

# A Study of *The Grapes of Wrath* from the Perspective of Ecocriticism

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Received: January 6, 2023

Accepted: February 23, 2023

Online Published: February 27, 2023

doi:10.5539/ells.v13n1p85

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ells.v13n1p85>

## Abstract

This paper intends to use the theory of eco-criticism to analyze the various problems presented in *The Grapes of Wrath*, so as to explore the ecological view embodied by John Steinbeck in this work, and to discuss the practical significance shown by John Steinbeck's ecological point of view. This paper studies both the crisis between man and ecology and the crisis between man and man. Through a comprehensive analysis of ecological thoughts in these three aspects, we can realize the author's pursuit and yearning for harmonious ideas.

**Keywords:** economic development, ecocriticism theory, anthropocentrism, harmonious relationship

## 1. Introduction

John Steinbeck's well-known work *The Grapes of Wrath* is a work in the 1930s in the United States, which records the tragedy and reality suffered by landless farmers during the process of their migration. The novel describes the experience of the protagonist, Joad's family, who were driven out by a tractor in Oklahoma and later forced to flee to California. The plot of the novel reflects the tragic fate of the bottom people during the Great Depression of the American economy.

*The Grapes of Wrath* is the famous work of American novelist John Steinbeck. Steinbeck himself was born in a family of four millers in California. He has engaged in various manual labors and has more contact with the working class. He is deeply influenced by Greek classical literature, *Holy Bible* and the English King Arthur story. *The Grapes of Wrath* was created in the United States in the 1930s, and it describes the huge impact of industrial civilization on nature and agriculture at that time.

In the 1990s, ecological criticisms have thrived in the United Kingdom and the United States. Since then, *The Grapes of Wrath* has been re-examined and evaluated under the ecological perspective. The description of the damage caused by industrialized production in nature and land in the work is impressive, and the work itself is also known as an ecological masterpiece.

## 2. Literature Review and the Methodology

Since *The Grapes of Wrath* was publicized, the critical views and favorable responses are mixed. Its criticism has always been a great controversy. Studies on its themes, styles and points of view vary. Up to now, a generally-accepted conclusion has not been yet reached. The purpose of the following content is to give a concise introduction to various studies of *The Grapes of Wrath* at home and abroad, so as to come to understand these researches.

When it comes to studying abroad, there are diverse perspectives concerning comments on *The Grapes of Wrath*. Barbara A. Heavilin tries to determine whether *The Grapes of Wrath* is propaganda in his work *Analysis of The Grapes of Wrath* from Modern Critical Theory (Heavilin, 1990). The book *John Steinbeck: Naturalism's Priest* written by Woodburn Ross expounds Steinbeck's biological theory (Woodburn, 1949). Martin Staples Shockley states that Casy is a symbol of Christ in his work *Christian Symbolism in The Grapes of Wrath*, and he holds the view that this work reflects a lot of Christian elements (Shockley, 1956). *The Grapes of Wrath* belongs to a category called "great wrath". *The Grapes of Wrath* not only keeps its famous and great status but also is believed to be a kind of philosophy which is connected with society. Hayashi interviewed Warren French who held the view that *The Grapes of Wrath* was the "summation of eighteen years of realism... a novel whose hunger, passion, and poetry were a direct answer to the angry stirring of our conscience these past seven years" (Hayashi, 1984). Fredrik Tydal stated that *The Grapes of Wrath* was a proletarian novel, which was filled with poor

people's resistance and persistence. The lives like characters in the book indicate the author's profound understanding of that period. According to the rigid and simplistic commentary, the novel ushers Steinbeck's literary reputation in his first peak. In the novel, millions of distressed American migrants become impoverished and suffer tremendous hardship because of the dust storm in the 1930s, which arouses the attention and sympathy of people (Tydal, 2021). Over the next few years, *The Grapes of Wrath* underwent a shift in accepting the criticism.

