The Bible and The Grapes of Wrath *

H. KELLY CROCKETT

As a student at Oklahoma University in 1939 and 1940 I witnessed firsthand the violent reaction of many Oklahomans to the publication and tremendous popularity of The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck. This ranged from an unbounded, almost reverent enthusiasm to strident condemnation. Many of the loudest outcries against the novel came from those—among them the governor of the state—who had not even read it. Hardly anyone was neutral or temperate. But one English professor of mine did manage to deliver a calm, critical disapproval of the novel, interesting to recall because it must have been fairly widespread at the time among academic men who make the estimate of literary qualities of fiction a part of their life-study.

He declared first of all that it exaggerated its case in order to strengthen sympathy for the Okies. It likewise suffered from carelessness and inaccuracies. The Joads spoke a dialect foreign to native Oklahomans, Steinbeck referred to lobo wolves and irrigation ditches, neither of which were found in eastern Oklahoma, and to a land "turtle" (the native word is "terrapin"). If one discounted their purpose of arousing attention to social injustice, the char-

acters were either repulsive or lacking in depth, sometimes both. But, most important, the novel was frankly propaganda, and once the situation which called it into being had passed, it would suffer the fate of novels like Uncle Tom's Cabin and The Jungle, to be read as a historical curiosity rather than for its own value. No propaganda novel since the days of Dickens, my professor asserted, had achieved any lasting literary stature.

From our vantage point twenty years later we can rejoice to see that The Grapes of Wrath has escaped the neglect my professor predicted for it. Nor is it a particularly difficult search for reasons to account for this continuing popularity. The novel is much more profound than even its contemporary partisans realized. Far from being merely "propa-
ganda," it was conceived on the grand scale, one of the few modern novels to achieve true epic proportions. Like other really good novels, it goes beyond the basic requirements of telling a story and making its characters and their actions believable. By the use of symbolism it identifies its elements with human experience and tradition, and by this and other means makes a strong appeal to the reader's imagination, intellect, and emotion. These added significances have been described as further layers or levels of meaning, but a more satisfactory comparison would be to ripples or waves spreading one after another in ever widening circles from the center of action, of character, or locale. Thus, the reader gains as much from reflection upon the novel as he does from reading it, and in later readings will always discover some new element to delight in.

The varied use of biblical parallels in

*This article is the result of my conviction that it would be useful to draw together scattered discussions into one convenient source and add my own interpretations of this interesting, valuable subject. The best and most comprehensive of former treatments have been Martin S. Shockley, "Christian Symbolism in The Grapes of Wrath," College English (November 1956), and Peter Lisca, "The Grapes of Wrath as Fiction," PMLA (March 1957).

Mr. Crockett teaches in the department of American Thought and Language at Michigan State University.
The Grapes of Wrath form such a further element of meaning. It would be difficult to estimate how deeply and inextricably the Hebraic traditions of the Bible have imbedded themselves in every aspect of Western civilization. On the American frontier the pioneer had music and dancing, but the Bible, with the religion it taught, was by far the most important of his few cultural interests and the only one he shared with more cultivated levels of American society. Plainly, Steinbeck has made the Joads representative of the American pioneer and, by investing them and their story with biblical elements, has made their characters more universal than they could otherwise have been.

Steinbeck has shown his fondness for biblical features in other of his works as well. The Garden of Eden theme is used in The Pastures of Heaven and East of Eden, and the similar theme of the influence of evil in the modern parable, The Pearl. In addition to Jim Casy, Doc in Cannery Row and Sweet Thursday is a Christ figure. But nowhere else in his writings do biblical symbols and motifs play so important a part.

Probably the most widely recognized of the biblical parallels of the Joad odyssey are those related to the title of the novel. Even the phlegmatic reader recognized immediately with the first publication its connection with the allusion in the second verse of Julia Ward Howe’s “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” itself a stirring call for victory over the forces which were repressing another downtrodden group. He might also have conjectured vaguely that, since the song is religious in tone, Howe’s metaphor had a biblical origin which, of course, it does. From Revelations comes the pronouncement that the wicked who follow after Babylon “shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God,” and suffer torment. The avenging angel with a sickle shall harvest both the vine and the grapes which are “fully ripe” and cast them in the winepress of the wrath of God, and from the press when they are trodden, blood shall flow. And from Deuteronomy Moses, speaking of the enemies of Jehovah and his people, says:

For their vine is of the vine of Sodom, and of the fields of Gomorrah: their grapes are the grapes of gall, their clusters are bitter: their wine is the poison of dragons, and the cruel venom of asps.

