

## *The Grapes of Wrath* Notes

### The Title

The title is taken from a line in “The Battle Hymn of the Republic”: “He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored.” Steinbeck said he chose it because “I like the soft with the hard and the marching content and the American revolutionary content.” The line has Biblical antecedent: “And the angel thrust his sickle into the earth, and gathered the vine of the earth, and cast it into the great winepress of the wrath of God” (Revelations 14:19).

“Their grapes are grapes of gall, their clusters are bitter. Their wine is the poisons of serpents” (Deuteronomy 32:32). Note also Number 13:23.

*The Grapes of Wrath*: “In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage.” (Find page in novel) Suggestion: Share lyrics of “Battle Hymn” and Biblical Account of Children of Israel (see Exodus).

### The Writing of the Book

In October 1937, Steinbeck wrote for a San Francisco paper seven articles called *The Harvest Gypsies*. In 1937 he drove to Oklahoma where he joined a group of migrant laborers and traveled to California with them. He lived in one of the federal migrant camps in central California and while there wrote to a friend: “I have to write this sitting in a ditch. I’m out working – may go south to pick a little cotton. Migrants are going south now and I’ll probably go along.” That fall Hollywood paid him \$1000 a week for six weeks to write the movie script of *Of Mice and Men*, and he gave \$2.00 to each of 3000 migrants. In 1938 he interrupted the writing of the book, telling his publisher, “I must go over to the interior valleys. There are 5,000 families starving to death over there, not just hungry, but actually starving. . . In one tent there are twenty people quarantined for smallpox and two of the women are to have babies in that tent this week . . . Funny how mean and how little books become in the face of such tragedies.”

### The Reception of the Book

An Oklahoma congressman called it “a black, infernal creation of a twisted, distorted mind.” It was banned and burned on both political and pornographic grounds from New York to California. (Why “political and pornographic,” do you think?) Archbishop Spellman (later Cardinal) denounced it in all Hearst papers (Hearst was the prototype of the Californian with 50,000 acres, page 183). But Darryl Zanuck, producer of the movie made from the book, sent private detectives to test the book’s accuracy and found conditions even worse than described by Steinbeck. It became a best seller, exceeding *Gone With the Wind* in sales.

## ***End Group 1***

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### Sources of Steinbeck’s Social Philosophy

1. Emerson’s faith in the common man, the transcendental oversoul, and Protestant self-reliance (Thoreau in *Walden*)

2. Whitman's religion of the love of all men and his mass democracy
3. The realistic philosophy of pragmatism and its emphasis on effective action (as exemplified by Jim Casy).
4. The agrarianism of Jefferson; the dust in Chapter One represents the human erosion that results when man, whether tenant or land owner, is separated from the land.

These ideas and materials come from the CONTENT of the novel. To the extent that Steinbeck succeeded in giving them artistic form, he will have succeeded in producing a work of major literature.

## ***End Group 2***

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### THE FORM OF GRAPES OF WRATH

#### 1. Structure

Steinbeck's content concerns the adventures of the Joad family and the Great Depression. These two blocks of material are interwoven in the plot development, but there was enough material left over to write separate, philosophic interchapters. This device is in the tradition of Fielding in *Tom Jones* and of Tolstoy in *War and Peace*.

#### 2. Plot Chapters

The plot chapters force us to visualize the problems of individuals, rather than groups of statistics. The intercalary chapters, by generalizing, deny in advance the charge that the loads were an exception or unique. They provide the physical (drought), social (migrant life), and economic (car sales, banks vs. farmers) background, as well as historical information.

There is a general correspondence between the material of the intercalary chapter and the succeeding narrative chapter. Specific details are intricately interwoven: a corner is knocked off an anonymous home and also of the Joad house, the generalized dialogue between banks and tenants is particularized in Muley's distinctive idiom:

"Well, I says, whose fault is it? I'll go an' nut the Fella." These specific cross-references amplify the loads' typical actions to the dimensions of a communal experience.

Often, the interlocking details become symbolic: dust, turtle and red ant, grapes, commercial foods contrasted to fried dough.

The intercalary chapters are further incorporated by the use of the techniques of fiction; forces such as the banks and tenant groups are dramatized and engage in dialogue. They function like the chorus in a Greek tragedy.

The novel may be termed an EPIC because the structure of the intercalary chapters develops the story of the Joad family from a personal one to a generalized and universal story of national significance.

### 3. The Pattern

In pattern the novel is circular. The rain in the last interchapter parallels the drought of the first chapter (the last chapter of each: “the women studied the men’s faces secretly”). The last chapter re-enacts the whole drama of the Joad’s journey in one uninterrupted continuity of suspense.

The plot of the novel develops two opposite themes:

The negative one tells of the increasingly desperate plight of the Joad family and the disintegration of their family unity. The few material assets they began with are gone: \$154 spent, pork eaten, their truck, tarpaulin and mattresses flooded. The grandparents and Casy are dead, Tom is a fugitive, Noah has stayed at Needles, and Al is with the Wainwrights, leaving Pa and Ma with Uncle John, Rose of Sharon, and the two young children.