On the contrary, domestic research about John Steinbeck and his work is much less than those abroad. According to statistics, China's influential literary journals such as *Foreign Literature Review*, *Foreign Language Research* and *World Literature* have published just two essays about Steinbeck, which indicates that there is a big shortage of the research of Steinbeck in China. The domestic research of Steinbeck focuses on the analysis of thematic significance in his different works and text characters. Gao Xiangyu published *The Grapes of Wrath and The Dust Storms in the 1930s*, and he studies *The Grapes of Wrath* from the historical perspective in this work. The domestic research of Steinbeck focuses on the analysis of thematic significance in his different works and text characters (Gao, 2011). Deng Shanshan and Xie Yun analyze *The Grapes of Wrath* from John Steinbeck's feminist perspective (Deng & Xie, 2015). She concentrates on two female characters in the novel. Some professors and students in the universities of China are also interested in studying at Steinbeck. From aesthetic aspects, cultural aspects, and any other aspects of literary criticism, the study of *The Grape of Wrath* is becoming various and comprehensive.

Ecocriticism is a mode of literary criticism. The concept of eco-criticism was proposed in the 1970s. In 1972, Joseph W. Meeker analyzed the concept of ecocriticism from the biological perspective, and proposed this concept in his literary work *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* (Meeker, 1972). As a theory of literary research, eco-criticism was proposed by some scholars in Europe and the United States in the 1970s, and was established in the mid-1990s. American scholar William Ruckert published *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* in the ninth issue of the *Iowa Review* in 1978, and used the term "eco-criticism" for the first time (Ruckert, 1978).

As one of the main American initiators of eco-criticism, Cheryll Glotfelty describes, "Simply defined, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment... Ecocriticism takes the earth-centered approach to literary studies..." (Glotfelty, 1996, p. 120).

Ecocritical theory pays great attention to the overall consciousness of ecology. Eco-criticism treats all elements of nature as a whole system, which also includes human beings, and its internal support and interdependence. Therefore, in this system, humans are closely connected with nature. Ecocriticism calls for deconstructing and prohibiting "anthropocentrism". It takes nothing of the world as the center, but takes natural ecology as a closely linked whole system. The criterion for evaluating the legitimacy of human activities is to observe whether human activities meet the common interests of nature and ecology, not just the interests of human beings themselves. Therefore, the important responsibility of ecocriticism in literature is to awaken people's ecological consciousness and keep a good relationship between human beings and the ecological environment. The theory of eco-criticism reminds human beings to take ecological responsibility.

### 3. Three Kinds of Ecological Crises in *The Grapes of Wrath*

*The Grapes of Wrath* narrates the tragic experience of a poor American family during the capitalist Great Depression in the 1930s in America, and describes the dire situation of workers and peasants at that time, as well as the situation of workers' strikes and suppression. The author embodies the simple folk customs of solidarity and mutual assistance of the proletarian masses. The story is set in the 1930s in the United States with multiple strikes, and tells the story of the Joad' family and other local farmers who had to leave the place where they had been living due to Oklahoma Dust Bowl. John Steinbeck shows the serious ecological crisis through the description of the characters' difficult encounters. They are the natural ecological crisis, the social ecological crisis and the spiritual ecological crisis.

#### 3.1 *The Crises of Natural Ecology*

First, the gradual deterioration of the relationship between man and land reflects an ecological crisis. John Steinbeck described in this novel that Joad's whole family and other poor farmers living in Oklahoma were driven away by the dust storm because the land could no longer be cultivated for food and the land had become a wasteland. Young people drove tractors to drive away their elders and villagers in the same village, and the unemployed acted as thugs for a few dollars to go to the shelter to pick quarrels and cause trouble. Afterwards, they would always defend themselves plausibly: "I still have a wife and children to support, so I can't leave them alone, right?" (Steinbeck, 1939, p. 23). The farmers firmly believe that the land is left to them by their ancestors,

because they have cultivated and cultivated this land for generations. In the novel, Joad and other farmers say their grandfather killed the Indians and took over the land. Their father was born here, and then they were born here. Today, their children are also born here. So when they were evicted, they were very reluctant to leave the land.