From Jeremiah, on the punishment of the wicked, we have: “But every one shall die for his iniquity; every man that eateth of the sour grape, his teeth are set on edge.” Steinbeck makes the parallel specific by equating the grapes to the fermenting wrath of the Okies which promises doom to the California deputies, farmers’ associations, Bank of the West—all groups who place their possessions above human welfare. Ma is the best illustration in action of this growing wrath. Her indignation at her treatment from the deputy at Needles, the necessity of flight to escape the burning-out of their first Hooverville, and at the insults of the vigilantes who refuse to let the Joads pass through their town on their way to Weedpatch rises to such a pitch with each act of persecution that she, as she confesses to Rose of Sharon, has come to “feel mean,” a feeling which nevertheless she continues to exhort Tom not to acquire. Nor does the wrath die with the peaceful stay of the family at the Weedpatch camp. The brutality and injustice at the Hooper Ranch, Casy’s death, and Tom’s trouble feed it for her. As they pull safely away from the ranch, with Tom concealed beneath the mattresses in the back, Ma leans against the truck side and says:

“Gives ya a funny feelin’ to be hunted like. I’m gittin’ mean.” “Ever’body’s gittin’ mean,” said Pa.
Grapes are also a biblical symbol of fruitfulness, renewal, and of promise. The Israelite spies into the land of Canaan carried back a bunch of grapes so large that two men had to carry it in a staff between them, firm proof of the productivity of the land to which God had led His Children. Steinbeck uses grapes to symbolize this meaning also, especially at the beginning when he has Grampa declare:

"Or grapes. There's a thing I ain't never had enough of. 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 run off my chin."

In an area where every farm has grapes, and wild grapes abound in every patch of woods, Grampa should have known how grapes grow. But Steinbeck is concentrating on the symbolic importance of the proposed action involving the grapes. In doing this, Grampa will revitalize himself and become the "heller" he used to be. Later events make this passage as ironic as are the dreams of the Joads about California. The attempt to remove Grampa by force from his native land kills him, and California is not a Promised Land but a man-blighted Eden. But the relation of the grapes to the biblical sense remains.

Next to the biblical significance of the title, the use of Jim Casy as a Christ figure plainly reveals the author's intent. Like Stephen Crane with Jim Conklin in The Red Badge of Courage, Steinbeck obviously attempted to show the parallel by giving him the same initials (i.e., J. C. for Jesus Christ). To many readers this equation, had it been recognized earlier, would have seemed sacrilegious, might seem so now, for Steinbeck was aware that in the pioneer-type camp meeting or revival, still a familiar part of rural Oklahoma life, the religious fervor and aroused emotions found frequent outlet in sexuality. In the interests of realism he gave to Casy this very human weakness, although we learn of it only from Casy's early confession to Tom. In this and other parallels Steinbeck makes curiously effective use of inversion to the biblical accounts. Troubled in his soul over this "sin" into which he falls always in moments of highest religious feeling, Casy, like Christ, retires into his wilderness to wrestle with his nature and be spiritually purified for his mission. The devil who tests and tempts him is represented by his old religious convictions which he comes to reject—like Satan they depart from him. To Tom he expounds his new creed, his Sermon on the Mount, in principles strikingly similar to those of Emerson a century earlier:

"There ain't no sin and there ain't no virtue. There's just stuff people do. It's all part of the same thing. And some of the things people do is nice, and some ain't nice, but that's as far as any man got a right to say. . . . What is this thing called spirit? . . . It's love. I love people so much I'm fit to bust sometimes—an' I want to make them happy—maybe it's all men an' all women we love; Maybe all men got one big soul everbody's a part of."

