



## STEINBECK WITH HIS NOVEL *THE GRAPES OF WRATH*: A CRITICAL OUTLOOK

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### ABSTRACT



Every age has its representative writer, whose career follows its major interests, whose voice is its voice. In him we can see the moods, if not the actual events of his time, most clearly reflected and its strongest drives most forcefully crystallized. The two basic impulses of the 1930s towards escape and toward social consciousness found their sharpest expression in the writing of John Steinbeck, whose work represents more faithfully than any of his contemporaries the temperament of an angry decade. The greatest literary event of the year 1939 was the publication of his classic novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. The present article is a critical analysis of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*

**Keywords:** *Inhumanity, Labouring Class, Communism, Agricultural Depression.*

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John Steinbeck is one of the few American writers who can be discussed in relation to the past as well as the present. He might have been the last writer of a generation for whom being an American seemed in itself a special thing and being an American an extraordinary thing. He is generally regarded as the most versatile of contemporary American fictional artists. "An American writer who

had appeared with a sure and subtle sense for literary effect, a story-teller worthy to be compared to Chekov or Anatole France for his skill in shaping up the stuff of human lives in forms that delight the mind and imagination", (1957: 80) and that was John Steinbeck, as Joseph Warren Beach rightly put it.

Steinbeck with his novel *The Grapes of Wrath* at once joined the company of Hawthorne,



Melville, Stephen Crane, and Norris and easily leapt to the forefront of all his contemporaries. "Steinbeck is now a better novelist than Hemingway, Farrell or Dos Passos, he does not invoke comparisons, he simply makes one feel that Steinbeck is, in some way all his own, a force", as Louis Kronen Berger would consider (1939: 440-41).

The greatest literary event of the year 1939 was the publication of his classic novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. It won the Pulitzer Prize of the year and also brought him the Nobel Prize for literature in 1962. Steinbeck has written nothing else so successful as this. Few writers however, have written one such work, one that marks not only the high point of its author's career but the close of an era in American history and literature. Before the Nobel Prize in literature was awarded to John Steinbeck only five Americans had been previously thus honoured, Ernest Hemingway in 1954 and William Faulkner in 1949. Steinbeck had been considered on those occasions and also in 1945 when the Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral was selected.

As the honour is by far the greatest any writer can receive, Steinbeck was elated. The feeling of elation was tempered slightly, however by the observation expressed by Steinbeck in 1956, that recipients of the Nobel Prize seldom write anything of value afterwards. He cited Hemingway and Faulkner as examples, minimizing the point that by the time of their selection most writers had already written their best work. Sixty himself on that occasion, Steinbeck wrote to a friend that he would not have accepted the award had he not believed that he would continue to write well that, "he could beat the rap". It made Steinbeck stand among the great American writers like Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson, Mark Twain, William Faulkner, T.S. Eliot, Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway and Toni Morrison.

The desert seemed to be spreading into the plains. Topsoil was blowing in tremendous quantities. At intervals there were winds of high velocity with spiraling masses of powdery dust. As the time went on the dust, which was cause in the beginning, was blown again and again and become exceedingly fine. In addition to their serious damage to the soil dust storms brought tragedy and loss to

human beings; they killed livestock, made highways impossible, ruined motors, damaged the contents of stores, factories, and homes; buried orchards and fields and disrupted commercial production. Dust storms still continued in 1939, but the "dust bowl" had shrunk to about one-fifth of its original size, from fifty million acres at its worst to about ten million acres. There was a national deficiency of rainfall in 1939 which temporarily revived the dust storms, but more rain came in succeeding years and the plains had returned nearly to normal in time to meet the demands of the nation in World War II.

If a reader expects the writer who exposes the evils of contemporary society to be able to say with Walt Whitman, "I am the man, I suffer'd, I was there," John Steinbeck could claim such direct acquaintance with the plight of the Okies. The publication in 1936 of *In Dubious Battle* had established him as the literary voice of the California migrants as well as the gadfly of the deligent American conscience.

In autumn of 1937, Steinbeck followed the trail of the migrants from Oklahoma to California, and lived with them in the roadside camps. On the basis of this experience, he wrote an epilogue to his 1936 newspaper reports, bringing them up to date, and they were published in 1938 as an illustrated pamphlet entitled *Their Blood Is Strong*. Readers of *The Grapes of Wrath* will recognize in the reports collected in *Their Blood is Strong* many details which Steinbeck subsequently put to artistic use. Not only does the pamphlet serve as an illustration of Steinbeck's ideas, it offers evidence, by contrast, that the novel is art rather than programme. The two works differ, however, in their treatment of the material, in their tone; one can see that the changes were dictated by Steinbeck's effort to make the novel something more than a tract about an immediate situation. He was, in fact, trying to present an enduring and crucial problem in human relations that stemmed essentially from "man's inhumanity to man".