However, while the situation for the farmers was miserable, it was also because of the severe sandstorms caused by the over-cultivation of the land by the people themselves that they could not continue to cultivate the land themselves. Moreover, John Steinbeck described that the serious natural disaster is also related to a huge amount of grain growing for War I. Besides sandstorms, they also suffered from torrential rain. The excessive consumption of nature by humans has led to the deterioration of the ecological environment. The occurrence of heavy rains has caused heavy floods. Faced with floods and sandstorms, the migrants' tents were submerged and they faced not only their lives but starvation as they were unable to find jobs in California to make ends meet.

Steinbeck reflects anthropocentrism in describing the ecological crisis caused by human beings. Anthropocentrism refers to that when human beings live in nature, they are self-centered, because all activities they make to transform nature are mainly to meet their own needs, and even violate the laws of nature. Humans achieve their own development at the expense of sacrificing and consuming nature. Just as John Steinbeck described in the novel: "These things were lost, and crops were reckoned in dollars, and land was valued by principal plus interest, and crops were bought and sold before they were planted" (Steinbeck, 1939, p. 35). Therefore, in the novel, what the author wants to express is that when human beings adhere to the idea of self-centeredness, what awaits them will be an extremely serious ecological environment crisis, and this crisis will eventually threaten the survival of human beings themselves.

### 3.2 *The Crises of Social Ecology*

Secondly, the severe natural ecological crisis has also affected the entire social system, leading to a severe social and ecological crisis. Social ecology is against hierarchies because hierarchies threaten the rest of social life today. As it threatens the integrity of organic nature, it cannot always exist in this social reality.

Once the natural ecological crisis occurs, the most direct result it causes is people's poverty. Although the progress of science and technology has improved the efficiency of agricultural production, they have abused agricultural machinery and equipment due to the lack of corresponding knowledge of the use of agricultural machines. In the novel, the owner man said the tenant system would no longer work because one person working on a tractor could substitute twelve or even more families. This has led to over-cultivation of the land, which causes irreparable damage to the land and soil. On this basis, farmers' land can no longer be as fertile as before, and crops can no longer be grown. The author narrated men's situation in the novel: people looked in despair at the destroyed corn, and they were all silent and motionless. The deterioration of the land has left farmers facing hunger and poverty (Steinbeck, 1939, p. 46). In addition, the Great Depression in the United States in the 1830s also caused economic downturns in all walks of life. As a result, the whole society fell into poverty.

The poverty of the peasants stemmed from the unemployment problem in society at that time. John Steinbeck describes in the novel: "The kids are hungry. We have no place to live. Like ants scurrying for work, for food, and most of all for land" (Steinbeck, 1939, p. 53). Unable to survive due to rural unemployment, the Joad family had hope in California when they were evicted. But when they arrive in California, they find that immigrants already living there, like Joad, have no choice but to lose their jobs. They can only do hard physical work, and most importantly, they get paid wages that can't even cover one day's food bills. Even when Joad's family arrived in California, a group of children from the refugee camp flocked just to get food from the Joad family, because they had been starving for a long time.

Because of some historical and social reasons, people have been separated into two types. They are the rich class and the poor class. To make the most amount of money, the landowners looted the countless farmers' property and drove them from their land. Moreover, as a capitalist society, the United States exposed its own shortcomings during the Depression. In the state of economic downturn in the whole society, the income of capitalists also decreases, so they uncontrollably squeeze the bottom peasants and working people in order to obtain the maximum profit. Steinbeck describes the work of the Joad's family and other immigrants picking fruit in the orchard. Their wages are so meager that one day's income cannot even afford their own meals.

### 3.3 *The Crises of Spiritual Ecology*

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the third manifestation of the ecological crisis is the spiritual ecological crisis. Capitalism makes the rich so ambitious that they exploit the labor of the poor in pursuit of maximum profit.

