

The Tone Of Music

Music, quite possibly the most emotional form of human expression. By altering the vocal intensity of their song, a musician can project either immense sadness or extreme anger. The instruments and to what extent they are utilized can greatly effect the ferocity of music or allude to a sense of calm and serenity. The actual words of a song are essential for describing what a song is about, though the way they are sung is how the song is explained. This is especially evident when one song is sung in two completely different ways. An example of such a contrast can be identified when comparing Bruce Springsteen's and Rage Against The Machine's versions of The "Ghost of Tom Joad." Both reflect certain elements which exist in the novel upon which they are based, The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck. However, only one of these songs projects the true tone of this novel and this is evident by examining the afore mentioned defining properties of a song. This is Bruce Springsteen's "The Ghost of Tom Joad." Springsteen's version holds true to the sadness and emptiness within the novel while Rage Against The Machine's interpretation is based upon the mood felt by an individual while reading The Grapes of Wrath.

The vast majority of The Grapes of Wrath focuses on miserable sadness and the hardships which cause this. Set during The Great Depression of the United States of America, this novel follows the journey of the Joads, and Oklahoma family, on their

quest to find a sustainable means of living. Faced with incredible strife, the family must do whatever they can just to simply survive. Forced to leave their farm by banks and farming conglomerates, they travel westward to California with hope of a better tomorrow. During this trek they experience vehicular mishaps, human intolerance, food shortages and death. The family does however survive the journey and they eventually arrive in California. This supposed “promised land” turns out to be the complete opposite, a land of even greater intolerance, hatred, starvation, dilapidation and unemployment. It is in fact rather obvious that this new home for the Joad Family is no better than the dust bowl from which they came, despite its rather deceptive lush façade. Throughout and at the end of this journey the Joads are forced to endure hardships with little or no recourse to actually improve their situation. In light of this, the family is forced to accept their fate as sad and repressed people. This is especially true for Tom Joad. Tom submits himself to the oppression forced upon him by the capitalistic system, convinced he can achieve nothing better other than to be a mindless worker drone. This sad and empty tone emphasized by the majority of The Grapes of Wrath through the characters’ general feelings of melancholy, is also depicted in Bruce Springsteen’s “The Ghost of Tom Joad.”

Bruce Springsteen’s song begins with the humming of a harmonica, a solemn expression of loneliness. This alone is enough to perceive the empty misery which this song is designed to portray, though these emotions are solidified when Springsteen begins to sing. The actual lyrics are nearly irrelevant to determining the

meaning of the song and what does matter is his quiet and almost mumbled singing. Springsteen's words flow with this subdued emotion as if he is indeed Tom Joad, sitting beneath the underpass just attempting to survive. "The Ghost of Tom Joad" projects such a depressive feeling of hopelessness, very similar to that which is inferred by the general tone of The Grapes of Wrath. As Springsteen's song progresses other instruments are added, although they are always secondary to the solemn solitude of the harmonica. Not once does the song diverge from the feeling of despair shown by the harmonica and Springsteen's somber singing. Even when the song transcends into a slightly more optimistic view of the future for Tom Joad and humanity, it does not seem as though there is a realistic possibility for a better tomorrow simply because of the way it is sung. This is where this version of "The Ghost of Tom Joad" deviates from that which is sung by Rage Against The Machine and also displays the difference between the tone and mood of The Grapes of Wrath.

In The Grapes of Wrath, the reader is meant to be rather disgusted and outraged by the appalling conditions of life during The Great Depression. The portrayal of hopelessness and melancholy implores the people to rise up and make a difference. This is what Tom Joad eventually realizes in the novel. Tom for the majority of the book has been forced to accept the idea that he can do nothing to better his life or that of others. After learning from the "preaching" of Jim Casy, who previously attempted to help his fellow man until his untimely death at the hands of The Machine, which he was trying to bring down, Tom decides that he too

should attempt to make a difference. Although the novel finishes before Tom Joad actually attempts to fight for better pay, better working conditions and overall equality, it is indeed inferred that he will do so by his decision to leave the Joad family. Rage Against The Machine's version of "The Ghost of Tom Joad" is based upon these ideas of the demand for an equal and fairer society. Unlike Bruce Springsteen's harmonica, Rage Against The Machine's song begins with the beating of helicopter blades, suggesting that someone is running from authority rather than standing by and submitting to it. When Rage Against The Machine's instruments begin to play, they sound not like the quiet acoustic guitar and harmonica of Bruce Springsteen but of the rage of electric guitars and drums. This alone suggests a very angry attitude although it shows no emotion in comparison to the actual singing of the song. In stark contrast to Springsteen's subdued singing, Rage Against The Machine's iteration is sung with loud and often screaming passion. Instead of just accepting what is, Rage Against The Machine is encouraging a "rebellion" against society's evils. Reminiscent of a protest, this version of the song is based upon The Grapes of Wrath's few occasions where people rise up against oppression and fight for what is right. This is also the main underlying idea of the novel itself, that people must throw away the shackles of an "evil" capitalistic society and help each other to achieve a better tomorrow. While this song may indeed borrow from certain events of the novel and portray a mood of anger, which is meant to be held towards the conditions of life depicted in the book by the reader, it is not accurately representative of the majority of the novel.

The Grapes of Wrath, while encouraging the reader to rise up and help their fellow man, has a tone of utter hopeless melancholy. Bruce Springsteen's "The Ghost of Tom Joad" is a rather accurate representation of this depressive feeling. Springsteen's quiet lyrics and somber instrumentals portray a sense of emotional emptiness, that which is felt by John Steinbeck's characters. Rage Against The Machine does indeed perform a superior interpretation of the aggressive attitude portrayed by the characters at times and felt by the reader throughout the novel. This however is the mood and not the tone of the novel. The tone is certainly expressed through Bruce Springsteen's version of "The Ghost of Tom Joad," a melancholic acceptance of life, very much like that of the tone depicted by John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath.

References

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