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Author(s): Eric W. Carlson
Source: College English, Vol. 19, No. 4 (Jan., 1958), pp. 172-175
Published by: National Council of Teachers of English
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/371677
Accessed: 02/09/2011 11:24
Rebuttal

SYMBOLISM IN The Grapes of Wrath

ERIC W. CARLSON

In his “Christian Symbolism in The Grapes of Wrath” (CE, Nov. 1956) Martin Shockley shows a commendable freedom from the usual critical stereotypes about this novel as a “propaganda tract” of the Thirties or as an example of “sociological naturalism” in fiction. In disagreeing with Paton and Pope he holds that Casey is a true Christ-symbol and that “the meaning of the book is revealed through a sequence of Christian symbols”; in agreeing with F. I. Carpenter (“The Philosophical Joads,” CE, Jan. 1941) he nevertheless finds a “further, stronger, more direct relation to the Bible.” Qualified only by the remark that Casey’s religion is “innocent of Paulism, of Catholicism, of Puritanism,” Shockley’s interpretation of Casey identifies him “simply and directly with Christ” from the evidence of his new-found religion, his deeds, and his death, and from Tom’s discipleship and Rosasharn’s sacramental gift of herself in the final scene of the novel. In short, the major intended meaning, it is claimed, is “essentially and thoroughly Christian.”

Now all this may seem plausible and in itself innocent enough. A closer examination of the novel as a whole, however, will lead to rather different conclusions, namely: (1) the Christian symbols and Biblical analogies function at best in a secondary capacity within a context of meaning that is so unorthodox as to be the opposite of what is generally considered “Christian”; (2) the primary symbolical structure, as well as meaning, is naturalistic and humanistic, not Christian; (3) the main theme reflects not only this foreground of natural symbolism but also the author’s philosophic perspective of scientific humanism. In other words, in The Grapes of Wrath a few loose Biblical analogies may be identified, but these are not primary to the structure and theme of the novel, and to contend that they give it an “essentially and thoroughly Christian” meaning is to distort Steinbeck’s intention and its primary framework of non-Christian symbolism.

In the first place, several of the Biblical analogies are really so tenuous as to depend entirely on other, major parallels for validity. Tom Joad as the Prodigal Son, for instance, hardly makes for a strong and direct analogy: Tom is quite unrepentant, having killed in self-defense, and Tom’s home-coming is described in a most moving fashion, without benefit of analogy. Other of the cited analogies can be invoked only as the loosest sort of parallels, hardly metaphorical, much less symbolic. For example, to speak of the Joads and other migrants as wandering, like the Israelites, in a wilderness of hardships while they seek the Promised Land is but to point up by conventional metaphor the general emotional pattern of the trek westward and the long-awaited sight of California. Even when the Joads make their dramatic entrance into California, as described in Ch. 18, that fact is subordinate to the significance of Ma’s stoicism (only she has known of Grandma’s death), her concern for the unity of the family, Tom’s idealism, etc. As for Noah’s going down the river, Shockley chooses not to “press” this point, major examples being enough. But if major examples suffice, why speak of the truck drivers’ generous tips (in Ch. 15) as constituting Mae’s reward for “casting her bread upon the waters”? Wouldn’t it be far simpler to say, without recourse to Biblical allusion, that this incident dramatizes a simple human fact: kindness breeds kindness? The strongest and most direct relationship of this incident is not to Christ but to Mae’s earlier reluctance to sell the loaf of bread and, by an even more emphatic contrast, to the penny-pinching tourist couples—both suggestive of how the hard shell of economic exploitation inhibits natural sympathy and generosity. In fact, Ch. 15 is but one of a number of carefully interrelated chapters that develop the social theme of mutualism.
and its negative counterpart, possessive egoism, out of a pattern of human experience that is realized pragmatically, not theistically, and distilled into natural, social and epic symbols.

The title-phrase "Grapes of Wrath" is a good case in point. According to Shockley, it is "a direct Christian allusion, suggesting the glory of the coming of the Lord, revealing that the story exists in Christian context, indicating that we should expect to find some Christian meaning." One grants that the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" expresses the spirit of militant Christianity, the sacrificial idealism and the retribution associated with the Calvinist legacy of the South. But except for fanatics like Grandma Joad and the Jehovahites, the specifically Christian association of "the grapes of wrath" has disappeared among the migrants, even as Casey had abandoned his old-style revivalism in search of something better. From the first chapter to the last, the "grapes of wrath" theme represents the indomitable spirit of man—that spirit which remains whole by resisting despair and resignation in the face of the drought of life, physical privation, exploitation, persecution, the tyranny of name-calling, and the uprooting of the very way of life itself. Out of these shared miseries there grows a spirit of resistance to the "possessive egoism" (Carpenter's term) of absentee ownership—"a bad thing made by men, and by God that's something we can change"; out of this nonconformity comes a sense of shared purpose and group action. Or, in the words of one of the interchapters, "From need to concept to action." In brief, then, the "grapes of wrath" theme is not specifically Christian for two reasons: it is not an expression of Christian humility and resignation; and, if one grants that the Christian spirit may on occasion be assertive and militant, here the title theme has its origin in the character and the experience of the people rather than in a body of religious concepts and beliefs. As Barker Fairley has made clear (SR, Apr. 1942), with special reference to the style of this novel, *The Grapes of Wrath* has behind it a long American "democratic tradition" which is embodied in its "epic form" and in its "epic tendency" of style, as well as in its folkways and philosophy.

