

The Grapes of Wrath

- John Steinbeck

Plot Overview

- Released from an Oklahoma state prison after serving four years for a manslaughter conviction, Tom Joad makes his way back to his family's farm in Oklahoma. He meets Jim Casy, a former preacher who has given up his calling out of a belief that all life is holy—even the parts that are typically thought to be sinful—and that sacredness consists simply in endeavoring to be an equal among the people. Jim accompanies Tom to his home, only to find it—and all the surrounding farms—deserted. Muley Graves, an old neighbor, wanders by and tells the men that everyone has been “tractored” off the land. Most families, he says, including his own, have headed to California to look for work. The next morning, Tom and Jim set out for Tom's Uncle John's, where Muley assures them they will find the Joad clan. Upon arrival, Tom finds Ma and Pa Joad packing up the family's few possessions. Having seen handbills advertising fruit-picking jobs in California, they envision the trip to California as their only hope of getting their lives back on track.
- The journey to California in a rickety used truck is long and arduous. Grampa Joad, a feisty old man who complains bitterly that he does not want to leave his land, dies on the road shortly after the family's departure. Dilapidated cars and trucks, loaded down with scrappy possessions, clog Highway 66: it seems the entire country is in flight to the Promised Land of California. The Joads meet Ivy and Sairy Wilson, a couple plagued with car trouble, and invite them to travel with the family. Sairy Wilson is sick and, near the California border, becomes unable to continue the journey.

Plot Overview (cont)

- As the Joads near California, they hear ominous rumors of a depleted job market. One migrant tells Pa that 20,000 people show up for every 800 jobs and that his own children have starved to death. Although the Joads press on, their first days in California prove tragic, as Granma Joad dies. The remaining family members move from one squalid camp to the next, looking in vain for work, struggling to find food, and trying desperately to hold their family together. Noah, the oldest of the Joad children, soon abandons the family, as does Connie, a young dreamer who is married to Tom's pregnant sister, Rose of Sharon.
- The Joads meet with much hostility in California. The camps are overcrowded and full of starving migrants, who are often nasty to each other. The locals are fearful and angry at the flood of newcomers, whom they derisively label "Okies." Work is almost impossible to find or pays such a meager wage that a family's full day's work cannot buy a decent meal. Fearing an uprising, the large landowners do everything in their power to keep the migrants poor and dependent. While staying in a ramshackle camp known as a "Hooverville," Tom and several men get into a heated argument with a deputy sheriff over whether workers should organize into a union. When the argument turns violent, Jim Casy knocks the sheriff unconscious and is arrested. Police officers arrive and announce their intention to burn the Hooverville to the ground.

Plot Overview (cont)

- A government-run camp proves much more hospitable to the Joads, and the family soon finds many friends and a bit of work. However, one day, while working at a pipe-laying job, Tom learns that the police are planning to stage a riot in the camp, which will allow them to shut down the facilities. By alerting and organizing the men in the camp, Tom helps to defuse the danger. Still, as pleasant as life in the government camp is, the Joads cannot survive without steady work, and they have to move on. They find employment picking fruit, but soon learn that they are earning a decent wage only because they have been hired to break a workers' strike. Tom runs into Jim Casy who, after being released from jail, has begun organizing workers; in the process, Casy has made many enemies among the landowners. When the police hunt him down and kill him in Tom's presence, Tom retaliates and kills a police officer.
- Tom goes into hiding, while the family moves into a boxcar on a cotton farm. One day, Ruthie, the youngest Joad daughter, reveals to a girl in the camp that her brother has killed two men and is hiding nearby. Fearing for his safety, Ma Joad finds Tom and sends him away. Tom heads off to fulfill Jim's task of organizing the migrant workers. The end of the cotton season means the end of work, and word sweeps across the land that there are no jobs to be had for three months. Rains set in and flood the land. Rose of Sharon gives birth to a stillborn child, and Ma, desperate to get her family to safety from the floods, leads them to a dry barn not far away. Here, they find a young boy kneeling over his father, who is slowly starving to death. He has not eaten for days, giving whatever food he had to his son. Realizing that Rose of Sharon is now producing milk, Ma sends the others outside, so that her daughter can nurse the dying man.

