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John Steinbeck's Wrath

Human Behavior During Desperate Times

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Abstract

This essay examines John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* and how he, as a writer, approached the subject of human behavior during desperate times. Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* was well received and immediately became a bestseller. In his novel Steinbeck explores the effects the Great Depression on human life, having researched intimately the life and situations of the economic refugees of the period. Some of most effective scenes in the novel deal with the harsh reality these people lived in. As a journalist, Steinbeck wanted to enlighten the public about the poverty and desperation people were facing. However, Steinbeck had difficulty getting his articles published so he saw that the only way to get his message across was to write a novel based on actual research and observations.

This essay commences with historical background about the major events that eventually led to the Great Depression. The Great Depression had devastating effects not only on the economy in the United States but also worldwide. Other factors such as the droughts that plagued the Midwest for a number of years did not make the situation any easier for the small farmer. The combined effects of the economic troubles, the drought, and technical advances changed the rules for small farmers and soon they were at the mercy of the open road. The historical contextualization of this essay concludes by sketching out how Steinbeck gathered first-hand information and facts for this novel. The third and final chapter demonstrates how Steinbeck created the Joad family essentially to give the reader a chance to follow one family through the whole process that made and kept a family migrant. Steinbeck shows the importance of hope; for the Joad family, hope is the motivation that keeps the family going in the face of often insurmountable obstacles.

Contents

Contents	1
Introduction	1
1. Historical Background	3
1.1 The Great Depression	3
1.2 The Dust Bowl.....	5
1.3 Steinbeck and Social Resistance.....	8
2. The Migrant Families	10
2.1 The Joads	10
2.2 Hooverville	12
3. Steinbeck in Times of Desperation.....	16
3.1 Steinbeck on Human Behavior	16
3.2 Steinbeck on Hopes and Dreams of California	18
Conclusion	21
Bibliography	23

Introduction

John Ernest Steinbeck, Jr. was born in Salinas, California on February 27, 1902. Steinbeck grew up in a small rural town, a frontier settlement on one of the world's most fertile land. Growing up, he spent the summer months working on nearby ranches, in road gangs and in sugar mills. While he worked there, he came in close contact with migrant workers who had traveled from far away in search of a better life and he truly got to know the lower class of society (Fontenrose 1-3). "He could get on well with all sorts of persons, and he discovered the genuine human qualities of humble people while working with them; he had no snobbery in him" (Fontenrose 3). Steinbeck witnessed the Great Depression himself as a young man, working as a journalist, and in his writing he was very honest and blunt about how employers of big farms behaved towards their workers. He did not paint a pretty picture of the situation his countrymen were facing and because of his too honest opinions, he had trouble getting some of his articles published. Steinbeck's difficulty getting his articles published, however, eventually led him on to write one of the greatest American novels of the 20th century.

John Steinbeck's novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, was first published in 1939 and it immediately became a best seller. Steinbeck wanted to write a novel that displayed truthfully the condition that migrant workers were facing as a result of the Great Depression. His initial aim was not to write a popular book or to court commercial success but rather to write the truth – inform his readers exactly how horrendous the situation was for the lowest class in society. Steinbeck wanted the book to be written in a realistic manner, not just a fictional novel. By doing so, he would give the book greater depth and move the reader on an emotional level (DeMott ix-xiv). Steinbeck is thus relatively political in *The Grapes of Wrath*, especially when it comes to the upper class of society. His views are socialistic and thus institutions like local governments, banks and big farmers are the targets of his social criticism in the novel. However, *The Grapes of Wrath* is not only a political propaganda; it also observes human behavior under difficult circumstances and the kindness that people show during desperate times.

The novel tells the story of the Joad family and its journey from Oklahoma to California during the Great Depression in the 1930s – 1940s. The Joads, like many

other tenant farmers, are forced off their land when they are unable to pay off their mortgage. Moreover, their crops have suffered in the drought that plagued the Great Plains during the 1930s and this has lessened the productive value of their land. When Tom Joad, the prodigal son, returns from prison after being convicted of murder, the family sets out on its pilgrimage to California with a total of thirteen people. Tom's family consists of his parents, Ma and Pa; his grandparents; his brothers, Noah, Al and Winfield; his sisters, Rose of Sharon and Ruthie; his uncle John and Rose's husband, Connie; and a former preacher named Jim Casy. On the road, the family witnesses the sheer number of people heading the same way and doubt about the promise of a better life soon sets in for some family members. Other family members are not strong enough to handle the difficult journey and perish on road. When the Joads finally reach their destination in California, they have suffered great losses and witnessed how cruel human beings can really be to one another. Many of their hopes and dreams about the promised-land in California turn out to be nothing but figments of their imagination as there is little to no work to be had and they as "Okies" are not welcomed in a positive manner. The novel is told from the perspective of the members of the Joad family so their status in life sets the tone for the book. Steinbeck intended to use the short inbetween chapters to give a glimpse into other people's experience of the effects of the Great Depression (French 95-96).

