

## MAN'S INHUMANITY IN "THE GRAPES OF WRATH" BY JOHN STEINBECK

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### Abstract

This paper will be of two chapters. The first chapter will discuss the three important aspects of the novel in addition to the biography of the author.

The second chapter will tackle the theme of Inhumanity in The Grapes of Wrath in addition to a Critical Reception of The Grapes of Wrath. Steinbeck painfully and again emphasizes that the refugees' immense suffering is brought on by other people, not by ill luck or bad weather. People are divided into wealthy and poor, landowners and tenants by historical, social, and economic factors, and those in positions of power fight ferociously to hold onto their privileges. The novel distinguishes the affluent from the destitute by drawing a simple line through the population and attributes all evil and misery in the world on this split.

Because of the way his writing captures the hardships of a typical dust bowl homeless family just trying to start over, The Grapes of Wrath has become and will continue to be regarded as a classic that countless people adore.

**Keywords:** Enthusiasm, Humor, Inhumanity, Migrants and prosperity.

### Section One

#### 1.1. Historical Background

Steinbeck's masterpiece is based on historical and social events of the 1930s in America, specifically the environmental disaster that an Oklahoma reporter named the Dust Bowl in 1935. Drought had been a major issue for the United States' Great Plains region for many decades preceding the 1930s; sharecroppers began to settle the land for agricultural purposes in the late 1880s, but a particularly severe drought in 1894 caused such widespread crop destruction that up to 90% of the settlers abandoned their claims in some areas. Several reports of dust clouds covering the land during this period of drought brought livestock suffocating and obscuring vision.

Increased rainfall and the sod-covered barren plains at the beginning of the 20th century helped the Plains states regain their agricultural production, and by World War I, large-scale farming had resumed. But soon after the battle, the temperature started to rise, and the region once more experienced a persistent drought. Meanwhile, the harsh cotton crops were depleting the soil of its nutrients, and the poor farming practices of many sharecroppers had destroyed the land's potential for agriculture. Together, these two factors make it challenging for farmers to produce a crop that is lucrative.

Following the 1929 stock market crash and the ensuing downturn in the US economy, banks were in a frantic attempt to recover their losses. Land firms began evicting families from their farms, claiming that it was more profitable to combine the sharecroppers' holdings into one huge farm that would be farmed by a business. Since the majority of sharecroppers had been so unsuccessful, the banks already possessed their land. The impoverished family lacked education and expertise in non-agrarian affairs, making them unfit for other jobs.

The naïve and drifting newcomers were in an ideal position to be used by the major agricultural owners' promotional tactics. Throughout the affected area, hundreds of thousands of handbills were handed out with the promise of many possibilities and high earnings for farm laborers. These leaflets appealed to the sharecroppers' need for respectability and land, luring them west with the promise of steady income. The farmers had little choice except to load up their families and most valuable possessions onto their cars and drive to California. The hordes of impoverished families that fled to California gained notoriety. Historically, the majority of migrant laborers in California's agricultural sector have been lone males who have followed the seasons and crops as a way of life. A second kind of migratory worker emerged as a result of the 1930s economic conditions: the removal migrant. These displaced agricultural laborers were compelled to live itinerant lives and want to settle down somewhere to relax. Eventually, more than 450,000 individuals would have little choice but to hit the road in search of work. These impoverished immigrant families terrified the state's established residents and earned them the nickname "Okies," a pejorative word for any outcast from the northern plain states or the Southwest.

## 1.2. Biography (Steinbeck: his life and works)

John Ernst Steinbeck Jr. was an American author. He won the 1962 Nobel Prize in Literature "for his realistic and imaginative writings, combining as they do sympathetic humor and keen social perception.

Steinbeck's novels can all be classified as social novels dealing with the economic problems of rural labor, but there is also a streak of worship of the soil in his books, which does not always agree with his matter-of-fact sociological approach. After the rough and earthy humor of *Tortilla Flat*, he moved on to more serious fiction, often aggressive in its social criticism, *In Dubious Battle* (1936), which deals with the strikes of the migratory fruit pickers on California plantations. This was followed by *Of Mice and Men* (1937), the story of the imbecile giant Lennie, and a series of admirable short stories collected in the volume *The Long Valley* (1938). In 1939, he published what is considered his best work, *The Grapes of Wrath*, the story of Oklahoma tenant farmers who, unable to earn a living from the land, moved to California where they became migratory workers.

