



**New Student Reading Project  
Fall 2009  
Student Essay Winners**

**Spencer Chen**      **Kate Pascucci**  
**Erik Johnson**     **Da Eun Seong**  
**Michael Alexander** **Kats-Rubin**     **Emma Sheldon**  
**Nancy Li**             **Emily Throwe**  
**Chase Meyer**        **Laura Van Winkle**

Early on in *The Grapes of Wrath*, the female characters are often described as “cautious” and “quiet,” tending to leave the men alone “to figure and to wonder in the dust.” (p. 34). But later in the novel (e.g., p. 210; p. 280; 454-455), female characters seem to become more active and assertive. What, if anything, do these changes tell us about the role of gender in *The Grapes of Wrath*?

**Kate Pascucci**

## **The Illusion of Feminism in the Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath***

As a historical novel, Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* naturally mirrors the social structure and culture of its time. In 1939 the roles of women across the nation were evolving as feminism grew in popularity. As a result, the character “Ma” begins in a role of generic obedience and raises to a position of distinguished power in the Joad family. However, due to preexisting societal roles, Ma is very limited in how and when she can assume the role of leader. She only exhibits strong leadership qualities when she is dealing with inherent feminine issues (ie the family, children, and nurturing). While assertions made by Ma may give the illusion that women in the novel are rising to more prominent and respected positions, it is the content of Ma’s assertions that shows that women only appear to become more powerful when they are in fact preserving their own oppression.

In the traditionally structured family of Steinbeck’s time, the women maintain the role of nurturer and homemaker while the men are the strength and providers. At the beginning of the novel these roles are not challenged or questioned; “Men stood by their fences and looked at the ruined corn – women came out of the houses to stand beside their men” (Steinbeck, 3). The women happily and quietly fulfill their roles as support for their husbands. There is no question that the “Men sang the works, and the women hummed the tunes” (194), showing that women did not speak out but instead provided foundation and support for the men. However, as the novel progresses, Ma in particular becomes more vocal about her decisions and the way she wants things to be done.

In chapter 16 the Joad family truck breaks down. Tom suggests that he, Al and Casy stay behind to fix it while the rest of the family moves ahead toward California. It is at this suggestion of fracturing the family that mother’s first outburst occurs. Her voice becomes commanding, and her stature threatening as she wields a jack handle and refuses to break up the family. After a few tense moments of argument “the group knew that Ma had won, And Ma knew it too” (169). While this triumph for Ma may seem groundbreaking and important for the women of the novel, the fact is that her victory is shallow. During the dustbowl, it was the women’s role to maintain and protect the family while the men looked for work. So when Ma violently asserted her intention to keep the family together, she was simply fulfilling her role as the archetypal matron character.

Throughout the novel Ma maintains her traditional role in nontraditional ways. She becomes violent with police that threaten her family, and she conceals Granma’s death to ensure safe passage through the dessert. In each of these scenarios Ma takes a commanding role, but

when the content is examined it becomes clear that Ma's newfound power is only an illusion, and in fact she still existing in her traditional female role but simply in a more vocal and obvious way.

**Works Cited:**

Steinbeck, John. *The Grapes of Wrath*. New York: Penguin Books, 1939.

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## **Da Eun Seong**

In The Grapes of Wrath, John Steinbeck introduces a familial system which initially relies on patriarchy. As the plot develops, however, such form of control disintegrates, as Pa fails to fulfill his responsibilities as a patriarch to provide for the Joads. It is the female characters, who, amidst adversities, begin to take a more significant and active role. Ma advances as the backbone of the family, trying to keep the family together; similarly, Rose of Sharon develops into a paragon of life's continuity as she chooses to act beyond personal welfare and feeds a starving man with her life-filled milk. Ultimately, the switch in gender roles presents different forms of leaderships that men and women display within the society; while men are responsible for providing the family materialistically, women strives to provide spiritual unity and stability.

