Mere Interludes
A Short Study on the Structure of *The Grapes of Wrath*

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During the first decade of his authorship (1929-1939), John Steinbeck had ten books published, and his first nine works are markedly different one from another in matter, tone and style. When he published the tenth book, *The Grapes of Wrath*, in April in 1939, he returned for the first time to a mood and manner previously used but devised quite a radically experimental structure.\(^1\)

*The Grapes of Wrath*, which has thirty chapters without any larger grouping, is interwoven with two main threads: fourteen chapters that develop the adventures and struggles of the Joads and other families and sixteen separate interchapters that present the author's philosophic ideas and general description of the social background. The latter thread makes up a total of less than a hundred pages and in none of these chapters do the Joads, Wilsons or other characters appear. In this respect, the method is perspective, though not structurally, similar to the use made by Dos Passos of the "Newsreel" and "Camera Eye." Even a cursory reading shows that Steinbeck's subject in *The Grapes of Wrath* is not the adventures of the Joads family so much as the social conditions which occasion them. In order to present a full development of this subject, which is a situation rather than an action, description must frequently and inevitably substitute for narration.

Thus it may be considered that the author evidently expects the intercalary construction to accomplish the visualization from "pictorial" towards the "scenic," to use Percy Lubbock's terms.\(^2\) The novelist seeks for an answer to the question phrased for him by Lisca\(^3\): "does Steinbeck succeed in aesthetically fusing what he calls a 'cold,' 'conscientious' observation having 'no author's moral point of view' with what he refers to as the 'human' elements?" And his practical effort to effect such an objectivity or self-neutralizing makes him pick up the original intercalary technique as a vital means.

Therefore it is quite certain that Steinbeck attempts to adopt this particular technique in order to create a significant form whose main purpose is to develop one idea both vertically and horizontally, in spite of Lubbock's unfavorable criticism on the intercalary construction.\(^4\)

In the fourteen narrative chapters, the author takes up a primitive and simple construc-

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1 P. Lisca, however, refers to the structural similarity with Tolstoy's *War and Peace*.


4 *op. cit.*, p. 33.
tion of chronicle style. Instead of a complex plot he presents a progression of serial incidents with almost similar stereotype characters and situation. On the other hand, the sixteen interchapters generally function as a kind of chorus adding to the epical drama. Here the author tries to comment on the social situation and to amplify the pattern of typical action created by the Joad family through the narrative section to the dimensions of communal experience. This is the reason why we have a single and powerful total impression that almost every aspect of the Joads’ adventures is enlarged in the interchapters and seen as part of the social climate.

The intercalary structure in The Grapes of Wrath, therefore, is an instance of a technical device by which the author gives his narrative a wider perspective. The story of the Joads is periodically but faithfully told as a series of particular incidents in their humiliating adventure. The readers hang with concern, suspense and sometimes sympathy over each turn of their fortunes. But the author is not content with that. He wishes to give us the final impression that the Joads are involved in the epic events of the migration not only individually but also as members of the mass. Along with the material events he wishes to show the social forces at play and present the sure and steady weaving of new social patterns for a people and a nation. In order to emphasize this kind of perspective, to every chapter dealing with the Joads and other families, he adds a shorter, more general, but often not less powerful chapter describing the general situation.

It is important, however, that while the interchapters generally relate to each other and correspond with the material of the current narrative portion the author gives us almost by rule one particular aspect of the social situation before each relevant and specific incident and not afterwards. Thus, for example, Chapter I presents magnificently the drought which compels the Joads to leave their land in Chapter II, and after Chapter V expresses how cruel cats (meaning tractors) and monsters (meaning banks) are we face the sad anger of Muley Graves in Chapter VI. Also, the last intercalary Chapter XXIX describes the rain and flood in which the action of the novel ends.

So it can be said that one interchapter of general description, most of which are odd-number chapters, introduces one chapter of specific incident in panoramic terms and these two chapters form a pair. We have the following fourteen pairs which beautifully unite general background and specific incident. They are I-II, III-IV, V-VI, VII-VIII, IX-X, X11-X111, X1V-X1VI, XV-X1VII, X1X-X2, X21-X211, X211-X2111, X2V-X2VI, X2VII-X2VIII and X2IX-X30, though the degree of their interlocking can be measured differently.

