Grapes Of Wrath: Jim Casy, The Silent Philosopher Essay, Research Paper

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Jim Casy: The Silent Philosopher

It is a widely accepted theory, in numerous areas of study, that a whole is the sum of its parts. It has also been acknowledged that the reaction formed by a combination of forces is greater than the sum of the individual forces. Such a synergistic principle has become a strong motive behind many incidents in history, in which individuals have assembled into a group to become an increasingly powerful and influential force. This is the case in John Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath, in which thousands of farmers are affected by the economical, climatic, and agricultural crises of the 1930’s and forced to migrate to the promising valleys of California. As these migrants make their long, arduous journey across the deserts of America, they are faced with numerous predicaments, most of which place them on the brink of survival. In the end, they learn that it is their love for one another and their togetherness that will allow them to complete the journey and fulfill their long-lived dreams. As the story progresses, a marked growth becomes evident among each character as they make the transition from an “I” level of thinking to a “we” level of thinking. One such character is the itinerant preacher, Jim Casy. Although his actions are not directly influential to the story’s plot, it is his philosophies and outlooks on life and religion that affect the events, as well as the other characters, in the story.

Perhaps the most significant theme interpreted from the journey of the Joad family is that of the shift from the “I” to the ”we” mentality. This concept results mainly from the mutual relationships formed between the migrants and their willingness to help one another. As the migrants progress on their journey, their concern for the well being of others overshadows their concerns for themselves. Their actions become completely altruistic and intended to protect the functionality of the migrant force as a whole. They readily make sacrifices to one another and work to create mutual bonds that help one another survive. Another aspect of the “I” to “we” transition is that of the togetherness of the migrant families and the unions formed between them. As the migrants begin to face the all the same hardships and dilemmas, they begin to organize and function as a single unit. The individuals among this unit are capable of helping one another and advancing the progress off the whole unit. For example, the workers organize and form a picket line outside of Hooper Ranch in order to protest the establishment of low wages. Such intimate bonds and mutuality between the migrants is what explains the “we” mentality of the workers and its strong influence on the development of the plot.

One of the characters in Grapes of Wrath that experiences a departure from the “I” form of thinking, towards the “we” form of thinking is the ex-preacher, Jim Casy. Jim Casy is seen as much of a philosophical character, relating much in a biblical sense to Jesus Christ, revealing his thoughts on life and human nature to the other characters. Although he does not portray any form of selfish behavior at the start of the novel, he is nevertheless portrayed as an independent character, initially insignificant and unlinked to the rest of the characters. It is learned that before the start of the story, Casy had disappeared into the wilderness to think about his life and about his role as a preacher. He begins to learn the true meaning of life and the human spirit. He explains that the human spirit is just one great being and the human soul is a member of a larger soul that is formed by the love between each person. Tom recalls that “one time Casy went into the wilderness to find his own soul, an’ he foun’ he didn’t have no soul that was his’n. Says he foun’ he jus’ got a little piece of a great big soul…his little piece of a soul wasn’t no good ‘less it was with the rest, an’ was whole” (70). This is the basic philosophy that the togetherness of the migrants is based on. Yet, at the start of the book, Casy only seems to be stumbling upon these ideas. He appears to be experiencing doubts about his former life and his lifestyle and beliefs as a preacher, rather than any doubts about the nature of mankind. His thoughts seem to be more focused around himself than the condition of the migrants. For example, Casy tells Tom that he is “just Jim Casy now. Ain’t got the call no more. Got a lot of sinful idears—but they seem to be kina sensible” (27). His skepticism regarding the true meaning of the sins that mankind commits is more centered on his duty as a preacher, than on human nature. He starts to present some philosophical ideas at the start of the novel, but it is not until later that he reaches a complete understanding of such ideas.

The first sign of Casy’s transition to a “we” level of thinking becomes evident when he and Tom find the rest of the Joad family. When the Joads are preparing to depart for their journey to California, Casy decides that he needs to join them. He says, “I need to be where the people are” (128). His statement proves his need to remain as part of the whole, since he believes that this itself is holy. As the Joads continue onto their journey, Casy begins to increase his understanding of the wholeness of the human spirit. He begins to understand that it is the unity and bonds between the people that will keep them strong and will help them survive. Yet, at this point, Casy continues to simply share his philosophy of attaining unity and remains a rather passive character, in that he does not perform any actions relevant to his beliefs.

The points in the story where Casy’s digression from passivity is evident is at the camps, at which the Joads stop several times. At these camps, Casy recognizes, from first-hand experience, the oppressive situation that the migrant’s are facing. He sees the low wages that the migrants are being paid, as well as the police’s natural aversion towards the “Okies” and their desire to crush any chance they have of organizing. This is where Casy first realizes that the migrants should attempt to organize to rebel against the exploitation of the migrants and corrupt social conditions. His call for a union among the worker’s clearly shows his following of his philosophy that the soul is part of a whole. Casy reveals his attachment to the Joads as he makes a sacrifice to save Tom at one of the camps. When a minor disturbance is caused between a proprietor and a migrant, the police are called in, leading to a series of events in which Tom ends up tripping a policeman in order to keep him from shooting a fleeing migrant. When more police arrive to arrest Tom for his actions, Casy decides to take complete responsibility in order to keep Tom from returning to jail, and is, in turn, imprisoned for a short time. It is not until Casy is put in prison that he is able to come to a full understanding of his prophetic views. In prison, he sees the advantage of men organizing and working together to achieve some goal. Once he leaves prison, he attempts to put his thoughts into action by organizing a strike at Hooper Camp. By doing this, he arouses the antagonism of the people in authority and is brutally slain. It is only after his death that the full meaning of his message reaches people and he has followers. His beliefs live on through the actions of Tom and Ma Joad and lead their decisions throughout the rest of the journey.

Like most of the characters in Grapes Of Wrath, the philosophical ex-preacher, Jim Casy, experiences a change in attitude as he makes the transition from “I” to “we”. Yet unlike the other characters, Casy’s transition is portrayed through his philosophy that all people are part of one whole. At the beginning of the novel, Casy was much of an independent character and his philosophy only had value for himself. Later, he realized that it is required of him to be part of this whole and help lead it as a united force. It is through this that Casy shows his togetherness with the rest of the people. Casy’s function in the novel is to offer a social message to the Joads and the rest of the migrants. Casy’s prophetic message develops throughout the course of the novel until it produces the results it does at the end. Without Casy’s ideas, it would be difficult for Tom to reach the point of development he achieves and for Ma Joad to exercise the strength that she exhibited. In Grapes of Wrath, Steinbeck shows that, through Casy’s words and the actions of the migrants, people should not need to be intimidated by the authoritarian figure in times of social oppression or economical exploitation. He shows that if all people share common ground or beliefs, they will show love for one another, and this will allow “I” to become “we”, the result of a powerful alliance.

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