In 1926 Steinbeck briefly lived in New York City, attempting to support himself as a manual labor and journalist. "I had a thin, lonely, hungry time of it" in New York, he wrote in 1935. "And I remember too well the cockroaches under my wash basin and the impossibility of getting a job. I was scared thoroughly. And I can't forget the scare." Steinbeck returned to California and settled in Lake Tahoe, where he worked as a caretaker for an estate and later worked at a fish hatchery. There, working long hours during the freezing winters, he finished his first novel, *Cup of Gold* (1929), a critically and commercially unsuccessful tale based on the life of the privateer Henry Morgan.

There he also met the woman who would become his first wife, Carol Henning. He was working for Tahoe City fish hatchery when Carol walked through the door, captivated by the sign above his office, "Piscatorial Obstetrician." A native of San Jose, Carol was a perfect companion for the young writer—smart, witty, engaging and outgoing. And she was devoted to his writing. He followed her to San Francisco and then the two moved to Los Angeles, where they married on January 14, 1930. After a few months in Eagle Rock, the couple moved to central California, living in the Steinbeck family summer cottage in Pacific Grove: "Financially we are in a mess," Steinbeck wrote to a friend, "but 'spiritually' we ride the clouds."

In the little Pacific Grove house, Steinbeck continued to write feverishly while Carol worked at various jobs. He wrote a friend who was also a struggling writer that both of them “take our efforts to write with great seriousness, hammering away for two years on a novel and such thing...We have taken the ordinary number of beatings and I don’t think there is much strength in either of us, and still we go on butting our heads against the English Novel and nursing our bruises as though they were the wounds of honorable war.” At that time, Steinbeck was writing his second book (third published) a God Unknown, a book that had its genesis in a college writing assignment, a play written by a friend. When the friend abandoned the story line, Steinbeck took it up and wrote and rewrote for over four years, shifting the setting to the San Antonio Valley, near King City, where Steinbeck spent some time as a teenager. This powerful, evocative novel was eventually published in 1933.

In March, 1932, Cape and Smith—later rebranded Jonathan Cape and Robert Ballou, Inc.—accepted Steinbeck’s manuscript of *The Pastures of Heaven*, a loosely connected collection of short stories set in Corral de Tierra, a small farming community between Salinas and Monterey.

Steinbeck's life spanned exactly two-thirds of the century that saw Americans change from horse-drawn provincials to jet-propelled megapolitan. The United States has also changed from a great country for immigrants seeking freedom and personal dignity to an exclusionist country—a closed cooptation with limited preference for the kindred of the earliest shareholders. Actually, this country has changed from ‘a sanctuary rigidly isolated from international power-politics to a self-appointed world policeman hopelessly bogged down in a thankless struggle in a remote area of the world’<sup>7</sup>. Steinbeck was born in the agricultural trading center of Salinas, in a Northern Central California valley about two-thirds of the way from Los Angeles to San Francisco on the major highway closest to the Pacific coast. It is the county seat and the trading and shipping center for the lower part of the valley. The Salinas valley, famed for truck farming, is especially known for its lettuce and its broccoli.

In the United States as in the rest of the world, the 1930’s were the years of the Great Depression, the period of mass unemployment and economic collapse which followed the stock-market crash of 1929. The tenant-farmers could neither satisfy their landlords nor get enough for themselves and their families to live on. These were the climate and economic conditions which drove tens

thousands of men whose incomes had been dependent upon farming prosperity to leave their homes on the Great Plains and make their way to California. These men were native-born American, representative of that small-farmer class so cherished in traditional American thinking from the time of Thomas Jefferson onwards. The implications of this situation are fully explored in *The Grapes of Wrath* which reflects the tension between the natural independence of the characters and the appalling pressures of needs and of sheer starvation, to which they are subjected.

John Steinbeck died of heart attack in New York on December 20, 1968. In the posthumously published *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights* (1976), Steinbeck turned his back on contemporary subjects and brought to life the Arthurian world with its ancient codes of honor. Steinbeck had started the work with enthusiasm but never finished it. Steinbeck's son John had problems in later years with drugs and alcohol; he died in 1991.

### 1.3. Steinbeck's Social Philosophy

The social philosophy presented by Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath* is complex and somewhat contradictory. The basic social theory expressed by Jim Casy, acted on by Ma Joad, and eventually realized by Tom Joad, is one that compels the so-called "little people," the impoverished and dispossessed, to come together in order to gain power against capital-minded owners. This social philosophy maintains that human survival is dependent upon the banding together of humans to find strength in group unity and action. The elaboration of this theory in the novel is seen in the education of the oppressed and disadvantaged with the organization of unions and strikes as vehicles of group protest and change.