This essay considers how Steinbeck presented the Great Depression in his novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. The most interesting thing about the book is how Steinbeck shows the power of hope and dreams in the face of the most miserable conditions – the sacrifices the Joad family makes in order to reach the "promised land." For historical context, I start on a brief historical overview of the economic crash and the drought that exacerbated the extreme conditions of this era. I then proceed to analyze the hope the characters have of a better life, which proves to be one of the main forces of this novel. Without hope, the characters of the novel have next to nothing to look forward to. Hope gives them a purpose in life, something to look forward to and work towards. *The Grapes of Wrath* is truly about what people are ready to sacrifice and go through in order to seek a better life for their family.

1. Historical Background

1.1 The Great Depression

David M. Kennedy provides highly useful insight into the Great Depression in his book *Freedom from Fear* (1999), from which I will draw some of the most relevant context for Steinbeck's novel. The Great Depression in the United States is said to have begun on 29 October 1929 when the stock market crashed. This day is usually referred as Black Thursday. For the next ten years or so both rich and poor countries around the world were faced with unbelievable economic crisis and uncertainty. The Great Depression was the most widespread, longest and deepest economic depression of the twentieth century.

For the United States of America, this economic crash came as a big surprise. The country had been experiencing steady economic growth since the Civil War ended in 1865 and during that time America saw thriving growth in industry and technology by companies such as U.S. Steel, Ford and General Motors. Therefore, when the depression hit in 1929 it meant the end of an era of prosperity. There are many contributing factors as to what caused the stock market to crash (Kennedy 10-12).

In the 1920s, the population of America had doubled since 1890 as a result of mass immigration from Europe after the Great War (1914-1918). Most of these immigrants came from countries that were deeply affected by the war, noticeably from the religiously and culturally different regions of southern and eastern Europe. The immigrants in the northern part of America sought after low-skilled jobs in heavy industry. However, for many, the hope and promise of the American dream was nothing but an illusion and many of the immigrants gave up altogether and went back to their home countries (Kennedy 13-15).

The participation of the United States in the Great War in 1917 meant that this relatively unprepared country needed to invest in military machinery and that caused the country to go into debt. Not only did it cost the nation a significantly high amount to send soldiers to war but after the war, the government was obligated to pay veterans benefits, a payment that dried up almost all budgets. Another issue that came up when the Great War began in 1914 was that at that point, the American agricultural system

had to supply the world's disrupted markets with provisions, as the European farmers were unable to tend to their crops because of warfare. This meant that the American farmers had to answer to a much greater demand, and in order to do so, they increased the size of their fields and invested in gasoline-engine tractors that could go over a larger area of land. With the gasoline-engine tractors substituting horse and oxen, millions of farm workers lost their jobs. When the war finally ended in 1918, and agriculture was blooming once again in Europe, the American farmers found themselves with a huge surplus of raw material and this caused prices to plummet. The Great Depression hit hardest the American farmers who were already in a vulnerable position. The prices did recover somewhat later on but it was not until the beginning of World War II that the prices resumed to the same value as they had been before the Great War (Kennedy 17-21).

In the earlier years of the 1920s, the average white American saw an increase in his salary. All of the sudden, luxury items such as canned foods, washing machines, refrigerators, telephones, radios and even automobiles were available to the average worker and the prices were affordable because of the high demand for the products. However, there were people who recognized that there had to be a limit on demand for a certain product and one of them, was a spokesman for the General Motors Corporation. He pointed out that even though there had been a very fast growth in economy and production, it was bound to even out. He stressed that big companies should aim for more modest but healthy growth in sales (Kennedy 21-23).

All these cumulative factors contributed to the biggest economic crisis of the 20th century and the effects of it were devastating – felt by just about everyone for the next years. Throughout the United States, everything from small businesses to big corporation industries suffered massive recession and unemployment escalated. It is estimated that when the unemployment was at its peak, roughly 25% of the working force were without a job. Big industrial cities in the north like Detroit, Chicago and Cleveland had a very high unemployment rate, up to 50%, because they were based on heavy industry and people had moved from the south to work there when everything was booming. The housing industry almost came to a complete stand-still and all big infrastructures were put on hold so thousands of laborers had no job. The effects were atrocious. Early in the 1930s, school nurses were reporting that up to 90% of the

students were malnourished. For farmers, the price of crops dropped significantly and many were forced off their land because of debt. During the economic crash, millions of savings accounts were wiped out so unemployed workers and their families not only lost their wages but also their savings. Because of the high unemployment rate people were being evicted from their homes by the thousands and it is estimated that up to two million people were homeless in the 1930s. The homeless gathered in shanty camps, which were called Hooverville in order to mock President Herbert Hoover. These camps were not pleasant in any way and the extreme poverty and horrible conditions became too much for some. A lot of people ventured out west to California in false hope of a better life but in reality work was limited and the pay was low. In the 1930s the immigrant status changed for the first time in many years as more people emigrated than immigrated. The U.S. government encouraged people to go to Mexico and work and, in fact, thousands of Mexican immigrants were deported against their will (Kennedy 14-24).

