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STEINBECK'S

GRAPES OF WRATH



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THE GRAPES OF WRATH

NOTES

including

- *Life and Background*
- *Introduction*
- *General Plot Summary*
- *List of Characters*
- *Chapter Summaries and Commentaries*
- *Notes on General Meaning and Style*
- *Character Analysis*
- *Examination Questions*

by

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INCORPORATED

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ISBN 0-8220-0542-5

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Printed in U S A

CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----------|
| LIFE AND BACKGROUND..... | 5 |
| THE NOVEL OF PROTEST..... | 6 |
| GENERAL PLOT SUMMARY..... | 9 |
| CAST OF CHARACTERS..... | 11 |
| CHAPTER SUMMARIES AND COMMENTARIES | |
| Chapter I..... | 13 |
| Chapter II..... | 14 |
| Chapter III..... | 15 |
| Chapter IV..... | 16 |
| Chapter V..... | 18 |
| Chapter VI..... | 19 |
| Chapter VII..... | 21 |
| Chapter VIII..... | 22 |
| Chapter IX..... | 25 |
| Chapter X..... | 26 |
| Chapter XI..... | 29 |
| Chapter XII..... | 29 |
| Chapter XIII..... | 30 |
| Chapter XIV..... | 33 |
| Chapter XV..... | 34 |
| Chapter XVI..... | 35 |
| Chapter XVII..... | 37 |
| Chapter XVIII..... | 38 |
| Chapter XIX..... | 41 |
| Chapter XX..... | 42 |
| Chapter XXI..... | 46 |
| Chapter XXII..... | 47 |
| Chapter XXIII..... | 50 |
| Chapter XXIV..... | 50 |
| Chapter XXV..... | 52 |
| Chapter XXVI..... | 53 |
| Chapter XXVII..... | 57 |
| Chapter XXVIII..... | 58 |
| Chapter XXIX..... | 60 |

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Chapter XXX..... | 61 |
| THE GENERAL MEANING OF THE GRAPES OF WRATH..... | 64 |
| STYLE..... | 65 |
| CHARACTER ANALYSIS..... | 65 |
| SUGGESTED EXAMINATION QUESTIONS..... | 72 |

THE GRAPES OF WRATH

LIFE AND BACKGROUND

John Steinbeck is the type of author who likes to know his material first hand. He is not content to narrate a story which has no basis in fact. Thus most of his works take place in California and deal with subjects which he thoroughly understands.

Steinbeck's father settled in California shortly after the American Civil War. John Steinbeck was born in Salinas on February 27, 1902. His mother was a school teacher in the public school in Salinas. Steinbeck grew up in this beautiful fertile California valley. From this valley, he found the materials for most of his novels. His imagination was kindled toward writing at a very early age partly because his mother, the school teacher, read to him from the famous literature of the world.

During his formative years, he played various sports in high school, worked at various jobs, and wandered around the countryside observing the phenomena of nature. He entered Stanford University in 1920, and even though he remained until 1925, he never graduated. In fact, he earned very few credits. He did, however, contribute some material to the Stanford literary magazine, both poems and short stories.

During his years at Stanford and immediately after his departure, Steinbeck worked at a variety of jobs. He went to New York in 1925, but found it unsuitable for his temperament. He returned to California, and between odd jobs, he began writing his novels. His first novel appeared in 1929.

In preparation for writing his novels, Steinbeck would often live, work and be with the people about whom he was to write. Thus, in preparation for writing *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck went to Oklahoma, joined some migrants and rode with them to California. Once in California, he stayed with these migrants,

living with them in Hoovervilles, joining them in their search for work, and attempting as much as possible, to come to terms with these people's essential characteristics. Leaving them, he made several trips to various camps to observe first-hand the living and working conditions of these migrants. He wrote some short pieces for the *San Francisco News* in which he described the plight of these people, and pleaded for a more tolerant approach in the handling of these migrants. These articles, however, were not very effective. It was only when he molded his raw experiences into the form of a novel that effects were achieved.

For his total body of works, Mr. Steinbeck was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1962, the highest honor in the field of literature.