Both Casy and his people henceforth turn their backs on the old religion with its conviction of sin, although Casy is the only one who does so consciously. The Jehovites and the Holiness sect represent traditional religion in the novel and constitute the Okie Pharisees and Saducees who would rob the people of all light and happiness in their lives as dooming them to damnation. They sit by, cold and condemning, while the rest of the camp goes joyfully to the dance at Weedpatch. Steinbeck gives particularly repulsive characterizations to the two women introduced to personify these sects. One of them Ma coldly turns away from the tent where Granma lies dying (although troubled by her inability to explain her impulse for doing so—she is Holiness herself); the
other she menaces with a stick of stove-wood. Preachers are discouraged from coming into Weedpatch because they exploited the misery of the people.

The Joads accept Casy upon his own spiritual terms. He no longer preaches, but they nevertheless consider him a spiritual leader who must perform his function in times of spiritual need. As Ma says, his grace has the sound of grace, and he “looks baptized.” Literally as well as figuratively he takes upon himself the “sins” of his people and goes to jail in Tom’s place in the altercation over the deputy at Hooverville. In his absence he has his role assumed by Jim Rawley, manager of Weedpatch, whose life is also dedicated to the Okie publicans and sinners, to serving the lowly. Like Casy, he doesn’t believe in orthodox sin; sin is causing misery like hunger, cold, and unhappiness. Then in the tent, outside the embattled Hooper ranch, as the inspired leader of his people in their gallant, hopeless fight against their oppressors, Casy appears again to deliver to Tom his golden rule, the philosophy which will give their people the will to struggle on:

“Anyways you do what you can. An’ ... the on’y thing you got to look at is that ever’time they’s a little step fo’ward, she may slip back a little, but she never slips clear back. You can prove that—an’ that makes the whole thing right. An’ that means they wasn’t no waste even if it seemed like they was.”

Outside the tent where he speaks, in a darkness like that on the Mount of Olives, are the California deputies, twentieth-century versions of the Roman soldiers lent to the High Priest, bent on destroying him. They catch him finally in the hard beams of their flashlights, in the midst of a stream which like the Jordan is a symbol of both life and death, and he falls beneath their clubs echoing the words of Christ on the Cross: “You fellas don’ know what you’re a-doin’!” But there is no victory in his death for the persecutors—his spirit is resurrected in Tom, and symbolically in all the Okies.

An even clearer parallel than the grapes or Jim Casy is that of the flight of the Okies from the parched Southwest to California to that of the Children of Israel from Egypt to Canaan. The Okies likewise come to a land flowing with milk and honey, but the modern Canaanites destroy their surplus of pigs, oranges, and potatoes while Okie children sicken from malnutrition. California thus becomes the wilderness through which the Okies must wander indefinitely, the land of promise still a mirage.

The hostility the Joads encounter along U. S. Highway 66 from the proprietor of the roadside camp and the filling station attendants at the edge of the desert corresponds to that of the hostile tribes like the Amorites and Midianites which the Israelites encountered along their way. The ragged man at the roadside camp and the discouraged Okie and his son at the Colorado River similarly fill the role of the spies who sought out information about the land of Canaan. Like the spies, these informers confirm the richness of the land into which the Joads are going and try to warn them of the reception which awaits them. But the Joads do not pattern their actions on the behavior of the Israelites. With nothing but misery behind them, they are compelled to move forward into greater misery. Involved in the journey is also a travesty on the manna from heaven when Ma, torn with pity, places her pot down outside the tent with the leavings of stew for the hungry children to scrape clean.

However, there are among the family those who “hanker after the fleshpots” and do not wish to enter or remain in the Promised Land. Grampa and Granma die on the journey, one at the beginning and the other at the end of it.
Noah, a modern Ishmael who symbolizes the loneliness of man's spirit, departs to find his own Eden along the river which flows through the barren desert—one more of Steinbeck's interesting juxtapositions of life and death elements with water. Connie deserts the family because he is spiritually deficient. He will return to Oklahoma (Egypt) and moral destruction because his materialistic dream of studying for a trade and thus achieving prosperity is as far beyond him as is the little farm for Lennie and George in *Of Mice and Men*. In the worst days of the Joads, decimated in numbers, penniless and homeless, they still have in the courage of Ma and Rose of Sharon a source of renewing will to survive.