Theoretically, Steinbeck's philosophy appears to be based upon the socialist theories of Lenin and Marx, although it shows the clear influence of several distinctly American philosophies. The Emersonian concept of the Over soul is expressed in the earthy folk language of Jim Casy, who believes that all person's souls are really just part of one big soul. The symbolic contrasts between the vitality of the land and the "deadness" of inanimate machines represent the theory of Jeffersonian agrarianism, which holds that the identification of humankind with soil is necessary for the continuation of the life cycle. The pragmatism of Henry James, in which the meaning and truth of all concepts are

defined by their practical consequences, is seen in the active approach of Ma and Tom to adversity. Finally, in Casy's assertion that "maybe it's all men an' all women we love," we find the idea of humanism, a love of all persons and the embracing of mass democracy found in the works of Walt Whitman and Carl Sandburg.

## 1.4. The Structure of The Grapes of Wrath

From its initial publication, the unconventional structure of *The Grapes of Wrath* has been both attacked and misunderstood by a great number of readers. Steinbeck's method of inserting chapters of general information or commentary between straightforward narrative chapters frustrates many readers who consider them distracting, an interruption in the "real" story of the Joad family. These intercalary chapters, as they were termed by critic Peter Lisca, serve a distinct purpose in commenting on and expanding the events of the narrative proper. Sixteen intercalary chapters are included in the book, accounting for approximately 100 pages, or one-sixth of the text. Although the Joad characters do not appear in any of these intercalary chapters, many of the incidents found in these chapters foreshadow similar situations experienced by the Joad. Some, written in a variety of literary styles, provide a generalized, dramatic overview of the central social conditions affecting the main characters, while others provide historical information and direct commentary on book's social and political background.

Steinbeck uses recurring symbols, motifs, and specific narrative episodes to link each intercalary chapter with its adjacent narrative counterparts so that the intercalary chapters, far from being an intrusion, actually unify and strengthen the dominant themes of the novel. The land turtle of the brilliantly descriptive and symbolic Chapter 3 will be picked up by Tom Joad in Chapter 4, and the dramatic monologue of a used car salesman figures immediately before the Joad purchase of a truck for their journey west. Likewise, the Joad search for work in California is preceded by a history of migrant labor in that state.

Steinbeck knew the importance of his readers grasping the greater social message presented in *The Grapes of Wrath*. The suffering of the wandering families and their oppression by larger, more powerful forces was a social crisis of widespread magnitude. He was concerned that readers would not comprehend this urgent, yet impersonal problem unless they could focus their sympathy on

the ordeals of a specific family. At the same time, however, he did not want the struggles of the Joad to be considered isolated events, specific only to a particular family. The use of intercalary chapters provides a balance, allowing Steinbeck to realize the ultimate artistic goal: To weave together specific social facts and lyrical elements to create a personal story that expresses universal truths about the human condition. (Warren 1961: 53).

### 1.5. The three most important aspects of The Grapes of Wrath:

- ❖ The Grapes of Wrath takes place during America's Great Depression, which lasted from the Stock Market Crash of October 1929 until World War II began 12 years later. During this time, a long period of drought and high winds affected large parts of the American Midwest, including much of the state of Oklahoma, creating what was called the Dust Bowl. Many of the people in the lower Midwest moved elsewhere, hoping to find fertile land on which to make a living.
- ❖ Tom Joad is the protagonist, or main character, of The Grapes of Wrath. Tom is the book's hero as well despite the fact that Tom attacks a policeman at one point in the novel and beats a man at another point, becoming a cave-dwelling fugitive as a result. Tom's actions, although illegal according to the letter of the law, are morally just.
- ❖ The most famous image in The Grapes of Wrath is the novel's final one, in which Rose of Sharon Joad, whose baby was recently stillborn, breastfeeds a sickly, starving man on the floor of an old barn. In this image, Steinbeck powerfully dramatizes the desperate plight of Depression-era migrant workers, whom the author felt had been abandoned by society

## Section Two

### 2.1. Inhumanity in The Grapes of Wrath.

In The Grapes of Wrath, the most brutal adversity the Joad face doesn't come from the unforgiving natural conditions of the dustbowl. Rather, the Joad and the Okie community receive the crudest treatment from those most capable of helping them: more fortunate individuals, typically ones who wield institutional power. Throughout the book, establishments and technological advances are shown to corrupt the humans behind them. Steinbeck's depiction of the state police shows that they've been perverted by their authority: in the first

Hooverville the Joad occupy, an exploitative contractor comes to recruit Okies for dirt-cheap labor, and the deputies that accompany him level blatantly false accusations of theft against Floyd Knowles, Tom, and anyone else who dares to protest.

