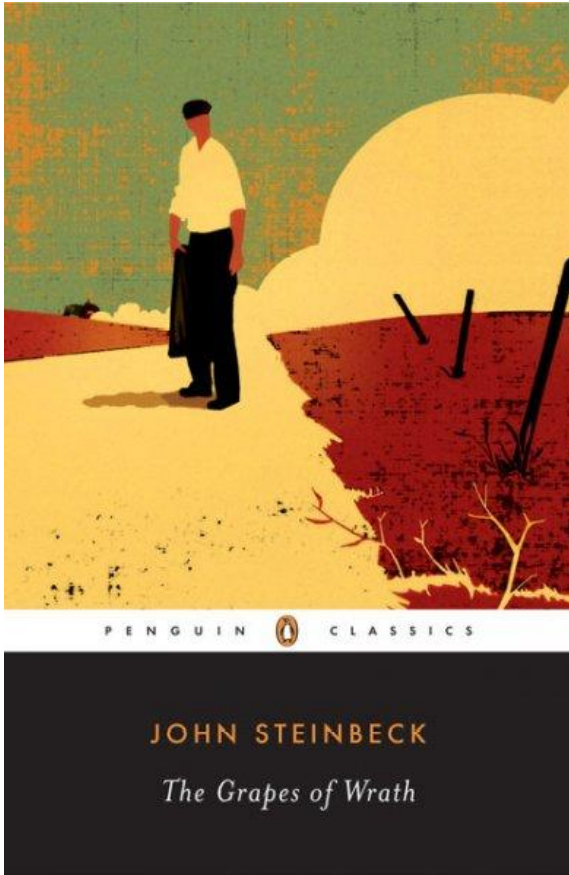


## About the book...



Set during the Great Depression, the book traces the migration of an Oklahoma Dust Bowl family to California and their subsequent hardships as migrant farm workers. It won a Pulitzer Prize in 1940. The work did much to publicize the injustices of migrant labor. The narrative, interrupted by prose-poem interludes, chronicles the struggles of the Joad family's life on a failing Oklahoma farm, their difficult journey to California, and their disillusionment once they arrive there and fall prey to a parasitic economic system. The insularity of the Joads--Ma's obsession with family togetherness, son Tom's self-centeredness, and daughter Rose of Sharon's materialism--ultimately gives way to a sense of universal community.

-- *The Merriam-Webster Encyclopedia of Literature*

## About the author... (<http://www.steinbeck.org/Bio.html>)



John Ernst Steinbeck was born in Salinas, California, on February 27, 1902 of German and Irish ancestry. His father, John Steinbeck, Sr., served as the County Treasurer while his mother, Olive (Hamilton) Steinbeck, a former school teacher, fostered Steinbeck's love of reading and the written word. During summers he worked as a hired hand on nearby ranches, nourishing his impression of the California countryside and its people. After graduating from Salinas High School in 1919, Steinbeck attended Stanford University.

Originally an English major, he pursued a program of independent study and his attendance was sporadic. During this time he worked periodically at various jobs and left

Stanford permanently in 1925 to pursue his writing career in New York. However, he was unsuccessful in getting any of his writing published and finally returned to California. His first novel, *Cup of Gold* was published in 1929, but attracted little attention. His two subsequent novels, *The Pastures of Heaven* and *To a God Unknown*, were also poorly received by the literary world.

Steinbeck married his first wife, Carol Henning in 1930. They lived in Pacific Grove where much of the material for *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row* was gathered. *Tortilla Flat* (1935) marked the turning point in Steinbeck's literary career. It received the California Commonwealth Club's Gold Medal for best novel by a California author. Steinbeck continued writing, relying upon extensive research and his personal observation of the human condition for his stories. *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) won the Pulitzer Prize.

During World War II, Steinbeck was a war correspondent for the New York Herald Tribune. Some of his dispatches were later collected and made into *Once There Was a War*.

John Steinbeck was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962 "...for his realistic as well as imaginative writings, distinguished by a sympathetic humor and a keen social perception."

Throughout his life John Steinbeck remained a private person who shunned publicity. He died December 20, 1968, in New York City and is survived by his third wife, Elaine (Scott) Steinbeck and one son, Thomas. His ashes were placed in the Garden of Memories Cemetery in Salinas.

