The Ending of *The Grapes of Wrath*: Aesthetics of Shock*

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"Beginnings are always troublesome, and conclusions are the weak point of most authors" (cited from Kermode, 174). This is what George Eliot said concerning the beginning and ending of a novel. Most serious authors are very conscious of the beginning and ending. Hemingway revised the ending of *A Farewell to Arms* more than fifty times. John Steinbeck is no exception, either. When he was writing the last part of *The Grapes of Wrath*, he wrote in his diary, "I'm almost dead from lack of sleep. Can't go to sleep. I don't know why. Just plan for the ending" (Steinbeck, 1989, 91-92).

The ending of *The Grapes of Wrath* has been a point of dispute among critics ever since the novel appeared. The final scene has been called a "commercial substitute for an artistic solution" (Hunter, 801) and "the tawdriest kind of fake symbolism" (French, 93). On the other hand, others have said, "Thematically, the novel's last scene is perfect" (Railton, 43) or "successfully and artfully concluded" (Pollock, 177). It still remains "a bone of contention" (French, 93). Pascal Covici,

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Steinbeck's friend and publisher, requested him to change the last episode, but without success, for as Steinbeck replied, "The reader must bring the implication to it. If he doesn't, it wasn't a book for him to read," rejecting the friendly suggestion adamantly (Steinbeck & Wallsten eds., 178).

Studies on the ending of *The Grapes of Wrath* continue. Pollock's "On the Ending of 'The Grapes of Wrath'", Chametzky's "The Ambivalent Endings of The Grapes of Wrath", Ditsky's "The Ending of The Grapes of Wrath: A Further Commentary," and the latest, Visser's "Audience and Closure in The Grapes of Wrath" are especially worth considering. Pollock's study is a short essay focusing on the theme of reproduction. Chametzky deals with the ending comprehensively but his conclusion is ambiguous. Ditsky's essay has a marked leaning toward the religious or mythological meanings of the ending, while Visser supposes *The Grapes of Wrath* to be a social novel, emphasizing that no writer can suggest a solution to a social situation that is still in progress. But at any rate, the aesthetic studies on the ending of this novel are still insufficient when the context of the whole novel is taken into consideration.

Aristotle clarifies his view of beauty in his "Poetics": "Whatever is beautiful, whether it be a living creature or an object made of various parts, must necessarily not only have its parts properly ordered, but also be of an appropriate size, for beauty is bound up with size and order" (Aristotle, 42). This shows that plot and order are important elements in "beauty." Therefore, if we ask whether an ending is dealt with aesthetically or not, we must make the effort to examine the plot and order of the work of art, and also to investigate how the ending harmonizes with the whole novel. Because "while the ending is of supreme importance, since it alone establishes the unity of all items of the story, it also is never final" (Pascal, 70).

In consideration of this point, I believe that study on the ending of *The Grapes of Wrath* will be effective only when study on the core message of this novel precedes it. The reason is that the plot of a novel is a device with which the author can communicate his message to readers aesthetically. It is also essential for researching the ending of this novel to analyse one of the minor characters, Rose