Election brought in a new president in 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt who promised the New Deal for the American people. The New Deal was to bring relief for the unemployed and the poor, help recover the economy to a normal level and make sure that the financial system would be reformed so that another depression could not happen. The New Deal did succeed although it took a fairly long time. By the beginning of World War II, the U.S. finally saw some optimistic years ahead (Kennedy 32-34).

1.2 The Dust Bowl

During the 1930s, Americans not only had to deal with the deepest economic depression in the history of the country but also series of draughts and huge dust storms that disrupted farmers all across the southern plains. The southern plains include parts of five states: Kansas, Colorado, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas. This area is known for its hostile conditions, dry and unfertile soil and extreme winds, which are a common plague. Any vegetation that grows under these conditions must therefore show adaptability and resilience in order to withstand these harsh conditions (Worster 3-4). The first settlers on the Great Plains were the Native Americans. The Native Americans

lived in tepees, which could easily be moved, and they hunted buffalos for food and for their hides. During this time, the soil was bound together with grass and no plans were made to try to farm these areas. Instead, the Native Americans tried to live with with the land and not waste the recourses they could find (Worster 76-77). By the mid-nineteenth century however, the United States Army had wiped almost all of the buffalo population out and the Indians had been pushed onto reservations. Now that the frontier was open and safe from the Indians, white settlers came along with the army looking for land to farm (Worster 80).

The Homestead Act of 1862 encouraged settlement on the Great Plains and with the completion of the first transcontinental railroads in 1869, the west was opened to a massive wave of immigrants looking to settle down. During the first years of settlement on the plains, cattle ranching was the most popular way of farming. The native vegetation of buffalo grass proved to be good and there was plenty of it. However, greed quickly settled in and soon there were too many cattle on the grass, resulting in depletion and long-lasting damage. Around 1890 the grass had diminished so much that approximately 80% of all cattle perished and their carcasses lay across the land rotting away (Worster 83). After cattle ranching had failed, thousands of people flocked out onto the plains. These were extremely poor people who were hoping to earn their money quickly in agriculture, especially farming. In order to provide shelter for their families, farmers would use sod as house material and their diet consisted solely on very bland foods. The sod houses did not last long because, beginning in 1889, a drought scorched the plains for the next six years. This drought was equal to the drought in the 1930s but without the massive dust storms because most of the grassland still remained in the sod (Worster 83-84).

At the turn of the century America changed rapidly, especially with the arrival of machinery. All of a sudden, sod could easily be turned into a field for future crop and leaving part of the ground fallow each year to restore moisture to turning the plains into a vast wheat factory. This new ideology and notably cheap land caused farmers from the Midwest to venture out west to gain bigger lands and the opportunity to earn more money. The wheat factory was pushed to its limits when war broke out in Europe in 1914. At that point, there came heavy demand from the government in Washington to plant more wheat. The average Western wheat farmer was no longer interested in

farming only enough to provide for his family but now became a member of an international production. With the arrival of machinery, a farmer could potentially have a much bigger crop and the farms increased their acreages. A machine that had a one-way disk plow was used to plow the grass away. It was highly sufficient in the way that it cut through the roots and laid the sod over practically unbroken. This machine ruined the soil and cut it up so fine that some observers blamed them for how the wind could pick up the soil so easily during the storms of the 1930s. Agriculture on the plains was by the late 1920s a very lucrative industry. More and more native vegetation was plowed in order to sow more wheat and virtually all the native buffalo grass was gone (Worster 87-94).

With the arrival of heavy machinery like the petroleum tractor, more farmers had no other choice but to invest in such a vehicle to be able to keep up with the demand of production. As investing in a tractor meant that the farmers had to put themselves in debt in order to purchase the tractor, the main idea was that the tractor would pay off in the coming years by the profits of good crops (Teisch 159). However, drought became a big problem in the beginning of the 1930s and in 1935, one-third of the land in the Dust Bowl region, roughly 33 million acres, were devoid of grass, and instead consisted of dry and very fine soil that was extremely vulnerable to the winds (Worster 87-94). For a long time, the machines were blamed for creating of the Dust Bowl but in reality the blame lay with American culture. American culture has always been about freedom so who was to say that people could not turn unproductive and unprofitable grassland into a roaring industry. It would also be wrong to say that it was ignorance that turned the Great Plains into deserted wasteland when droughts had plagued the same area 30 years before. The force behind the destruction was human greed and people turning a blind eye to what was really happening to the soil (Worster 97).