## Literary Criticism

Today the New York Review of Books comments on social change: the roads are clogged with "retired farmers" who "leave for Florida in their fancy campers." John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* records an earlier time, depression days of Dust Bowl farmers, their farms blown away, heading in jalopies for California's golden groves. If modern America has any idea of Okies and hard times, it is largely due to Steinbeck's greatest work. In it, Steinbeck's "voice over" and vivid episodes create a kind of newsreel of a period when times got tough and the tough got going, westward as ever in their very American and indomitable flight to something better. It is that courage and determination "in the presence of this continent" that has made the book a classic of our literature, that gained it in its own day a great success despite its ignorant Okies (with their accents and even their customs all wrong), and its nasty union men (either venal or fanatic), and its sordid language, as some thought. ("Take the vulgarity out of this book," a shocked Oklahoma congressman told the House of Representatives in 1940, "and it would be blank from cover to cover.") Steinbeck outdid himself as he wrote about what some representative Americans of his time "are doing, thinking, wanting." He said: "It's all a writer knows. I have set down what a large section of our people are doing and wanting, and symbolically what all people of all time are doing and wanting. The migration is the outward sign of the want." He intensely admired the Okies "because they are brave, although the technique of their life is difficult and complicated, they meet it with increasing strength, because they are kind, humorous and wise, because their speech has the metaphor and flavor and imagery of poetry, because they can resist and fight

back, and because I believe that out of these qualities will grow a new system and a new life which will be better than anything we have had before."

Steinbeck's faith seems to have been in something more like a Life Force than the strident socialism of his day; he had a sort of mystical belief in people, not a political belief in the proletariat. And so he wrote a work of art that went beyond the propaganda novel of police brutality and proletarian strikes, an angry and unorthodox New Testament of a religion of mankind. Critics differ as to whether Jim Casy is the Christ or the John the Baptist of this gospel and whether Tom Joad is the Christ or the St. Paul, but all must agree with the critic who wrote that what we have is "a re-enactment in modern times of events which occurred centuries ago," a story of man evicted from his garden that is far more successful as an allegory than *East of Eden*. The trials and tribulations show the sacrifice of a child to remove the curse of barrenness, the testing and the promise of salvation in the end, as well as the desert of despair and the water of life. God who provided the turtle with a shell can offer man no less protection. Run over, he will survive. Changes will have to come, but if brave Ma perishes then Rose of Sharon will be our Blessed Mother. This is a religious novel, not merely a socialist one, not merely a bitter comment on the sentimental "wagons westward" epics and the sociological diatribes. Steinbeck is more artist than activist, and he has woven of actual events and biblical allusions what has been rightly identified as "a pattern of dispossession; of nobility achieved by sacrifice necessitated by suffering; of wandering in the wilderness of exile; of struggle, defeat, hope, and eventual victory; of decadence and renewed struggles—here is an allegory of humanity itself."

This is the kind of message, if not exactly the kind of writing, that wins the Nobel Prize for Literature. This is the kind of theme that for once exactly fitted one of Steinbeck's basic limitations: he is not a great thinker and his characters are not, either. He specializes, our best American critic (Edmund Wilson) quickly noted, "not in those aspects of humanity in which it is most thoughtful, imaginative, constructive" but in simple human beings, "almost at the animal level," enduring or fighting to survive. His best subject is "the processes of life itself."

Steinbeck at his best, as in *The Grapes of Wrath*, writes of basic plights of mankind. Warren French perceptively writes: "If the Joads had not been caught up in the events of a particular time and place that had profoundly affected Steinbeck and troubled his public, we might more easily recognize that their story belongs with Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and other masterpieces of the travail and triumph of the human spirit." "That is why Peter Lisca (who edited the 1972 edition of *The Grapes of Wrath*, in which the text appears with about a dozen essential critical documents of great value to the serious student) could write this at the beginning of his preface:

Very few of those who read *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1939 could have foreseen that this book, which dramatized the headlines and newsreels of the day, which seemed so intimately connected with them that its merits were debated not in literary terms but in those of sociological research and political ideology, would continue to be read long after the headlines had been forgotten.... What distinguishes this one novel is not only its greater authenticity of detail but also the genius of its author, who, avoiding mere propaganda, was able to raise those details and themes to the level of lasting art, while muting none of the passionate human cry against injustice.... In fact, the response of students leaves no doubt that as literature *The Grapes of Wrath* is generally experienced more completely today than it was in 1939, when it was much more difficult to dissociate

the novel from current events or to see Steinbeck's bold technical experiments as something more than what one critic called "calculated crudities."