THE NOVEL OF PROTEST

CRITICAL ACCEPTANCE

The Grapes of Wrath has most often been considered a novel of protest or a social document. When the novel first appeared, the public began to take sides over its value. It was seldom discussed as a work of art, but instead, the subject matter was debated as to whether the facts were falsified, and whether the situation could possibly be this bad. From the religious viewpoint, it was attacked as obscene. It never had a chance to be evaluated as a work of art.

There were particularly vehement attacks against the book by the people of Oklahoma and California. The citizens of Oklahoma resented the fact that the people were depicted as *Okies* and denied the implications that Oklahoma is a dust bowl where it is impossible to grow crops. An Oklahoma congressman went on record maintaining that the book is a "black, infernal creation of a twisted, distorted mind." In California there appeared numerous pamphlets proving that John Steinbeck had written nothing but black lies. Within six months, there had been more public response to his novel than to any novel in American history with the possible exception of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Steinbeck, however, was not without his defenders. Ministers, university professors, sociologists, and government agents testified to the accuracy of Steinbeck's portrayal. Magazines such as *Life* ran feature stories on the plight of the migrants, and before the novel was made into a movie, the director sent men into the field to verify the accuracy of the novel, and his agents reported that conditions were much worse than had been reported by Steinbeck.

The furor raised by the publication of this novel has now passed into history. Many of the attacks were made by people ashamed of the desperate plight of the migrants, and ashamed of the way American citizens were treated by fellow Americans, but the immediate social situation is now past history. The reader today is not so much concerned with the sociological aspect of the novel. He should be aware that Steinbeck was telling an accurate story, but the plight of the migrants has virtually faded from the memory of the American people, leaving us free to evaluate the novel on artistic grounds.

The only point that Steinbeck was attacked on, that is still relevant today is the social philosophy advocated in the novel. Since his attackers accused him of being a communist because of this philosophy, we must consider this aspect of the novel in interpreting the exact nature of that philosophy. Today, to the more rational mind, we see that it is not so much a communistic philosophy as it is an Emersonian view. Emerson had maintained that every man comes from a great Oversoul and in death returns to that Oversoul. His ultimate conclusion involved the holiness or divinity of every man. This is essentially the same belief advocated by Jim Casy. This is transcendentalism and not communism, but the American public has needed the lapse of time to fully understand and appreciate the full meaning of this great novel of social protest, which is also a great work of art.

STRUCTURE

Steinbeck once said that the plight of the migrants was something impersonal and distant. Even though the American people knew about these people, they did not understand the nature of the entire situation. He felt that the American people could never

really sympathize with these migrants merely from reading about and hearing about their general plight. Therefore, he decided to tell the story of one family. He thought that if the public could become intimately acquainted with one family, then the entire situation would be better understood. Thus he wrote *The Grapes of Wrath* so that the public could personally get to know one family of migrants.

In telling the story, there seemed to be a lot of material left over. He wanted to tell a moving narrative about the Joads, but the narrative alone did not cover the entire picture. He therefore inserted chapters which spoke of the general picture of the society with which the Joads were involved. Thus we have the intercalary chapters, i.e., chapters which are not about the Joads, but about the background of the dust bowl, about the highway that leads from Oklahoma to California, about selling property, about the ownership of land in California, etc. These chapters present the plight in a general sense. They act as support for the narrative, and they reflect many aspects of the Joad narrative. The specific purpose of each chapter is discussed in a commentary after the chapter, but the general purpose is to present the social background against which the Joad's plight is seen, and also to give historical information which led to the present situation.

None of the main characters in the narrative portion of the novel appear in the intercalary chapters. But the reader should be aware of the close relationship between the intercalary and the narrative chapters. While the intercalary chapters fulfill the functions mentioned above, there is still artistic interweaving between these chapters. As pointed out in the *Commentaries*, the intercalary chapters serve many artistic and symbolic functions. Sometimes they are a comment on some action and sometimes they foreshadow actions that will occur later in the novel.