Steinbeck's description of the effects of the dust in *The Grapes of Wrath* is both dramatic and poetic. He describes how the colors of the land have changed because of the lack of rain. What was once red is now pink and gray earth is now white. A man walking on a dirt road stirs the fine soil and it takes a long time for it to settle down. The day no longer comes but only the dawn as the gray sky only lets red sunrays shine: "The dawn came, but no day. In the gray sky a red sun appeared, a dim red circle that

gave a little light, like dusk; and as that day advanced, the dusk slipped back towards darkness, and the wind cried and whimpered over the fallen corn” (Steinbeck 4). As the force of the wind increases, people are forced to shield their faces with handkerchiefs so they will not inhale the dust. The dust dampens down all noise and children do not run around playing like they are used to. Men stand and look to their crop, the damage that the dust has inflicted on it, and wonder if this is the end of their farming days (Steinbeck 3-6). Facing both the drop in the price of crops and severe drought that ruined and diminished the production, many farmers were forced to quit farming. Many of the farmers were burdened with debts that they were unable to pay and even after being tenants on their land for many years, they could not make ends meet. By law the land was no longer theirs even if their grandfathers had broken the land and established a farm and a family legacy (Teisch 153). Therefore, farmers and their families set out on a journey west to California to seek better prosperity and opportunities.

1.3 Steinbeck and Social Resistance

The Grapes of Wrath is a very political novel and it is fairly apparent that Steinbeck’s views during the time of writing were socialistic. He has immense sympathy for the working class in the novel, but thinks of the property holders – big farmers, bankers and any kind of materialistic figure – as greedy and mean. Steinbeck particularly casts the bank as something evil and personifies it as a monster: “The bank – the monster has to have profits all the time. It can’t wait. It’ll die. No, taxes go on. When the monster stops growing, it dies. It can’t stay one size” (Steinbeck, *Grapes* 34). It has to be mentioned here in the essay that during the Great Depression, Americans were faced with both an economic crisis and the results of extreme drought that forced thousands of farmers to give up their lands because of repeated crop failures and inability to pay rent (Railton 27). Steinbeck is pretty quick to skim over these facts and instead focuses on how the banks and landowners do not see high enough profit in having tenant farmers on their lands so they simply evict them along with their families. Right there, Steinbeck sets the tone for his opinion of landowners. No matter how much the tenant farmers plead and rationalize that this is their land and how they only took a small loan, the landowners

keep hiding behind the fact that the bank is in control. “We’re sorry. It’s not us. It’s the monster. The bank isn’t like a man. Yes, but the bank is only made of men. No, you’re wrong there – quite wrong there. The bank is something else than men ... It’s the monster. Men made it, but they can’t control it” (Steinbeck, *Grapes* 36). Steinbeck’s dislike for the banks can be traced back to a letter he wrote in 1938 where he said that his decision to write the novel was so he could put a tag of shame on the greedy bastards who were responsible for the situation in the country and his focus was on the “fascist group” of utilities and banks and huge growers (Railton 30). Steinbeck not only despised the upper class, he also hated the middle class. In his novels “his middle-class men are mean, pudgy creatures, bilking pinkly through spectacles, the slaves of their small anxieties and their neurotic and sexually frigid wives” (Champney 27).

Steinbeck started to write *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1938 and it took him roughly six months to complete it. Steinbeck wrote a letter to his friend saying that he had never worked so hard in his life or for so long before (DeMott x). Although the time it took Steinbeck to write the novel was not overly long, the research for the novel took considerable time and was emotionally draining for him. Steinbeck travelled out on the open roads and observed the squatters’ camps near Salinas, Bakersfield and other places around central California. While there, he resided amongst the migrant workers and corresponded with his friends in the cities in order to try to describe how awful the situation really was. People who were not in close contact with the squatters’ camp found the conditions unbelievable and most had difficulty comprehending how serious the situation really was. For Steinbeck it was a harsh reality and he saw that if nothing was done, some sort of civil war could break out (Lisca 144-145).

2. The Migrant Families

2.1 The Joads

The Joad family is a representation of the situation thousands of families faced during the years after the drought and the economic depression. The Joad's are a farming family who suffer bad crops, year after year, which results in less financial stability for them. Like so many other farmers, the Joads are tenant farmers and when the landowner informs them that it is time to leave his land, there is not much they can say or do because legally they cannot claim ownership of the land that they have spent their whole life farming. One of the contributing factors as to why the Joads go into bankruptcy is that they have not kept up with technology. Like many other small farmers, the Joads have mainly used human labor force for their farming; they have not follow the mainstream and bought a tractor because they feared what the tractor would do to their rural lifestyle and devalue their land. When they finally have to declare bankruptcy they are told that if they had invested in a tractor and a plow they might have saved themselves (Teisch 160-161). This is in a way a lesson in life that tells you that you cannot be stubborn and persist the changing times. Things will change without you and you get left behind.

The first character of the Joad family to be introduced is Tom Joad. Tom is being released from prison after serving a sentence for having killed a man. It becomes obvious early on that Steinbeck intended to have Tom represent a sort of a hero in the narration. He is at least to the Joad family as they treat him as the prodigal son upon his return. When Tom reaches his old family farm he notices that the place is deserted and the house has been pushed off its foundation (Steinbeck, *Grapes* 42). Tom gathers that his family has been forced off the land because the landowners claim they cannot afford to have tenant farmers anymore and use big tractors to plow through the homestead and make the housing inhabitable (Steinbeck, *Grapes* 49). Tom then travels on to his uncle John's farm and finds his family, as they are about to depart on their journey to California.

