

# THE GRAPES OF WRATH

by John Steinbeck



## THE AUTHOR

John Steinbeck (1902-1968) was born in Salinas, California, and grew up in the region made so memorable in the greatest of his novels. He entered Stanford University in 1919, but never graduated, supporting himself through the decade of the twenties with odd jobs, including writing for a newspaper. In 1929, he published his first novel, *Cup of Gold*. Two novels about migrant workers in California, *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932) and *To a God Unknown* (1933) followed.

He finally achieved commercial success with the publication in 1935 of *Tortilla Flat*. The late thirties witnessed the release of what many consider his finest fiction, including *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath*. A ceaseless experimenter with writing techniques and genres, he tried his hand at movie scripts, comedies, plays, travelogues, and a non-fiction work on marine biology. After the Second World War, he returned to long fiction with the semi-autobiographical *East of Eden* (1952). He received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962, despite the scoffing of critics who considered him a populist rather than a serious writer. He died in 1968.

Steinbeck always considered himself a man of the people, and he identified much more readily with the migrants about whom he wrote so frequently than with the intelligentsia who criticized his writings as being too elementary in structure and language. He was a convinced supporter of democracy and an enemy of fascism, though conservatives thought him too much of a socialist and leftists argued that he should be more vociferous in his condemnation of the evils of the capitalist system. He did admit that he had probably been insufficiently outspoken during the McCarthy era, but he was never able to satisfy those who wished to force his politics into their mold.

## PLOT SUMMARY

The Joads, a family of Tenant farmers in Oklahoma, are forced off their farm by the debt incurred during the Dust Bowl years. They hear about jobs available in California, and decide to head west. They are joined shortly before leaving by their son Tom, who has just been released from prison after having killed a man in a fight. They pack their family into a rickety old truck, taking with them a former preacher name Jim Casy. Tom joins them, despite the fact that leaving the state will mean violating his parole.

They travel westward along route 66, meeting and briefly traveling with another family named the Wilsons. Mrs. Wilson dies on the trip, as does Ma Joad's mother. By the time they reach California, it is clear to them that they will not be welcomed there. Neither the authorities nor the inhabitants want anything to do with the swarm of Okies descending upon their state.

They settle in a ramshackle Hooverville near Bakersfield, where a deputy sheriff looking for an excuse to drive them out picks a fight with one of the men in the camp. Casy and Tom knock him out, and Casy takes the blame and is taken off to jail. The camp is then torched by the authorities as a suspected hotbed of "red" agitation.

The family then moves on to a government camp at Weedpatch, which is clean, orderly, and free of police interference. Migrants choose their own leaders and make and enforce their own laws. The Joads enjoy the peace and company there, but still cannot find work, so eventually are forced to move on northward, using the last of their gas. They find a peach orchard that needs workers, but discover that more and more workers are being brought in, and that with each new group of workers, the wage is reduced. Outside the camp, Tom meets Casy, who has found his calling in prison, becoming a labor organizer. Local officials arrive and kill Casy, but Tom turns on the killer and smashes his head in. The Joads quickly escape, moving on to another camp to pick cotton. Tom hides out there for a while, but eventually leaves for fear of bringing trouble on the family. When the cotton is picked, the rains fall and the camp is flooded, destroying all of the family's remaining possessions. They flee to a barn to find warmth and shelter, but the story ends without any promise of food or employment on the horizon.

## **MAJOR CHARACTERS**

- Pa Joad - Forced to leave Oklahoma during the Dust Bowl, he decides to take his family to California, where there is a promise of work.
- Ma Joad - Tom's wife, she demonstrates her strength of character increasingly as things get worse for the family. It is her determination that holds the family together.
- Grampa - He does not want to go to California, and dies shortly after leaving Oklahoma.
- Granma - She travels west with the clan, but dies while the truck is crossing the desert on the way to California.
- Tom Joad, Jr. - He served four years in prison for killing a man in a fight, but he gets out in time to join his family for the trip. Despite his efforts to control himself, he loses his temper several times, and eventually kills the police officer who kills Casy, then is forced to flee.
- Rose of Sharon - Tom's younger sister, she and her husband Connie join the family on the westward trip. She is pregnant, but her baby is stillborn near the end of the story. Throughout the book, she thinks of nothing but the baby she is carrying and the life she and her husband will make for themselves in California.
- Ruthie - The younger daughter in the Joad family, she is curious and aggressive.
- Winfield - At ten, the youngest of the Joads.