Earlier on in the novel, the female characters appear much reserved than the male characters. The lyrical vignettes in the first few chapters reveal the Oklahoman farmers of the Dust Bowl era. The bleak landscape marked by droughts and hardship provides a circumstance that drives the migration of Oklahoman farmers. In contrast to the “dust-filled” setting characterized by uncertainty, the men appear extremely calm and authoritative; they are “silent and [do] not move often,” and are described as “hard and resistant” (3, Steinbeck). On the other hand, the women, taking a more passive role, secretly “studie[s] the men’s faces” to make sure things are alright. They wait for their husbands to make decisions, and believe that “no misfortune [is] too great to bear if their men [are] whole” (4, Steinbeck), illustrating their dependency towards men. At this point, the men are the primary decision makers of the house as they are the ones who “sit still –thinking– figuring” (4, Steinbeck), trying to decide for the future of the family amidst the inclement weather and starvation.

By introducing the Joads after the description of the general setting, Steinbeck suggests that the Joads family parallels with the society at large, including the distinct gender roles established by the characters. Just as in the first chapter, the female characters of the Joads family appear reserved and dependent at first. Upon the decision to migrate westward, Ma conveys a sense of uncertainty and apprehension. “I’m scared of stuff so nice, (10, Steinbeck)” she admits, as she claims that she has no faith in the journey the Joads are about to embark. Rose of Sharon, another female character, is also undeveloped at this point. Constantly reminding herself that she is pregnant, she complain[s] about things that [don’t] really matter” (13, Steinbeck). Her selfish view of the surroundings seems unchangeable, as she is preoccupied with the baby’s health and is reluctant to help her family pack for the journey. She shows dependency on Connie, who she believes would bring her out of poverty and hardship. It is evident that Rose of Sharon, like most women of the era, considers her man as the materialistic provider of the family at this point.

As the novel progresses, Ma takes on a more assertive role within the family as Pa fails to provide the family with money and food, an area he is responsible for as a patriarch. Ma is now described as a “healer, [whose] hands had grown sure and cool and quiet,” which resembles the description of Oklahoman men in the first chapter. Ma emerges as the backbone of the family, trying to guide, protect, and unite the Joads. She believes that the disintegration of the family would threaten their safety and the survival. This is evident when she expresses strong disagreement towards the idea of leaving Tom and Casy behind to fix Wilson’s car. It “seems like times [has] changed,” as Ma appears bolder than ever, confronting the officer who orders the family to leave the Colorado River.

Ma gradually adopts a larger group as her family as she realizes the dissolution of her immediate one. “Use’ ta be the family was fust. It ain’t so now. It’s anybody,” she says, and begins to take over the leadership positions at a community level. She “takes her place behind the squatting men” in various meetings, and gradually culminates to the novel’s ending, when she allows her daughter to save a starving man from dying.

Ma’s two rounds of transformation –from a reserved mother figure to a matriarch, and a matriarch to a caretaker of people beyond her family– instills an important message to the readers regarding the fundamental role of women during the era. Although men seem to rule the family as they hold financial responsibilities, trying to stay productive, it is the women that keep the family spiritually stable and intact.

Rose of Sharon also portrays a vast change in attitude soon after she delivers a stillborn baby. Despite most readers’ expectation that she would lament over the dead infant, she gathers herself and transfers the baby’s forgone life to a starving man by feeding him with her breast milk. Upon doing this, “she look[s] up and across the barn, and her lips [comes] together and smile[s] mysteriously.” This act of altruism resembles Ma’s outreach towards the people beyond her family members. Thus, despite the breakup of the Joad’s family, the novel ends with some sort of a rekindled hope, underscoring the importance of cooperation and unity amongst people.

The change of gender roles in The Grapes of Wrath conveys Steinbeck’s important messages to readers. The advancement of female characters highlights the latent yet important role of women within the family, who strive to keep the family intact and emotionally stable. Moreover, such a transformation reveals the duality of mankind; that leaders can be followers, and followers can be leaders, depending on the area of responsibility and obligations.

