

The Grapes of Wrath: A Literary Journey

One afternoon in the 1940s, my dad--who worked in the oil fields--stopped at the market in Edison to pick up groceries. A few men with bedrolls squatted near the door of the store, and one of them stood and approached my father. They spoke briefly, then my dad entered the building. He emerged a few minutes later with two bags of groceries, one of which he handed to the man with whom he'd spoken. They shook hands.

When I asked my father who those guys were, he said simply, "Working men out of work."

Those of us who grew up in working-class families here in the 1930s and '40s, especially agricultural families, could not fail to observe the persistence of poverty. As a kid, I saw the remnants of a Hooverville--a migrant camp--near the Kern River Bridge every time we crossed it--people living in tents or cars or other temporary shelters.

I had long noted those things, so it never occurred to me to ask why, but John Steinbeck did ask. He wondered how the Jeffersonian ideal of an aristocracy of worth rather than an aristocracy of birth had become so befouled that those born into poverty, no matter how gifted, had virtually no opportunity to rise in our society. He considered it a perversion of the Founders' intent.

As a result, in The Grapes of Wrath he wrote about that question not only with great literary skill but with considerable outrage. I was one of those youngsters who saw the movie before he read the book, and who'd heard--strange as it now seems, that there was a book based on the movie. Both movie and book originally went a bit over my head. They jibed with some of my own observations, though, so the story seemed to me then to be a relatively objective description of a terrible time. Only when I'd read it second then a third time did I get past the obvious to the deep theme of the novel.

When the book was published in 1939, some critics and more than a few naive readers had accepted it as history with which they agreed or disagreed. The actual history books that deal with the Depression migration--James Gregory's American Exodus, Walter Stein's California and the Dust Bowl Migration or Paul Bloomfield's The Dust Bowl, for instance--came much later when there had been time to understand perspectives. Those studies reveal that Steinbeck's novel is remarkably true to the temper of the time. Fiction's great power is extrapolative, and Steinbeck's novel actually made a large segment of the population more aware of the problems represented by the collapsing economy and the migrants in the 1930s.

But The Grapes of Wrath was never intended as a documentary listing of events and personalities. It certainly was intended as, among other things, an expression of outrage. Contemporary readers have to get past points of difference between historical events and the novel to understand it: for example, unlike the Joad family who are the center of the novel's narrative, most Depression migrants were urban not rural. Very few of them were lured by handbills. The vast majority knew nothing of Woody Guthrie. The migration came in waves not a steady stream, and it culminated in the 1940s. Moreover, Steinbeck's famous suggestion that there are five layers of meaning in the book is not to be taken literally but is instead an admonition to read deeply.

Both fiction and non-fiction, if honestly produced, are about truth, which can be elusive. History books are not always accurate because they are limited not to facts but to the selection of facts, a subtle but significant difference that leads to the study of historiography, the inquiry into how history is written. Thus Gregory, Stein and Bloomfield's books differ from one another in subtle but significant ways, leaving a final summation of truth up to readers.

Those three historians understood that "common knowledge" is not necessarily common or accurate. Look, for example, at the widespread use of the terms like the "Dust Bowler" and "Dust Bowl Migration." Historian Gregory asserts that "barely 6 percent of the total [migrants] from the Southwestern states" was from the actual Dust Bowl. Gregory explains that journalists "created the dramatic but misleading association between the Dust Bowl and Southwestern migrants." The actual Dust Bowl was a limited but blighted area including parts of Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, Kansas and Oklahoma, so it's likely only a few of us are really "Dust Bowlers," although we might well be "Okies" or "Arkies" or "Texies"--other terms of the time.

Fiction writing operates under a different set of rules than writing history. Skillful omission is one of a fiction author's techniques. Tell readers the least that will stimulate to become involved in the creative act, for the more they are involved, the more powerful will be their reading experience. That, in turn should enhance their knowledge of and concern for the characters and events of the story.