The positive theme tells of the sense of unity and community that develops: (Chapter 14) “The baby has a cold. Here, take this blanket. It’s wool. It was my mother’s blanket - take it for the baby. This is the thing to bomb. This is the beginning from T to ‘We.’” Casy expresses this idea in Chapter 4: “Maybe it’s all men an’ all women we love; maybe that’s the Holy Spirit...” The plot enables Casy to practice his new belief and his life amid death convert Tom, Ma and Rose of Sharon. The last scene in the book brings complete destitution of the family. Rose of Sharon, in offering her breast to the old man, expresses their new belief in the unity of all men. This symbolic climax allowed Steinbeck to avoid a “deus ex machine” ending (a phony, happy ending); a summing-up moral ending; or an ending, describing further disasters coming to the hard-pressed family.

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### 4. Religious Symbolisms:

Religious symbolism undergirds both themes: the journey to California parallels the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt to Canaan, and near the end of the novel Uncle John sets Rosasharn’s stillborn baby in an old apple crate and floats it toward the town saying, “Go down an’ tell ‘em”\_ (Moses in the basket). Grapes have the symbolic meaning of the title, but they are also a symbol for plenty, as when Grampa talks of “a whole big bunch of grapes off a bush, or whatever, an I’m gonna squash ‘em on my face an’ let ‘em run offen my chin.” In Numbers 12:23, Joshua and Oshea bring back from the excursion into Canaan a bunch of grapes so big that “they bear it between two on a staff.” Rose of Sharon’s name comes from “Song of Solomon,” which is considered to be an allegory on the coming of Christ: I (Christ) am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the Valleys.” Her giving of life to the old man recalls Song of Solomon 7:7: “This thy stature is like to a palm tree and thy breasts to clusters of grapes,” and “Take, eat, this is my body.” Jim Casy’s initials are another symbol.

### Structural Divisions

Irony intensifies the impact. The verbal irony of the words, “Okies,” “Hooverville,” and “Weedpatch” is also found in such comments as “Christ, I could git enough potatoes off’n that little patch to feed my whole family! It ain’t our’n. It got to have Jimson weeds.” The plot of the story develops from irony of situation; the displaced tenants love the land that the new owners

only exploit. The final part of the book is tragically ironic. Beautiful California is a place of suffering and starvation for thousands, starving children smell the rotting fruit, the forces of law bring violence and terror. “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.” **STUDY THESE THREE SENTENCES FOR STYLE** - the inter-weaving of irony, symbol, animal imagery and the cumulative rhythm with the beginning “ands,” the simple parallel, balanced phrases.

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### 5. Style

Steinbeck welds a specific style to each level of meaning in his novel. When he describes the universal conditions that affect all migrants, and that gives the book the scope of an epic, his style is indebted to the Old Testament. Consider this passage arranged according to phrases, punctuation intact.

The tractors had lights shining,  
For there is no day and night for a tractor  
And the disks turn the earth in the darkness  
And they glitter in the daylight.

And when a horse stops work and goes into the barn  
There is a life and a vitality left,  
There is a breathing and warmth,  
And the feet shift on the straw,  
And the jaws chomp on the hay,  
And the ears and the eyes are alive.  
There is a warmth of life in the barn,  
And the heat and smell of life.

But when the motor of a tractor stops,  
It is dead as the ore it came from.  
The heat goes out of it  
Like the living heat that leaves a corpse.

(Chapter 11)

Note: Use this passage in your presentation and demonstrate the following elements:

1. Cadences, parallel grammatical structure of parallel meaning
2. Simplicity of diction
3. Balance
4. Concrete details
5. Summary sentences
6. Reiterations (same idea expressed in slightly different form)
7. Organization: 4 phrases for tractor, 8 for the horse, 4 again for the tractor.

The Biblical resonance gives these passages dignity, power and authority. Steinbeck does not use this style on trivial or individualized passages.

His other prose styles are equally distinctive and functional: the short choppy, staccato sentences that describe the used cars, the photographic technique that describes the hamburger joints, the juxtaposition of the father's concern about the engine of his car and about his little boy ("Danny wants a cup of water"), the imitative harmony of the descriptions of music and dance ("The music snarled out 'Chicken Reel' shrill and clear, fiddle skirling harmonicas nasal and sharp, and the guitars booming on the bass strings . . ."), the careful working out of the details of the drought and the flood in Chapters one and twenty-nine. Influences on his style other than the Bible are probably Whitman, Hemingway, Sandburg, and folk idiom.

#### 6. Point of View

Steinbeck writes from the objective point of view in the plot chapters. Because his principal concern is theme rather than plot or characterization, both of these elements are important as they develop theme, and not for their own value. The objective viewpoint is probably the most effective and convincing for his purposes. Perrine indicates that it is also very demanding of the author, with its heavy reliance on dialogue and external action and its avoidance of comment, explanation, interpretation and the inner thoughts of the characters.

The use of the objective point of view also avoids sentimentalizing as the emotional impact comes from indirect presentation or the dramatization of emotion. Steinbeck shows us the condition; he does not talk about it.

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