In Dubious Battle Essay, Research Paper

In Dubious Battle

Most people?s first impression when reading In Dubious Battle, by John

Steinbeck, is that it is meant to act as communist propaganda. Some even believed that

Steinbeck himself was an advocate of the resurgence of the communist party in the first

half of the twentieth century. Whether he was or not is a moot point; the fact is that In

Dubious Battle is not communist propaganda. Several themes are present that relate to

the American people then and even today, but communism isn?t one of them. Steinbeck

uses the position of some communist radicals during the thirties as a springboard for

other themes. These themes include but are not limited to: it is nessicary for men to work

together and be part of a group, everyone must know who they are and know where they

are headed, struggles must be conquered step by step, some things just keep changing,

and that some things really don?t have a definitive ending.

In Dubious Battle takes place in the apple orchards of California during the

1920?s. It revolves around the actions of two communist radicals, Mac and Jim. The

story opens at Jim?s decision to join ?the party?. He meets Mac and is taken under his

wing. Initially Jim?s only duties are typing letters and other various petty odd-jobs. This

soon changes. Mac learns of frustration over wage cuts of some apple pickers in the

Torgas Valley and sees a chance to ?get a good ruckus going? and Jim?s first real

communist activity.

Once they arrive in the Valley, Mac and Jim get a bit of luck by coming across

one of the pickers daughters going into labor. By helping the girl, they earn the trust of

the other pickers and are taken into the group. They then proceed to go to the orchards

with the other men in hopes to promote a strike. They eventually get into some of the

men?s heads and the idea of a strike starts to circulate and they get close to some of the

natural leaders of the group, London and Darkin. The strike finally breaks and Mac does

a lot to get the workers organized and working together.

There are various incidents involving the strikers and the orchard owners. All

through this Jim is getting increasingly antsy and wants to do more than follow Mac

around. Little by little Mac gets Jim more embroiled in the strike. Mac even starts to

realize that Jim?s mind might be more vital to the party then his own. Another member of

the party, Joy, comes in order to try and win some of the scabs, temporary workers, over

to the side of the strikers but is immediately shot. Mac then uses him as a symbol for the

pickers to follow. But every thing that they try is only a temporary fix and things start to

unravel. Because of the increasing annoyance of the owners and the escalating confusion

of the workers, tension begins to mount. Then in a rapid fire, abruptly-ending scene, Jim

is shot and Mac procedes to try to use him as motivation.

Despite the abundance of communism in the book, it is not the central theme.

The first theme that does arise is that of the need to belong to a group. Jim?s joining of

the party is the initial example. When he is introduced he is alone and claims that his

?whole family has been ruined by the system.?. His father was a ?sticker in a slaughter

house? and ?had a reputation for being the toughest mug in the country.? He fought the

system by himself and was eventually killed by a riot gun. After Jim?s father died, his

mother withdrew from the family and eventually died because she ?she just didn?t want

to live? and wouldn?t talk to Jim. He then turned to the party to be part of a group and to

?work towards something.?

The idea of needing to belong doesn?t end with Jim?s joining of the party. One of

the best examples is during the birth scene. Mac starts delegating tasks which makes the

whole camp feel they are involved in the delivery. This involvement created a ?current

of excitement? that brought the entire camp together. Mac realizes the importance of this

feeling of belonging and uses this knowledge when dealing with the strikers. After the

delivery is made Mac had all the cloth, used and unused, burned. He stated:

?Every man that gave part of his clothes felt that the work was his own. They all

feel responsible for that baby. It?s their?s, because something from them went to

it. To give back the cloth would have cut them out. There?s no better way to

make men part of a movement than to have them give something to it.?

By using all that every man had to contribute, Mac made them feel like they were part of

a cause.