In the context of the Great Depression, dust storms have rendered the land no longer of agricultural value. The

land owners are trying to deprive farmers of their land by driving out local farmers for more profit. Landlords even hired excavators to destroy farmers' houses when farmers resisted leaving the soil which they have loved for generations. What's worse, the landlord hires Joad's neighbor to drive the forklift, leaving Joad desperate and helpless. The behavior of the landlords is cruel and reflects the pitiful nature of the people at the bottom of the capitalist background. When they arrived in California, these tenants had to work as temporary seasonal workers, fruit picking. Suffering the severe exploitation, they were paid 10 cents per hour or even less. No matter how hard they worked, they could not survive properly. The capitalists who hired peasants were ruthless and indifferent. The poor who were recruited to the orchards were forced to be imprisoned. In order to prevent the poor from escaping, capitalists hired many violent men to monitor the poor. Immigrants suffered inhuman treatment in their accommodation. Joad just asked the watcher if he could go out for a walk, only to be threatened by his vicious words.

In order to maintain a higher price of agricultural products, capitalists have to destroy part of the surplus agricultural products. At the same time, many migrants are dying from starvation. Many children even got sick from starvation and died.

In the novel, Steinbeck also describes the estrangement of a wife from her husband's relationship. There was a young couple following the Joad family's escape, named Connie River and Rose of Sharon. Connie River is Joad's younger sister. At first, her husband was gentle and considerate with her and accompanied her to California with her family. Although Connie River is pregnant, which means it will be very hard on the road, Rose of Sharon takes good care of her. Two people can live happily because of love even in a difficult environment. Even when their father died on the run, her husband accompanied and comforted her. However, their relationship hasn't always been sweet and beautiful. When they were tricked into working in the orchard, Rose of Sharon could not endure such a hard life because of the miserable life. He chose to leave his pregnant wife and abandoned his wife and unborn child. This reflects the crisis in their marital relationship.

#### 4. Reasons for Ecological Crises

Combined with the background of the times and other practical reasons, through the phenomenon of three crises, we can deeply study the essence of the crisis. Many reasons led to the emergence of the crisis. And the most essential and fundamental reason is the wrong belief of human beings—anthropocentrism. Around anthropocentrism, people have made various behaviors that go against the laws of nature in the process of getting along with nature, society and their same species.

##### 4.1 Human's Consumption of Nature

Since human beings appeared on the earth, their activities have been consuming nature step by step. John Steinbeck stated in *America and Americans*, the farmers, "they cut and burned the forest to make room for crops; they abandoned their knowledge of kindness to the land in order to maintain its usefulness. When they had cropped out a piece they moved on, raping like invaders" (Steinbeck, 1939, p. 5).

At that time, the United States was in a period of rapid technological progress, and the agricultural machinery manufacturing industry developed rapidly, so there were agricultural machinery and equipment which could replace manual work. The use of industrial machinery and equipment can improve the efficiency of agricultural production, so large-scale machinery and equipment appeared in the agricultural production process. Technology is a double-edged sword. While it brings convenience to people's lives, it also causes harm to nature due to the improper use of technology by humans. Farmers overuse machinery due to lack of proper knowledge of machinery usage. They over-cultivated the land, which eventually led to dust storms and further disasters such as floods.

Compared with uncontrollable industrialization, the more important and fundamental reason is the infinite desire of human beings. People's anthropocentrism makes them constantly pursue their own interests and ignore nature. From the anthropocentric point of view, it mainly focuses on human beings, which means it neglects nature and ecology. From this perspective, human beings are separated from nature, and whatever they do is use natural resources when they need them.