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*Early on in The Grapes of Wrath, the female characters are often described as “cautious” and “quiet,” tending to leave the men alone “to figure and to wonder in the dust.” (p. 34). But later in the novel (e.g., p. 210; p. 280; 454-455), female characters seem to become more active and assertive. What, if anything, do these changes tell us about the role of gender in The Grapes of Wrath?*

## **Emma Sheldon**

### **A Piece of All Bearing**

While it is true that the female characters of The Grapes of Wrath are initially described as “cautious”, or “quiet”, there is never any intimation of weakness in Steinbeck’s handling of these words. Ma’s “muscle” arms and “strong, broad” feet, and her face: “not soft... controlled” leave no doubt that, despite her placid nature, she is an incredibly powerful woman. Steinbeck makes clear right away that this is the core of the female role in the novel: the “citadel of the family”. Thus, it is no surprise that the Joad family’s expulsion from comfortable, agricultural lives to those of threadbare migrants causes the strength of the women to be invariably brought forth. After all, Ma knew that “if she swayed, the family shook, and that if she ever really deeply wavered... the family would fall” (p.74).

Both physically and figuratively, the women of the novel are the centers of their families and homes. While the men present themselves to outsiders as the head of the family, the women stand between their husbands and their children. Likewise, in family meetings, although the men are at the middle of the gathering, it is the women who stand between husband and child. They physically connect the different members of the family.

This is true in a less literal sense as well, as it is the women who do the cooking. It is often said that a hearth is the center of a home, and likewise, it is the women who bring life and food to the hearth, and thus to the family. In fact, mealtime is the only time of day that all the Joads are together and engaging one another—even when they are crammed together on the truck the conversations and activities are fragmented. Therefore, it is fair to say that, although the men claim the title of Head of the Family, it is the women who truly join father, mother and child together.

But life on the road makes this a difficult task. Part of the women’s ability to perform their role as the family’s core relies on the men’s capabilities as breadwinners; if there is no money, there is no food, nothing to warm the hearth and the family. And during the Dust Bowl, there was no work for any “Okie”, back home or elsewhere. Thus, breadwinners turned to beggars, and the women had to fight to keep the family whole.

Ma repeats over and over throughout the novel that the family has to stay together, that “it ain’t good for folks to break up” (p.165). It is evident that she understands that, as the family’s center, it is her duty to stop this from happening. Thus, when it comes time for decision making on the road, it is Ma who makes the choices as it is she who bears responsibility for the family, and Pa’s traditional title is squashed.

When the Wilson's old jalopy breaks down and Tom suggests that he and Casy stay behind to fix it while the family moves on, the men all begin to agree. But then Ma steps in. With jack handle in hand, she threatens Pa, "The only way you gonna get me to go is whup me... an' if ya do... I'll knock you belly-up". Pa complains weakly, but "the whole family shifted back to Ma. She was the power. She had taken control." (p.169) It was decided: the family would stick together no matter what, and it was Ma who made it so.

Yet her most shocking act to shelter the family comes as they cross the desert of Arizona in the night. Granma, who has become increasingly unwell, dies while lying next to Ma in the back of the truck. But there are still hours of travel ahead of the Joads before they can escape the desert—and they must do so before the sun rises, punishingly hot. So throughout the night, Ma lays quietly next to her mother-in-law's cadaver. Clearly, she will do whatever it takes to hold her family together.

But as Granma dies, Connie and Rose of Sharon make clandestine love in a corner of the truck bed, unaware. This startling juxtaposition illustrates Ma's thinking that "bearin' an' dyin' is two pieces of the same thing." (p.210) A full circle of life is taking place in the truck bed, and Ma is stuck in the middle of it, telling herself, "it's gonna be alright... you know the family got to get acrost."(p.225) It is a mantra that compels her to hold fast to her female role of protecting the family.

Meanwhile, Rose of Sharon is just beginning to make a family of her own and to understand this approaching responsibility. She is the only other woman who actually makes it in to the latter part of the novel. While it's true that Ruthie, too, survives the journey, her role is a child's, not a woman's.

Rose of Sharon is pregnant with her first child and is developing from a feisty young hoyden into a mother, a citadel of her own family. As the novel and the pregnancy progress, she feels the weight of her duty grow in her swelling womb. On the road, Rose of Sharon cautiously "[takes] up the road shock in her knees and hams... pregnant and careful... her whole thought and action were directed inward". In her own little world, the once boisterous child has become a "demure"(p.95) young mother, and her callow husband Connie looks at her change in pregnancy with both wonder and fear.