Jim Casey belongs to this deeply rooted American liberal-democratic tradition. Like Emerson, Casey gives up the church and becomes a humble free-thinking seeker of the truth, relying on observation, shared experience, natural sympathy, and natural introspection and insight. When the revelation of his new calling comes to Casey, it comes as a result of his having lived among the migrants, sharing their hardships, miseries, and hopes. His new faith grows out of an experiential understanding and love of his fellow man. As articulated by Casey, his new faith has four major beliefs: (1) a belief in the brotherhood of man, manifesting itself as "love"—i.e., good will, compassion and mutualism; (2) a belief in the spirit-of-man as the oversoul or Holy Spirit shared by all men in their outgoing love; (3) a belief in the unity of man and nature; and (4) an acceptance of all life as an expression of spirit. To Casey these beliefs are ideal spiritual values and therefore "holy"; he seems to doubt that the word "holy" has any other valid meaning, really, and that there is holiness enough in the ideal unity of common purpose (spirit) when men strive together toward a worthy goal in harmony with nature (the way of life). Here we have the social theme again, with religious overtones associated by some readers with Christianity—or at least that core Christianity which remains after doctrine, dogma, sacrament, ritual, miracle, and theism itself have been stripped away, leaving only the idealized brotherhood of man and the unitarian Over-Soul. "I figgered about the Holy Spirit and the Jesus road," Casey explained. "I figgered, "Why do we got to hang it on God or Jesus? Maybe," I figgered, "maybe it's all men an' all women we love; maybe that's the Holy Spirit—the human spirit—the whole shebang. Maybe all men got one big soul ever'body's a part of." Now I sat there thinkin' it, an' all of a sudden—I knew it. I knew it so deep down that it was true, and I still know it." Like Emerson's Brah- ma, this is not the God of Christ—at least not to Casey and Steinbeck; and it is dubious semantics to insist on labeling "Christian" so unorthodox a creed. Christianity without
Christ is hardly Christianity. And although Carpenter concludes that "a new kind of Christianity— not otherworldly and passive, but earthly and active"—is developed from Steinbeck's integration of "three great skeins of American thought" (Emersonianism, Whitman's democratic religion, and pragmatism), that integration is less a product and characteristic of Christianity than it is of the humanist tendency and character of the American experience and the modern climate of opinion.

But if Casy's beliefs are not characteristically Christian, there is still a striking similarity to Christ in Casy's initials and his dying words. In those final words—"You don't know what you're a-doin'"—the ideas of resurrection and redemption are conspicuously absent, however. His death is not the death of a redeeming Christ, any more than the death of Jim Conklin in The Red Badge of Courage is such a death, even if both have names beginning with J and C. Casy does not seek death, nor is he resigned to it when it comes, though in his last words he seems to forgive his enemies. Apart from dramatizing the brutality of exploitative capitalism (not capitalism as such, necessarily), the significance of Casy's death lies in its indication of his love of man, a love that risked death even as Tom assumes Casy's mission at the same risk. This love of man, channeled by a democratic sense of social justice and a realistic sense of pragmatic action, explains Casy's compulsion to serve his fellow man, and his willingness to take the blame, after striking down the deputy, in order to save Tom from arrest. Sacrificial in appearance, this latter action is motivated by a pragmatic social idealism.

After Casy's death, Tom consciously accepts the mission of Casy's practical humanitarianism as more inspiring and realistic than Christian resignation to circumstance and the promise of heavenly reward.