When the Joads begin their travel there are thirteen people and a dog crammed into a converted Hudson Super-Six sedan that should only fit about six people

comfortably. The car being so crowded means that no one could really take any personal belongings, only the bare essentials such as eating utensils, frying pan, stew kettle, coffee pot, tools, a few clothes for each family member, mattresses and tarpaulins. Photographs, letters and other memorabilia are left behind (Steinbeck, *Grapes* 113). The children are forced to leave behind their dolls and Indian bows and the adults burn all letters, photographs and other personal items that they cannot take with them (Steinbeck, *Grapes* 92-93). During the drive, three people sit in the front while the remaining ten hoist themselves on top of the load and sit or lie on top of the trunk. Those who sit on top of the trunk are exposed to the natural elements all day long: “On top of the truck the others stirred to life. Their faces were shining with sunburn they could not escape” (Steinbeck, *Grapes* 129). These traveling conditions are harsh and take their toll on each family member. It was also expensive to travel long distances and most people like the Joad family had to sell almost everything of value before their departure. Because of the haste people were in, the buyers would take advantage of that fact and drive a hard bargain so the seller often ended up selling his possession much cheaper than its value. “Fifty cents isn’t enough to get for a good plow. That seeder cost thirty-eight dollars. Two dollars isn’t enough. Can’t haul it all back – Well, take it, and a bitterness with it” (Steinbeck, *Grapes* 90). The Joads manage to sell off their possessions and round up 150 dollars. That is not particularly much considering that there are thirteen people going on this journey and many costly events can come up that would put them in financial straits. For many families, the journey would stretch their budget to the limit. When they finally arrived in California they would have sold everything they owned, even their blankets, utensils and tools in order to buy gasoline for the car. They would be in a state of semi-starvation and would accept any work that they could find, no matter how low the wages (Steinbeck, *Harvest* 5).

The travel out to California turns out to be a constant struggle for the Joad family and after only a day of traveling, they suffer their first casualty. Their dog gets killed while they make a pit stop as it runs out on to the highway and gets hit by a car. (Steinbeck, *Grapes* 135). The next victim of the road is Grampa as he suffers a stroke later in the day after the dog gets killed: “Grampa seemed to be struggling; all his muscles twitched. And suddenly he jarred as though under a heavy blow. He lay still

and his breath stopped. Casy looked down at the old man's face and saw that it was turning a blackish purple" (Steinbeck, *Grapes* 143). Grampa dies on the side of the road and is buried there without much dignity because unfortunately it would take too much money out of the family's budget to hold a proper burial. (Steinbeck, *Grapes* 151). Granma passes away close to the California state border on the back of the truck and Ma lies with her after she has passed and manages to get the family into the state by saying that Granma is terribly ill, when in fact she already passed away. Ma sacrifices her own comfort for the family's needs. Connie and Noah also leave the entourage. Connie does not return after having wandered off in one of the camps and Noah decides to stay behind when the family stops by a river to wash and cool off. " 'Tom, I ain't a-goin' on.' Tom sat up. 'What you mean?' 'Tom, I ain't a-gonna leave this here water. I'm a-gonna walk on down this here river' (Steinbeck, *Grapes* 217).

The situation of the Joad family becomes gradually more desperate and difficult. However, when the reader departs with the family at the end of the novel, it is on a hopeful note that indicates that perhaps things will be all right, even if the story leaves the reader with a certain uncertainty about the family's fate.

2.2 Hooverville

Once families left their farms and homes to seek a better life out west they soon became nomads or gypsies. They no longer had a sense of place where they belonged; instead they wandered around the highways and were in the way of those who still had a stable homestead. These people were unwanted and unwelcomed. Some families would sleep on the side of the road but that was generally frowned upon, especially since there were no sanitary facilities of any sorts on the open highway. With the huge amounts of people traveling west they were bound to crowd together to communicate and share information about jobs and other resources. Some states would even form formal state camps, nicknamed Hoovervilles, where people got official authorization to set up tents and settle down for the time being. This way, by forming camps, people were no longer crowding the highways but were rather herded into a specific location.

Steinbeck wrote an article published in 1936 where he describes the typical squatter's camps:

The squatters' camps are located all over California. Let us see what a typical one is like. It is located on the banks of a river, near an irrigation ditch or on a side road where a spring of water is available. From a distance it looks like a city dump, and well it may, for the city dumps are typical sources for the material of which it is built. You can see a litter of dirty rags and scrap iron, of houses built of weeds, of flattened cans or of paper. It is only on close approach that it can be seen that these are homes. (Steinbeck, "Harvest" 8)

The article goes on to describe how in the beginning a family has a house built out of corrugated paper and has a dirt floor that needs to be swept every day. It is impossible to keep anything clean in these houses because the mud touches everything. When it rains, the paper turns to mush but the family still has hope as long as their clothes are still relatively whole. As the months pass the clothes will fray off the children's bodies and the lack of nutrition will make the family vulnerable against pneumonia.