The novel also reads better today because many college students are, quite frankly, almost as unfamiliar with fine writing as they are with socialist theories or biologism or regional Oklahoma dialect (all of which take a beating in the book). They are moved by the tragedy of the Joads and the lilt of a "song of social significance" and they do not notice that this is one of those great American masterpieces (along with *Moby-Dick* and *An American Tragedy*, not to get too close to living writers) which is very awkwardly written. Edmund Wilson again: in 1948 he shrewdly summed up Steinbeck's novels, of which this is indisputably the most powerful, as marking "precisely the borderline between work that is definitely superior and work that is definitely bad."

The strong story line is well-known. The Joad family is driven from the Dust Bowl farm "house broke." Hardworking Grampa and religious Granma and lonely Uncle John join Ma (she's the one in charge) and Pa (he's a trifle confused by it all), stupid Noah, hotheaded Tom, Connie and Rose of Sharon (carrying a child), Al, Ruthie and Winfield—a motley crew joined in desperation and in hope. The trek will also involve Jim Casy (a sort of mix of the traditional preacher and the traditional village atheist). Some are lost on the way. Some desert. But the rest keep on: "There ain't nothin' else you can do." California is their dream but turns out to be a nightmare of evil sheriffs and worse. "The caravan winds up in a kind of concentration camp and the able-bodied are forced to pick fruit in a black-listed orchard, where they run into angry strikers. Leading the strikers is socialist Casy. He is killed, and Tom kills Casy's murderer and has to lie low. The others guard him, and pick cotton, and finally Ma sends Tom away. He goes to take up Casy's cudgels as a labor organizer, with a credo of helping the Little Man in need wherever he may be. Rose of Sharon's baby is born dead, but there is a hope of life going on: she suckles a starving man who "ain't et for six days." The men will organize and fight and the women will succour and bring new life. A little food, a dry place. Things will get better, somehow, some time. "We ain't gonna die out," says Ma. "People is goin' on ... goin' right on." As the novel ends what is left of the group is hard-pressed indeed, but we are meant to believe that they will survive. It is, in fact, impossible to think otherwise. This upbeat philosophy—and *The Grapes of Wrath* is bold to mix philosophy or even a secular theology with facts—is what the Nobel Prize chiefly honored in Steinbeck in 1962 when the Swedish Academy said:

His sympathies always go out to the oppressed, the misfits, and the distressed; he likes to contrast the simple joy of life with the brutal and cynical craving for money. But in him we find the American temperament also expressed in his great feeling for nature, for the tilled soil, the waste land, the mountains and the ocean coasts, all an inexhaustible source of inspiration to Steinbeck in the midst of, and beyond, the world of human beings.

Steinbeck liked the title *The Grapes of Wrath* "Because it is a march, because it is in our revolutionary tradition and because in reference to this book it has a large meaning." He added: "And I like it because people know the Battle Hymn [of the Republic] who don't know the Stars and Stripes." Others like the book because it is quintessentially American, and all the more so (perhaps) because though not "literary" it is one of our literary classics.

*Source Citation: Ashley, Leonard R.N. "The Grapes of Wrath: Overview." Reference Guide to American Literature. Ed. Jim Kamp. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Detroit: St. James Press, 1994. Literature Resource Center. Gale.*

Title: *The Grapes of Wrath*  
Novel, 1939

### Introduction

Steinbeck's Pulitzer Prize-winning masterpiece *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) is distinguished by its lucid prose, engaging naturalistic descriptions, forceful symbolism, and examination of the myth of America as Edenic paradise. Written after Steinbeck produced a series of articles for the *San Francisco News* about the mass exodus to California of thousands of Oklahoma and Arkansas farmers facing poverty and starvation due to the Great Depression and severe drought of the 1930s, *The Grapes of Wrath* caused an uproar of controversy and was one of the most commonly banned books of its time because of Steinbeck's obvious socialist sympathies. Nonetheless, the novel remains one of the most admired and studied works of social protest fiction of the twentieth century.

