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Author(s): Martin Shockley
Reviewed work(s):
Source: College English, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Nov., 1956), pp. 87-90
Published by: National Council of Teachers of English
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/372506
Accessed: 23/08/2012 16:36

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Christian Symbolism in
The Grapes of Wrath

MARTIN SHOCKLEY

In their recent study (Saturday Review, 1954) of the Christ-symbol in modern fiction, novelist Alan Paton and theologian Liston Pope dismiss Jim Casy because their reaction to him “is essentially one of pathos rather than of awe.” I hesitate to disagree with two such eminent Christians, but I do disagree. I propose an interpretation of The Grapes of Wrath in which Casy represents a contemporary adaptation of the Christ image, and in which the meaning of the book is revealed through a sequence of Christian symbols.

Before and after The Grapes of Wrath Steinbeck has used symbolism and allegory; throughout his work he has considered a wide range of Christian or neo-Christian ideas; in relation to the context of his fiction as a whole, Christian symbolism is common. His use of Biblical names, for instance, is an inviting topic yet to be investigated. The Pearl is an obvious allegory on the evil of worldly treasure. The Pirate in Tortilla Flats exemplifies a Steinbeck character type, pure in heart, simple in mind, rejected of men, clearly of the kingdom of heaven. More pertinent perhaps, the title of The Grapes of Wrath is itself 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.

It has, indeed, been found before. Frederic I. Carpenter has pointed out (CE, 1941) the relationship of the Joad philosophy to the Unitarian, transcendental pantheism of Emerson and Whitman. I would not deny that Casy preaches the gospel according to Saint Walt; but I find further, stronger, more direct relations to the Bible.

Consider first the language of the novel. Major characters speak a language that has been associated with debased Piedmont culture. It is, I suggest, easy to find in vocabulary, rhythm, imagery, and tone pronounced similarities to the language of the King James Bible. These similarities, to be seen in qualities of simplicity, purity, strength, vigor, earnestness, are easy to illustrate. The novel contains passages of moving tenderness and prophetic power, not alone in dialogue, but even in descriptive and expository passages.

Like the Israelites, the Joads are a homeless and persecuted people. They too flee from oppression, wander through a wilderness of hardships, seeking their own Promised Land. Unlike the Israelites, however, the Joads never find it.

More specifically, let us examine the Christ-Casy relationship. Jesus began his mission after a period of withdrawal into the wilderness for meditation and consecration; Preacher Casy comes into the book after a similar retreat. He tells Tom, “I went off alone, an’ I sat and figured.” Later when Casy and Tom meet in the strikers’ tent, Casy says he has “been a-goin’ into the wilderness like Jesus to try to find out sumpin.” Certainly Steinbeck is conscious of the parallel.

Much has been made of Jim Conklin’s name as a key to his identification in the symbolism of The Red Badge of Courage. Whether Steinbeck copied Crane is immaterial; Jim Casy is by the same initials identified with Jesus Christ. Like Jesus, Jim has rejected an old religion and is in process of replacing it with a new gospel. In the introductory scene with Tom
Joad, Tom and Jim recall the old days when Casy preached the old religion, ex-
pounded the old concept of sin and guilt. Now, however, Casy explains his rejection
of a religion through which he saw him-
self as wicked and depraved because of
the satisfaction of natural human desires.
The old Adam of the fall is about to be
exorcised through the new dispensation.

It should not be necessary to point out
that Jim Casy’s religion is innocent of
Paulism, of Catholicism, of Puritanism.
He is identified simply and directly with
Christ, and his words paraphrase the
words of Jesus, who said, “God is love,”
and “A new commandment give I unto
you: that ye love one another.” Casy says,
“What’s this call, this spirit? . . . It’s
love. I love people so much I’m fit to bust
sometimes.” This is the truth Casy has
found in his wilderness, the gospel he
brings back to the people he loves.

Beyond this simple, central doctrine,
identical and cardinal to Jesus and to Jim,
there is the Emerson-Whitman-Unitarian-
pantheism which Professor Carpenter
notes. Jim elaborates: “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.” I would avoid theological suble-
ties; I see Jim Casy as a simple and direct
copy of Jesus Christ. Yet Casy’s doctrine,
“all that lives is holy,” comes close to the
document of one of the most distinguished
Christian theologians of our time, Albert
Schweitzer, whose famous and familiar
phrasing of the same concept is known
to us as “reverence for life.”