Another family is lucky when it comes to employment and the husband is able to earn a few hundred dollars, but then his car breaks down and soon his children go to bed hungry and he and his wife share a look of complete desperation. Yet another family arrives in these camps, a family of six. They lie on the ground in a tent that has mildew. All of them share on quilt and lie on a piece of canvas and the stench of nearby human feces is suffocating. Soon the children become ill because they have not had any milk for months and one night the youngest boy goes into convulsion and dies. The cause of death is poor nutrition and lack of hygiene. Naked children with swollen abdomens caused by malnutrition wander around the camp, women give birth to stillborn babies, (the mother would be unable to lactate so the child would have passed away eventually) and husbands who are unable to find work look at their families with a broken look (Steinbeck, "Harvest" 8-11). These are examples taken from the article Steinbeck wrote. All of this testimony was of incidents he witnessed himself as he traveled the county in order to conduct research for his novel.

Steinbeck felt a great sense of compassion for these people, and he had a hard time standing on the sidelines while people suffered from famine and diseases: "In one tent there are twenty people quarantined for smallpox and two of the women are to have

babies in that tent this week...Talk about Spanish children. The death of children by starvation in out valleys is simply staggering...I'll do what I can" (Lisca 146). The first camp the Joads stay at is called a Hooverville (Steinbeck, *Grapes* 254). It is a basic campsite, which provides only the barest of necessities. There is no luxury and most of the occupants there seem to have wandered around for some time and do not appear to have any money of any sort. Once Ma starts to cook dinner for her family, the children at the campsite gather around her like a hungry flock of animals and look at her cooking with bewildered eyes (Steinbeck, *Grapes* 257). Ma strikes up a conversation with one of the children and soon learns that none of them ate breakfast this morning. Ma gets overwhelmed with the desperation of the children and does not know how to handle the situation: "Ma said helplessly, 'I dunno what to do. I got to feed the fambly. What'm I gonna do with these here?'" The children stood stiffly and looked at her. Their faces were blank, rigid, and their eyes went mechanically from the pot to the tin plate she held" (Steinbeck, *Grapes* 269). Ma leaves the pot outside for the children after she has rationed enough for her family and the children lick everything clean. Later on, a mother of one of the children approaches Ma and scolds her for her actions. Ma does not clearly understand the harm she supposedly caused but it is obvious that the Joads were eating better food than their neighbors and the folks do not appreciate Ma showing off their luxurious foods (Steinbeck, *Grapes* 279-271).

While staying at Hooverville the family hears about a government camp called Weedpatch that has running water toilets and bathtubs and decide to head over there. When they arrive they are informed that this camp expects everyone to participate in chores to keep the campsite tidy and that their work will go towards rent. It is obvious that the Joad family has never had the luxury of owning a toilet because Ruthie and Winfield are completely clueless when it comes them: "Winfield was embarrassed. His hand twisted the flushing lever. There was a roar of water. Ruthie leaped into the air and jumped away. She and Winfield stood in the middle of the room and looked at the toilet" (Steinbeck, *Grapes* 313). The family is overjoyed to be at this camp and by all the fancy committees it has. Finally the family has found a place where they are not looked down on or where there is only desperation and destitution.

Nevertheless, even though the Weedpatch is a good place, it is not a place to settle down and call home. After a while, the lack of jobs available gets to the Joad

family and they move on in hopes of finding work somewhere else. The last place the Joads camp at is by a peach farm where the wages are only five cents per box but being desperate for money the family now has no choice but to accept those terms (Steinbeck, *Grapes* 386). Steinbeck leaves the Joad family in a great uncertainty on a peach farm during a massive flood. Obviously their dream about the little white house they were hoping to get once they reached California is lost forever. Their goal now is simply to stay alive.

3. Steinbeck in Times of Desperation

3.1 Steinbeck on Human Behavior

After the Great Depression and the droughts in the Dust Bowl many families lost their houses and became wanderers and nomads of the open roads. The reason why most of the people went to California was that California was supposed to be the land of opportunities and prosperity. However, once people reached California – their promised land – the attitude that met them was not what they had expected. Travelers faced discrimination and were treated in a degrading manner. Steinbeck showed in the novel how inhumane people could be for example by the use of the term “Okie”. “Okie” was a slang word used by the Californian people for migrant people from Oklahoma, Arkansas, Kansas, Texas, and other neighboring states. It was used in a derogatory manner to put the migrants in their place and make sure that they knew that the locals did not accept them. The local people even whipped themselves into a frenzy of cruelty. They would form squads and units that bore arms in order to protect themselves from the “Okies.” Landowners would offer the “Okies” work for less money than the locals and use their desperate need for food and shelter as a bargaining tool. “They had no argument, no system, nothing but their numbers and their needs. When there was work for a man, ten men fought for it – fought with a low wage. If that fella’ll work for thirty cents, I’ll work for twenty-five” (Steinbeck, *Grapes* 296).