Each author has his/her own way of doing this. Steinbeck in this novel uses a journey as the spine of his tale, a classic approach. On one level, the Joad's truck may be seen as a *narrenchiff*--a ship of fools--because the characters have no idea what they're getting into. Steinbeck also indulged his propensity to start tales with descriptions of landscapes or settings: "To the red country and part of the gray country of Oklahoma, the last rains came gently, and they did not cut the scarred earth. The plows crossed and recrossed the rivulet marks. The last rains lifted the corn quickly and scattered weed colonies and grass along the sides of the roads so that the gray country and the dark red country began to disappear under a green cover...." If he is successful, readers will build an image of the landscape he describes, "seeing" it through the lenses of their imaginations. They might do the same thing with the characters: Ma Joad or Jim Casy or Tom Joad, and perhaps discover they don't necessarily resemble movie actors Jane Darwell or John Carradine or Henry Fonda.

Also in the first chapter of The Grapes of Wrath, dust is mentioned twenty- seven times, so Steinbeck was writing a story in which setting and conditions--the Dust Bowl and later the San Joaquin Valley-- would be as important as the characters. This is a feature of much of Steinbeck's fiction; look, for example, at his openings of such important other work as Cannery Row, "The Chrysanthemums" or Of Mice and Men.

Chapter two of The Grapes of Wrath introduces readers to Tom Joad, who like so many of the characters is complex, a mixture of positive and negative traits, rather than a contrived hero. His reluctantly growing awareness will illuminate the awareness of readers. Then the next chapter veers from the human characters to present a turtle that evokes an allegory of the determined Joads' journey. That is the first of sixteen intercalary chapters in which none of the human characters appear. In fact, the Joads appear directly in less than half the chapters.

Steinbeck used those interchapters to offer perspectives and extrapolation--historical, philosophical, and social--as he wove them amidst his narrative of the Joad family's experiences, establishing a conceptual rhythm. He also produced stories within stories that freshened reader interest. Why did he choose that technique? He explained in the preface to The Forgotten Village: "It means very little to know that a million Chinese are starving unless you know one Chinese who is starving." In the Joads we meet a singular family that personalizes our experience of a larger dilemma. They are unique, yet symbolically representative.

Not until chapter eight do we meet the novel's strongest figure, Ma Joad, the family's core. "Her hazel eyes seemed to have mounted pain and suffering like steps into a high calm and superhuman understanding. She seemed to know, to accept, to welcome her position, the citadel

that could not be taken."

This is a finely crafted novel, and some critics expressed surprise that a writer without a college degree could produce so nuanced a story. Steinbeck was, in fact, a deep reader who as a student at Stanford had created his own creative-writing program, making no effort to earn a degree but taking the courses that he thought would expand his perspectives, and hone his craft, while studying with one of the great writing teachers of the time, Edith Mirrelles.

The 1930s were a magical literary decade for him. He entered them as the young author of one unsuccessful novel (Cup of Gold) and departed them as a major novelist with a string of successes that may constitute the finest decade ever enjoyed by an American: The Pastures of Heaven (1932), To a God Unknown (1933), The Red Pony (1933), Tortilla Flat (1935), In Dubious Battle (1936), Of Mice and Men (1937), The Long Valley (1938), and finally at decade's end The Grapes of Wrath.

Part of the reason for his extraordinary rise to the top of American letters was of course his God-given talent. He also had a strong work ethic and high energy, which led to a steady improvement of technique as well as great productivity. Another characteristic was his willingness to try new approaches and styles; Tortilla Flat, In Dubious Battle, and Of Mice and Men were about as stylistically different as any three novels by one author in that decade. Certainly, his marriage to Carol Henning was a major factor, too. She was his editor, his goad, his confrere, and his inspiration throughout the 1930s. In my judgment, he never wrote another great novel after their marriage fell apart, though he wrote some good ones.

Most of all, though, Steinbeck in the 1930s was very much a man engaged: he did not avoid the controversial issues of his day. For instance, after completing a second draft of Of Mice and Men in 1936, at a time when most urban Californians were unaware of, or perhaps avoiding knowledge of, the poverty-stricken masses crowding into the state's agricultural valleys, Steinbeck accepted an assignment from the San Francisco News to write a series of articles about the plight of migrants.

His earlier strike novel, In Dubious Battle, had shocked many readers, most of whom had known him only from the lighthearted Tortilla Flat. It also outraged both communists and unionists because of the author's rigorous objectivity. He wasn't anyone's spokesman.