Tom Joad

- Tom begins the novel in possession of a practical sort of self-interest. Four years in prison, he claims, have molded him into someone who devotes his time and energies to the present moment. The future, which seems illusory and out of reach, does not concern him. He adopts this philosophy toward living not because he is selfish but as a means of coping: he fears that by putting his life in a context larger than the present day, he will drive himself mad with anger and helplessness. Of course, Tom, who exhibits a rare strength, thoughtfulness, and moral certainty, is destined for more than mere day-to-day survival. Tom undergoes the most significant transformation in the novel as he sheds this *carpe diem* (seize the day) philosophy for a commitment to bettering the future.
- During their journey west, Tom assumes the role of Jim Casy's reluctant disciple. The former preacher emphasizes that a human being, when acting alone, can have little effect on the world, and that one can achieve wholeness only by devoting oneself to one's fellow human beings. The hardship and hostility faced by the Joad family on their journey west serve to convert Tom to Casy's teachings. By the time Tom and Casy reunite at the cotton plantation, Tom realizes that he cannot stand by as a silent witness to the world's injustices; he cannot work for his own family's well-being if it means taking bread from another family. At the plantation, Tom abandons the life of private thought that structures the lives of most of the novel's male characters—including Pa Joad and Uncle John—and sets out on a course of public action.

Ma Joad

- A determined and loving woman, Ma Joad emerges as the family's center of strength over the course of the novel as Pa Joad gradually becomes less effective as a leader and provider. Regardless of how bleak circumstances become, Ma Joad meets every obstacle unflinchingly. Time and again, Ma displays a startling capacity to keep herself together—and to keep the family together—in the face of great turmoil. She may demonstrate this faculty best during the family's crossing of the California desert. Here, Ma suffers privately with the knowledge that Granma is dead, riding silently alongside her corpse so that the family can complete its treacherous journey. At the end of the episode, Ma's calm exterior cracks just slightly: she warns Tom not to touch her, saying that she can retain her calm only as long as he doesn't reach out to her. This ability to act decisively, and to act for the family's good, enables Ma to lead the Joads when Pa begins to falter and hesitate. Although she keeps her sorrows to herself, she is not an advocate of solitude. She consistently proves to be the novel's strongest supporter of family and togetherness. Indeed, the two tendencies are not in conflict but convene in a philosophy of selfless sacrifice. Ma articulates this best, perhaps, when she wordlessly directs her daughter to breast-feed the starving man in Chapter Thirty. With her indomitable nature, Ma Joad suggests that even the most horrible circumstances can be weathered with grace and dignity.

Pa Joad

- Pa Joad is a good, thoughtful man, and he plans the family's trip to California with great care and consideration. The hardships faced by the Joads prove too great for him, however, and although he works hard to maintain his role as head of the family, he complains of muddled thoughts and finds himself in frequent quandaries. Until the very end, Pa exhibits a commitment to protecting his family. His determination to erect a dam is a moving testament to his love and singleness of purpose. When his efforts begin to fall short, however, Pa despairs. In California, his inability to find work forces him to retreat helplessly into his own thoughts. As a result, he becomes less and less effective in his role as family leader, and Ma points this out directly. Upon leaving the Weedpatch camp, she boldly criticizes him for losing sight of his responsibility to support the family. By the end of the novel, further diminished by the failed attempt to prevent the family's shelter from flooding, he follows Ma as blindly and helplessly as a child. Pa's gradual breakdown serves as a sharp reminder that hardship does not always “build character.” Though the challenges of the Joads' journey serve to strengthen Ma, Tom, and even Rose of Sharon, they weaken and eventually paralyze Pa.