- Uncle John - Pa Joad's brother, he is man burdened down with guilt over the death of his wife. He eventually loses all hope and leaves the family to wander in the desert.
- Jim Casy - A former preacher who had a habit of seducing young girls after he baptized them, he loses his faith, then decides to accompany the Joads on their trip westward. He takes the blame for an attack on a deputy sheriff and is arrested. In prison he decides to become a labor organizer, but he is killed by a police officer shortly after his release.
- Connie - Rosasharn's husband, he deserts the family after they arrive in California.
- Ivy Wilson - A farmer who befriends the Joads and travels with them to California.
- Sairy Wilson - Ivy's wife, a sickly woman who dies on the journey.

### NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“Men stood by their fences and looked at the ruined corn, drying fast now, only a little green showing through the film of dust. The men were silent and they did not move often. And the women came out of the houses to stand beside their men - to feel whether this time the men would break.” (p.6)

“Every kid got a turtle some time or other. Nobody can't keep a turtle though. They work at it and work at it, and at last one day they get out and away they go - off somewheres. It's like me. I wouldn't take the good ol' gospel that was just layin' there to my hand. I got to be pickin' at it and workin' at it until I got it all tore down. Here I got the sperit sometimes and nothin' to preach about. I got the call to lead people, an' no place to lead 'em.” (Casy, p.27)

“How can we live without our lives? How will we know it's us without our past? No. Leave it. Burn it.” (p.114)

But how can such courage be, and such faith in their own species? Very few things would teach such faith. The people in flight from the terror behind - strange things happen to them, some bitterly cruel and some so beautiful that the faith is refired forever.” (p.156)

“If you who own the things people must have could understand this, you might preserve yourself. If you could separate causes from results; if you could know that Paine, Marx, Jefferson, Lenin, were results, not causes, you might survive. But that you cannot know. For the quality of owning freezes you forever into 'I,' and cuts you off forever from the 'we.’” (p.194)

“Every night a world created, complete with furniture - friends made and enemies established; a world complete with braggarts and with cowards, with quiet men, with humble men, with kindly men. Every night relationships that make a world, established; and every morning the world torn down like a circus.” (p.250)

“And the great owners, who must lose their land in an upheaval, the great owners with access to history, with eyes to read history and to know the great fact: when property accumulates in too few hands it is taken away. And that companion fact: when a majority of the people are hungry and cold they will take by force what they need. And the little screaming fact that sounds through all history: repression works only to strengthen and knit the repressed. The great owners ignored the three cries of history. The land fell into fewer hands, the number of dispossessed increased, and every effort of the great owners was directed at repression.” (p.306)

“And the companies, the banks worked at their own doom and did not know it. The fields were fruitful, and starving men moved on the roads. The granaries were full and the children of the poor grew up rachitic, and the pustules of pellagra swelled on their sides. The great companies did not know that the line between hunger and anger is a thin line. And money that might have gone to wages went for gas, for guns, for agents and spies, for blacklists, for drilling. On the highways the people moved like ants and searched for work, for food. And the anger began to ferment.” (p.364-5)

“There is a crime here that goes beyond denunciation. There is a sorrow here that weeping cannot symbolize. There is a failure here that topples all our success. The fertile earth, the straight tree rows, the sturdy trunks, and the ripe fruit. And children dying of pellagra must die because a profit cannot be taken from an orange. And coroners must fill in the certificate - died of malnutrition - because the food must rot, must be forced to rot.” (p.449)

“Well, they was nice fellas, ya see. What made ‘em bad was they needed stuff. An’ I begin to see, then. It’s need that makes all the trouble.” (Casy, p.490)

“The women watched the men, watched to see whether the break had come at last. The women stood silently and watched. And where a number of men gathered together, the fear went from their faces, and anger took its place. And the women sighed with relief, for they knew it was all right - the break had not come; and the break would never come as long as fear could turn to wrath.” (p.556)

“For a minute Rose of Sharon sat still in the whispering barn. Then she hoisted her tired body up and drew the comfort about her. She moved slowly to the corner and stood looking down at the wasted face, into the wide, frightened eyes. Then slowly she lay down beside him. He shook his head slowly from side to side. Rose of Sharon loosened one side of the blanket and bared her breast. ‘You got to,’ she said. She squirmed closer and pulled his head close. ‘There!’ she said. ‘There.’ Her hand moved behind his head and supported it. Her fingers moved gently in his hair. She looked up and across the barn, and her lips came together and smiled mysteriously.” (p.580-1)

## ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. Discuss the role of women in John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*. Does he view them as powerful or powerless? How does he portray their relationship to men and to nature? Cite specific incidents or quotations from the book to support your conclusion.

