The Grapes Of Wrath As A Documentary Propaganda

The definition of propaganda, according to The Merriam-Webster dictionary is “ideas, facts, or allegations spread deliberately to further one's cause or to damage an opposing cause” (Merriam-webster.com, 2019). We can certainly say that Steinbeck wrote The Grapes of Wrath to further his cause, but did he do it to damage someone else’s? According to Google propaganda is also used to enact political change which The Grapes of Wrath did, encouraging Franklin D Roosevelt to see firsthand the crisis that was the Dustbowl and subsequently enact the New Deal. However, The Grapes of Wrath toes a strange line between documentary and fiction. Whilst the events were real, the people were accurate and the suffering was real, the actual story is not.

Ioan Marc Jones of the Huffington Post argues that Steinbeck is not pushing communist or even socialist ideas in his book but rather “common sense politics”(Marc Jones, 2014). Jones argues that supporting the oppressed worker does not have to be an exclusively socialist or communist ideal but rather but a sensible idea. Steinbeck supports the downtrodden and those who have it hard through no fault of their own. He was moved to write The Grapes of Wrath as these people had their otherwise successful livelihoods destroyed by nature which is, quite clearly, not their own fault. Jones establishes the question: Why wouldn’t we support these people? It does not take a hard-line communist to feel sympathy, nor does it take a staunch socialist to feel sympathy. One need only look at the sheer destruction to feel pure horror on behalf of those affected, particularly those in Oklahoma which was hit hardest in April 1935, as detailed by Sparrow, “It is considered the worst dust storm of the era, and is estimated to have blown away 300 million tons of fertile top soil. Oklahoma was hit the hardest but its force was felt in many states and the dirt and dust fell to the ground as far away as New York City.” (Sparrow, 2018) However, parts of The Grapes of Wrath do read like the communist manifesto in its support of revolution and the discussion of such as though it is not a possibility but inevitability. Steinbeck says “when a majority of the people are hungry and cold they will take by force what they need. And the little screaming fact that sounds through all history: repression works only to strengthen and knit the repressed.”(Steinbeck, 1939) One could easily be forgiven for thinking this was the work of Marx or Engels.

Ironically enough, from the accusations of communist propaganda, grew a trend of burning The Grapes of Wrath. The act of book burning, mostly carried out in fascist states, is a form of censorship that has been well documented in both Nazi Germany and most ironically of all, the USSR. At the site of the infamous book burning in Nazi Germany in 1933 there is a quote from the Heinrich Heine play Almansor that reads “Where they burn books, they will, in the end, burn human beings too” (Heine, 1913). Heine is communicating in no uncertain terms that where they are willing to burn books and censorship ideas that threaten the ideology or the system that is currently in place, they will also be willing to let the suffering of human beings happen. This is clear in the USA at the time of the dustbowl. They burned books but they did not quite burn people. However, they did leave a huge number of famished, poor and hopeless workers to perish at the hands of an unfeeling and purposefully ignorant ruling class. The aforementioned ruling class thought, without doubt, that the book was simply communist propaganda and they felt threatened by the ideas of helping those who need it. We see the Joads have problems finding work several times, and several times we see the ruling class or employers exploit and