Jim Casy

- Steinbeck employs Jim Casy to articulate some of the novel's major themes. Most notably, the ex-preacher redefines the concept of holiness, suggesting that the most divine aspect of human experience is to be found on earth, among one's fellow humans, rather than amid the clouds. As a radical philosopher, a motivator and unifier of men, and a martyr, Casy assumes a role akin to that of Jesus Christ—with whom he also shares his initials. Casy begins the novel uncertain of how to use his talents as a speaker and spiritual healer if not as the leader of a religious congregation. By the end of the novel, he has learned to apply them to his task of organizing the migrant workers. Indeed, Casy comes to believe so strongly in his mission to save the suffering laborers that he willingly gives his life for it. Casy's teachings prompt the novel's most dramatic character development, by catalyzing Tom Joad's transformation into a social activist and man of the people.

Rose of Sharon

- In creating the character of Rose of Sharon, Steinbeck relies heavily on stereotypes. We read that pregnancy has transformed the girl from a “hoyden”—a high-spirited and saucy girl—into a secretive and mysterious woman. Time and again, Steinbeck alludes to the girl's silent self-containment and her impenetrable smile. This portrayal of pregnancy may initially seem to bespeak a romanticism out of keeping with Steinbeck's characteristic realism. However, Steinbeck uses such seemingly trite details to prepare Rose of Sharon for the dramatic role she plays at the end of the novel. When she meets the starving man in the barn, she becomes saintly, otherworldly. Her capacity to sustain life, paired with her suffering and grief for her dead child, liken her to the Virgin Mother and suggest that there is hope to be found even in the bleakest of circumstances.

Man's Inhumanity to Man

- Steinbeck consistently and woefully points to the fact that the migrants' great suffering is caused not by bad weather or mere misfortune but by their fellow human beings. Historical, social, and economic circumstances separate people into rich and poor, landowner and tenant, and the people in the dominant roles struggle viciously to preserve their positions. In his brief history of California in Chapter Nineteen, Steinbeck portrays the state as the product of land-hungry squatters who took the land from Mexicans and, by working it and making it produce, rendered it their own. Now, generations later, the California landowners see this historical example as a threat, since they believe that the influx of migrant farmers might cause history to repeat itself. In order to protect themselves from such danger, the landowners create a system in which the migrants are treated like animals, shuffled from one filthy roadside camp to the next, denied livable wages, and forced to turn against their brethren simply to survive. The novel draws a simple line through the population—one that divides the privileged from the poor—and identifies that division as the primary source of evil and suffering in the world.

The Saving Power of Family and Fellowship

- The Grapes of Wrath chronicles the story of two “families”: the Joads and the collective body of migrant workers. Although the Joads are joined by blood, the text argues that it is not their genetics but their loyalty and commitment to one another that establishes their true kinship. In the migrant lifestyle portrayed in the book, the biological family unit, lacking a home to define its boundaries, quickly becomes a thing of the past, as life on the road demands that new connections and new kinships be formed. The reader witnesses this phenomenon at work when the Joads meet the Wilsons. In a remarkably short time, the two groups merge into one, sharing one another's hardships and committing to one another's survival. This merging takes place among the migrant community in general as well: “twenty families became one family, the children were the children of all. The loss of home became one loss, and the golden time in the West was one dream.” In the face of adversity, the livelihood of the migrants depends upon their union. As Tom eventually realizes, “his” people are all people.