Yet as the Joads make their way to California, family and food contract, but Rose of Sharon continues to grow. As Tom puts it, "if she keeps a-swellin' like this, she gonna need a wheelbarra to carry it." (p.336) But Connie abandons her, and the whole family is starving. Rose of Sharon's panic to take care of her unborn child causes her to become snappy and demanding, losing her initial quiet grace. She complains, "ain't had milk like they said I ought... this here baby ain't gonna be no good."(p.353-354) Another sign of her desperation to fulfill her protective role as a woman and mother is that she eats slack lime. This is symptomatic of pica, a disorder that causes some pregnant women to crave non-food items like dirt, in an effort to make up for vitamin or iron deficiencies. Rose of Sharon also begins to spend most of her time lying down and refusing to work; she is already husbandless and she is terrified of losing the other,

unborn member of her new family.

Yet in the final, most heart wrenching scene of the novel, the baby is delivered a stillborn, “a blue shriveled little mummy” (p.444) in an abandoned box car. Outside, a terrible flood is rising. The flood is a symbolic purgation that recalls the Great Flood, and despite its destructive nature will allow for a new beginning as it ends. The family escapes to a barn on higher ground, in which they find a boy and his starving father clinging to life. It is here that Rose of Sharon creates a new beginning, completing her transformation into a citadel, a protector of life in the face of death.

The family respectfully leaves the barn as she breastfeeds the dying man, and “her lips came together and smiled mysteriously.” (p.455) In her first act that is not directed inward, it is clear that Rose of Sharon has come to understand her role of sanctuary giver in a much greater family than her own. She sees that Ma was right: “bearin’ is a piece of all bearin’, an’ bearin’ an’ dyin’ is two pieces of the same thing.” (p.210) That is, she has joined the brotherhood of man that the preacher Casy had prophesized. The death of her child and her rescue of the dying man are little pieces of “one big soul ever’body’s a part of.”(p.24)

Rose of Sharon’s quiet, cautious nature changes to a strong and selfless one. She becomes not just a mother, but a piece of Mother Earth, a citadel for not just a family, but for humanity as a whole. She delivers Steinbeck’s plea for the triumph of compassion over cupidity, for the end of human suffering caused by human avarice.

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*In one of the most memorable passages in the novel, Steinbeck's narrator laments the circumstances in which when a "crop grew, and was harvested, no man had crumbled a hot clod in his fingers and let the earth sift past his fingertips. No man had touched the seed, or lusted for the growth. Men ate what they had not raised, had no connection with the bread." (p. 36). Why did Steinbeck seem to think this mattered, and was he right to think so?*

## **Erik Johnson**

A central theme of John Steinbeck's novel The Grapes of Wrath, and seemingly his own social philosophy, is the importance of mankind as an interconnected unit. It is one defined by contradictions, whereby man constantly struggles through competing notions of self-interest and altruism, and one of the cycles, those that give history to man's competing struggles. This idea of man is presented throughout The Grapes of Wrath, as we see even in the earliest part of the book, where the trucker who picks up Tom Joad is caught between his desire to help Tom and his concern for his own job, to the end of the book, where Rose of Sharon, despite her own weakness and sense of dignity, provides milk to an old, dying man. Yet, while mankind is defined by such a complicated array of competing ideas, they are all ultimately one experience, a part of the single structure of mankind, borne from an understanding of each other's suffering and each other's need to survive. As we find in Casy's speech in Chapter 20, Steinbeck proposes the unity of human nature with the lines: "maybe it's all men an' all women we love."

Yet, what happens when one man can no longer see the troubles of another, when he is indifferent to his toils, and doesn't understand his experience in life and nature, in the way he "had crumbled a hot clod in his fingers and let the earth sift past his fingertips"? This failing of human unity is the crux of what Steinbeck asserts as the indifferent mechanization of man's experience. As the novel progresses, we see how machines replace the long-established labors of men, how they are methodical and ceaseless in their apathetic "rape" of the land. That "no man had touched the seed, or lusted for the growth," this is the tragedy of Steinbeck's humanism. A man on a tractor provided by the bank no longer sees the sweat and toil that another man put all his life into, and he soon forgets other men's ordeals and why they are hungry and why they are angry for the loss of their land, or their endless journey across another horizon, in search of a job, any job.