This technique of inserting general chapters in between the narrative chapters is not new with Steinbeck. It has been used by other famous writers, such as Fielding (*Tom Jones*) and Tolstoi (*War and Peace*). Steinbeck's successful handling of this technique contributes greatly to the success of this novel.

GENERAL PLOT SUMMARY

Tom Joad is hitchhiking home after being released from the state prison on parole. He has served four years of a seven year sentence. He catches a ride with a truck driver who takes him to the road which leads to his family's farm. As he is walking the rest of the way, he meets Jim Casy, an itinerant preacher. Casy explains that he has been away for some time trying to figure out some things, and has decided that since all things are holy, he need not be a preacher any more but just live with the people because the people are holy. They go together to Tom's place. When they arrive, they find that the place is deserted. They can't understand it. It looks as though all the neighboring farms are deserted. Soon they see someone coming. It is Muley Graves who tells them that Tom's folks are at his Uncle John's. Jim and Tom sleep in the fields that night and walk on to Uncle John's the next day.

When they arrive, they find the Joads making preparations for a trip. It is explained to Tom that the banks and large companies closed out all the small farmers, and now most of them are heading to California where there is supposed to be work. They sell all of their belongings, but get only eighteen dollars for them. Casy joins them, because he has to be where the people are. When they are about ready to leave, Grampa Joad doesn't want to leave. They have to dope him in order to get him away. When they stop on the first night of the journey west, Grampa has a stroke and dies immediately. The Joads, who have stopped next to some more migrants, the Wilsons, borrow a quilt from the Wilsons and bury Grampa. They then fix the Wilson's broken-down car, and the two families begin the trip together. Just as they reach California, Mrs. Wilson becomes so sick that she can't go any further, and the Joads give them some money and food and leave them.

During the entire trip, Granma Joad has been getting sicker and sicker. As they begin the trip across the great desert at night, Ma Joad realizes that Granma is dying. She explains to the old woman that the family must get across the desert because they are about out of money. Granma dies early in the night. When a guard

stops them, Ma Joad tells the guard that they must get to a doctor because Granma is sick. The guard looks and lets them pass. Ma tells the family to drive on, and in the morning when they are safely across, she tells the family that Granma is dead. They have to leave her to be buried a pauper because they don't have enough money for a funeral.

They arrive in a place where many other migrants are camping. Even though it is filthy and disorderly, they stop. But the men are unable to find work. A contractor comes through looking for workers, and when a friend of Tom's asks what they are paying, the friend is accused of being a "red" and is arrested. A fight ensues, and the sheriff tells the people that the whole camp will be burned. The Joads pack up and leave. They find a vacancy in a government camp which is protected from the sheriff. Here there is law and order, but the Joads are still unable to find work. Soon they are out of money and food and must move on in search of work.

They hear of work in a peach orchard. When they arrive, they are escorted into the camp by policemen. There are many men standing outside the camp, some yelling and waving. The Joads begin picking peaches immediately so they can have something to eat that night. Later Tom slips outside to investigate the situation involving the yelling men. He finds his friend, Jim Casy, who has been in prison, and Casy tells Tom that they are striking against the owners of the orchard who cut the wages in half. While they are talking, some men come looking for Casy who is apparently the leader of the strike. The men advance on Casy and immediately kill him. Tom becomes infuriated and kills one of the men. He flees and gets back to the camp, but has to hide because his nose is broken. The Joads' wages are cut in half the next day because the strike is broken. They leave and find a place where they can pick cotton and where Tom can hide in a nearby thicket.

One of the Joad children gets into a fight and threatens to call her brother Tom, bragging that he has killed a man. Ma hears about the child's threat and goes to Tom and tells him that he must leave. Tom is going to carry on with the work that Casy was doing, and he takes a little money from Ma Joad and leaves.

As soon as the cotton picking is over, the rains set in. Just as the Joads are thinking about leaving, Rose of Sharon, the daughter, goes into labor pains. Pa and some other men try to build an embankment to keep out the rising water. But the embankment collapses. The baby is born, but it is dead. The water continues to rise, and comes into the boxcar where they are living. Pa Joad builds a platform inside the boxcar where they stay for two more days.

