Historical Intro Of The Challenge To Social Classes Essay, Research Paper

?The historical introduction of the Challenge to Social Classes?

A journey through the twentieth century in America via the trials and tribulations as offered by American novelists depicts a common social evolution. Struggle, discontent, and the inherent obstacles in life are not particularly unique to the characters of the American novelist, however the experiences and the perseverance of each have defined our country and our society in similar ways. Many novels of this period depict the hardships endured by immigrants to this country as well as those who may revert to an immigrant class at some point in life. Historically, social class was a birthright (or wrong). The content and discontent did little to challenge their destiny and breakthrough the social class boundaries. American novelists in the twentieth century have provided a unique path of stepping stones, one novel at a time to explore changes in social class and how people through the years have dealt with inherited cultural boundary and the subsequent shift in these boundary over the course of the last century.

The most challenged social structure in American society is the freedom to cross social boundaries, achieve any level of success and not be constrained by the heritage and roots from which one began. In no other country has that journey been more of a reality and therefore a common thread of life than in America.

American novels abound with stories of settlers that colonized the nation, gave birth to towns and farms, built new railroads and ports and overcame the adversities of settling a land already inhabited by others. There are also numerous illustrations of people and social classes working to improve their social condition through much hardship and at great immediate and prolonged cost. It is in novels such as ?The Grapes of Wrath?, by John Steinbeck that social betterment are directly detailed through the journey of the Joad family and underlying social change and a culture shift from an independent way of life to a more collective society are chronicled and suggested. In this novel, Steinbeck tells a magnificent story of a family forced from their farm in search of the most primitive of needs; food, shelter; and money to survive. In addition to the experiences shared through the story the reader is exposed to a second ?narrative? containing detailed descriptions of the times, thoughts, and people of this era that stand independently from the story of the Joad family themselves.

Life culminating up through the dust bowl in the central United States was a very independent existence. Extended families lived together on a single farm and provided for themselves and their immediate future generations with each days labor satisfying the needs of the survival of the clan-like family unit. Sharing and collaboration with those outside of the immediate family was a charitable event and not a means by which to achieve or work toward a vastly different future purpose or social outcome. The family was what it was and had what it had and would continue to follow that path despite any hardships or obstacles, such as Tom Joad serving time in prison. A fixed, rigid mindset did not afford much opportunity for social class advancement and/or change.

The acceptance of the social climate in which a family is born is further illustrated in two unique ways. Steinbeck tells of those refusing to leave their farms in search of mere survival and it is this philosophy that is best defined in the under developed characters of both the grandfather and father figures in ?The Grapes of Wrath?. Their inability to adjust to a changing social climate is illustrated in their deteriorating significance in providing for the family. As a result of the events following the war, the drought, and subsequent dust bowl conditions their way of life had failed them. Each knowing no other way to provide for the family or exist in a society in which they no longer had a piece of land to lay claim, was relegated to go along for the ride and to take a back seat to their younger family members.

Steinbeck does a masterful job, through the travels of the Joad family at offering society the advice that success, life, and stability can be achieved through other means than individualism. By organizing and joining forces, people of lower social classes with no money, possessions, or power can collectively become a force that as a whole are a society unto themselves and their needs and demands can be realized. This journey must begin, however, with a desire to overcome and with the willingness to cope with what singular experiences and challenges each is faced with. This shift in society illustrated in ?The Grapes of Wrath? is an underlying premise repeated in ?My Antonia? as well. Immigrants depicted in this American novel for the most part were somewhat more organized in that their society and geographical location to others of their same origin were determined. However, the determination and spirit to improve one?s quality of life, work hard, and be rewarded, both monetarily and in happiness emphasizes the social shift unique to the American culture.

Antonia, herself lives a life of many hardships beginning with her status as an immigrant to a new country in which her family did not know the language and were quickly taken advantage of. Through the course of her life there are many obstacles that she must overcome including her father?s suicide which keeps her from attending school with her fellow classmates because she is forced to take over his job, which is working in the fields. Even after she moves to town as a ?hired girl? a new set of boundaries are imposed on her. The working girls portrayed in ?My Antonia? were presented more so as a group than as an individual. With that stereotype each member of this group was afforded only certain respect. Despite these social constraints, hardships, and limitations, Antonia continues to possess a fire for life. She has a resilient inner spirit that drives her to succeed and survive adversity and seek out happiness. Throughout her life she accepts what happens to her and continues to strive to build an abundant, promising future. The journey through life to keep striving for a higher place was somehow found for Antonia in the end when all that she encountered, became, and was forced to live with still resulted in a happy, content, and fulfilling life in contrast to others.

Willa Cather further defines the social climate for Antonia by interlacing the backdrop of the novel with the societal conditions of Jim Burden and Lena Lingard. The finality of where each character emotionally settles in life is the best portrayal of the changing social class value. Cather exhibits Lena as living a somewhat static, shallow life where in she was the character from the highest social class and therefore afforded to most opportunity. The character of Lena contrast nicely with that of Antonia and Jim Burden, of a more moderate social class, providing the reader a clear image of not only these class boundaries but also more importantly, the spirit of each. Jim Burden, in his own journey through life, realized that he was only truly happy with what he knew from his childhood and Antonia. He signifies the shift in society from complacency with one?s class and boundaries to the realization that the continual search for happiness and improvement is afforded only to those who seek it. The comparatively similar classes of Jim Burden and Lena Lingard annotate the complacent thinking, which is similar to that of the Joad family on their farm before the dust bowl in ?the Grapes of Wrath.

Both novels express vividly the hardships of life in their respective times. While seemingly unrelated in their messages, it is this constant theme of social significance and the mere chance to search out happiness and contentment. The journey and determination to seek that goal is a historically new social structure in and of itself which was born from a country founded by immigrants and advanced by those with a pioneer attitude. Those who do not search out a better life or live each day in the direction of one will never find it.

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