Man has a heart, but a machine does not, and while men can help each other through adversity or understand each other's dreams and shortcomings. A machine knows only the ceaseless churning of its gears and metal organs. The human experience is not meant to be run by metal behemoths with "no prayers or curses."

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## **Nancy Li**

The novel The Grapes of Wrath written by John Steinbeck builds an image of a struggling America as it follows the journey of the Joad family through the west. Alongside the great migrating people of the Dust Bowl era are the members of the Joad family, each with a colorful moral view that digresses from their rustic farming background. Individually, each character makes important self revelations about his or her hopes, dreams and fates; collectively, the characters illustrate the broad spectrum of emotions that came about through America's Great Depression. But beyond the Joad family is a different group of Americans: passive Americans, individuals who experience much different tribulations than the Joads. In contrast to the members of the Joad family who actively fight to maintain their dignity, these passive Americans suffer from apathy, a social condition that Steinbeck addresses and rightfully denounced throughout the novel.

Steinbeck's most affirmative criticism of apathy is illustrated through his description of the men's disconnection with the soil. In contrast to the Joad family, whose roots are deeply embedded in the surrounding landscape, these passive men have never "touched the seed, or lusted for the growth" (Steinbeck 36). Steinbeck further focuses on the lifeless nature of these men as they "[eat] what they [have] not raised" (36) ultimately losing all "connection with the bread" (36). Steinbeck's written circumstance is a powerful argument against apathy because it directly blames passivity for breaking the men's connection with the earth. These passive men no longer relate to the vital elements of survival which in this case are the crops that provide nourishment and sustain life. Steinbeck's discontentment towards the men's dispassion for the origin of their food is further depicted through the plot. It is solely the takeover of the Joad family farm by machine dominated crop corporations that cause the Joads and other families to embark on their turbulent journey to California. The distraught emotions expressed through Ma's action in burning her family photos early in the novel further intensifies the immorality of these corporations. Thus, by juxtaposing heartbreaking human moments against the proliferation of machines, Steinbeck establishes a direct correlation between sorrow and the consequences of men's disconnection with the earth.

However, the men's detachment from the soil is only a specific example of the more prominent issue of apathy in society. In The Grapes of Wrath, Steinbeck draws a parallel between the harm in disconnecting from the earth and the even more prominent danger in disconnecting from society. In one of the many vignettes in the novel, Steinbeck explains in detail the "failure" of America, a concept that solidifies the vital role of passivity in the Great Depression. In contrast to the more conventional belief that the depression was spurred by the monetary collapse on Wall Street, Steinbeck places the blame on the civilians of America and their ignorance of one another. In Chapter 25, Steinbeck first prides the imaginative scientists

who construct the seeds of fruits, formulate chemical mixtures for pesticides, and delicately mold plants into elaborate creations. However, beyond these praises, Steinbeck also notes the important role that these men play in the creation of the Great Depression. Despite the brilliance in their discoveries, the monetary repercussions of the scientists' super-fruits are tremendous. Due to the consequential high price in producing and nursing these new fruits, the cost of labor must be suppressed in order to make these fruits profitable. The inability of these intelligent scientists to see beyond their own successes and connect with the other brackets of society results in repercussions that lead to the creation of financial difficulties for many. As Steinbeck notes, these "men who can graft the trees and make the seed fertile and big can find no way to let the hungry people eat their produce" (349) and their "failure hangs...like a great sorrow" (348).

Furthermore, the apathy evident in the owners of the fruit plantations evokes disturbing consequences. The businessmen's devotion to the idea of profit and passivity towards the needs of laborers creates not only financial woes but also anger and frustration. Their actions in "squirting kerosene on the oranges, ...burn[ing] coffee for fuel in the ships, ...burn[ing] corn, ...dump[ing] potatoes in the rivers, ...[and] slaughter[ing] pigs" (349) are "crime[s] that goes far beyond denunciation" (349). The resulting smell of decay throughout the America effectively portrays the decay of American morals and values. The hardening of the businessmen's heart through apathy consequently results in the destruction of the American lifestyle and dignity. Thus, the ignorance and apathy of scientists and businessmen intensify the sorrow in the Great Depression for these men do not understand the roots of the economic and social problem and consequently lack the ability to remedy the situation.