As soon as the rains slacken a little, Ma Joad says that the family must find some drier place. Carrying the children on their backs, they wade through the water until they come to the highway. Down the road they find a barn with some dry hay. They also discover a man dying from starvation. The man's son tells them that his father hasn't eaten for six days. The Joads have no money and no food. Ma suggests to Rose of Sharon that she feed the dying man from her breast which Rose of Sharon gladly does.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Note: for a fuller discussion of the main characters, see the section at the end on *Character Analysis*.

PA JOAD

A tenant farmer who has just lost his farm as a result of the Oklahoma dust destroying the crops. He is taking his family to California where he hopes to get work.

MA JOAD

The strong, determined wife and mother who is the guiding or controlling member of the family. She holds the family together.

GRAMPA AND GRANMA

The grandparents who originally settled the ~~forty~~ ^{forty} acres which Pa Joad has just lost.

NOAH JOAD

The oldest son who was somewhat injured at birth when Pa Joad had to perform the delivery. He moves rather slowly and quietly.

TOM JOAD

The second son who killed a man four years ago in a fight and who has been paroled after four years in the state prison.

ROSE OF SHARON

The daughter who is married to Connie. She is expecting a baby and dreams of a nice place to live in California.

AL JOAD

The sixteen-year old son who is interested only in cars and girls.

CONNIE

Rose of Sharon's husband who deserts her after they reach California.

RUTHIE and WINFIELD JOAD

Ruthie and Winfield are the two youngest. Ruthie is just twelve and Winfield is ten.

JIM CASY

Casy was once a preacher, but has decided to give it up because he has found that everything is holy, and man needs no preacher to say this. He goes along with the Joads to California.

IVY and SARAH (SAIRY) WILSON

A couple that the Joads meet when they first begin their journey West. The Joads fix the Wilson's car and help them across the country.

MR. and MRS. WAINWRIGHT

The family who live in the opposite end of the boxcar during the last part of the novel.

AGNES WAINWRIGHT

Their young daughter who becomes engaged to Al Joad.

MULEY GRAVES

A neighbor to the Joads who refuses to leave his land after he lost it and who is living wild and sneaky like some animal.

EZRA HUSTON

Chairman of the central committee in the government camp in California.

WILLIE EATON

The man in charge of the entertainment committee and who directs the actions against the rioters.

JULE VITELA

A half-breed Indian, whom Tom meets at the government camp.

CHAPTER I*Summary*

In the red and gray country of Oklahoma, the last of the rain came in early May. Even that was only enough to cause small droplets to appear. Then the weeds began to turn color to guard against the onslaught of the sun. The corn began to fade and dry up. When June was half gone, a few drops of rain fell, but it only made the dust on the corn seem freckled. Soon it became necessary to tie handkerchiefs over one's nose for protection against the dust. At night the dust failed to settle so that the stars could not pierce the dust. Little lines of dust crept into the houses even though they were all padded.

The men just stood and looked at the ruined corn. The women would come out and look at the men to see if they would break. The "women and children knew deep in themselves that no misfortune was too great to bear if their men were whole."

Commentary

The first chapter, short as it is, presents the essential background situation which will cause the great migration toward California. Here we see the land being turned into a dust bowl, the crops being ruined, and the men idle.

Chapters of general importance will be interspersed throughout the novel. Generally, Steinbeck will have a chapter of narration

followed by a chapter of indirect comment or a general situation which suggests something about the personal tragedy of the main characters. These inserted chapters are called intercalary chapters.

The idleness of the men suggested at the end of the chapter and the way in which the women watch their men will be one of the central motifs throughout the novel. The women can keep going as long as their men don't give up. Thus later, Ma Joad will intentionally goad her husband in order to test him, in order to see if he has given up.

CHAPTER II

Summary

A man walking along the highway crossed over to a roadside cafe where a huge transport truck was parked. He noticed the "No Riders" sign on the truck, but he sat down on the running board and waited anyway. He was dressed in a cheap new suit of clothes and new shoes. While waiting, he unlaced his new shoes. Inside the restaurant, he could hear music blaring from a machine. Soon, the truck driver came out and the man asked him for a ride. The driver pointed to the "No Riders" sign, but the man said that some drivers will be a "good guy even if some rich bastard makes him carry a sticker." The driver thought a minute and told the man to hide until they came around the corner and then he could climb in.