Nevertheless, Californian farmers were dependent on these migrant workers, especially farms that grew peaches, hops and cotton. These kinds of farms only require the work of twenty men most of the year, but when it is time to harvest the crop up to two thousand workers were needed to pick and pack the fruit and that is where the migrant worker became vital. If farmers did not manage to get enough manpower and the harvest was delayed only for a week, the crop would rot and be lost (Steinbeck, *Harvest* 3-4). Therefore, it is very ironic how much the migrant worker was hated when he was so vital. The reason for this hatred was based on the misconceptions that the migrants were ignorant and dirty people, that they carried diseases and that they were the reason for the necessity to increase the number of police officers (Steinbeck, *Harvest* 4). “These goddamned Okies are dirty and ignorant. They’re degenerate, sexual

maniacs. These goddamned Okies are thieves. They'll steal anything. They've got no sense of property rights" (Steinbeck, *Grapes* 296). The locals no longer looked at the migrant workers as fellow humans but as savages and they were never received into a community or into the life of a community. Wanderers were never allowed to feel at home (Steinbeck, *Harvest* 4). There was also the constant fear that the migrant workers would organize a union and make all sorts of demands that would cost the farmers more money and force them to provide better conditions for the workers, who would go on strike and the crop would not get picked but instead be ruined (Steinbeck, *Harvest* 4).

During his travels out on the open road and his visits to camps in order to conduct research for his novel, in the early spring of 1938 Steinbeck witnessed the flooding and starvation in Visalia, California. He grew horrified and yet helpless to bring about immediate change of the conditions the migrants lived in. He described in an article how the awful flooding and starvation in the interior valleys was and the complete lack of medical care: "I must go to Visalia. Four thousand families, drowned out of the tents are really starving to death....The death of children by starvation in our valleys is simply staggering" (Dickstein 123). Steinbeck wrote this in a letter that became one of the most effective pieces of Depression journalism. The situation was so horrible that nurses were removed because the problem was too great for anything to be done (Dickstein 123). Steinbeck also mentioned the hostility of the surrounding towns towards these migrants, but in reality there was only so much outsiders could do when the situation got so horribly out of hand. What was really needed was governmental help, but they did nothing. After witnessing these events, Steinbeck shifted from being an observer to an advocate. He felt the need to write from the migrants' perspective. He tried to show that the migrants were not aliens but neighbors, people like the people in the surrounding towns and that they were not migrants by nature but rather gypsies by force of circumstance (Steinbeck, *Grapes* 124).

Steinbeck did not create the Joad family to explore their adventures on their big journey out west, but rather explore the social conditions that occurred to them and in those instances, the intercalary chapters all reflect on the Joad's [sic] situation in some way (Lisca 165). The Joad family was created in order to be the advocate of the average migrant family. The family experiences not just the general idea but instead the concrete, visceral evocation of things as they were; eviction from the farm, dying

children, the camps and the desperation. Steinbeck ultimate goal was to write a novel that showed things as they really were and not paint a pretty picture of the inhumanity that was taking place (Dickstein 125).

3.2 Steinbeck on Hopes and Dreams of California

“Maybe we can start again, in the new rich land – in California, where the fruit grows. We’ll start over” (Steinbeck, *Grapes* 91). This sentence describes well what people thought about California. For many of the people from the Great Plains, California was a place where everyone was nice and enough jobs were available for all whom wanted. The reason people initially started to think to California as the hopeful paradise was because for some time, a handbill advertisement had been distributed all over that said that people were needed in fruit picking and that good wages would be paid (Steinbeck, *Grapes* 94). The Joad family had seen this handbill and fallen for the promises of a good life and happy living that could be found in California. Ma even talks about how they would save up money and buy a house. “But I like to think how nice it’s gonna be, maybe, in California. Never cold. An’d fruit ever’place, an’ people just bein’ in the nicest places, little white houses in among the orange trees. I wonder – that is, if we all get jobs an’ all work – maybe we can get one of them little white houses” (Steinbeck, *Grapes* 95). With a description like that of what California has to offer, it is no wonder that people jumped on the chance and traveled out west. Tom seems to be the only one who has any knowledge that this might be an exaggeration of how the situation really is. When Tom informs Ma about a conversation he had with a man from California about how awful the situation really is out there, Ma has a hard time accepting it.

Unfortunately most of the things the man said would turn out to be true, from the wages being very low to the people living in dirty old camps. Tom finally agrees with his mother that it must be nice out in California but he is mostly just agreeing with her because he sees how important the hope of a better life is to his mother. Nevertheless, Ma does have her reservations about California and the handbill that glorifies all the promises. She shares her concerns with Tom and tells him that she is

afraid that reality is not as nice as promised and that they are leaving their home in blind faith (Steinbeck, *Grapes* 94). Despite Tom and Ma's worries, other members of the family fall for the illusion that California is the answer to their troubles, that life out there will not be filled with as much hardship and that opportunities will be available to everyone that seeks them. Rose of Sharon and Connie are a good example of young people that really believe everything they have read and heard. Their plan is for Connie to get a job in a store or a factory and study at night so that someday he will be able to become an expert at something and open his own store (Steinbeck, *Grapes* 170) and that will provide them enough so that they can afford luxuries like having their own place and new things. "An' we'll live in town an' go to pitchers whenever, an'— well, I'm gonna have a 'lectric iron, an' the baby'll have all new stuff" (Steinbeck, *Grapes* 172).

