

**In the Name of the Most Compassionate**



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**An Althusserian Socio-Ideological Analysis of John Steinbeck's**

*To a God Unknown*

**And**

*The Grapes of Wrath*

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## Abstract

Among the world's literary figures, John Steinbeck is undoubtedly a giant novelist whose works have won him worldwide acclaim and global audiences. The present study aims at analyzing *To a God Unknown* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, the highest achievement of twentieth century American novel, from the perspective of Louis Althusser's critical ideas and theories. Analyzing these two plays from an Althusserian perspective clarifies how ideology rules over all the characters and relations in the fictional worlds of the novel. In the examination of these novels in the first analytic part of this study the following matters are considered: the role and significance of the dominant ideology, the ideological functions in different institutions, ideological ambivalences, naturalization of the ideology, the material existence of ideology, and the subjection of the subjects. The following part seeks into the study of the ambivalent viewpoint of *The Grapes of Wrath* toward capitalism and revolution through the notion of Repressive State Apparatus and Relative Autonomy and also examines the concept of ideology in *To a God Unknown* and its role in the representation of the imaginary relationship of the individuals to their real conditions of existence. In the end, what is striking in both *The Grapes of Wrath* and *To a God Unknown* is how ideology determines the individuals' mind frame and consequently their identity, and how it controls the dominating truth in the society in accordance with its own advantages.

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## **Chapter One**

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### **Introduction**

This study aims at interpreting and evaluating both a popular prize-winning novel rated as a masterpiece and an unpopular novel by John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* and *To a God Unknown*. The appealing idea of locating texts in a social and ideological frame has become the base of the present project. The researcher attempts to analyze and decode the novels through the viewpoint of Althusserian methodology.

In the first chapter for the starting point the researcher launches an investigation into Steinbeck's brief biography followed by a list of his noted works. The biography section mostly focuses on what stands out in Steinbeck's life concerning his writing career. Afterwards, the main focus is on the 'argument' embodying the elaborated goal of the research, the research questions, and some convincing reasons why the research has been worthwhile being undertaken. An account of the previous postgraduate researchers on these plays plus a brief explanation of the major sources consulted for this study are what comes next. Later, the focus is on the thesis structure, the theoretical methodology employed, and the definition of the key terms one would come across throughout this study.

## **1.1. General Background**

### **1.1.1. A Brief Biography: Becoming 'John Steinbeck'**

According to Frank William Watt, John Steinbeck is one of America's most promising and popular novelists (*Steinbeck* 1). In *John Steinbeck* (1971), James Gray states that Salinas where Steinbeck grew up is important, because many of his best novels take place in an enclosed valley, a microcosm that includes fundamental human experiences such as death and life, violence and compassion (7). In *The Red Pony* (1945), what Jody learns of birth, life, old age, death, and the difference between reality and dream is a microcosm of the



experiences of a man. In Steinbeck's writings, there is always a sense that each man is but a part of a larger physical whole (Gray 7).

The book *John Steinbeck* explains that Olive Hamilton Steinbeck is the first in a line of strong women who had an impact on both Steinbeck's writings and his life. Steinbeck writes that "her theology was curious mixture of Irish fairies and an Old Testament Jehovah" (Gray 8). Olive Steinbeck's artistic and religious values encouraged her son to write his mythological fiction (Gray 8). His mother had the sense that all things about us are enchanted, that there was a potential for magic everywhere and in every experience. She refused to accept any reality that was against her wishes and found her way into many of his most memorable characters, from the young unmarried school teacher, Molly Morgan, in *The Pastures of Heaven* to the Joseph Wayne's sacrificial spouse, Elizabeth McGreggor Wayne, in *To a God Unknown* (Gray 9).

According to Railsback and Meyer, Edward F. Ricketts is considered to be another model for Steinbeck's personae in several of his novels, notably *In Dubious Battle* (1936), *Cannery Row* (1945), and *Sweet Thursday* (1954). The creations are often called Steinbeck's Doc characters because they are named Doc (*Steinbeck Encyclopedia* 314). Ricketts was a biologist of a biological supply house in Pacific Grove, California (312). In 1940 Steinbeck and Ricketts made a scientific expedition off the Southern California coast. A year later, the two jointly published *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* (1951), which consists of a philosophical narrative and a catalogue of the specimens (314). The narrative defines and explains non-teleological thinking, also called "is" thinking. This philosophy looks at life as it is without looking for the reasons or the causes for its present state (313).