When they were down the road, the driver started talking at random about a number of things. He began to ask the man all kinds of questions. When the man tells him that he is returning to his "old man's" forty acre place, the driver is surprised that someone with only forty acres still has a place which hasn't been taken over by a "cat." The man explains that he has been away for four years, and then gets rather angry at all the questioning and tells the driver his name is Tom Joad. The driver tries to explain that he gets lonesome driving all day and didn't mean any offense by the questions, but he just feels the need to talk. He talks some more and tells how he is planning on studying fingerprints. Then Tom accuses the driver of trying to snoop into everyone's business, and Tom

confesses that he has been to McAlester, the state prison, for four years. He was convicted of manslaughter and sentenced for seven years, but he got out early for good behavior. By this time, Tom is at the road leading to the farm.

Commentary

While there are many symbolic passages and events in this novel, the central emphasis is on plot and the development of the central situation. It will be through a dramatic telling of the struggles of the Joad family that the central meaning of the novel will be revealed. Therefore, the plot summary and the situation developing in the story line carry the burden of the meaning of this great novel. This chapter begins to set up certain elements of the central story. Tom, who has been in prison, will become a mainstay of the family, but because of his record, he will also become somewhat of a burden. That is, he will not be free to act as he would like.

One of the central motifs is suggested by the sign on the truck. The "No Riders" sign implies for Tom that the "rich bastards" are the opposite of the good guy—that the rich are out to destroy the poor. This begins to set the tone for the episodes with the land owners both in California and now in Oklahoma.

The driver's surprise that Tom's family still has a farm presents in advance the essential predicament. Actually Tom's family has already been shoved out by one of the big cats (machines which were used in farming that were big enough to knock down one of the small houses found on the tenant farms). The episode with the truck driver is often carried over into the bulk of the novel. As the Joads travel along, they will often run into scenes involving truck drivers and stop-over restaurants. Ma Joad says at the end, when a poor person wants something, he had best go for help to one of his own kind. Thus it was that Tom was even able to get a ride with the truck driver in the first place.

CHAPTER III

Summary

The concrete highway lay amid a mat of dried grass. A few grasshoppers were to be seen. A land turtle approached the highway

and slowly and laboriously climbed the embankment. After many frantic efforts, he finally reaches the top and slowly begins the long and arduous crossing. A car driven by a forty-year old woman passed by. She swerved to miss the turtle. A few minutes later, a light truck came down the road driven by a young man. He swerved to hit it. He clipped the edge of the shell and flipped the turtle off the highway. It landed on its back, and had to struggle for some time before it could turn itself back over. Then it slowly proceeded on its way.

Commentary

Often in Steinbeck's writing, there is an implication that man is a victim of a hostile universe, that he has little or no control over his destiny. Thus the presentation of the slow moving turtle trying to fulfill his destination, and being hindered by ants, hills, oat seeds under his shell, and finally, by the dangerous traffic offers a rather bitter analogy to the predicament of man. And throughout the novel, the Joad family meets with such hardships, but as the turtle refused to be swayed from his purpose, so the Joads will continue to struggle with great fortitude.

Passages such as these attest to Steinbeck's greatness as a realistic and symbolic writer. Steinbeck bases his presentation on a highly realistic rendition of facts. The description of the turtle is accurate in the finest degree. Yet in the very realism of the description, we have suggested the realistic view of this hostile world.

CHAPTER IV

Summary

Tom watches the truck drive off and then turns toward home. He notices the thickness of the dust. Close by is a land turtle. He picks it up and plans to take it to one of the kids. As he walks along, he notices a person sitting under a tree. Tom approaches and speaks. The man recognizes Tom as Old Tom Joad's son. He explains that he is the preacher who baptized Tom, but says that Tom was too busy pulling some girl's pigtails to be bothered with baptism. He is the Reverend Jim Casy, but he is no longer a preacher. He