In the first campsite the Joad family stop overs at, Pa starts to share his plans with fellow campers and explains his family's situation. He talks about how his home was demolished by the owners of the land but states that he does not worry too much about it since his family is heading out west. "Lucky for us it ain't gonna las' long," said Pa. "We'll get out west an' we'll get work an' we'll get a piece a growin' land with water" (Steinbeck, *Grapes* 196). Once he has shared his optimistic plans about California, a man in torn clothes and dusty face turns to Pa and tells him his own story. It turns out that this unfortunate man has already been to California but is going back home to the Great Plains. The man tells the group that there is no work to be had in California and that this supposed handbill is full of lies. The man explains to the group that according to the handbill eight-hundred workers were needed, however, five thousand copies were made and as the news spread around, tens-of-thousands must have heard of this handbill and with this many people traveling out for work it is obvious that there is impossible for everyone to get employment. Because of the excess of people fighting for jobs, crop owners start to lower the wages and those desperate enough accept working like slaves for hardly any pay (Steinbeck, *Grapes* 197-199).

The Joads encounter more people returning from California who claim that there is no way to make a living out there. They meet a father and son while resting by a creek and their story is similar to others. These men inform the Joads that there is no land available anymore to buy, that they will not have a steady job and will have to scarp for dinner every evening and the Joads hear the term 'Okie' for the first time.

‘Okie’ is meant to have a derogatory meaning and let it be obvious what the public opinion of the newcomers really is. “People gonna have a look in their eye. They gonna look at you an’ their face says, ‘I don’t like you, you son-of-a-bitch.’ Gonna be deputy sheriffs, an’ they’ll push you aroun’. You camp on the roadside, an’ they’ll move you on. You gonna see in people’s faces how they hate you” (Steinbeck, *Grapes* 214). Pa tries to argue with these men that if a man is willing to work an honest day that he will get paid for his work and eventually he will be able to save up enough for his family to have a steady life again (Steinbeck, *Grapes* 216). Pa is really starting to look naïve in the way he refuses to listen to the people who are trying to warn him about the harsh conditions and hopelessness in California, but the fact of the matter is that hope is all that the Joads have left; they cannot turn back to Oklahoma. They have to get to California to see for themselves and at this point, hope is the only motivation carrying them through their journey.

For Steinbeck, California was nothing more than a beautiful fraud that would never be within the migrants’ reach. What the Joads also failed to know was that when they left the Southern Plains in the 1930s, all of California had already been conquered and divided almost a century earlier. It is also ironic to put California’s extreme fertility and wealth next to the migrants living amongst squalor and despair for it displays the real tragedy that was happening during that time (Teisch 154).

Conclusion

The moral message on human behavior in the novel is delivered so brilliantly because Steinbeck is realistic and authentic in his narration. When the Joads head out on their journey west and Grandpa falls ill, the brotherhood of the open roads first becomes apparent. The Joads meet an old couple, Ivy and Sairy Wilson, whose car has broken down. When it is obvious that Grandpa is seriously ill, the Wilson's offer their tent so he does not have to die out in the open (Steinbeck, *Grapes* 141-144). Mama Joad shows unselfish behavior when she lies with grandma on the truck bed for an entire night after she has passed away. She put the family's needs before her own and if that means that she lies beside a deceased woman for hours then so be it. "The family looked at Ma with a little terror at her strength. Tom said, 'Jesus Christ! You layin' there with her all night long!' 'The fambly hadda get acrost,' Ma said miserably" (Steinbeck, *Grapes* 239). One of the most effective scenes in the novel which show courageous human behavior and compassion is in the end when Rose of Sharon is in the barn with her family after escaping from the flood and comes across a man dying of starvation and his son. Rose herself is sick after childbirth but in an instance she knows what she need to do, she needs to save this poor man and she is the only one of the family who is able to do so.

Then slowly she lay down beside him. He shook his head slowly from side to side. Rose of Sharon loosened one side of the blanket and bared her breast. "You got to," she said. She squirmed closer and pulled his head close. "There!" she said. "There." Her hand moved behind his head and supported it. (Steinbeck, *Grapes* 476)

All these scenes pull on the heartstrings of the reader and make the lower class more sympathetic in their roles as victims of society.

The Grapes of Wrath managed to become one the greatest American novel because of the way Steinbeck wrote about people. In his novel, people are just people and even though most of the characters have been subjected to unfairness and cruelty the Joads continue to hold up their honesty and choose to live their life in a dignified manner. There is little self-hatred amongst them or frustration towards the middle and upper class but rather determination and tenacity to hope for a better life (Champney

28). A writer like Steinbeck also helps the reader to make a sense of nature's place in the human past and increase understanding when it comes to their relationship with the earth. Steinbeck's message to the reader is that if humans do not change the way they think about their relationship to the land, humans will subject themselves to history's ironies once again (Teisch 170-171).

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