In *John Steinbeck: A Biography* (1995), Jay Parini mentions that America has had a long heritage of political fiction writers, but in the 1930s the stage was set for the genre to

come of age. The societal instability surrounding the crash of the stock market, the Great Depression, and the Dust Bowl all contributed to an economy that accentuated a sharp division between those who had jobs, money and food, and those who did not. Of these factors the Great Depression played the most significant role in a shift toward the increasing use of political fiction (162).

Parini asserts that a well-publicized organization of the day was the John Reed Club, which took as its slogan "Art Is a Class Weapon" (*John Steinbeck* 163). The author explains that the club's purpose was to push artists into activism by using their work, primarily paintings, novels, and poems to influence people, educate them in the struggles of the working class, and develop solidarity among workers (163). Radicalism peaked during the mid-1930s, the period when Steinbeck was most productive in writing his novels *Tortilla Flat* (1935), *In Dubious Battle* (1936), *Of Mice and Men* (1937), and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939).

In *John Steinbeck: Working Days* (1995), Robert DeMott states that Steinbeck published several works prior to the release of *The Grapes of Wrath*, but it was this novel that fully established his reputation as a "proletarian" writer, a reputation which haunted him personally and professionally in his later years (xxxiii). According to Schultz and Li, the radical left took on Steinbeck's work as a call to unification after the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath*, but in later years he suffered undue criticism from the liberal left for his supposed abandonment of communist ideology as his attention shifted away from the plight of the impoverished and oppressed (*Critical Companion* 90). Schultz and Li argue that it was unfortunate for Steinbeck, because he never intended to represent the Left. He only wanted to report a balanced account of the treatment of the migrants. Steinbeck hated

to be labeled or categorized, and most of all, feared to be called a social-political writer (*Critical Companion* 90). DeMott notes:

Between 1936 and 1938 Steinbeck's commitment to his material evolved through at last four major stages of writing: (1) a seven-part series of newspaper articles, *The Harvest Gypsies*; (2) an unfinished novel, "The Oklahomans;" (3) a completed, but destroyed satire, "L' Affaire Lettuceberg;" and (4) a final fictional version, *The Grapes of Wrath*.

(John Steinbeck xxxiii)

In *A John Steinbeck Encyclopedia*, Railsback and Meyer admit that in many ways these works all overlapped and culminated in the completion of *The Grapes of Wrath* (129-30). The subject of each project was very similar, but as Steinbeck learned his craft as an author he dug deeper into the social issues that caused the inequality in the agricultural the fixed core of entrenched power, incredible wealth, and tyranny of the rich landowners and their agricultural associations that ran the agricultural factory of California and their battle with the migrant workers that produced human rights violations and loss of dignity for the workers, and forced them into a form of involuntary slavery (130). The landowners and the agricultural associations accomplished this through the use of threats, reprisals, and violence that produced feelings of powerlessness, poverty, victimization, and fear within the migrant farm worker community (130).

According to Parini, one of the events that profoundly affected Steinbeck's desire to become more socially active was the Salinas Valley Lettuce Worker's strike between 1934 and 1936. Steinbeck grew up in Salinas and Lived there through the duration of the strike, becoming an active part of outcry of justice. He observed firsthand the treatment the laborers were receiving from the organized owners. The lettuce strike affected him and inspired him to become more involved and explore the societal forces that triggered this event (*John Steinbeck* 164).

In their book, *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters* (1975), Elaine Steinbeck and Robert Wallsten state that John Steinbeck's knowledge of the working class went far deeper than simply writing about their struggle. His work with the striking lettuce workers led directly to his creating the novel *In Dubious Battle* in 1936, a novel he had referred to as his "communist idea" (97). In referring to *In Dubious Battle*, Steinbeck and Wallsten state that in another letter Steinbeck "used a small strike in an orchard valley as the symbol of man's eternal, bitter warfare with himself" (98).

Railsback and Meyer declare that in 1936 Steinbeck, as an up and coming prospect, was recruited to write for the *San Francisco News*. This led to a significant work on the subject of how the owners treated the migrant farm workers. It was a *San Francisco News* multi-part article called "The Harvest Gypsies," which after the appearance in the *San Francisco News* was later published as a short non-fiction work called *The Harvest Gypsies* (*Steinbeck Encyclopedia* 129). This opportunity gave Steinbeck the funding and backing he needed to dig deeper into the problems encountered by the migrant farm workers and also gave him a voice to air his concerns (*Steinbeck Encyclopedia* 129).