The novel The Grapes of Wrath not only explores the nuances of human emotion but also sheds light on social problems present in the Great Depression. John Steinbeck focuses greatly on the social issue of apathy in all aspects of the novel through the instances of men's detachment with the earth and the more disconcerting problem of men's detachment with one another. The men's passivity towards the origins of their food create problems that lead to evictions and family traumas, but it is men's passivity towards one another that ultimately gives birth to the emotions of anger, fear, and frustrations that only escalate the agony of the Great Depression.

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*What should we make of the narrator's description of the turtle in chapter three of The Grapes of Wrath? Is this just an interlude, or does the description have some greater significance in the novel?*

## **Emily Throwe**

The early chapters John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath are marked by a noticeably slow narrative pace and extensive description. Such an opening makes the appearance of and specific attention to the turtle appropriate and possibly predictable. Initially, the turtle's involvement in the novel can be viewed as a stylistic device, contributing to the tone of the prose; but as the plot progresses the turtle reveals itself as a parallel to the story's human travelers.

The placement of the turtle's appearance near the beginning of Steinbeck's novel aids in developing the mood of the piece and creating a unified environment. The book's opening is marked by elaborate description of "the gray country," (1) "sluggish smoke," (2) and a sun "red as ripe new blood" (3). This lengthy passage sets an unhurried narrative pace, while its individual words connote death and sickness to add to concept of slowed time. The turtle then reinforces this pacing by introducing an archetype of slow travel and lifestyle. Along with the copious description, the start of the story also contains numerous instances of personification of the natural environment. Weeds "protect themselves" (1) and the wind "crie[s] and whimper[s]" (2) as if the setting itself were a living, and suffering, character. Once again, the turtle holds an important role. With its introduction readers see a character who, although alive, reflects the arid and desolate region. This helps bridge the divide between main characters such as Tom Joad, who is starting a new era of his life, and the novel's setting, which is wasting away. Still, the turtle's main significance cannot be viewed in this limited sampling of the novel, but rather must be applied across the text.

The turtle is not simply an item used as a diversion from the plot or as a manipulator of the narrative pace; it also parallels the novel's human characters. Just as Joad family makes its way across the country, the turtle also traverses the dying landscape, slowly bringing itself to a destination. Beyond this direct parallel, the turtle represents the qualities the successful travelers must have: determination, resilience, a home figuratively carried on their backs. Potential troubles such as "barley beards...and...clover burrs" simply "slid off" or "rolled to the ground" (14) mirroring the determination the Joads must have in the face of squalid living conditions and lack of work. When the turtle is hindered or even totally interrupted in its journey it does not worry about time lost or future obstacles, it simply makes a continual effort to resume its course. This gives the turtle an advantage over the Joads who are worn by their worry of having money or crossing the desert. Similarly, the turtle holds superiority in the carrying of its home. Literally, the Joads create a fair replication of having a home on their backs with their laden and modified car; psychologically however, the Joads face great stress from the loss of companions, a disturbance to the peace and success of their home. The concept that one "shouldn't of broke up the fambly" (48) is repeatedly expressed, yet the Joads separate on multiple occasions. This contrast between the successful turtle and the monumental struggle of its human counterparts suggests Steinbeck's greater message of what is necessary to survive. Even when the

environment is utterly unforgiving, perseverance and a strong connection with family and friends will allow for success.

Initially as a stylistic element and secondly as a carrier of the novel's themes, the turtle deserves a deeper examination than its innocuous description might suggest. As a stylistic device and a metaphor for human migration, the small appearance by the turtle truly holds great significance. "[N]ot really walking, but boosting and dragging his shell along," (14) this creature epitomizes the values and possibilities of the successful individual.

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What do you think it means that The Grapes of Wrath starts with a drought and ends with floods?

