one soul again in much the way Blake saw Christ as the final divine unification of all men. Bent on bringing about such a unification, Casy follows the migrants to California, working in the fields with them.

The final truth of the message Casy has been formulating throughout the novel comes to him when he is in jail. He discovers the need of self-sacrifice, of each individual working for the good of all. Actually, the first hint of this had come earlier when Muley Graves had shared his rabbits with Casy and Tom, declaring that "I ain't got no choice in the matter. ... If a fella's got somepin to eat an' another fella's hungry--why, the first fella ain't got no choice." In reply, Casy had reflected that "Muley's got a-holt of somepin, an' it's too big for him, an' it's too big for me" (p. 66).

It takes sometime for Casy to put this idea in place in his overall scheme, but it fits well with other notions he gathers along the way--that if "one mis'able little fella got the bit in his teeth an' run his own way," then the bond between men, "the holiness," is broken (p. 110). What Casy learns in jail is that there is strength in numbers. A body of men working together can accomplish what the same men working separately cannot. His role as labor agitator is symbolic of this cooperative spirit, and his final words when he is killed--"You fellas don' know what you're doin'" (p. 527)--reflect the Mutual Forgiveness of the Christian and the Blakean Christ.

Tom Joad emerges as a follower of Casy; he will carry on the work Casy has begun. But he is to be more than a labor organizer. He will, in fact, become the spirit of humanitarian brotherhood. But he comes slowly to this awareness. In the beginning, he is self-centered. He callously tempts the truck driver with a bottle of whiskey right after the driver has told him he can't drink on the job (p. 16), and he wraps the proud and haughty turtle up in his coat and won't let it go despite its constant struggles for freedom and Casy's admonition that he will smother it (pp. 24, 28). This act is doubly significant when we remember that Casy, echoing Blake, defines the ultimate human error as the hindrance of the action of any man--and thus, by extension, of any life.

Steinbeck very pointedly ties Tom to a state of innocence in the beginning of the novel with the Christmas card Granma sends him while he is in prison. The verse paraphrases two lines from "The Lamb"--"He is meek & he is mild; / He became a little child" (p. 115)--with these words: "Merry Christmas, purty child, / Jesus meek an' Jesus mild, / Underneath the Christmas tree / There's a gif for you from me" (p. 35).

The experience of the road, however, toughens Tom to defiance against injustice and awakens in him Casy's belief that each man has "a little piece of a great big soul" that belongs to all of mankind, and thus his final words to Ma--"I'll be ever'-where-wherever you look" (p. 572)--relate to the words of Christ--"Lo, I am with you always"--but again it is a Blakean Christ, the culmination of all men.

For Blake there is a final awareness, an apocalypse for individual men and for mankind as a whole. This is, of course, essentially the message that Casy, with his doctrine of love and interdependence, is preaching throughout *The Grapes of Wrath*. Tom learns it from Casy, as does Ma, who says in the final chapter, "Use' ta be the fambly was fust. It ain't so now. It's anybody" (p. 606). Ma has not only realized her debt to all humanity but has ceased the protective mother role associated with Blake's *Songs of Innocence*. In cutting loose family ties, she sees each individual must make his own experience and come to his own individual knowledge. And Rose of Sharon, who throughout the novel has been self-absorbed, who has to be admonished a number of times by Ma to stop engaging in self-pity, in the end offers her milk to a starving stranger. In this final scene, she assumes the womanly role of protector of life--but this time, it is not her own, nor is it the family's; it is all life. Steinbeck effectively uses the final scene to reassert Blake's truth: "Everything that lives is Holy."

Notes

1. Edmund Wilson, *Classics and Commercials: A Literary Chronicle of the Forties* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Company, 1950), pp. 35-45.
2. Stanley Edgar Hyman, *The Promised End* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1963), pp. 17-22.
3. Peter Lisca, *The Wide World of John Steinbeck* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1958); Warren French, *John Steinbeck* (New York: Twayne, 1961); Joseph Fontenrose, *John Steinbeck: An Introduction and Interpretation* (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1963).
4. Fontenrose, p. 90.
5. Steinbeck, *Cup of Gold* (New York: Bantam Books, 1953), p. 150.
6. Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath: Text and Criticism*, ed. Peter Lisca (New York: Viking Press, 1972), pp. 196-97. All quotations from *The Grapes of Wrath* are from this edition and identified by page number following quotations.
7. William Blake, *Blake: Complete Writings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 160. All

quotations from Blake are from this edition and are identified by page numbers following the quotations. Blake repeats "Everything that lives is holy" in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (p. 195) and *America* (p. 199).

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