punish the working class person for simply trying to survive. When the Joads reach the first camp and upon an offer of work Floyd attempts to have a promise of wage in writing he is immediately accused of being a “red” and we witness an attempt at arrest that would have been successful had the others not intervened. It seems the land owners and employers were so offended and threatened by The Grapes of Wrath because it gave an insight to the true nature of the employers to the average person. Everyone in America got an insight into how cruel and heartless they were and therefore the attempted to burn and ban the book around the country in an attempt to stop that message getting out. In his book Obscene in the Extreme, Rick Wartzman details some of the instances in which the book was burned or banned and it appears to consistently lead back to the Associated Farmers of California. “In East St. Louis, Illinois, the library would soon vote to burn the three copies of the book it had in its collection. Aboard the U.S.S Tennessee, the chaplain removed The Grapes of Wrath from the ship’s Library, even though more than fifty men were on the waiting list to read it. And for at least a time, the U.S. Postal Service barred the novel from the mails.” (Wartzman, 2009) The Associated Farmers of California went on the imply that The Grapes of Wrath was “Filthy material” yet were okay with the horrid working conditions that had been put upon the labourers in their farms. It’s quite clear that the farmers did not want the treatment of workers to be public knowledge as it was despicable. In this way we see the book as no longer propaganda but rather a public service, a well of information and an illuminating light of the conditions that many a poor worker had to suffer to survive. As we see when the Joad family arrive at the camp site where they find work picking peaches, the owners were paying the Joad family 5 cents per box which wasn’t enough to feed the family and yet the owners wanted to pay the workers two and a half cents per box which is ludicrous if 5 cents won’t even feed a family. This situation is one of the most damning and shocking. This portrays the employers as simply money greedy and heartless. The worker, to them, is less than human and undeserving of any kindness or sympathy.

One way in which The Grapes of Wrath could be seen as propaganda is the unionising message portrayed all the way throughout the book. We see strikes taking place, people standing up to authority and workers sticking together to survive against the odds that are swayed by the land owners and authorities. If the thousands upon thousands of people, around 250,000 by 1940 (Migration.ucdavis.edu, 2008), who moved from the dustbowl states of California got together as a unified force then the land owners and employers would be much less powerful than when the workers were split and almost competing for jobs. The Grapes of Wrath encouraged this unionisation and teamwork which massively threatened the power and control that the wealthy had over the poor. Particularly near the end of the novel as Tom intends to carry on the work of Casy, it seems he intends to organise people to fight against unfairness and inequality. As the book comes to a close ma sends Tom away with some money and he tells her some of his aspirations for new life, “I been thinkin' how it was in that gov'ment camp, how our folks took care a theirselves, an' if they was a fight they fixed it theirself; an' they wasn't no cops wagglin' their guns, but they was better order than them cops ever give. I been a-wonderin' why we can't do that all over. Throw out the cops that ain't our people. All work together for our own thing—all farm our own lan'.” (Steinbeck, 1939) Tom Suggests some communist ideals of having no police service, being self sustaining and everyone having land from which they can comfortably live.

Some definitions of propaganda suggest that it is bias information, used particularly to enact political change. So, one could certainly argue with the impact The Grapes of Wrath had on FDR and the subsequent new deal that this is undoubtedly, by definition, propaganda.

Steinbeck, although not directly, certainly wrote the book with a sense that the brutal nature of the descriptions and treatment that he could indeed make a political change. When Eleanor Roosevelt visited a work camp she was asked by a reporter whether The Grapes of Wrath was exaggerated or not she replied with certainly “I have never thought The Grapes of Wrath was exaggerated”.

The resistance to authority is a main point for considering this book to be propaganda. We find at the beginning of the book that Tom has only been released from jail and he repeatedly, along with many others, defies authority and law. At the first camp Tom trips a policeman making him vulnerable to attack and later on at the orchards when the authorities kill Casey, Tom beats the man then needs to go into hiding. However, this is not painted as a negative as his actions are justified. The opposition and violence toward authority is framed as just and the idea of morality over law is introduced and consistent throughout. We even see that Tom intends to carry on the work of Casy which would imply that Tom is indeed moral and right but yet we know he has killed two men. Steinbeck was also known to resist authority as he wrote to the Attorney General in 1942 asking “Do you suppose you could ask Edgar's boys to stop stepping on my heels? They think I am an enemy alien. It is getting tiresome.' Steinbeck is referring to J Edgar Hoover, the first director of the FBI who was known to act outside of his jurisdiction particularly in his investigations of supposed communists such as Steinbeck.