**Chase Meyer**

## **When It Rains, It Pours**

***“But, Tom, we keep a-comin’. Don’t you fret none, Tom. A different time’s comin’.”***

**-- Ma Joad**

The Grapes of Wrath, a classic great American novel written years ago by the infamous John Steinbeck, is a work of the highest literary merit that has been read, reread, viewed, reviewed, picked apart, and occasionally overanalyzed so often and for so long that little room remains for original interpretation and novel thought. That doesn't mean, however, that it can't be attempted, as the book contains a plethora of images and ideas, observations and views that remain relevant still a full seventy years after its publication. To delve right into deciphering the book and its message, the environmental setting is a simple-to-understand yet highly symbolic place to start. Although the weather throughout the novel is most certainly a prominent and powerful driving force behind many of the main characters' actions, decisions, motivations and developments, a start comparison between the climatic conditions of the novel's commencement and of its closing is an often overlooked and underappreciated avenue on the road to evaluating the complex meanings of Steinbeck's attempted message.

As he paints a debilitating scene at the novel's beginning of near-complete desperation and sorrow, Steinbeck attributes the main cause of the Joad family's deteriorating financial and emotional situation to be the widespread lack of rainfall and its subsequent and devastating effects on the soil of America's breadbasket. Beginning his story with such a setting, Steinbeck immediately puts the reader into the mindset that most of middle America felt at the time of the Great Depression: utter exhaustion. The earth was dry, the sky was dry, pocketbooks were dry, lives were dry – the drought mirrored the emotions of the people, and vice-versa.

As the farmers of Oklahoma waited out the worst of their condition, they quickly realized that the situation would only be getting worse. It was only then, at a point where every other option was exhausted, that the dream of California really erupted and took off among the people. Before leaving for the Golden State, the hopes and dreams of the “Okies” were empty and lost, just like the drought-infested land. Immediately upon leaving and for mostly thereafter, these hopes and dreams of the weary travelers evolved and grew little by little as they dealt with the pain of leaving their homeland for a foreign state. Each migrant worker, upon reaching the west coast, had developed a spirit of hopeful anticipation as to the opportunities California held for a better life; however, the cruel humor of the universe prevented any such luxurious Shangri-La type paradise from ever being attainable to the impoverished farmers.

As the novel came to its close, a memorable closing chapter brought torrential downpours to the dusty Joad family and to those around them. Reasons as to Steinbeck's intention for this interesting ending could be analyzed in myriad ways, with the archetype of water and renewal being the most clear-cut and logical; however, an alternate way of viewing the flooding rains

could also be considered. In comparison to the novel's beginning climate conditions, the lack of any water in the atmosphere could be seen, as earlier stated, to mirror the emotions, hopes and dreams of the people which were also lacking. As the drought in the beginning reflected this absence of good feeling, so do the floods at the end symbolize the over-accumulation of such hopes and feelings amongst the people – hopes that never came to fruition. Too much of a good thing can most certainly turn bad, and such can be seen in the hopeful ignorance of the migrant travelers as to the real workplace conditions of California thus bringing a tragic and sickening situation filled with starvation, poverty, and lack of work for all as they “flooded” into the state. As Ma Joad said to her son Tom, “a different time's comin'” to the people of America.

The meaning of the beginning drought and concluding floods is open to the interpretation of each individual reader, but it's an interesting take on the subject to consider that nature, more powerful than any man, could in fact be just a reflection of man himself, and of the hopes and dreams man had for his family as he traveled across the country in Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath.

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*Does the progress of the story in The Grapes of Wrath give us any reason to think that Tom Joad could have been justified in killing the deputy? If so, how? If not, why not?*

## **Michael Alexander Kats-Rubin**

For any political activist, from the environmentalist to the communist, the greatest foe is never corporate greed or vicious landowners, but rather the apathy of the common man. It is this constant struggle against the grinding crush of the hundreds of minor daily tasks that each person faces that determines the success of any movement, and it is this critical battle that makes Steinbeck's imposed justification of Tom Joad's murder so meaningful. Steinbeck provides a context for a morally repugnant act that makes the act not only moral, but deserving of sympathy by creating a hatred of the deputy and the system he represents, revealing Tom's previous encounters with violence and murder, and develop an ethical system independent of that of the United States legal system. In doing so, Steinbeck is able to leave the otherwise apathetic reader not merely sympathetic with the migrant worker, but fully aligned to an otherwise shocking degree.