The strained quality of Shockley's thesis is most apparent, however, in his interpretation of the final scene, where Rosasharn gives her breast milk to save the life of the starving old man. Here an attempt is made to cram a stark, primal symbol into the mold of orthodox Christian symbolism and doctrine. Having identified Casy's gospel as "innocent of Paulism, Catholicism and Puritanism," Shockley now identifies Rosasharn's symbolic action with Communion or Mass and with the "resurrection aspect of Christ"! How much simpler is Carpenter's remark that in this scene Rosasharn "symbolically transmutes her maternal love to a love of all people." As implied by her smile and hair-stroking gesture, Rosasharn, whose maternal instinct has been frustrated, feels a momentary satisfaction. But the beauty and the significance of this scene derive chiefly from its symbolizing the main theme of the novel: the prime function of life is to nourish life. Throughout most of the novel Rosasharn has been a weak, silly, and sentimental woman—an ironic contrast to the idealized Rose of Sharon of the "Song of Solomon." And yet in this closing scene common biology and psychology are transcended and transformed by a symbolic meaning that grows out of the natural, right, and compassionate quality of the action itself and out of the already developed structure of symbolism and meaning. In fact, I can think of no more impressive example of what William Sansom recently (NYTBR, 30 Dec. 1956) termed the round ending, one "that truly 'rounds off' the book, completing as a broad and living thing—an egg, if you like, rather than a straight thin line between arbitrary points. Round indeed as the final chords of a symphony—whose quality is not only finality but also a balanced suggestion that the music really continues... an ending must suggest the continuance of life, and, by definition, of that which makes life continu-able and endurable, hope: the end thus must be a statement of beginning."

That this "roundness" and significance lies not in any specifically Christian symbolism can be seen in Steinbeck's careful preparation of the primary symbolic structure of the novel, a body of symbolism which, in keeping with the theme, is both naturalistic and experiential. Ch. 1, for instance, describes the way the elemental forces in nature turn into dust and death. In the last paragraph of this chapter the men attempt to think through their frustration as they face this drought of life. Here, at the outset, is implied the universal
interdependence or ecological balance of man and nature. In Ch. 3, the second of a series of symbolic interchapters, the turtle is a remarkable example of creative nature symbolism, further developing the idea of interdependence and introducing the central theme, the primal drive of life. The former is implied by the description of the seeds in the opening paragraph, and of the way the head of oats caught by the turtle’s leg is dropped and covered with earth by the turtle’s shell. The latter theme is symbolized by the turtle’s dogged movement forward, the way all life naturally seeks to go somewhere through an instinctive urge to self-realization. In Ch. 4 Tom picks up the turtle, strokes the smooth, clean, creamy yellow underside with his finger and then rolls it up in his coat, as if identifying himself with its sensitivity, previously described by the turtle’s sudden reaction when a red ant irritated the soft skin under the shell. A few pages further on in this chapter and also in Ch. 6 Tom and Casy find in the turtle’s fixed sense of direction and purpose—briefly re-enforced by the sight of the shepherd dog trotting fast down the road, heedless of Tom’s whistle—a point of common meaning for the idea that people too have a right to “go somewhere.”

This sort of nature symbolism recurs throughout the novel but, as these first chapters have illustrated, the nature symbols tend increasingly to relate to human situations and events that themselves have symbolic values. Among these we might note the tractor and its driver (5), Mulkey (6), the second-hand car dealer (7), Highway 66, the Joads’ truck, the empty abandoned houses (11), the federal camp, the Hooverville camp, Noah’s departure, the death and burial of Grampa, Casy’s death, and the flood. Along with the main characters, these events are presented with such vividness and representative value as to become dramatic symbols of basic attitudes, conflicts and purposes in life—some social, others universal or epic. The social truths implied range from the tyranny of words (the handbills), the crime of monopoly (the evils of absentee ownership), economic exploitation, and the tragedy of direct action, to the positive values of folk fellowship, folk morality (the new Law of the Road) developed out of the migration (17), group action and democracy-in-process (22). But the most significant level is the epic level of the universally human: man’s dependence on the primal elements (water, sun, fire, land), and the epic nature of sex, womanhood, family life, death, mutualism of spirit, and the epic idea of the race of man. The final though separate identifications with humanity of both Tom and Rosasharn underscore the epic idea that all men are brothers because all men belong to the Race of Man. This emphasis on the transcendent yet real unity of spirit is clearly more than a “biological approach to ethics” (Hyman).

The Grapes of Wrath is epic in form as well as theme, mainly through the skillful interweaving of the interchapters and the narrative chapters. It is undoubtedly this basic structure that Steinbeck had in mind when he described the structure of this novel as “very carefully worked out.”

Many critics have found in Steinbeck’s work an element of the mystical, the mysterious, or the religious. But as Steinbeck’s search for spiritual values looks inside human experience, nature, and the life process, it is teleological only in the scientific (not the metaphysical) sense of the term. Steinbeck’s naturalism goes beyond both the mechanistic determinism of Dreiser and the mystic dualism of traditional Christianity. Steinbeck lifts the biology of stimulus-response to the biology of spirit, much as Edmund W. Sinnott has done in his studies of cell and psyche. His epic naturalism is neither romantic, nor mystic, nor Christian; it is an experiential discovery of the process by which “physiological man” becomes the “whole man” (Sea of Cortez, p. 87). As such it is a humanistic integration of the knowledge of man made available by modern science, philosophy, and art.