The third article of Casy’s faith is a
related one: “‘Maybe,’ I figgered, ‘Maybe
it’s all men and 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 thinking it, an’ all of a sudden—
I knew it. I knew it so deep down that it
was true and I still know it.” Casy’s
knowledge of the oversoul is derived
from the same source as Emerson’s and
Whitman’s—from within himself, or if
you prefer, from God speaking within
him.

Jim realizes, as did Jesus, that organi-
zied religion will reject his new teaching.
Tom points this out: “You can’t hold no
church with idears like that,” he said.
“People would drive you out of the
country with idears like that.” In both
cases, people make the rejection.

I should like to go on from this formulat-
ion of a creed to the expression of
document through deeds, to the unfolding
of the incidents of the plot in which Jim
Casy reveals himself through significant,
symbolic acts.

First, he feels a compulsion to minister,
to serve, to offer himself. When the Joads
are preparing to leave for California, he
tells them: “I got to go . . . I can’t stay
here no more. I got to go where the folks
is goin’.” Not long afterward, Casy offers
himself as the sacrifice to save his people.
When Tom is about to be arrested, Casy
tells the police that he is the guilty one.
‘It was me, all right . . . I’ll go ‘thout
no trouble.’” So the Joads escape the con-
sequences of their transgressions. “Bew-
tween his guards Casy sat proudly, his
head up and the stringy muscles of his
neck prominent. On his lips there was a
faint smile and on his face a curious
look of conquest.” Jim Casy had taken
upon himself the sins of others.

Casy’s death symbolically occurs in the
middle of a stream to represent the “cross-
ing over Jordan” Christian motif. Particu-
larly significant, however, are Casy’s
last words directed to the man who mur-
ders him, “Listen,” he said, “You fellas
don’ know what you’re doin’.” And again,
just before the heavy man swings the
pick handle Casy repeats, “You don’ know
what you’re a-doin’.” Jesus said, as they
 crucified Him, “Father forgive them; they
know not what they do.”

One of the major emotional climaxes
of the novel is the scene in which Tom
tells Ma goodbye and explains why he
must leave. He has told Ma about Casy,
who “Spouted out some Scripture once,
an’ it didn’ soun’ like no hellfire Scripture.” He goes on to repeat what Casy told him about two being better than one. He rehearses Casy’s teaching about the individual and the collective soul, recalling that Casy went into the wilderness to find his soul, then found, “His little piece of a soul wasn’t no good ’less it was with the rest, an’ was whole.” He explains to Ma Casy’s theory of Christian Socialism.

“‘Tom,’ Ma repeated, ‘What you gonna do?’ ‘What Casy done,’ he said.” At this point Tom becomes Casy’s disciple. He has learned from his master, and now he takes up his master’s work. Two of Jesus’ disciples were named Thomas. Most of those chosen by Him to found the religion we profess were called from among people like the Joads.

Tom’s answer to Ma’s worry lest he lose his life is the answer he has learned from Casy.

“Then it don’ matter. Then I’ll be all aroun’ in the dark. I’ll be ever’where—wherever you look. Wherever they’s a fight so hungry people can eat, I’ll be there. Wherever they’s a cop beatin’ up a guy, I’ll be there. If Casy knewed, why, I’ll be in the way kids laugh when they’re hungry an’ they 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. See? God, I’m talkin’ like Casy.”

The One that Casy talked like said, “Lo, I am with you always.”

These evidences of a Christ-Casy relationship mean more to me than they do to Mr. Paton and Dean Pope. I would not argue that Steinbeck’s interpretation of the relationship of pathos and awe in the Christian tradition is identical with the interpretation of Paton and Pope, nor that his interpretation is more or less correct than theirs. Nevertheless, I find in the novel what seems to me to be adequate evidence to establish the author’s intention of creating in Jim Casy a character who would be understood in terms of the Christ symbol.

Beyond this personal identification, I find further use of Christian symbols. The conclusion of The Grapes of Wrath has been said to be extreme, sensational, overwrought. The Joads have reached at last a condition of utter desolation. Rosasharn, her baby born dead, is rain-drenched, weak, her breasts heavy with milk. In the barn they come upon a boy and a starving old man, too weak to eat the bread his son had stolen for him. Ma knows what must be done, but the decision is Rosasharn’s: “Ma’s eyes passed Rose of Sharon’s eyes, and then came back to them. And the two women looked deep into each other. The girl’s breath came short and gasping.