The Dignity of Wrath

- The Joads stand as exemplary figures in their refusal to be broken by the circumstances that conspire against them. At every turn, Steinbeck seems intent on showing their dignity and honor; he emphasizes the importance of maintaining self-respect in order to survive spiritually. Nowhere is this more evident than at the end of the novel. The Joads have suffered incomparable losses: Noah, Connie, and Tom have left the family; Rose of Sharon gives birth to a stillborn baby; the family possesses neither food nor promise of work. Yet it is at this moment (Chapter Thirty) that the family manages to rise above hardship to perform an act of unsurpassed kindness and generosity for the starving man, showing that the Joads have not lost their sense of the value of human life.
- Steinbeck makes a clear connection in his novel between dignity and rage. As long as people maintain a sense of injustice—a sense of anger against those who seek to undercut their pride in themselves—they will never lose their dignity. This notion receives particular reinforcement in Steinbeck's images of the festering grapes of wrath (Chapter Twenty-Five), and in the last of the short, expository chapters (Chapter Twenty-Nine), in which the worker women, watching their husbands and brothers and sons, know that these men will remain strong “as long as fear [can] turn to wrath.” The women's certainty is based on their understanding that the men's wrath bespeaks their healthy sense of self-respect.

The Multiplying Effects of Altruism and Selfishness

- According to Steinbeck, many of the evils that plague the Joad family and the migrants stem from selfishness. Simple self-interest motivates the landowners and businessmen to sustain a system that sinks thousands of families into poverty. In contrast to and in conflict with this policy of selfishness stands the migrants' behavior toward one another. Aware that their livelihood and survival depend upon their devotion to the collective good, the migrants unite—sharing their dreams as well as their burdens—in order to survive. Throughout the novel, Steinbeck constantly emphasizes self-interest and altruism as equal and opposite powers, evenly matched in their conflict with each other. In Chapters Thirteen and Fifteen, for example, Steinbeck presents both greed and generosity as self-perpetuating, following cyclical dynamics. In Chapter Thirteen, we learn that corporate gas companies have preyed upon the gas station attendant that the Joads meet. The attendant, in turn, insults the Joads and hesitates to help them. Then, after a brief expository chapter, the Joads immediately happen upon an instance of kindness as similarly self-propagating: Mae, a waitress, sells bread and sweets to a man and his sons for drastically reduced prices. Some truckers at the coffee shop see this interchange and leave Mae an extra-large tip.

Improvised Leadership Structures

- When the novel begins, the Joad family relies on a traditional family structure in which the men make the decisions and the women obediently do as they are told. So invested are they in these roles that they continue to honor Grampa as the head of the family, even though he has outlived his ability to act as a sound leader. As the Joads journey west and try to make a living in California, however, the family dynamic changes drastically. Discouraged and defeated by his mounting failures, Pa withdraws from his role as leader and spends his days tangled in thought. In his stead, Ma assumes the responsibility of making decisions for the family. At first, this shocks Pa, who, at one point, lamely threatens to beat her into her so-called proper place. The threat is empty, however, and the entire family knows it. By the end of the novel, the family structure has undergone a revolution, in which the woman figure, traditionally powerless, has taken control, while the male figure, traditionally in the leadership role, has retreated. This revolution parallels a similar upheaval in the larger economic hierarchies in the outside world. Thus, the workers at the Weedpatch camp govern themselves according to their own rules and share tasks in accordance with notions of fairness and equality rather than power-hungry ambition or love of authority.

Rose of Sharon's Pregnancy

- Rose of Sharon's pregnancy holds the promise of a new beginning. When she delivers a stillborn baby, that promise seems broken. But rather than slipping into despair, the family moves boldly and gracefully forward, and the novel ends on a surprising (albeit unsettling) note of hope. In the last few pages of his book, Steinbeck employs many symbols, a number of which refer directly to episodes in the Bible. The way in which Uncle John disposes of the child's corpse recalls Moses being sent down the Nile. The image suggests that the family, like the Hebrews in Egypt, will be delivered from the slavery of its present circumstances.

The Death of Joad's Dog

- When the Joads stop for gas not long after they begin their trip west, they are met by a hostile station attendant, who accuses them of being beggars and vagrants. While there, a fancy roadster runs down their dog and leaves it for dead in the middle of the road. The gruesome death constitutes the first of many symbols foreshadowing the tragedies that await the family.