



Depiction of Moral Principles in John Steinbeck's Novels

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ABSTRACT:

The following paper is a study of moral principles like social responsibility and ethics present in John Steinbeck's novels. Respect for others, treating everyone equal, kindness and responsibility for personal actions are all examples of moral values. They are defined as the ideals and principles that guide people how to act. Moral values have an important role in improving the quality of life. Human values are the foundation for any society that individuals choose to practice in the pursuit of doing what is right or wrong or what is expected of them by the society. John Steinbeck's novels have all the moral themes and presents social commentary through them. He evidenced a serious interest and background in moral principles especially in ethics and social responsibility in his novels compared to any other modern period of American literature. His works promote serious moral reflection whose characters profound moral growth. This article explores the traces of social responsibility and ethics in John Steinbeck's works.

KEY WORDS: American society, material success, struggle of migrants, being compassionate, social responsibility and ethics in daily actions

John Steinbeck delved deep into the troubled inner lives of people and portrayed ethical characters that survived against social evils in leading a decent life. His novels are a sympathetic portrayal of migrants and urge us to move forward with justice and equality in all walks of life. An individual becomes socially responsible when he or she expresses responsibility toward social, cultural, economic and environmental issues. Ethics are moral principles that govern a person's behavior or the conducting of an activity. It defines what is good for individuals and society and is at the core of every individual's everyday life. Steinbeck depicted the social, racial and economic injustices through the realistic portrayal of life's struggles. He defined social responsibility and ethics as a quality to live life to the fullest.

During the thirties the American society was thoroughly altered by an extreme desire to acquire wealth. Their culture is over determined by money-making attitudes so much that it was deeply affected by a lack of moral values. Due to the extreme avarice of social success, the American society had difficulties in reconstructing the much fragmented society. Steinbeck's perspective seeks to reconstruct the Americans' cultural, political and social policy in order to provide the American people more civilized conducts. His writings exemplify the question of human values in America which were doubly affected by the power of money and the craving for modernity. His novels *The Pearl* (1947) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) reflect the unsettling mind of American citizens and the atrocious materialistic land owners. Steinbeck was dissatisfied with his society for being torn by an extreme wish for material gain. In *The Grapes of Wrath* and *The Pearl* Steinbeck highlights the consequences of materialism on American people who are short of moral principles. It is true that material success brings comfort but it also causes sorrow and fatality. In every case, many people believe that material prosperity can solve all their problems which are not exactly right. Steinbeck tries to explain what it means to be human. Man is a very small part of a very large universe, in the greater scheme of things. Individuals come and go and leave a very little lasting mark. Yet deep inside all people is a longing for a place in nature- the desire for the land,

roots and a place to call 'home'. The struggle for such a place is universal and its success is uncertain. Durst Johnson (1997) points this about *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) as,

In Chapter 19, Steinbeck writes that corporate greed has turned landholders into slaveholders, taking advantage of the dispossessed farmers pouring into the state, hiring the cheapest labor possible, providing them with inhumane living conditions, luring thousands with the promise of work when they will only hire several hundred at rock-bottom pay. (10)

The theory of social responsibility and ethics applies in both individual and group capacities. Steinbeck declares that people will always have a better quality of life if they focus on the community around them rather than on the individual. He stresses that people need to stick together and help each other if they want to survive and prosper. Steinbeck saw men as a part of the whole, often against a background of the disintegration of larger social and economic units and systems. Steinbeck, as a socialist, believed in the interdependence of society and it is explored throughout the body of his works. He supports primitive life for it endures all the complexities and has the perseverance to value the ethics and morals. Steinbeck through his characters educate the whole mankind that materialistic pleasures do not last long and states that being compassionate gives a better understanding of life. He reiterates that dreams give meaning to human lives. His characters in pursuing their dreams end up only experiencing common life. The struggle and sacrifice of the migrants is clear evidence that their hardships and setbacks only make them stronger in their tough times and finally choose an ethical life. Steinbeck's novels imply that his aim is to eradicate the social evils and make people rise above the struggle and turmoil of the world.

Ethics is an important part of work and every individual is accountable in fulfilling his or her civic duty as the actions of an individual affects or benefits the whole of society. Steinbeck's individuals exhibit group behavior that exerts significant influence on others. Hevelin (2000) observes,

The distinguishing personal mark of practically all Steinbeck heroes is their leadership and complete involvement in a communal action. (92)

The characters deal the situations ethically as they form foundation for the long span human survival. Steinbeck's group-man theory rested on the view of human psychology and on the Darwinian understanding of cultural evolution. Steinbeck ultimately wished to convey a theory of human behavior grounded in a particular kind of biological naturalism. He says there is a difference between the individual and as part of a group. He says that group is a unit often with a drive, intent, an end, a method. The ideal group formation, in the writer's view, is one in which the members act as individuals and at the same time contribute creatively to the formation of a harmoniously integrated whole as a society.

Social responsibility and ethics have to be incorporated into daily actions and decisions as it has an effect on other persons and the environment. One of Steinbeck's recurrent symbol which expresses this concept of being ethical is sharing the food with the children in the camp by Ma Joad, as it encompasses positive characteristics such as participation, unity among men and sharing. Sharing the food has always had, from primitive times, a deeper meaning which stresses communion among individuals of a social group. When Ma Joad cooks in the government camp, the local children gather around her pot. She also leaves some leftovers for the starving children. According to Johnson (1997)

There are no exalted regal heroes in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Its people are from the humblest ranks of society and, like proletarian or working – class works of literature, our attention is drawn, not to a single hero, but to the group, as if to emphasize one of the novel's messages- that strength, even survival, lies in unity. (5)

Through the characters he strive for a perfect end and to reach out to illuminate the path of mankind, step by step, searching for that perfect combination of influence and love to guarantee a creative, democratic community for all. Steinbeck says in *Tortilla Flat* (1935), "*Happiness is better than riches,*" said Pilon. "*If we try to make Danny happy, it will be a better thing than to give him money.*" (p 92) This illustrates that good ethics leads us to maintain our honest image and enables to bring about chances of positive growth and development. We are rational creatures and being ethical is a part of what defines us as human beings. Without it, our actions would be random and aimless. By being moral, we enrich our lives and the lives of those around us

The above study has brought to forefront few vital aspects that are common across people who strive to lead a life that is more ethical than materialistic. Throughout Steinbeck's novels it is obviously

clear that if ethics and being socially responsible is incorporated into daily actions and decisions it not only helps us but also the lives of people around us. In conclusion, being morally good gives us huge strength and perseverance to endure challenging situations.

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