The author threw himself into the San Francisco News assignment, buying an old bakery truck, which he called his "pie wagon," and outfitting it with blankets, food, and cooking utensils. He then drove into the San Joaquin Valley with Eric Thomsen of the Resettlement Administration to investigate ditch-bank settlements and squatters' camps. On that trip, Steinbeck met the single most important influence on The Grapes of Wrath, Tom Collins, the director of the Farm Security Administration's Weedpatch Demonstration Camp, who tutored the novelist on the harsh realities of migrant life.

Biographer Jackson Benson suggests that "...both Collins and Steinbeck had an idealized view of the common man and attributed somewhat more dignity, wisdom, and courage to the migrants than they...probably possessed." Some of Steinbeck's characters and expressions would come directly out of Collins' notes. Like most writers, Steinbeck was not only a keen observer but also a promiscuous borrower.

More importantly, he wasn't naive; he had been raised in Salinas, an agricultural community, and he had seen plenty of migrant workers. He knew the conditions in which they tended to live, but the malnutrition, the lack of sanitation and, most of all, the hopelessness of the camps, stunned him. Conditions were far worse than he'd expected. As biographer Benson writes, "...he couldn't get them out of his mind."

The articles that Steinbeck published in the News after the trip were originally collected as "Their Blood is Strong," and they remain masterpieces of advocacy journalism. In one, for example, he wrote:

"The three year old child has a gunny sack tied about his middle for clothing. He has the swollen belly caused by malnutrition.

He sits on the ground in the sun in front of the house, and the little black fruit flies buzz in circles and land on his closed eyes and crawl up his nose until he weakly brushes them away.

They try to get at the mucous in the eye-corners. The child seems to have the reactions of a baby much younger. The first year he had a little milk, but he has had none since.

He will die in a very short time...."

That such scenes could be found in the richest agricultural region in the world, in what claimed to be the world's most democratic nation, seemed to him as obscene as it did paradoxical. "There is a crime here," he proclaimed, "that goes beyond denunciation... There is a sorrow here that weeping cannot symbolize. There is a failure here that topples all our success. The fertile earth, the straight tree rows, the sturdy trunks, and the ripe fruit. And children are dying of pellagra..."

While many other prominent Californians kept silent, he publicly declared it wrong under any circumstances in this nation that people willing to work should be abandoned and that their children should starve while others accumulated gluttonous wealth. His was not a popular stance among the interests that then controlled California.

Life magazine offered Steinbeck a handsome stipend to write a piece about the migrants, and he at first accepted, then but he refused: "I'm sorry," he wrote to them, "but I simply can't make money on these people....The suffering is too great for me to cash in on it." For a time, Steinbeck and photojournalist Horace Bristol worked on the images and text of a book about the migrants, but Steinbeck finally decided to concentrate on writing a novel, and backed out.

He knew that only fiction could capture the dimension of the problems he observed, and he wrote to his agents, "The subject is so large that it scares me." By June of 1938, he had drafted a 60,000-word manuscript of a novel he called La' Affair Lettuceberg, but he then rejected it, saying, "...this book is finished and it is a bad book and I must get rid of it...." He destroyed it and started again. His next try called The Oklahomans also failed in his eyes, and that manuscript too was destroyed.

He learned from those early attempts, and on his third try, explains another biographer Jay Parini: "Steinbeck had a vision of what he wanted to do: he would write a book on an epic scale that was politically engaged....He knew already that [the novel] would alternate chapters of exposition and narrative, following the trail of one particular family...." The novelist also recognized that nearly everyone--grower, migrant, townsfolk alike-- was trapped in the Great Depression.

Once he hit his rhythm on that third try, "work on the novel progressed with astonishing speed." As Fall of 1938 arrived, he was nearly done, and his wife, Carol, suggested a title taken from his own text via Julia Ward Howe's "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" via the biblical "Book of Revelations": "in the eyes of the hungry there is a growing wrath. In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy for the vintage."

By the time he had begun writing The Grapes of Wrath, Steinbeck was well versed in the use of literary gambits such as allusion, personification, simile, metaphor, analogy, and so on, but an

author creating a story works rather differently than a professor trying to explain an author's work. Steinbeck did not self-consciously employ those devices as he might have in some of his less-skilled, apprentice stories of the 1920s. Rather he allowed them to emerge as his sense of narrative flow required them. A small house "crushed like a bug"; cotton that "sucks all the blood out of" the land; a tractor driver who was "part of the monster, a robot in the seat"; and so on.