2. John Steinbeck was criticized for the political content of his writings by those on both the right and the left of the political spectrum. Conservatives thought he was a communist, while socialists and communists thought he was insufficiently vocal in his condemnation of the capitalist exploiters of the poor. Discuss the political implications found in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Do you believe Steinbeck was a socialist, or is he merely presenting a realistic portrayal of the sufferings of the poor during the Great Depression?
3. The picture of the migrant labor camps painted by John Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath* glorifies the primitive democracy of such arrangements, where one might observe “Every night relationships that make a world, established; and every morning the world torn down like a circus.” Obviously, the fact that Steinbeck decries the abuses of the American governmental system does not mean that he favors a different one. In a concise essay, describe what you believe to be the political position of John Steinbeck, using specific incidents or quotations from *The Grapes of Wrath* to support your conclusions.
4. Some critics have argued that John Steinbeck was, more than anything else, a literary heir of the Transcendentalists, following in the footsteps of nineteenth-century writers like Emerson and Walt Whitman. Concepts like sin and righteousness were understood, not in terms of moral or immoral human behavior, but in terms of the harmony of man and nature. Cite specific incidents in *The Grapes of Wrath* that would support this assessment of Steinbeck’s underlying philosophy of life.
5. In John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, we read of the exodus of a family of Oklahoma farmers, and their journey through the wilderness in search of the Promised Land. In a variety of ways, Steinbeck portrays the migrants as God’s people. The story ends, however, without them ever reaching the Promised Land. Given his twist on this basic biblical framework, discuss Steinbeck’s theology of redemption. Is there any redemption in Steinbeck’s view of the world? If so, what is it?
6. “The angel swung his sickle on the earth, gathered its grapes and threw them into the great winepress of God’s wrath” (Revelation 14:19). Discuss the significance of the title of John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*. Why did he choose this particular passage from the book of Revelation as the title for his novel? In what ways does the passage express the basic themes of the novel?
7. John Steinbeck was a member of the Popular Front, a varied conglomeration of organizations which, though spearheaded by and manipulated by the Soviet Union’s Third International, shared in common little beyond their abhorrence of fascism. How does *The Grapes of Wrath* reflect more of a rejection of fascism than an espousal of socialism?
8. Using specific evidence from John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, discuss how the author responded to Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal. Did he favor it or oppose it? Why do you think so?

9. Compare and contrast the views of the American Dream presented in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. What accounts for the differences between the points of view of the two novels. Keep in mind when the novels were written.
10. Would you describe the view of man and society set forth in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* as optimistic or pessimistic? Why? Defend your choice with specifics from the novel.
11. How do the brief interchapters relate to the longer chapters presenting the narrative of the journey of the Joad family in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*? What do they add to the impact of the novel?
12. Much attention has been given by critics to the chapter about the turtle (chapter three) in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. What is the significance of this chapter? How does it relate to the narrative within which it is found?
13. At several points in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, the author draws comparisons between the plight of the poor farmers during the Depression and the condition of the Russian peasants before the Bolshevik Revolution. Is the comparison a valid one? In what ways are the situations similar, and in what ways are they different?
14. In John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, the author almost invariably pictures those who have little of this world's goods as generous and giving, while those who have possessions are selfish and grasping oppressors of the poor. To what extent is this a valid assessment of human nature? What biblical principles might be applied to this question?
15. What does the character of Tom Joad in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* imply about the necessary connection between oppression and violence? Cite specific incidents. Is it inevitable that those who are beaten down will rise in bloody revolt against those who oppress them?
16. What is the symbolic significance of the final act of selflessness with which John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* ends? Does the ending leave you with a sense of hope or hopelessness? Why?
17. The social upheaval predicted in the interchapters of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* never occurred. Why not? What happened to alter the conditions against which Steinbeck protested so vociferously? How did the events you cite produce the change that was needed without violent revolt by the oppressed migrants?
18. What is the religious perspective found in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*? To what extent does the character of Jim Casy reflect Steinbeck's own religious thought? What is the value of religion, according to the story?

19. Alan Paton had been reading John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* just before writing his great novel *Cry, the Beloved Country*. Compare and contrast the social messages of the two works. In what ways are the depictions of the plight of blacks in South Africa and that of migrant workers in the United States similar, and in what ways are they different? Be sure to compare the techniques and perspectives of the two authors and the solutions they advocate for the problems they present in their respective novels.
20. Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* both deal with themes of social injustice and the oppression of the poor. In the former, the injustice is rooted in the law and the social system it supports, while in the latter the injustice is largely tied to economic conditions. Compare and contrast the two authors' ideas concerning the causes and cures of social injustice, incorporating details from both works in your analysis.
21. John Steinbeck was very concerned about the problem of social inequality and the oppression of the poor by the rich. Compare and contrast the social critiques found in *The Pearl* and *The Grapes of Wrath*. In what ways do the settings - colonial Mexico and the United States during the Great Depression - shape the nature and content of the social criticism found in the novels?