Steinbeck began touring California's agricultural areas in an old bakery truck and was stricken with what he saw:

Whole families lived in cardboard boxes or in large disused pipes; indeed, shelters were constructed from anything that came to hand: an old rug, some straw mats, and pieces of driftwood. Food was scarce and expensive, and people in some areas were reduced to eating rats and dogs. Babies were dying from lack of adequate nutrition or proper medical services.

(qtd. in Parini 174)

According to Railsback and Meyer, in the Federal Resettlement Administration's Weedpatch Labor Camp located near Arvin, California, Steinbeck met the camp manager

Tom Collins, and they quickly became close friends and bonded together through the same calling—improving the treatment of the migrant workers. Collins provided Steinbeck with the in-depth knowledge of migrant relations and the official government reports Steinbeck needed to begin researching his articles on the labor camps (*Steinbeck Encyclopedia* 129). The friendship with Collins lasted through the completion of *The Grapes of Wrath*, which starts with the dedication, "To Carol, who willed it. To Tom who lived it" (*The Grapes* 1). Railsback and Meyer explain that Tom Collins was the real life aspiration for Steinbeck's fictional migrant work camp manager Jim Rawley in *The Grapes of Wrath* (*Steinbeck Encyclopedia* 203). According to Railsback and Meyer, Steinbeck and Collins traveled in the old truck to visit nearby farms, migrant work camps, and road-side settlements, logging thousands of miles together in California's Salinas, Central, and Imperial Valleys (*Steinbeck Encyclopedia* 129). Jay Parini writes of Steinbeck's first trip to Weedpatch that "Steinbeck left Weedpatch in his bakery truck with a briefcase stuffed full of reports given to him by Collins" (*John Steinbeck* 174). Railsback and Meyer define that these reports were Collins' status reports that were sent to Washington twice a month, and included his observations about camp life, including statistics, personal histories and health records of camp residents, and other information that would prove to be useful to Steinbeck in compiling his articles for *The San Francisco News*, and later, in authoring *The Grapes of Wrath* (*Steinbeck Encyclopedia* 16).

### **1.1.2. John Steinbeck's Principal Works**

*Cup of Gold* 1929, *The Pastures of Heaven* (a collection of short stories) 1932, *To a God Unknown* 1933, *Tortilla Flat* 1935, *In Dubious Battle* 1936, *Of Mice and Men* 1937, *The Red Pony* 1937, *The Long Valley* (a collection of short stories) 1938, *The Grapes of Wrath* 1938, *The Forgotten Village* (a documentary) 1941, *Bombs Away: The Story of a Bomber*

*Team* (a volume of reportage) 1942, *The Moon Is Down* 1942, *Cannery Row* 1945, *The Wayward Bus* 1947, *The pearl* 1947, *A Russian Journal* (a volume of reportage) 1948, *Burning Bright* (a play in story form) 1950, *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* (a journal of travel and scientific research) 1951, *East of Eden* 1952, *Sweet Thursday* 1954, *The Winter of Our Discontent* 1961, *Travels with Charley* 1962, *America and Americans* (journalistic pieces) 1966.

## **1.2. The Argument**

The presented research intends to analyze two novels of John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* and *To a God Unknown*. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* compiled by Ali Khodamoradi refers to the early 1930s as the most important historical background in John Steinbeck's major novels. The socio-economic and political pressures of the Great Depression in America were inevitable. This period was a time of chaos that was almost turning into revolution. Steinbeck used the 'Proletarian' literary form in his novels to portray the working class as a rebellious revolutionary force (2: 467-468). In *John Steinbeck Bloom's Major Novelists*, Harold bloom explains that Steinbeck believes a man in a group isn't a separate being but he is like a cell of the big body of the society (19). James Gray mentions that Steinbeck's novels easily reflect poverty, strike, war, unemployment, wage cutting, etc (*John Steinbeck* 9). He plainly mirrors some socio-political and economic unrest of his time in his works, and the way in which these works are visibly affected by the social changes and class situations. Steinbeck's writings continue to explore the impact of the shocking violence on the ordinary people of unusual or extreme situations. Also he tries to examine how social and political issues determine individuals' personal lives (Gray 9). Analyzing *To a God Unknown* and *The Grapes of Wrath* which have a rich social and political background heavily demonstrates a fruitful

basis to a new social and ideological context. The concern of this research is to come across the social world of the works and study the stories of dominant ideology, subjectivity, and repression.