Human beings even develop themselves under conditions that violate the laws of nature under the condition of damaging the natural environment. Moreover, this is clearly reflected in the novel. In the novel, peasants misused their land in order to gain more profit. They thought they had to harvest cotton as fast as possible before the land dried up and sell the land to the people in the east. They planted cotton in large quantities and replaced trees and grasses with cotton. In the novel, when peasants can no longer live because of the sandstorm, foolish people initially think that the severe sandstorm is the will of the gods. They never seem to realize that their

inappropriate behavior caused them to bear all the consequences themselves. Human beings who violate the laws of nature will surely suffer the consequences themselves. So they ended up being hit by dust storms and floods that put them at risk of starvation and their lives. What's worse, this natural ecological crisis will also lead to the social and ecological crisis, and even suppress people's spirits. Society as a whole is suffering as a result.

#### 4.2 *Complicated Social Situation*

Under the capitalist social nature of the United States at that time, there was a huge gap between the rich and the poor. Moreover, for economic and historical reasons, the possession of wealth by the poor and the rich has become polarized. This is also evident in the novel. When the land could no longer be used to grow grain, the peasant's land was taken by the rich. When migrants are driven from their hometowns by landlords' forklifts, they have to leave the land they've always loved:

After a time perhaps the tenant man looked about—at the pump put in ten years ago, with a goose-neck handle and iron flowers on the spout, at the chopping block where a thousand chickens had been killed, at the hand plow lying in the shed, and the patent crib hanging in the rafters over it (Steinbeck, 1939, p. 167).

So they fantasized about their new life in California, where they thought they could get a good job and a chance to survive. However, when they arrived in California, everything was different from what they had imagined. Joad's family and other immigrants can only continue to be exploited by the local wealthy and work for meager wages.

According to the headlines of *Wall Street News* that year, during the Great Depression, more than 5,000 banks went bankrupt, more than 80,000 companies went bankrupt, 14 million workers lost their jobs, the output value of the steel industry dropped by 80%, the output value of the automobile industry dropped by 95%, and the national GDP dropped by 50%. Under such bad circumstances, all walks of life in the United States are destroyed, in an economic crisis. Landlords deprive the poor of their land in order to increase their property. The rich exploit the labor of the poor in order to obtain the greatest benefit, and the poor are always the ones to be squeezed and exploited. Orchard owners have even dropped prices to very low prices in order to sell their fruit. What's worse, farmers also experienced bad situations. In the novel, a young man who works here says that when the peaches are ripe, they must have them within two weeks or the peaches will rot. So they handed out flyers everywhere. They needed 3,000 workers to pick peaches, but they hired 6,000. In this way, they could pay everyone very little. As a result, fruit-picking farmers are paid so low that they cannot even pay for food in their wheat fields.

The Great Depression caused serious unemployment problems. By 1939, one in four Americans had lost their jobs. Among them, farmers were unable to continue farming due to severe dust storms and soil that had been damaged, which caused farmers to lose their jobs. Immigrants are forced to become immigrants to California without their original source of livelihood. After arriving in California, the unemployment problem is still very serious, which can be seen in the novel: "Three hundred thousand in California and more coming. And in California the roads are full of frantic people running like ants to pull, to push, to lift, to work. For every manload to lift, five pairs of arms extended to lift it; for every stomachful of food available, five mouths open" (Steinbeck, 1939, p. 169). They are recruited to the orchards by orchard owners to do seasonal picking. Although they have jobs, their income is difficult to support their families. After the harvest season, they were unemployed for months without finding any paid employment. Many migrants even survive only by begging or begging: "Huddled under sheds, lying in wet hay, hunger and fear bred anger. Then boys went out, not to beg, but to steal; and men went out weakly, to try to steal" (Steinbeck, 1939, p. 189).

#### 4.3 *Alienation Among Humans*

At the time, in American society, capitalism made the rich seem to have only possession of assets and the pursuit of money in their minds. The landlords brutally expelled the local peasants for more immediate property, and even hired peasants from the same village to evict the peasants when they resisted leaving their own land. In order to seek the largest profit, the landlords even used vicious words to the tenants. In the novel, they threatened the farmers that if you stayed you would be murdered. To get the most profit, they violated the code of ethics.