In his attempt to "write history while it is happening", Steinbeck brilliantly documents the suffering of a people in flight, the tragic loss of homeland and the discovery that in the land of plenty there isn't enough to go around. Simultaneously *The*



*Grapes of Wrath* offers an education in the dynamics of the labouring class. *The Grapes of Wrath* demonstrates how labour organizations, or unions grow from the desperation of the workers, how capitalism is inherent in the quest for profit that keeps the machinery going and it oppresses and even destroys the labourer. The novel serves as a powerful reminder of the struggle to organize the working class during the twenties and thirties as a well as reminder of the wide-spread fears of Communism that lasted through the McCarthy era of fifties.

In American literature only one novel had previously brought together the political, sociological, and aesthetic powers, Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. With its searching indictment of the south and of the institution of slavery, it struck the human conscience with its unequalled brilliance and its use of the vernacular.

Novels that have become classics do more than tell a story and describe characters, they offer insight into men's motives and point to the springs of action. Together with the moving picture, they offer a criticism of life.

Although this theory of art may seem classical, all important modern novels, especially American novels have clearly suggested an abstract idea of life. *The Scarlet Letter* symbolized 'sin', *Moby Dick* offered an 'allegory of evil', *Huckleberry Finn* described the revolt of the "natural individual" against "civilization" and *Babbitt* (like Emerson's "Self Reliance") denounced the narrow convention of "society". *The Grapes of Wrath* goes beyond these to preach a positive philosophy of life and to damn that blind conservatism which fears ideas. *The Grapes of Wrath* is a shrewd novel, a lively pattern of experience, varied and skillful in texture.

*The Grapes of Wrath*, as Warren French has noted (1982-49) stands apart, the novel has having no quarrel with the past, no especially innovative or experimental form, no obsession with multiplicity or ambiguity and no fear of sentiment. Steinbeck wrote a realistic novel that mimics life and offers social comments on real life in Midwest American in the 1930s. But it also offers a social comment, directly in the intercalary chapters and indirectly in the places and people it portrays. Typical of very many, the Joads are driven off the land by far

away banks; they set out on a journey to California to find a better life.

However the journey breaks up the family, their dreams are not realized and their fortunes disappear. What promised to be the land of milk and honey turns to sour grapes. In the same way, the hopes and dreams of a generation turn to wrath. Steinbeck did see this mess come together, and the public did put it to the side. Steinbeck places *The Grapes of Wrath* out there to the public to really prove what was happening in this world. By catching the people's attention he could tell the people what he thought of the situation. *The Grapes of Wrath* is a novel about the agricultural Depression of the 1930s, and that memory of the folly and failure of man, the dustbowl. Yet it is a novel not about conditions, but about people, the common people of the Howells even though Howells would have been shocked at the novel itself. Steinbeck's despair and imagination are too great for a Howells, and his characters far from the familiar society of a Howell – like Anderson and Faulkner, in contrast to Howells, he even questions the assumption of free will in the individual. This novel, unlike most of the novels of the previous century, is as much about a few central people. John Chamberlain, in *Harper's Magazine* (1963:109) found it "a wise and tender and moving book as well as a social document of the first order". Charles Angoff, writing in the dying *North American Review* (1936-110) observed that, "The book has all the ear marks of something momentous monumental and memorable. Peter Monroe Jack, writing in *The New York Times Book Review* (1963:110) said that "the real truth is that Steinbeck has written a novel from the depths of his heart with a sincerity seldom equalled".

In the *Literary History of the United States* (1948), Maxwell Geismar, spoke of *The Grapes of Wrath*, "recalling as it did the historical meaning of the frontier in terms of social crisis," as "a big and life-giving book" (1963:194). Malcolm Cowley, declaring fervently that "A whole literature is summarized in this book and much of it is carried to a new level of excellence", went on to state that "in the Joad family, every one from Granpa down to the two brats, Ruthie and Winfield, is a distinct and living person" (1963:193). Joseph Warren Beach declared



in 1941 that *The Grapes of Wrath* is “probably the finest example produced in the United States of what in the thirties was called the proletarian novel” (1963:192).

*The Grapes of Wrath* was first announced in *Publisher's Weekly* on December 31, 1938. Three advanced printings occurred before the novel actually appeared in March. By April it was selling 2,500 copies a day, by May it reached the top of the best-sellers list. Viking shipped out 430,000 copies by the end of the year.

In his Biography of Steinbeck, Brain St. Pierre notes of *The Grapes of Wrath* that “In 1982, *The New York Times* reported that it was the second best-selling novel ever in paperback in American, with 14,600,000 copies printed”. Feeling ran highest in Oklahoma and California; writing in 1944 Martin Shockley reported that *The Grapes of Wrath* sold sensationally in Oklahoma bookstores.

The three phases of response, each of about fifteen years, can be roughly characterized as the Histrionic, the Formal and the Contextual. In the first, the novel is subjected to a correspondence theory of truth that measures it against some putative social reality and the commentator against his or her political credentials. In the second, the novel provokes attention as a work of art that fulfills literary conventions and expectation. In the third, the novel is framed by its biographical and regional fields of force.

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