No one will fail to notice a curious irregularity that disturbs the perfect symmetrical.

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1 There is another homage to classics in the respect of characterization in the narrative portion: “the speaker is like a chorus in ancient tragedy, embodying the collective sentiments of a large group.” Joseph W. Beach, “John Steinbeck: Art and Propaganda,” Steinbeck and His Critics (Univ. of New Mexico Pr., Albuquerque: 1957). p. 258. Also The Octopus (1901) by F. Norris opened the way to a new kind of primitive epic that later writers such as Wolfe and Steinbeck were to develop.” Robert E. Spiller, The Cycle of American Literature (Mentor Book, 1957), pp. 156-57.
structure. According to the pairing hypothesis just mentioned above, Chapters XI-XII and XIII-XIV should be combined together successively. Chapters XII and XV are sufficient for the progression of the novel. Having delayed the progress because of instalments of Chapters XI and XIV, the author resumes the original pattern in Chapter XII and XV respectively. Chapter XII is devoted to Highway 66:

Highway 66 is the main migrant road. 66—the long concrete path across the country, waving gently up and down on the map, from the Mississippi to Bakersfield—over red lands and the gray lands, twisting up into the mountains, crossing the Divid and down into the bright and terrible desert, and across the desert to the mountains again, and into the rich California valleys.¹

This chapter is followed by Chapter XIII, in which the loads are destined to take their westward trek after their departure. Chapter XV, which might be titled "Along Highway 66," is a fine description of the road side gossiping:

Big Bill grasped his cup around the top so that the spoon stuck up between his first and second fingers. He drew in a snort of air with the coffee, to cool it. "You ought to be out on 66. Cars from all over the country. All headin' west. Never seen so many before. Sure some honeys on the road."

"We seen a wreck this mornin'," his companion said. "Big car. Big Cad', a special job and a honey, low, cream-color, special job. Hit a truck. Folded the radiator right back into the driver. Must a been doin' ninety. Steerin' wheel went right on through the guy an' left him a-wigglin' like a frog on a hook. Peach of a car. A honey. You can have her for peanuts now. Drivin' alone, the guy was."

Al looked up from his work. "Hurt the truck?"

"Oh, Jesus Christ! Wasn't a truck. One of them cut-down cars full a stoves an' pans an' mattresses an' kids an' chickens. Goin' west, you know. This guy come by us doin' ninety—r'ared up on two wheels just to pass us, an' a car's comin' so he cuts in an' whangs this here truck. Drove like he's blin' drunk. Jesus, the air was full a bed clothes an' chickens an' kids. Killed one kid. Never seen such a mess. We pulled up. Ol' man that's drivin' the truck, he just stan's there lookin' at that dead kid. Can't get a word out of 'im. Just rum-dumb. God Almighty, the road is full a them families goin' west. Never seen so many. Gets worse all a time. Wonder where the hell they all come from?"

¹ p. 160. This and all subsequent references are to the first edition of The Grapes of Wrath (Viking Press, 1939).

² p. 215.
In the following chapter the narrative takes up the same theme as the Joads and the Wilsons travel down Highway 66 together.

Thus it appears that the two interchapters XI and XIV are quite irregular and only disturb the symmetrical structure. Why, then, did the author venture such a risk? Is there any justification for the disturbance? The present study must attempt a concentrated interpretation of these particular chapters, but it will be well to begin with the analysis of the general nature of the whole sixteen interchapters.

As many critics interpret, Steinbeck's ideas seem to appear abstractly and obviously in the interchapters with both merits and demerits. Joseph Warren Beach, for example, surveyed The Grapes of Wrath in his American Fiction 1620-40 and presented several favorable arguments for the unity of the novel by relating the interchapters to the narrative. Also, among others, Peter Lisca and Frederic Carpenter defend the instalments of the interchapters in their respective articles. The main point of these scholars' interpretation is that the interchapters more or less explicitly develop the author's final ideas and his moralizing interpretation. Further more, as many critics agree, there are many kinds of distinct prose style in the interchapters of the novel. Indeed it can be said that for students of style, the prose scattered there is a feast of tastes. They can discover that hardly any style is missing from them and that they are as diversified in coloring as a Persian carpet.