The present study represents the processes through which a social system functions. It seeks to locate the novels in their historical and political frame and to investigate the ways in which the social institutions give the stamp approval to the dominant social order. An important thing to consider in this light is the concept of ideology and the tangible material forms it takes in social institutions. Reading through the dominant institutions in the novels, the lives of the characters and their reactions to the dominant ideology become considerable. The concept of repression is so clearly depicted in these works together with the dissident perspective opposed to that dominant ideology.

In a set of predefined roles in the fictional worlds of these two novels, characters either show acceptance or are excluded. Limitations in different respects are imposed on the characters by the value system of their societies. The existence of constraints allows subversive perspectives in these fictional worlds. The analyses of ideology, its distortion of true face of reality within the society, and representing the force of repression and constraint, serve as primary focus of this research. The answers to the following questions constitute the core concepts for the analytic practice in present study:

- . How does the ideology of these two novels form and inculcate the characters?
- . What are the basic signs of ideological state apparatuses (ISA) in these two novels?
- . How are the characters being interpellated by the ruling ideologies in the texts of these two novels?
- . How can these two novels include an ideological apparatus?
- . How do the characters of these two novels present their subjection to the Subject?

- . What are the agents of repression?
- . Who are the actual victims and victimizers of ideological systems?
- . What are the instances that prove these two novels non-scientific?
- . What are the signs of the relative autonomy of the characters?
- . What is the relation between Dust Bowl and Capitalism?

The questions asked above can be worked upon under the light of the thoughts and perspectives of Louis Pierre Althusser who has inspired so many critics and authors by his socio- ideological ideas through his influential essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses". In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (1971), Louis Althusser mentions that bourgeois' ideology is in power and exercises 'hegemony' (16). In the article of the same book, Althusser explains that "ideology interpellates individuals as subjects" (*Lenin* 170-71). He means that the individuals obey what the government asks them to do and through this obedience the individuals are shaped as subjects. The ideological exploitation is hidden by imaginary representation of the individuals' relation to their real life (*Lenin* 162). He emphasizes that there is no escape from ideology for the individuals. Becoming conscious of the way we are being shaped in life seems to be somehow problematic, but tracing the impact of such ideological apparatuses and social limitations prepares a useful ground to maintain a distance from them while being able to judge lives of the others and even to sympathize and sometimes find ourselves in these characters (*Lenin* 175). According to Robert Paul Resch, Althusser is commonly referred to as a Structural Marxist, although his relationship to other schools of French structuralism is not a simple affiliation and he is critical of many aspects of structuralism (*Althusser* 2). The book *Althusser and the Renewal of Marxist Social Theory* (1992) explains that Althusser



has had a direct influence on Michel Foucault and Slavoj Žižek (Resch 2). He himself was influenced by Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan and Karl Marx, and he is considered not only a Marxist thinker but a structuralist as well as a psychologist and an influential sociologist (Resch 2). He believes that our understanding of the world in which we live and the way we live and set our beliefs and actions are completely predetermined by some very complicated social and political sets of rules called ideology. We make and form ourselves and identity by these so-called ideologies (Resch 2). Detecting social and ideological roots under the light of Althusserian theories in these two plays is something which has never been done (either in a national scope, or abroad).

The researcher has found the mentioned novels heavily capable of ideological aspects we expect from an artist. By going through the courses of these novels it becomes clearer that one of the main purposes of the author was to picture the social situation of the characters and their omnipresent struggle with the ruling ideologies. The context of the present research, *To a God Unknown* (1933) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1938) by John Steinbeck, will best fit the approach chosen to go through. The social background, the characters, ideological apparatuses and institutions that are available in the novels as well as the fundamental clashes between the characters and their environment and the others are all necessary elements of this study to precisely be scrutinized in the light of a socio-ideological approach. One of the main concerns of this thesis is the ideologies and their role in our lives and its impact on our thoughts and beliefs. In a society where people are engaged in their everyday lives and where habitual machinery living styles take the control of our social behaviors, a copious literary work plays a vital role in people's vigilance against this unconscious controlling power.