Similarly, the banks are beyond the control of the men that work for them, and like the industrial farms, they expand unchecked, without regard for human life. As the banks and farms grow and grow, their owners stoop lower and lower in order to increase their profits. Some California farms even go so far as destroying perfectly good food in order to keep prices high, all while starving migrants clamor for food and jobs. Steinbeck describes the modern men of industry as mechanized, unnatural beings who live detached from the land and in so doing have become dehumanized, unlike the farming families they displace. This hostility is contagious—even small business owners fear and resent the Okies, and local Californians form militias to intimidate the desperate migrants.

At the same time, Steinbeck occasionally shows glimpses of humanity, especially in the most wretched characters. These acts often come when a character breaks the rules of an oppressive system, which further reinforces Steinbeck's point that institutions tend to be dehumanizing and morally toxic. After she is extorted at a farm company store, Ma Joad observes that "if you're in trouble or hurt or need - go to poor people. They're the only ones that'll help—the only ones." The poorest characters are often the most generous, and the richest the most selfish. Because most Okies can barely support themselves, let alone help others, every instance of altruism becomes a powerful moment in the text.

Inhumanity-Historical, social, and economic circumstances separate people into rich and poor, and the people in the dominant roles struggle to preserve their positions. In his brief history of California, Steinbeck portrays the state as the product of squatters who took the land from Mexicans and, by working it and making it produce, rendered it their own. Californians are worried that history will repeat itself.

'And the little screaming fact that stands throughout all of history: repression works only to strengthen and knit the repressed.'

## 2.2. Critical Reception of The Grapes of Wrath.

From its first printing, *The Grapes of Wrath* enjoyed immediate and widespread commercial success. Advanced sales of the novel shot it onto the national bestseller list where it was to stay throughout 1939 and 1940. Although mass circulation reviewers complained of its unconventional structure and downcast ending, the novel garnered a number of awards, including a Pulitzer Prize.

However, not everyone was convinced of the novel's brilliance. The book was attacked vehemently in both California and Oklahoma, labeled in one magazine editorial as communist propaganda. In Kern County, California, the Board of Supervisors banned *The Grapes of Wrath* in both schools and libraries. The San Bernardino Sun said, "the fallacy of this [story] should not be dignified by a denial." Most of the negative energy in Oklahoma was targeted at discrediting Steinbeck's portrayal of the state and its inhabitants. An article in *The Oklahoma City Times*, titled "Grapes of Wrath? Obscenity and Inaccuracy," was typical of the reaction in that state. In retrospect, it is probable that many people were ashamed by both the terrible dilemma of the migrant families and the inhumane treatment they received from society. Much like the German citizens who refused to believe in the existence of the Nazi death camps, a denial of the truth of the social situation could be viewed as an attempt to lessen their own culpability.

In the years that followed, *The Grapes of Wrath* experienced a shift in critical reception. The passage of time had distanced the book from the volatile social and historical circumstances of its setting, allowing readers a clearer perspective of Steinbeck's work. At the time of its first appearance in 1939, the novel was considered, at best, an influential social tract, and at worst, full-fledged propaganda. Following World War II, it became clear that if the novel were going to maintain its influential status, it would have to be considered not only for its social philosophies, but also for its artistic merits. Although some insisted the novel was no more than a romantic "wagons west" saga, many respected literary critics began to seriously examine the literary elements of the novel. For the next three decades, indeed up to today, critics have delved into the work's artistic and conceptual traits, scrutinizing and debating its use of biblical allusions and symbolism, the effectiveness of its unconventional narrative structure, and the validity of its ending. The wealth of criticism that has emerged proves *The Grapes of Wrath* is indeed one of the most important works in

American literature, and, for the perceptive reader, provides an abundance of artistic and philosophical considerations.

## Conclusion

The Grapes of Wrath shows that people are naturally evil and inhumane to others when faced with a situation that is threatening. Because he was imprisoned for killing a man at the beginning of The Grapes of Wrath, Tom Joad's bad nature was immediately apparent. However, it wasn't until much later in the novel that the reader was able to see that he was not as evil as they had thought. During this period, landowners were forcing people to leave their homes and blaming the bank for it; this is exactly what led Tom's dear family to depart. The evilness in people became more pronounced, with no place to stay and no way to make money, the Joad learned that they weren't the only family that was dealing with the overwhelming cruelty of others. The story of the Joad that John Steinbeck created accurately shows the selfishness of people, and tells a story that is both educational and inspirational. Because of the way his writing captures the hardships of a typical dust bowl homeless family just trying to start over, The Grapes of Wrath has become and will continue to be regarded as a classic that countless people adore.

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