“She said, ‘Yes.’”

In this, her Gethsemane, Rosasharn says, in effect: “Not my will, but Thine be done.”

The meaning of this incident, Steinbeck’s final paragraph, is clear in terms of Christian symbolism. And this is the supreme symbol of the Christian religion, commemorated by Protestants in the Communion, by Catholics in the Mass. Rosasharn gives what Christ gave, what we receive in memory of Him. The ultimate mystery of the Christian religion is realized as Rosasharn “Looked up and across the barn, and her lips came together and smiled mysteriously.” She smiles mysteriously because what has been mystery is now knowledge. This is my body, says Rosasharn, and becomes the Resurrection and the Life. Rose of Sharon, the life-giver, symbolizes the resurrective aspect of Christ, common in Christian tradition and literature, used by Mr. Eliot in his “multifoliate rose” image. In her, death and life are one, and through her, life triumphs over death.

Cited incidents occur at points of major importance in plot and action, accompany major emotional crises, and relate to the major and most familiar examples of Christian symbolism. Other less obvious examples might be brought in, such as the incident at the roadside cafe where the waitress lets the migrant have a loaf
of bread and is immediately rewarded by large and unexpected tips from the two truck drivers: she had cast her bread upon the waters. In a recent issue of the Colorado Quarterly (1954) Bernard Bowron notes Noah's wandering off down the stream as possibly "a biblical association." I would not, however, try to press my point further; major examples are enough.

Certain of these symbols may be identified as pre-Christian. The motif of crossing water in death is, of course, widespread in folklore; and the Freudian, totemistic interpretation of the miracle of transubstantiation lies in the background. It is not within the scope of this paper to explore these labyrinthine shadows. Suffice it to say that we recognize in Christianity elements of older religions. Further, it is easy to identify elements of Steinbeck's ideology with other religions. For example, the principle of reverence for life, or "all that lives is holy," has been believed and practiced for centuries by Buddhists.

Such, however, I regard as incidental. In The Grapes of Wrath the major intended meaning is neither Buddhist nor Freudian nor Marxist; it is, I believe, essentially and thoroughly Christian. In my interpretation, Jim Casy unmistakably and significantly is equated with Jesus Christ.1

1 In the April 1954 issue of The Annotator, mimeographed house-organ of Purdue's English Department, "H. B." (Professor Howard Burton, I assume) lists "Biblical Analogies in The Grapes of Wrath" taken from term papers submitted by Barbara Hyland and John Hallett. Together they cite seven "Biblical Analogies," including "stylistic parallels," "attitude toward the rich," "Casy and Christ," "the wanderings of the children of Israel [and] ... the migrants seeking California as a promised land," "Tom's return from McAlester [as] ... the Prodigal Son." The most interesting analogy in relation to my purpose in this paper is the suggestion of a halo for Casy: "As Casy and Tom approach Uncle John's house, the morning sun lights Casy's brow—but not Tom's. And just before Casy is killed, an attacker says, 'That's him. Its that shiny one.'" Professor Burton's note was called to my attention after this paper was accepted for publication.

A "Qualitative" Vocabulary Test

Frederic C. Osenburg

Of the so-called skills that contribute to competent writing—vocabulary, grammar, punctuation, etc.—vocabulary not only correlates highest with competent writing but also is the most easily isolated for study and measurement, perhaps is the only one besides spelling that can be isolated with reasonable success. Yet, the instrument for the measurement of vocabulary, the multiple-choice objective test, possesses all the precision of a pair of calipers made from an old monkey-wrench. Fundamentally a statistical device for gross measurements, it is used in individual cases with results that are frequently invalid and nearly always to some degree unmeaningful, for no one can say for certain what the scores mean, even though they are explained by all the customary statistical jargon.

The multiple-choice vocabulary test is based upon the false assumption that people either know words or don't know them, so that no distinction is made between good identifications and poor identifications, all identifications being treated only as "correct" or "incorrect." All "correct" identifications are added up, and the sum is accepted as an index of vocabulary knowledge. Yet a "correct" identification can mean anything from (1) that the testee knows the test word and the test synonym and uses both of them meaningfully to (2) that the testee knows that the