On the other hand, at least two critics, Freeman Champney and Blake Nevius, criticize Steinbeck's "scientific" view of things often presented in the interchapters, of which the full discussion will be done later in the analysis of Chapter XIV. Frederick J. Hoffman severely criticizes the defects of a shallow philosophy also often found in the interchapters.

Let us present some examples of the variety to see how the author succeeds in creating so many prose styles of different moods and making them instrumental for his purpose but also how often he is addicted to the complacent presentation of reality with sugar-covered description.

There is the harsh, staccato prose of Chapter VII, which is concerning the sale of used cars:

"See if you can't find a spark plug that ain't cracked. Christ, if I had fifty trailers at under a hundred I'd clean up. What the hell is he kickin' about? We sell 'em, but we don't push 'em home for him."
That's good! Don't push 'em home. Get that one in the Monthly, I bet. You don't think he's a prospect? Well, kick 'im out. We got too much to do to bother with a guy that can't make up his mind. Take the right front tire off the Graham. Turn that mended side down. The rest looks swell. Got tread an' everything. ¹

A clear contrast to this style is offered by Chapter IX, which generalizes the loss and despair of people who are forced to sell their household goods:

The women sat among the doomed things, turning them over and looking past them and back. This book. My father had it. He liked a book. Pilgrim's Progress. Used to read it. Got his name in it. And his pipe—still smells rank. And this picture—an angel. I looked at that before the last three come—didn't seem to do much good. Think we could get this china dog in? Aunt Sadie brought it from the St. Louis Fair. See? Wrote right on it. No, I guess not. Here's a letter my brother wrote the day before he died. Here's an old-time hat. These feathers—never got to use them. No, there isn't room. ²

The general conflict between small farmers and the banks in Chapter V is discussed by means of dramatization:

We're sorry. It's not us. it's the monster. The bank isn't like a man.

Yes, but the bank is only made of men.

No, you're wrong there—quite wrong there. The bank is something else than men. It happens that every man in a bank hates what the bank does, and yet the bank does it. The bank is something more than men, I tell you. It's the monster. Men made it, but they can't control it. ³

It is given to us through an imaginary dialogue, each speaker personifying the sentiments of his group. And although neither speaker is a "real" person, both are dramatically differentiated and their arguments embody details particular to the specific social condition. At times, as in description of a folk dance in Chapter XXIII, the style belongs to another typical kind:

Look at that Texas boy, long legs loose, taps four times for ever' damn step. Never seen a boy swing aroun' like that. Look at him swing that Cherokee girl, red in her cheeks an' her toe points out. Look at her pant, look at her heave. Think she's tired? Think she's winded? Well, she ain't. Texas boy got his hair in his eyes, mouth's wide open, can't get air, but he pats four times for ever' darn step.

¹ p. 85.
² p. 120.
³ p. 45.
an' he'11 keep a-goin' with the Cherokee girl.\(^1\)

The rhythm of this passage clearly follows that of a square-dance "caller" with its steady beat.

The last symbolic climax is materially prepared for by the last interchapter,XXIX, where the full development of the novel's sentiment is manifested by means of the lyrical fluency of the prose:

Over the high coast mountains and over the valleys the gray clouds marched in from the ocean. The wind blew fiercely and silently, high in the air, and it swished in the brush, and it roared in the forests. The clouds came in brokenly, in puffs, in folds, in gray crags; and they piled in together and settled low over the west. And then the wind stopped and left the clouds deep and solid. The rain began with gusty showers, pauses, and downpours; and then gradually it settled to a single tempo, small drops and a steady beat, rain that was gray to see through, rain that cut midday light to evening. And at first the dry earth sucked the moisture down and blackened. For two days the earth drank the rain, until the earth was full. Then puddles formed, and in the low places little lakes formed in the fields. The muddy lakes rose higher, and the steady rain whipped the shining water. At last the mountains were full, and the hill-sides spilled into the streams, built them to freshets, and sent them roaring down the canyons into the valleys. The rain beat on steadily. And the streams and the little rivers edged up to the banks and worked at willows and tree roots, bent the willows deep in the current, cut out the roots of cottonwoods and brought down the trees. The muddy water whirled along the bank sides and crept up the banks until at last it spilled over, into the fields, into the orchards, into the cotton patches where the black stems stood. Level fields became lakes, broad and gray, and the rain whipped up the surfaces. Then the water poured over the highways, and cars moved slowly, cutting the water ahead, and leaving a boiling muddy wake behind. The earth whispered under the beat of the rain, and the streams thundered under the churning freshets.\(^2\)