### Plot and Major Characters

*The Grapes of Wrath* chronicles the migration of the Joad family, led by the matriarch Ma Joad, from the Dust Bowl of Oklahoma and Arkansas to the supposed Eden of California after drought and economic depression cause their small family farm to collapse. They are joined by Jim Casy, a former preacher, now disillusioned with religion, who sparks their evolution from a self-contained, self-involved family unit to a part of the migrant community that must work together for the greater good, and who inspires the Joads's son Tom to support the cause of the working poor. Interspersed among the chapters dealing specifically with the Joads are chapters in which Steinbeck took a broader, more universal approach to illustrate the full force of the tragedy of the migrant farmers--commonly and disparagingly referred to as "Okies" and "Arkies"--of the 1930s. Simultaneously symbolic and journalistic, these chapters provide a historical overview of the events of the time not only for the displaced farmers but also for American society as a whole, which, according to Steinbeck, must bear the responsibility and the consequences for its callous treatment of the working poor. During the course of their travels, the family's dog is hit by a car, and both of the grandparents die. Then Rose of Sharon, the Joads's pregnant daughter, is deserted by her husband. When the Joads--and all those like them--finally make their way to California, they expect to find themselves in a kind of paradise with plenty of well-paid work available. Instead they find an oversaturated work market where they are forced by hunger and desperation to work as scabs in migrant camps. Casy tries to organize the workers and is murdered by a thug who works for the farm owners, and Tom Joad, who has already violated his parole by leaving Oklahoma, must go into hiding after killing Casy's murderer. Finally, the migrants face a disastrous flood, during which Rose of Sharon's baby is stillborn. In the ultimate affirmation of the Joads's recognition of their membership in the human family, Rose of Sharon gives her breast milk to a starving migrant man in order to save his life.

### Major Themes

*The Grapes of Wrath* is in one sense a documentary account of American socioeconomic events of the 1930s. Photojournalists recorded the suffering of the people of the Dust

Bowl region, and Steinbeck was strongly influenced by the widely published photographs, including those in the book *You Have Seen Their Faces*, by Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White. Steinbeck's interest in the plight of farmers in the face of rapidly encroaching agribusiness and his sympathy for union organizers became important themes in the novel, along with the struggles of the average person against big business. But beyond the depiction of historical events is Steinbeck's symbolism. Jim Casy, although he is a reluctant preacher, serves as a Christlike figure, leading the Joads and the workers to consider the higher purposes of the community over their own individual interests. Ma Joad, with her considerable inner strength, and Rose of Sharon, particularly in the final scene of the novel, are earth-mother symbols who instinctively understand their roles as nurturers. This religious symbolism--both Christian and non-Christian--pervades the novel. Images of exodus, plague, and the search for paradise, as well as of the sanctity of the land, dominate the farmers' travels to the West.

#### Critical Reception

While *The Grapes of Wrath* is praised by most critics for the universality of its themes, it is sometimes faulted by others for excessive sentimentalism and melodrama. Initial reception of *The Grapes of Wrath* was distorted because the book caused a maelstrom of political controversy due to its castigation of agribusiness and the governmental system that contributed to the Dust Bowl predicament. The press and politicians attempted to discredit Steinbeck's book, accusing him of socialist sympathies. With its political implications now defused, critical study of *The Grapes of Wrath* has more recently focused on Steinbeck's religious and nature symbolism and the role of his female characters, which earlier critics had considered stereotypical and one-dimensional. But regardless of critical opinion, *The Grapes of Wrath* remains one of the most respected modern American novels.

*Source Citation: "The Grapes of Wrath." Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism. Ed. Janet Witalec. Vol. 135. Detroit: Gale, 2003. Literature Resource Center. Gale*

## Film Review

### *The New York Times*

In the vast library where the celluloid literature of the screen is stored there is one small, uncrowded shelf devoted to the cinema's masterworks, to those films which by dignity of theme and excellence of treatment seem to be of enduring artistry, seem destined to be recalled not merely at the end of their particular year but whenever great motion pictures are mentioned. To that shelf of screen classics Twentieth Century-Fox yesterday added its version of John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath," adapted by Nunnally Johnson, directed by John Ford and performed at the Rivoli by a cast of such uniform excellence and suitability that we should be doing its other members an injustice by saying it was "headed" by Henry Fonda, Jane Darwell, John Carradine and Russell Simpson.

We know the question you are asking, have been asking since the book was acquired for filming: Does the picture follow the novel, how closely and how well? The answer is that it has followed the book; has followed it closely, but not with blind, indiscriminating literalness; has followed it so well that no one who has read and admired it should complain of the manner of its screen telling. Steinbeck's language, which some found too

shocking for tender eyes, has been cleaned up, but has not been toned so high as to make its people sound other than as they are. Some phases of his saga have been skimmed and some omitted; the book's ending has been dropped; the sequence of events and of speeches has been subtly altered.

The changes sound more serious than they are, seem more radical than they are. For none of them has blurred the clarity of Steinbeck's word-picture of the people of the Dust Bowl. None of them has rephrased, in softer terms, his matchless description of the Joad family's trek from Oklahoma to California to find the promised land where work was plenty, wages were high and folk could live in little white houses beside an orange grove. None of them has blunted the fine indignation or diluted the bitterness of his indictment of the cruel deception by which an empty stew-pot was substituted for the pot of gold at the rainbow's end. And none of them has—as most of us feared it might—sent the film off on a witch hunt, let it pretend there had just been a misunderstanding, made it end on the sunrise of a new and brighter day.