According to Brian Railsback and Michael J. Meyer, in the novel *To a God Unknown* each character represents a different religious ideology. The oldest brother, Thomas, almost influenced by animistic ideology, has a mystical connection to animals but not colored by sentimentality. Burton, the second brother, is pious and strongly influenced by Protestantism. The huge rock which is found by Joseph demonstrates the site for prehistoric Native American religious ceremonies. Thomas and Joseph Wayne travel to the Pacific Coast, and meet an old man, a sun worshiper, who sacrifices small animals to guarantee sunrise and inculcates pagan ideologies and rituals to Joseph (*Steinbeck Encyclopedia* 379). Joseph is also influenced by the family ISA when his father says, "There is something more strong in you than in your brothers, Joseph; more sure and inward" (*To a God* 6). In *Critical Companion to John Steinbeck: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work* (2005), Jeffrey Schultz and Luchen Li write that Steinbeck's *To a God Unknown* shows how Joseph encounters and interacts with the Native people such as Juanito in Nuestra Senora Valley and how Joseph's own values and ideologies are shaped by his experience with Junito, Old Joan, and other locals (216).

Harold Bloom mentions that the Protestant individuals in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1938) are transformed into the members of a social group. When the Joads are forced to leave their own house and to wander aimlessly about, the old society has been split. So a new nucleus must be found to prevent chaos and nihilism (*John Steinbeck* 19). In this situation new ISAs appear. Ma and Grandma are strongly influenced by the religious ISA. Tom is influenced by Jim Casy's ideologies, and Jim Casy is a representative of the non-teleological philosophy of John Steinbeck.

The significance of this study is to clarify and identify the social and ideological institutions that are controlling the lives of the people and this analysis will be done

according to the ideas of Louis Althusser. It also attempts to establish the concept of ideology and Althusser's theory of ideology through deep analysis of John Steinbeck's *To a God Unknown* and *The Grapes of Wrath*. According to Robert Paul Resch, Althusser's theory of ideology, as well as Marx, draws on Freud's and Lacan's concepts of the unconscious and mirror-phase respectively, and describes the structures and systems that enable the concept of the self. These structures for Althusser are both agents of repression and inevitable. It is impossible to escape ideology. Despite its many institutional forms, the function and structure of ideology is unchanging and present throughout the history (*Althusser* 2 - 4).

According to Jeffry Schultz and Luchen Li, there is a Christian ideology which includes that in the belief of many American early pioneers, transforming the land into a garden is a holy task. Joseph Wayne conceives of himself as an agent of God in the regenerating process that turned the useless land into a beneficent civilization. He is influenced by the movement of many pioneers to the West, because as they claim, the "Lord" and "God" want them to conquer the wild and to Christianize savagery. Civilizing the west meant enlightening darkness, ordering chaos, and changing evil into good (*John Steinbeck* 124). Steinbeck thus writes of Joseph:

As he looked into the valley, Joseph felt his body flushing with a hot fluid of love. "This is mine," he said simply, and his eyes sparked with tears and his brain was filled with wonder that this should be his .... He felt that the trees were his children and the land his child. For a moment he seemed to float high in the air and to look down upon it. "It's mine," he said again, "and I must take care of it."

(*To a God* 10)

In the novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, the Joads are influenced by the Bible instructions which believe in strongly gaining strength even in the moments of intense despair. Ma

cautions Tom in one of the focal passages of the novel and says, "Easy, you got to have patience. Why, Tom—us people will go on livin' when all them people is gone. Why, Tom, we're the people that live. They ain't gonna wipe us out. Why, we're the people—we go on" (190).

The researcher is trying to reach out to those audiences who maintain a distance between themselves and the work of art so that this analytical approach can help them to produce an effect of enlightening against the social institutions that are indirectly calling us to follow them blindly. The effect will demonstrate not only a better appreciation of the artistic work but leads to a pure sense of sympathy towards the novel's characters and their current living style and beliefs; a kind of fellow feeling that the researcher hopefully wishes to fundamentally affect our thoughts and the way we live and interpret the world in a context where freedom and human rights are of the highest value.

The limitation of this study returns to the nature of the analysis of two novels, *To a God Unknown* and *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck. The novels to be discussed in this study not only belong to an American society where there are so many difficulties to have access and reach directly but also cover a period that encounters this research with some limitations of the accessibility of the historical material as well as its authority. Another factor to be mentioned here is maintaining the equilibrium between the society that the text belongs to and the society where the research is being done. Such equilibrium needs two completely equal sides to be perfectly maintained, but because of some basic differences between the society of the text and the Iranian society there will be some limitations to face with.

This study can be bounded to the list of the works cited of this thesis. On one level, the writer has more than ten novels, some non-fictions as well short stories. So, this thesis will