The extreme contrast demonstrated in the quotations and recognized in all the interchapters helps remarkably to prevent the reader from confusing one section with another. The interchapters are, as a group, a separate entity and not a direct part of the narrative, but they have an individuality which stems from the relevant subject matter and wonderful exploitation of every technique of prose style. Each different prose style may suggest a number of influences on Steinbeck: the Bible, Dos Passos' "Newsreel" technique mentioned before, probably Walt Whitman, Hemingway and

1 p. 449.
2 pp. 589-90.
perhaps Carl Sandburg's *The People, Yes* and others. But the author integrates them all into the whole and their arrangement asserts his originality. This device keeps the novel from falling into two parts, so that the interchapters are transformed far beyond literal reporting and are assimilated into the narrative portion.

But we must confess that some of the more idealistic passages do not ring quite true but sometimes they are too weak and broad to convince us. There is a slight suspicion here and there of a sentimental and maudlin forcing of the note. Sometimes the author's mystical ideas and his moralizing, even didactic, interpretation prevents the plot from flowing and their frequent intrusion interrupts periodically the smooth appreciation of the reader. Unfortunately it is in the two irregular interchapters we pointed out above that these suspicions or defects are betrayed most clearly. Let us demonstrate by analysing these two interchapters separately.

Chapter XI,¹ which occupies only two pages and a half, describes at length a decaying and deserted house which is the prototype of all the houses abandoned in the dust bowl. It appears on the surface to be a scientific description expressed in the terminology of biology and chemistry:

And in the tractor man there grows the contempt that comes only to a stranger who has little understanding and no relation. For nitrates are not the land, nor phosphates; and the length of fiber in the cotton is not the land. Carbon is not a man, nor salt nor water nor calcium. He is all these, but he is much more, much more; and the land is so much more than its analysis. The man who is more than his chemistry, walking on the earth, turning his plow point for a stone, dropping his handles to slide over an outcropping, kneeling in the earth to eat his lunch: that man who is more than his elements knows the land that is more than its analysis. But the machine man, driving a dead tractor on land he does not know and love, understands only chemistry; and he is contemptuous of the land and of himself.²

Also we hear in this chapter the author's philosophy of the contrast between the tractor, signifying death, and the horse, signifying life. It is expressed simply and the author's main philosophic idea can be understood convincingly. We have a beautiful interpretation of the prose style in this chapter written by P. Lisca.³ But what

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¹ This is the beginning chapter of the second movement in the novel. Of the movements in the novel, P. Lisca has treated in detail in his *The Wide World of John Steinbeck*.

² pp. 157-58.

³ "The novel's Biblical structure and symbolism are supported by Steinbeck's skillful use of an Old Testament prose. The extent to which he succeeded in recreating the epic dignity of this prose can be demonstrated by arranging a typical passage from the novel according to phrases, in the manner of the Bates Bible (?), leaving the punctuation intact except for capitals."
flows under this philosophy seems to be a kind of nostalgic sentimentalism. Blake Nevius asserts in his excellent article that Steinbeck's scientific view of things prompts a "sentimental evasion." The description is terminated in the deserted night, which is an appropriate time for expressing sentiment. Especially through the poor simile:

They (the wild cats) moved like shadows of a cloud across the room, we can strongly sense the sentimentality.

In Chapter XIV, which occupies only about three pages, we find the nature of that new nomadic society which the loads are helping to form and the nervous situation of the western States:

nervous as horses before a thunder storm.

It looks in general as the other interchapters but the stylistic structure of this chapter is full of such repetition as is found in fairy tales:

The tractors had lights shining,
For there is no day and night for a tractor
And the disks turn the earth in the darkness
And they glitter in the daylight.