Despite the brutal eviction, Joad and other immigrants have hope for life in California. They think there are plenty of money-making opportunities in California, where the climate is good and the soil is fertile. Instead, when they arrive in California, not only exploitation, but racial discrimination awaits them. They were discriminated against and were called "Okies" by the locals. "Okie" are dirty, ignorant, and sex-crazy in the eyes of California's prosperous. They are considered thieves. People with property said: "They (Okies) will steal anything" (Steinbeck, 1939, p. 177). No one cares who is depriving these homeless people of their property

rights. They are hated by landowners in California because they are seen as land thieves; they are hated by the bank because they have nothing to contribute to the bank; they are hated even by the equally oppressed working people of the local area, just because the coming of the Okies will lead to a drop in wages. They are monitored by the local watchdog. Once they appear outside the designated area, they will be intimidated or even beaten.

The rich would rather throw away a lot of excess food than go to the relief of starving migrants. At the same time, many children die of starvation. This reflects the alienation between people, because the rich have only interest in their eyes and no compassion.

In such a harsh living environment, some of the immigrants thought of fighting for their right to survive. Joad eventually joined the rebels. In the final part of the novel, faced with his mother who was suffering and disappointed, Joad told her that he was willing to sacrifice his own life if his sacrifice could lead to the liberation of the group.

## 5. Solution to Ecological Crises

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck manifests three ecological crises. Unlike other writers, John Steinbeck is not only concerned with natural ecological issues, he also loves nature. In the novel, the author presents a picture of his ideal ecological harmony. Therefore, John Steinbeck not only revealed and criticized the ecological crisis, but also hoped that human beings could have a harmonious and beautiful ecological environment. Studying the solutions to the crisis presented in this novel has practical significance for human life today.

### 5.1 Rebuilding Harmony Between Man and Nature

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, it was originally people who violated the laws of nature for their own sake. They constantly consumed nature and over-cultivated the land. With the fast development of science and technology in agriculture, due to lack of knowledge, farmers misused agricultural machinery, and the misuse of agricultural machinery eventually led to soil depletion. Then sandstorms and floods happened, as well as soil erosion, extinction of animals and plant species, acid rain, etc. In *America and the Land* in the collection of essays *America and the Americans* published in 1966, Steinbeck enumerates what human beings have done to nature with the help of the continuous progress of machine civilization since the first immigrants settled in the United States:

Intensified and unbridled unprecedented looting-burning forests, slaughtering buffaloes, nibbling away fields, killing whales, dumping garbage, polluting rivers, poisoning the air; depicts the bleak scene of nature's cruel and ruthless ravages: forests disappeared and felled empty, like the villages, rivers and creeks that were innocently destroyed by the war, and have since become full of poison and lifeless. Birds are going extinct due to lack of food sources (Steinbeck, 1939, p. 171).

If it causes harm to nature, human beings would eventually bear all the bad consequences, so farmers could no longer cultivate the land. Farmers experienced unemployment and agricultural development suffered a severe blow. As a result, it further affected other industries and eventually led to serious unemployment problems in the entire society. To make matters worse, the natural ecological crisis caused by people's violation of the laws of nature is the root cause of other severe problems. Unemployment and even the Great Depression caused by the natural ecological crisis led to social and ecological crises. People who encountered social and ecological crisis had to endure huge mental pressure. For example, peasants are expelled from their land, and the poor are endlessly exploited by the rich. Therefore, it has led to the emergence of a spiritual ecological crisis.

To sum up, the natural ecological crisis is the root cause of all crises. The consequences of violating the laws of nature are unbearable for human beings. It is imperative to restore harmony between humans and nature. Humans must realize the importance of respecting the laws of nature and rebuilding ecological relationships.