Jim Casy could certainly be considered a metaphor for communist ideals on religion. Casy rejects organised religion for the belief that unity is the true Holy Spirit. Casy suggests that the spirit is more than just God or Jesus but more so about the fellow man as he says to Tom: “I figgered about the Holy Sperit and the Jesus road. I figgered, 'Why do we got to hang it on God or Jesus? Maybe,' I figgered, 'maybe it's all men an' all women we love; maybe that's the Holy Sperit—the human sperit—the whole shebang. Maybe all men got one big soul ever'body's a part of.” (Steinbeck, 1939) This is a metaphor for unity and could in turn be a suggestion of unionisation, man having one spirit would suggest that everyone is linked and therefore hurting your fellow man would hurt yourself. This, in turn, would cultivate a culture of helping each other, making sure everyone is healthy and happy: i.e., communist ideals.

The book closes with Rose of Sharon Joad breast feeding a sickly old man after her child was stillborn. This is arguably the most powerful images in the book if not within American literature as a whole. There are few more disturbing, sad and yet harrowing moments one can think of in literature. For a woman with so little to share what she has in such a close and personal manner is absolutely striking. This firmly suggests that no matter what, the downtrodden will help each other without the aid of the privileged and adversity will only strengthens the resolve to do anything to survive. As Steinbeck says “when a majority of the people are hungry and cold they will take by force what they need. And the little screaming fact that sounds through all history: repression works only to strengthen and knit the repressed.”(Steinbeck, 1939) The closing scene of the book is the epitome of the repressed being strengthened and knitted closer by the repression they face together. It’s hard to imagine Steinbeck writing both the closing scene and the previously mentioned quote without some hint of communist ideology in mind. Whilst Steinbeck may not have been an outright communist there is absolutely no denying that his writing bears strong resemblance to many communist or socialist ideas.

If one is to consider the book propaganda then it is in no uncertain terms documentary propaganda. Steinbeck was active and hands on in his research for The Grapes of Wrath, visiting camps and travelling route 66, the main road used during the dustbowl. Steinbeck’s

main source for documentary inspiration for the fiction work was Arvin Federal Camp and the dedication at the beginning “To Tom who lived it” refers to the camp owner Tom Collins whom he met and became close with over his time researching the conditions that the migrant workers endured. Deborah Gardner of the Public Policy Institute at Hunter House speaks about the negative treatment of Steinbeck, particularly following his visit and reporting of the migrant camps, “He was accused of being a revolutionary and having made up the details about the conditions.” (Gardner, 2014) Steinbeck reported the conditions through fiction yet there was nothing fictional about how the camps were described. The Grapes of Wrath toes the line of fiction and documentary as the situations, surroundings, conditions and places were all accurate. Is it propaganda, however, to report the truth and be passionate toward others? There is certainly an argument that it is considered propaganda simply because it is the plight of workers. If it were another downtrodden group that didn’t have such close ties to the ideals of Communism then it may not even be considered propaganda in the same sense.

In Conclusion, It’s clear that The Grapes of Wrath is to a certain extent documentary propaganda, particularly with a socialist or communist leaning. However, the term “communist propaganda” immediately conjures up negative connotations due to what society and the media has told the public about Communism. Whilst Steinbeck clearly held communist/socialist ideals and used The Grapes of Wrath as a vehicle by which to share them there is nothing dangerous or negative about his suggestions of how we should live. Steinbeck simply shuns the horrible treatment of workers and clearly demonstrates how everyone could be much healthier, happier and stronger if we were to unite and be more willing to share what we have. Whether this is through giving other food or shelter or simply for an employer making sure they pay enough for their employees to live comfortably, there is nothing dangerous or negative about his ideas. So whilst it could easily be considered communist propaganda, that phrase, in this case, does not need to carry the negative and hurtful connotations one would naturally think of when the word “propaganda” is used. “A piece of documentary propaganda in fictional form” is indeed an accurate description of The Grapes of Wrath.