As the book progresses it starts to be apparent that Mac isn?t excessively

concerned in whether or not the strike succeeds. He feels that just buy striking he has

perverted the minds of the workers with self confidence, defined their identity, and has

given them a common enemy- the capitalist. Mac comprehends the fact that without

identity and objective, people are lost. He offers these ideals to London:

?If the thing blew up right now it would be worth it…. They [now] know how

much capital thinks of them and how quick capital would poison ?em like a bunch

of ants…. We showed them two things- what they are, an? what they have to do.?

Even if the strike fails a bigger goal has been accomplished. This goal is applicable even

to today?s world. There is a great importance in knowing who you are and where you are

going. Without these two things, nothing would ever be accomplished.

Mac begins to show that this strike isn?t the end of anything either, no matter how

it turns out. This strike is just intended to start the spread of the infection that is the idea

that the worker has rights. Mac recognizes the fact that a war this large cannot be won in

a single battle. He relays this sentiment to Jim:

?We haven?t a chance [to win this strike]. I figure these guys here?ll probably

start deserting as soon as much trouble starts. But you don?t want to worry about

that, Jim. The thing will carry on and on. It?ll spread and some day- it?ll work.

Someday we?ll win.?

He tries to relate this strike to a more encompassing labor world, there in turn relating it

to one of the primary goals of this communist party. When it is completely broken down,

this goal is very simple: to free the worker from underneath the cloak of the rich.

But this is not what Steinbeck is trying to relay. He is playing off of these ideas to

show that any fight of this size is not won immediately. Steinbeck sees that the

individual strikes and conflicts that the communist party dealt with are only bricks in a

much larger wall. You must push and push, all the while expecting to win the war but

excepting the losses of smaller battles. By using the communist struggles and losses in

the twenties and thirties, Steinbeck gives the reader something to relate their problem to.

Whether their problem is with their boss, a political leader, or even within the family, it

can only be won step by step.

At several points in the book it appears that the strike is collapsing all around the

pickers. At every one of these critical turning points, something happens that keeps that

keeps the strike going by slightly changing the focus. When it seems that the workers are

about to turn on Mac and Jim, they are distracted by a fight involving London. When the

men were being stood off by the cops at the train station, a vigilante shoots Joy. Since

the pickers new Joy only as a face, it became the face of the common worker. They then

fought for not only themselves but for that face.

Jim surfaces as a significant leader but is then killed. This doesn?t slow anything.

In fact it puts the ball rolling again. Mac uses the death of Jim as a way to put another

concrete face on the abstract ideas he is trying to push. But this time the workers knew

Jim and what he stood for. Mac tries to emphasize this by preaching, ?This guy didn?t

want nothing for himself.? It, like the previous examples, shows how something can just

keep changing its path ever so slightly in order to keep going. This can apply to current

farming, factory workers, a strategy for war, or even to modern ethical beliefs.

Jim?s death scene is the last scene in the book and leaves the reader without a

finite ending. We never really know what happened to Dr. Burton. We never know if Al

Anderson or London officially join the party. We never find out if the strike went

through or if it just disbanded. The lack of adjournment on these events is very

significant and creates a great impact on the reader, pointing to yet another theme. This

one says that many things and battles, not unlike the book, don?t have a defined ending

and go on infinitely. Steinbeck, by not putting closure on things, displays this universal

idea magnificently.

Steinbeck expresses several themes in In Dubious Battle that still apply today,

communism is not one of them. Communism acts merely as a canvas to paint these other

abstractions. He shows it is basic human nature to need to belong and to have identity

and goals. He displays the fact that not every ?war? can be won in one day or one battle.

Just because some of these battles will be losses, doesn?t mean the war still can?t be a

victory. By not letting the story die and always giving a new way to turn, Steinbeck

exemplifies almost a Darwinian theory of adaptation and evolution. With the seemingly

inconclusive ending, he shows that the point of writing this was more than just a story. It

says that things aren?t always open and shut with concrete closure or a finite ending.

Steinbeck makes it impossible to ignore these themes and the fact that they are forever

applicable.

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