First of all, to solve ecological problems, we must start with education. Farmers abused agricultural machinery due to the lack of knowledge about the use of agricultural machinery, and people blindly pursued their interests due to lack of understanding of natural laws. Due to lack of awareness and knowledge, soil quality has deteriorated and nature has been ruthlessly consumed by humans. Therefore, it is crucial to make human beings aware of the importance of harmonious coexistence between man and nature.

Secondly, from the perspective of the whole novel, it is the endless desire of human beings that has been driving human beings to harm nature for their own interests. Farmers planted cotton on land that should have been planted with trees in order to make more profit. In order to improve agricultural efficiency and make more money, they over-cultivated the land, which eventually caused the soil to lose its ability to be cultivated. In the end, not only did humans not get what they wanted, but they suffered from unemployment and the Great Depression. It can be seen that only by respecting and protecting nature can human interests be long-lasting and

stable. Humans must realize that we need to take a long-term view, not just focus on immediate interests.

Finally, John Steinbeck embodies his own critique of anthropocentrism throughout the novel. In the author's view, anthropocentrism has serious exclusivity. That is to say, humans only focus on themselves and ignore other conditions. John Steinbeck advocated ecological holism. That is, man and nature should be a community. The seriousness of human beings cannot be only by themselves and neglect nature. Otherwise, human beings can only bear the serious consequences by themselves. Through his description of animals and the harmonious relationship between man and animals in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck revealed his own ecological thought from the harmonious relationship between man and nature.

### 5.2 Cooperation Among Humans

In addition to the natural ecological crisis, the social and ecological crisis displayed by *The Grapes of Wrath* also profoundly affected American society at that time. The Great Depression, unemployment, exploitation in class society, and other complex situations all made life fragmented. John Steinbeck also reflects his yearning for a harmonious relationship between people in his novels. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck endorses harmony between individuals, which is called "group man theory."

In this novel, Joad's family is brutalized by ruthless agricultural capitalists and manufacturers. In the end, they formed alliances with other workers in a common struggle for emancipation and livelihoods. When Joad's family arrived at the first migrant gathering place, a group of hungry children swarmed. Although Joad's family had limited food, they also distributed food to each child. Bankrupt people also helped each other when they were on the same path and lived in the same difficult times. Steinbeck showed his sympathy for the tragic experiences of bankrupt farmers. Joad started spreading the idea of solidarity, helping not only their neighbors but everyone they met. Although everyone has suffered in the severe social and ecological crisis, through cooperation and mutual help, everyone's hearts are always united, and this will help people overcome many difficulties. For example, Rose of Sharon, Joad's sister in the novel. In the first half of the novel, Rose of Sharon is pregnant. In the beginning, she was accompanied by her husband on the way to migration. Although she is a bit narcissistic and only cares about herself and the child in her womb, her husband took good care of her. Rose of Sharon also felt very happy. However, because he could no longer bear the hardships on the road, he abandoned his wife and the child in her womb and chose to leave alone. Rose of Sharon was hit hard by this behaviour. But under the guidance and comfort of her mother, Rose of Sharon was no longer a selfish and immature girl, but a mature woman. To some degree, this plot also reflects the cooperative relationship between people. The author created the character Rose of Sharon in part to celebrate the spirit of cooperation between people. In this fiction, there is another apt example of this. For example, the alliance of the Wilsons and the Joads, the two families helping each other and fighting each other for a common livelihood, clearly and unequivocally shows Steinbeck's expectation for a harmonious relationship between people. Moreover, around the time Joad's grandfather died, the Wilson family provided the Joad family with a tent. Wilson said he was happy to be able to help people in need. Although Mrs Wilson was in poor health by then, she accepted her dying grandfather and helped Joad bury the old man.

To sum up, the novel praises the spirit of cooperation and mutual assistance among people, and the harmonious relationship between people established by displaced people. John Steinbeck has already given us the answer to solve the social ecological crisis in the book. That is, only through cooperation and help between people, can human beings have the powerful power to overcome all social crises.