A classic admonition is that if you seek to become an author you must first be a reader. An indication of how well read Steinbeck was can be found in his use of biblical allusions in The Grapes of Wrath: among the more obvious, "The novel's three sections correspond to the oppression in Egypt, the Exodus, and the sojourn in the land of Canaan," Peter Lisca points out. The family name "Joad" and its members' hardships compare with those of Job. There are, moreover, 12 Joads just as there are 12 tribes of Israel; brother Noah is attracted to the water; Jim Casey (J.C.) becomes a version of the Savior and when he is killed his final words--"You fellas don't know what you're a-doin'"--paraphrase the words of Jesus, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do"; Tom Joad (doubting Thomas) becomes Casey's disciple. On a symbolic level, mechanization represented by tractors, seems to be the farmer's Moloch. Perhaps most important, Rose of Sharon, whose name appears in the Solomon's "Song of Songs," performs her saintly gesture at the novel's conclusion, showing we should all help one another. Some scholars even suggest "Biblical Inversion" in the novel: thus the dead baby cast adrift on the water at the end is an inversion of the biblical baby Moses, and so on.

Steinbeck was not a practicing Christian, but he recognized the great cultural impact of Christianity and The Bible, and-- given the novel's rather remarkable final scene--a strong argument can be made that the book's major theme is that we are indeed our brother's keepers. The noted critic Warren French says the theme is "the education of the heart."

In any case, biographer Jackson Benson later observed that "for Steinbeck, life was not a struggle toward anything, but a constant process...." The novelist's view was "non-teleological," or perhaps "objective." Steinbeck himself said, "The only light we have is the light we create for ourselves by our courage, compassion, and love." We can't blame God for our mistakes or credit Him for our triumphs. This, it turns out, would eventually be a deep message of The Grapes of Wrath, although many parochial critics missed it.

Like many of the actual migrants, the Joads entered California as a self-centered family seeking an American Eden, instead of a place demanding not only hard work but much luck.

They drove through Tehachapi in the morning glow, and the sun came up behind them, and the--suddenly they saw the great valley below them....The vineyards, the orchards, the great, flat valley, green and beautiful, the trees set in rows, and the farm houses...

"...A windmill flashed in the sun, and its turning blades were like a little heliograph, far away. Ruthie and Winfield looked at it, and Ruthie whispered, 'It's California.'" Of course the desert they had just crossed had also been California, and it had presaged their experiences better than their ideal did.

Hardships that follow force the Joads to grow beyond individualism, beyond even familial loyalty. They and migrants generally must learn to be a part of all humanity. Says Ma Joad, "Use ta be the fambly was fust. It ain't so now. It's anybody. Worse off we get, the more we got to do."

On Steinbeck's sweeping canvas everyone is flawed. Yet the migrants seem to develop a sacred view of the land even if they are ignorant of soil science. Their ancestors may have killed the snakes and killed the Indians and, later, by employing poor farming practices, some have

helped kill the land itself. In Steinbeck's view, this is also true of many big owners, who tend to have a profane view of the soil, seeing it only as a medium for growing money. The small farmers, he suggests, tend to know it more intimately and to see it as a living thing. One tenant farmer warns the owners, "...you'll kill the land with cotton." The owners reply, "We've got to take cotton quick before the land dies. Then we'll sell the land." That, of course, had been an attitude in the cotton south that was not much shared by growers in California, so those kinds of passages enraged groups like the local Associated Farmers.

California critics at first counterattacked the novel with red herrings: Steinbeck's characters' use of profanity--such as the people at a hamburger stand being called "shitheels"--came in for much superficial criticism. Certainly, God's name was frequently taken in vain in the text: Muley Graves complains, "Them sons-a-bitches says I got to get off--an', Jesus Christ, a man can't...."

I worked from the time I was twelve as a seasonal farm laborer during school vacations, then in packing sheds, then as a soldier, then as a roughneck and roustabout in the oil patch...and everywhere I worked men cussed. Steinbeck's characters seemed to me close to the real voices I'd heard from my male, working-class kin. Pushed on the topic, Steinbeck explained, "I've never changed a word to fit the prejudice of a group and I never will."