Steinbeck's story might have been exaggeration; at least some will take comfort in thinking so. But if only half of it were true, that half still should constitute a tragedy of modern America, a bitter chapter of national history that has not yet been closed, that has, as yet, no happy ending, that has thus far produced but two good things: a great American novel (if it is truly a novel) and a great American motion picture.

Its greatness as a picture lies in many things, not all of them readily reducible to words. It is difficult, for example, to discuss John Ford's direction, except in pictorial terms. His employment of camera is reportage and editorial and dramatization by turns or all in one. Steinbeck described the Dust Bowl and its farmers, used page on page to do it. Ford's cameras turn off a white-striped highway, follow Tom Joad scuffling through the dust to the empty farmhouse, see through Muley's eyes the pain of surrendering the land and the hopelessness of trying to resist the tractors. A swift sequence or two, and all that Steinbeck said has been said and burned indelibly into memory by a director, a camera and a cast.

Or follow the Joads in their piled-up, rattling, wheezing truck along Highway 66, and let the Russian realists match if they can that Ford shot through the windshield, with three tired faces reflected in it and the desert through it. Or the covered wagon's arrival at the first of a series of Hoovervilles, with a litter of humans and dogs and crates in its path, and the eloquence of their mute testimony to poverty and disillusion and the degradation of the human spirit. We could mention a score of others, but they would mean no more unless you, too, had seen the picture. Direction, when it is as brilliant as Mr. Ford's has been, is easy to recognize, but impossible to describe.

It's simpler to talk about the players and the Nunnally Johnson script. There may be a few words of dialogue that Steinbeck has not written, but Mr. Johnson almost invariably has complimented him by going to the book for his lines. A sentence from one chapter is made to serve a later sequence; sometimes Ma Joad is saying things the Preacher originally said; sometimes Tom is harrowing Ma's lines. But they fit and they ring true, and that applies, as well, to Mr. Johnson's reshuffling of the Steinbeck sequences, his coming to the end of the saga before Steinbeck was willing to punch out the final period. And if all this seems strange for Hollywood—all this fidelity to a book's spirit, this resoluteness of approach to a dangerous (and, in California, an especially dangerous) topic—still stranger has been the almost incredible rightness of the film's casting, the

utter believability of some of Hollywood's most typical people in untypical roles. Henry Fonda's Tom Joad is precisely the hot-tempered, resolute, saturnine chap Mr. Steinbeck had in mind. Jane Darwell's Ma is exactly the family-head we pictured as we read the book. Charles Grapewin's Grampa cannot be quite the "heller" we met in the novel; the anti-profanity dictum bothered him more than the rest of them; but Mr. Grapewin's Cramp is still quite an old boy.

We could go on with this talk of the players, but it would become repetitious, for there are too many of them, and too many are perfect in their parts. What we've been trying to say is that "The Grapes of Wrath" is just about as good as any picture has a right to be; if it were any better, we just wouldn't believe our eyes.

## Discussion questions

1. Why does Steinbeck structure the novel the way he does? Do you find the technique of alternating chapters about the social situation in general with ones about the Joads effective?
2. Why is Ma Joad so important to the family and the story?
3. Wrath is an important concept in the novel. Why does Steinbeck think anger is important?
4. How is Tom Joad transformed throughout the novel? How is he ultimately different from his mentor, Jim Casy?
5. How effective is Rose of Sharon's final gesture as a way of ending the story?
6. Who is the hero of this novel?
7. Were you reminded of any present-day situations while reading *The Grapes of Wrath*?
8. Many readers dislike *The Grapes of Wrath* because they feel it promotes hatred between classes, or presents a negative portrait of American society to an already-critical world. How did you react to novel as a whole? (*Novelist*)

## Multimedia

The Grapes of Wrath (Film) <http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1223395>

## Readalikes

*Plainsong* by Ken Haruf

*Ironweed* by William Kennedy

*The Tortilla Curtain* by T. Coraghessan Boyle

*Out of the Dust* by Karen Hesse



**Watchalikes:**

*The Searchers*  
*Of Mice and Men*  
*How Green Was My Valley*

**Activity**

For the meetings' food offering create a centerpiece draping with grapes, or a fruit dish predominantly full of grapes.



Ann Arbor District Library