And when a horse stops work and goes into the barn
There is a life and a vitality left,
There is a breathing and a warmth.
And the feet shift on the straw.
And the jaws champ on the hay.
And the ears and the eyes are alive.
There is a warmth of life in the barn.
And the heat and smell of life.

But when the motor of a tractor stops,
It is as dead as the ore it came from.
The heat goes out of it
Like the living heat that leaves a corpse. (p. 157)

The parallel grammatical structure of parallel meanings, the simplicity of diction, the balance, the concrete details, the summary sentences, the reiterations—all are here. Note also the organization: four phrases for the tractor, eight for the horse, four again for the tractor. Except for the terms of machinery, this passage might be one of the psalms. P. Lisca, "The Grapes of Wrath as Fiction," PMLA, vol. LXXII, June 1957, No. 3, p. 304.

2 p. 159.
3 p. 204.
This you may say and know it and know it. This you may know when the bombs plummet out of the black planes on the market place, when prisoners are stuck like pigs, when the crushed bodies drain filthily in the dust.

The formula, "I have a little food plus I have none...is equal to We have a little food," manifests a basic attitude to social problem but it is a too generalized philosophy. Frederick J. Hoffman says, "his (Steinbeck's) novels reveal the deficiencies of a homespun philosophy, in which the suggestions made are vitiated and confused by a 'hausfrau sentimentality' and a naive mysticism." It may sound exaggerated to say but perhaps it is the author's self-complacency that leads him to believe that the appeal can be emphasized under the sweet cover of emotional sentimentality.

The main defect in the interchapters, apart from the frequent interruption of the plot, may be divided into two points. One is Steinbeck's view of things through biology or chemistry. The other is his sentimental view of humanity. Here is a passage from Sea of Cortez which amply illustrates Steinbeck's preoccupation with biology and indicates the source of his biological view of man.

And we have thought how the human fetus has, at one stage of its development, vestigial gill-slits. If the gills are a component of the developing human, it is not unreasonable to suppose a parallel or concurrent mind or psyche development. If there be a life-memory strong enough to leave its symbol in vestigial gill-slits, the preponderantly aquatic symbols in the individual unconscious might well be indications of a group psyche-memory which is the foundation of the whole unconscious.

Let us hear what the author says about this notion in Chapter XIV.

And in the night one family camps in a ditch and another family pulls in and the tents come out. The two men squat on their hams and the women and children listen. Here is the node, you who hate change and fear revolution. Keep these two squatting men apart: make them hate, fear, suspect each other. Here is the anlage of the thing you fear. This is the zygote.

This process from an individual to "en masse," however, is more physically and visually expressed in the narrative plot. We do not think it is necessary for the whole process to be presented beforehand abstractly. The Grapes of Wrath is not a novel whose theme is too broad and too complicated to put adequate expression in the mouth of a single man on a particular occasion.

We admit that the intercalary technique in The Grapes of Wrath is inevitable for the author so that he can symbolize and expatiate the general view and undercur-

1 p. 205.
3 New York: The Viking Press, 1941, p. 32.
4 p. 206.
rent rhythm of the period. He tries to reconcile the interests of theory with those of imaginative art. He succeeds structurally in absorbing these interchapters smoothly into the whole texture and his style is poetic rather than naturalistic and suitable to the development of an epic form of the novel. But his sentimentality which may originate from a way of regarding humanity or a way of feeling rather than reason can not be crystalized into pathetic fallacy but falls into the tear-jerking expression of sentiment.

After examining Steinbeck's method of construction and the values it upholds, his handling of patterns of philosophic ideas, we should like to conclude by affirming that Chapter XI and XIV are not necessary nor inevitable for *The Grapes of Wrath*. Contrast to the wonderful success in the other interchapters, they can be nothing but flaws in it. Here is found the author's personal and emotional philosophy rather than a general description of the social background as in the other fourteen interchapters. Rather, without them, *The Grapes of Wrath* would be more beautifully constructed and more perfectly symmetrical. The justified reasons for their instalments may be explained in several ways. They may have been installed in order to make the crucial chapters, for example, Chapter XIII more effective. Or they may have resulted only from the author's sentimentality, one of the characteristics of his style. And the latter explanation seems to be nearer to the truth.
Bibliography


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