Along with profanity, presumed communism and the supposed "filthy" ending of the novel were most used to steer readers away from The Grapes of Wrath. Local critics tried to keep people from reading the book and its unflattering portrayal of some elements of the power structure that ruled California at the time. That is perhaps ironic, since many actual Californians--like Mr. Thomas in the book--went out of their ways to help migrants then.

My own major criticism of the novel is that I've never considered Steinbeck's use of phonemic spelling to evoke visual dialects--"Pu-raise Gawd fer vittory"--to be very skillful. It seems to have been much influenced by the journals of Tom Collins and, when contrasted with, say, the dialects later employed by Flannery O'Connor, it seems rather clumsy. But that is a distinctly minor flaw to me. On the important points, like plot, theme and characters, I think his fictive craft is terrific.

When I decided to read The Grapes of Wrath as a high school boy I was warned away from it by well-intended librarians and even neighbors, many of whom had not read the book themselves. I bought and read a copy and soon figured out that it was Steinbeck's pictures of economic exploitation that really offended the local power structure.

When Darryl Zanuck was arranging to produce the classic movie based on the novel, he had conditions in the fields checked by a detective agency. Asked by Steinbeck what they'd found, Zanuck replied, "That conditions are much worse than you reported." That's what historians found, too.

Steinbeck's political philosophy at that time seemed to be a little left of center but far to the right of extremists. He simply recognized that people were being misused and were suffering. Feeling exposed or misrepresented by Steinbeck (or, perhaps, guilty), powerful Californians attacked The Grapes of Wrath. W.B. Camp, President of the Associated Farmers of Kern County, for instance, in a famous quote claimed The Grapes of Wrath was all lies and that "The Communist party wrote the outline and Steinbeck filled in the rest of the crap." In those days, folks tended to accuse anyone who dared disagree with the power structure of being red. Yet the novel's content seems to me to better reflect the ideas of Ralph Waldo Emerson, of Ed Ricketts, of Walt Whitman and of Jesus Christ than it does those of Karl Marx.

Ironically, communists were generally displeased with Steinbeck's portrayal of them in his

works; Steinbeck found communism lacking. He wrote, "In a thoroughly collectivized state, mediocre efficiency might be very great, but only through the complete elimination of the swift, the clever, and the intelligent, as well as the incompetent."

Writers by no means always or even often understand the full dimensions of their own accomplishments. Great artists, in particular, move well beyond the limitations of their consciousness. The Joads were unique inventions not typical migrants, but it can be reasonably argued that at its deepest level, The Grapes of Wrath explores the human spirit and conception of a new human community being formed from the wreckage of an old one. It is about exodus and the lessons of exodus, about survival and the lessons of survival. Steinbeck employed a historical reality, the great floods of 1938, to frame his novel's climax.

Producer George Stevens once wrote that "the story has no ending." He was correct, because in 1939 no ending was in sight. The novel does have a conclusion, and a powerful one. The creation of life is both sacred and biological, and readers see the impulses and needs from which religion arose--a young Madonna suckling mankind. I found that concluding scene sacramental. Barbara Heavilin speaks for me when she writes, "...this conclusion places the remainder of the story squarely in the hands and on the heart of the reader. It also leaves a powerful closing image of human compassion--giving what little one has to save another."

In reality, the migrants' destitution would finally end only with Pearl Harbor and the national mobilization that followed when Americans had to do exactly what Rose of Sharon's act had symbolized--aid one another or perish. Fifteen million people, including the Joads, got jobs during World War II and California was transformed to a high-tech state.

Steinbeck, meanwhile, wrote no more classics, but he never lost sight of his sacramental obligation as an artist. In his 1962 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, he said,

"The ancient commission of the writer has not changed... He is charged with exposing our many grievous faults and failures, with dredging up to the light our dark and dangerous dreams for the purpose of improvement."

He actually did those things.

Artists are not required to always be correct, but they are required to always move beyond mere slogans, to make honest efforts, and to always keep their minds open. There are no perfect novels--this one included--but as critic Harold Bloom observed, there are also "no canonical standards worthy of human respect that could exclude The Grapes of Wrath from a serious reader's esteem." The Grapes of Wrath remains timeless because its author saw past immediate subjects to enduring themes and mythic possibilities. That's why it moves readers who wouldn't know an Okie from an oak tree.