Tom was apparently meant to be the central figure in the novel. He is, however, completely dwarfed by Ma—an often ungovernable aspect of artistic creation known to all novelists. Only as a symbolic representation of Moses and Peter is he successfully realized, and in this way he achieves the stature of an epic hero. His principal role is that of Moses, the leader of his people. In keeping with this parallel, Tom has been in exile (jail) from them through killing a man. Barefooted, he approaches the divine presence (Casy); instead of the signal of the burning bush, the whole land is burning. The revelation to Tom of the plight of his people is not made by Casy but by the half-demented Muley Graves who appears before them like a wilderness prophet.

The character Muley, with Noah and Uncle John (and the "mayor" of Hooverville), reveals Steinbeck's fascination with twisted mental and emotional impulses. These men are not abandoned by their people, but by their own actions they set themselves apart from the normal aspirations of the rest. Noah is a living manifestation of old Tom's failure. Uncle John has set the mark of Cain upon himself and is driven like the legendary Wandering Jew to do a never-ending penance. He and Muley are voices crying in the wilderness prophesying the coming not of a Messiah but of retribution. Uncle John especially takes on the role of John the Baptist as he places the box containing Rose of Sharon's dead baby on the swollen stream, a powerful inversion of the living baby Moses on the life-giving Nile, and screams after it as John had screamed condemnation and warning of wrath to come to the Pharisees and Saducees of old: "Go down an' tell 'em. Go down in the street an' rot an' tell 'em that way. That's the way you can talk. . . . Maybe they'll know then."

The description Muley gives of the injustice his people and the Joads have suffered turns the sentimental home-coming of Tom into a purposeful drive to rejoin them and help them. At his arrival the fairly leisurely preparation for departure becomes feverish haste. At this point Steinbeck again inverts a biblical motif. The Egyptians gave gold, jewels, and other precious things to hasten the removal of the Israelites from among them, but the Joads are cheated and despoiled of their possessions by used-car and second-hand dealers, and themselves discard remaining practical and sentimental items for which there is no room on the truck. Tom in his role of Moses leads his people westward and supports his mother in her determination to hold the family together. Ma herself points out that he is dedicated ("spoke for"), set apart from the rest, and that she must lean on him.

The migrants on the road to California develop their own codes, and Chapter 17 may be considered the Okie deuteronomy, but Tom, consistent with his role, is also a law-giver of the all-important commandments of courage and self-reliance, and a castigator of defeatism and self-pity. To the fat service-station owner he snaps:

"I seen fellas like you before. You ain't
askin' nothin'; you're jus' singin' a kinda song, 'What we comin' to? You don' wanta know. Country's movin' aroun' goin' places. They's people dyin' all aroun'. Maybe you'll die pretty soon, but you won't know nothin'. . . . Just sing yourself to sleep with a song—'What we comin' to?'

And to the sniveling, one-eyed junkyard helper he is even more thorough in precept and example:

"Now look a-here fella. You got that eye wide open. . . . Ya like it. Lets ya feel sorry for yaself. 'Course ya can't get no woman with that empty eye flappin' aroun'. Put somepin over it an' wash ya face. . . . Why, I knowed a one-legged whore one time. Think she was takin' two-bits in a alley? No, by God! She was gettin' half a dollar extra . . . an' the fellas comin' out thinkin' they're pretty lucky. She says she's good luck. . . . Jesus Christ, an' all you got is one eye gone. . . . There ain't nothin' the matter with you. By yaself some white pants. Ya gettin' drunk an' cryin' in ya bed, I bet."

In the stream beside the Hooper ranch Tom becomes Peter, taking on the mantle of his fallen master. He strikes down the brutal deputy as Peter had smitten the Roman soldier and, in a like manner, flees to save himself. Later, and briefly, he parallels Moses again, at the beginning of the career of the biblical leader after he had killed the Egyptian whom he caught beating an Israelite. Tom realizes sadly, as Moses did, that his own people will betray him if he tries to remain with them. But for him it is no flight to Midian and the arms of a daughter of Jethro. In his moving farewell to Ma he acknowledges his debt to Casy for his philosophy of the oversoul and the power of unity. His resolution to dedicate himself to helping his people has a messianic ring that is strongly reminiscent of Christ's farewell to His disciples. He now rises above the role of Peter to symbolize the resurrection. One can speculate at this point whether Steinbeck did not intend to suggest the grave or tomb with the cavity of the mattresses in which Tom hides to escape from the Hooper ranch and with the culvert and cave where he conceals himself afterward. If so, he now ascends from the tomb. When Ma voices her fear that "they" may kill him like they did Casy, he replies:

"Then it don't matter. Then I'll be aroun' in the dark. I'll be ever'where—wherever you look. Whenever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever they's a cop beating up a guy, I'll be there. If Casey knowed, why, I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad an'—I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry an' know supper's ready. An' when our folks eat the stuff they raise an' live in the houses they build—why I'll be there."

He adds wryly and significantly that he sounds just like Casy, that he thinks of him constantly, even sees him sometimes. He is going forth on his mission freed of man's greatest fear—symbolically he has conquered death.

Finally, there is Ma, a truly great character creation of modern fiction. She is the spirit of her people, their source of ultimate regeneration. This one sees in her echoing of the Psalms at critical points of the story. "We are the people—," she affirms on the first of these occasions, "we go on." Her fight to hold her family together is not defeated in the end but is an illustration of the "little step" forward-and-backward principle Casy expounds in his last speech to Tom. Even in the overwhelming and degrading misfortunes of the Joads which mark the close of their story, it is through the unflinching fortitude of Ma, and through Rose of Sharon who now becomes an extension of Ma, that the promise of future revival is given. This beautiful name from the Canticles was not given to Rose of Sharon by accident, but until the close she has not lived up to it. The whimper-
ing, self-centered girl must be tempered by suffering, even by death before she is worthy to share in Ma’s great spirit.

Thus, the closing scene, in which Rose of Sharon gives her breasts to save a man dying of starvation, provides a climax which is another symbol of resurrection (it would be difficult not to concede the concept of the Eucharist here). The significance of this scene refutes the not uncommon charge that after Tom’s departure the novel drags to a purposeless close of revolting naturalism. Rather, Steinbeck ends with a message of hope to the Okies, biblical in implication and strength.

Miss Margaret Adams
David M. Rein

For fifteen years Henry Polling, Instructor in English, had been mired in his lowly rank. He had been an excellent teacher but—apparently—an unproductive scholar, unable to satisfy the demands of his superiors for published research. He had been working toward a book on Chaucer, growing old while younger men in the department passed him by. During most of these years he had loved the picture above his desk, an oriental print of a man with a sword—a man so angry his eyes were crossed. Through all the years when Henry, feeling cheated and oppressed, was laboring for recognition this fierce portrait had been his friend, hand on sword, ever ready to cut down the enemy.

Three months ago Henry had finally published his book on Chaucer and was scheduled for promotion to Assistant Professor. The print, after that, seemed out of tune and Henry replaced it with a reproduction of Boy with a Medal. For a while the new picture seemed just right. The Chaucer book certainly made him feel successful. There were congratulations from friends, appreciative letters of acknowledgment for gift copies, favorable reviews, and then, it seemed—nothing. Henry felt deeply dis- appointed, as though the recognition had been in vain, as though he had found none where he really wanted it. He sent out additional gift copies to keep the compliments flowing in, hoping that one of them might bring the satisfaction he had looked for in vain. But none did and at last Henry tore the Boy with a Medal from the wall, leaving a clean, empty space.

There was only one picture left in his office now, the picture of his mother on his desk, her white classic features touched with a sad smile. All that I am or hope to be I owe to. If only she were still alive to share this time of glory, in recompense for the bleakness she had shared with him, his five years—after he had graduated from high school—as a filing clerk writing novels evenings and Sundays and getting none published, his years as a college student and then as a lowly instructor ever so much older than his fellow instructors. If only he could put a copy of his book in her hands, quote from the letters and reviews and show her the first check from the publishers! What a climax that would be to all the kindly words of praise!

Two years ago, suddenly—his mother had died, before his book was finished. At once Henry sold the house they had been living in, where he had been born

Professor of English at Case Institute of Technology, Mr. Rein has appeared once before in College English (March 1959).