### 5.3 Care and Love Among Humans

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck shows a picture of a lack of love and concern among people. Initially, peasants were ruthlessly expelled from their hometowns by the landlords. The landlords only considered their own interests, and did not sympathize with the peasants for their suffering. When the landlord drove them away, the landlord only saw profit and did not give any form of compensation to the peasants, but drove them away with peace of mind. Landlords even knocked down their houses. After a large number of immigrants went to California, they still had unemployment problems. To make matters worse, food shortages were severe because soil could no longer grow enough crops. During the Great Depression, capitalists destroyed excess food in order to drive up the price of food. At this time, many poor people were dying of starvation. The capitalists saw the poor as lifeless labor tools. They exploited the poor and paid the poor wages that could not even cover the daily food expenses of the poor.

The novel describes some mercenary car salesmen who are dishonest in order to make huge profits. They cost very little to fix the car, but they sold it for a good price at a low price. They were not responsible for the poor buyer. The cars they sold were of such poor quality that they didn't even keep functioning properly. This reflects

the indifference between people. It seems that in society, there are only interests among people.

In Chapter 12, Joad's family was on their way to California, and a gas station attendant saw many of the same cars passing by and hinted to Joad that California was increasingly overcrowded with immigrants. The waiter treated them with contempt, and told him that America as a whole was not big enough to support everyone. The waiters were very unwelcoming to the poor immigrants who came from other places.

In contrast to the above plots that show human indifference, the mutual help between immigrants makes readers feel the warmth among people. The two families, Joad and Wilson, helped each other through some difficult things together. Joad finally chose to leave his family to help more oppressed people at the bottom. John Steinbeck contrasts these two diametrically opposed behaviors to show even more clearly the need for mutual care and consideration between people.

## 6. Conclusion

To sum up, John Steinbeck criticized the humans for disregarding the laws of nature in *The Grapes of Wrath* from the perspective of ecological criticism. From the perspective of his own ecological philosophy of "group theory", he believes that human beings should go from "me" to "us". Steinbeck wants to tell people that even if modern civilization and technology have bad effects on people's lives and harmonious interpersonal relationships, people should love and help each other like farmers in the book, not like selfish landlords and banks in the novels. Home is so numb. Steinbeck hopes that we can coordinate the relationship between man and nature through our own efforts, so as to have a society as harmonious as nature. John Steinbeck's concept of ecological values in *The Grapes of Wrath* remains indelibly relevant to our modern society. John Steinbeck reminds us to pay attention to the severe damage human beings have caused, and warns us to renovate the relationship between man and nature.

*The Grapes of Wrath* is more than just a piece of literature for readers. It contains many profound ecological thoughts and ecological philosophy, as well as a healthy ecological lifestyle. Steinbeck's ecological thinking in *The Grapes of Wrath* is still instructive to us today. Analyzing this novel from the perspective of eco-criticism can arouse readers' awareness of environmental protection, make readers think rationally about the relationship between man and nature and realize the responsibility of man. Today, ecological crises are widespread all over the world. We should reinterpret human concepts and behaviors with ecological concepts. Steinbeck evokes ecological awareness inside and good ecological behavior outside. Therefore, studying *The Grapes of Wrath* is of extraordinary significance when we face a severe ecological crisis. Human beings have made an achievement in science and technology. However, we also face many challenges, such as environmental and developmental issues. The premise of correctly understanding and solving these problems is to learn more about the relationship between man and nature and reshape the relationship between man and nature, and between man and man. Therefore, the correct understanding and analysis of the ecological thought embodied in *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck has realistic and profound revelation for today's society and sustainable development.

Today, people should keep in mind the consequences of damaging nature, enhancing environmental protection concepts and awareness, and jointly protecting nature. We have to take seriously what John Steinbeck taught us in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

## Acknowledgement

This paper is a periodic achievement of Research on New Liberal Arts and the Construction of Ideology and Politics in the Classroom of Foreign Language Majors in Henan Province (Project of the Union of the Social Sciences in Henan Province in 2022 No. SKL-2022-1287).

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