The groundwork for justifying the murder of an officer of the law is laid through showing the overwhelming, unrelenting, and catastrophic injustice committed against the migrants, enforced, and often committed by, officers. Steinbeck carefully, and credibly, portrays this injustice, edging it towards an empathy with wrath through the book. The abuse takes a multitude of forms, from threatening and "scarin' women" (pg. 214), to corruption, greed, and murder. More than faceless butchers though, their motivation is made clear, time and again, as the officers strive "to keep these here people down or they'll take the country" (pg. 236). With belief that "if they (the migrant workers) ever get together there ain't nothin' that'll stop'em," (pg.236) deputies try desperately to carry their hate beyond their jurisdiction into government camps, where "the fellas that runs the camp is jus' fellas—camping here" (pg. 287). In spite of the fact that "no cop can come in here (the government camp) without a warrant" (pg. 287), order is maintained in a camp where the migrant workers are able to "feel like people again" (pg. 307). Yet the knowledge that the migrant workers, descendants of men who "fit in the Revolution" (pg. 307) are able to live like people infuriates the officers, who pay men to start a riot, just so they can invade the camp. The proactive application of the law, and the frequent violation of it by officers sworn to uphold it leaves even the initially aloof reader offended and angry.

Officers go beyond even this proactive law enforcement, however, when they spread false stories in the news about the destruction of a Hooverville, and threaten Tom, saying "if it gets around that you got reds out here—why, somebody might git hurt" (pg. 264). Later, after the family flees, Tom hears a news article revealing the overwhelming and systematic oppression of the migrants: "Citizens, angered at red agitators, burn squatters' camp. Last night a band of citizens, infuriated at the agitation going on in a local squatters' camp, burn the tents to the ground and warned agitators to get out of the country" (295). The mistrust of law officers and outrage against such unremitting injustice brings the reader's feelings into alignment with Tom's own feelings, "they was a guard made it tough. I was gonna lay for 'im. Guess that's what makes

me mad at cops. Seems like ever' cop got his face. He use' ta get red in the face. Looked like a pig. Had a brother out west, they said. Use' ta get fellas paroled to his brother, an' then they had to work for nothin' if they raised a stink, they'd get sent back for breakin' parole. That's what the feller said" (pg 366). In creating this alignment of feelings, Steinbeck not only sets the stage to justify a murder, but also provides a starting point from which to judge Tom's actions.

Beyond creating in the reader a hatred for deputies, Steinbeck also creates for Tom a history of violence that is not so black and white. The story begins with Tom returning from McAlester prison for a murder that occurred in a drunken brawl. Even after his four years Tom believes that "if Herb or anybody else come for me, I'd do her again. Do her before I could figure her out" (pg. 55). Because the crime was done in self defense, it is for most readers, understandable. Even when Tom witnesses a man being arrested for standing up for other migrants, he waited until the man to try to free himself before merely putting "out his foot for him (the deputy) to trip over" (pg. 264). Rather than kill that officer to get away or protect his friend from jail time, Tom runs and hides. With the murder of the deputy however, Tom witnesses Casy's murder and kills the officer. In spite of the pervasive cruelty of officers in the book, Steinbeck is careful to not indicate that the deputy Tom murders would have turned on Tom violently. At best, Tom's act is that of vigilante justice, but Steinbeck is careful not to create the justification of self defense. To do so would be to give the reader an excuse, instead, Steinbeck forces the reader to grapple with the murder and come to terms with it.

To direct this moral struggle, Steinbeck draws the prevailing laws and governance into question throughout the book. Steinbeck reveals the suffering caused by the existing systems, and is swift to point out that "a fallow field is a sin and the unused land a crime against the thin children" (pg. 234). For the deputies, this struggle is particularly dangerous, for "how can you frighten a man whose hunger is not only in his own cramped stomach but in the wretched bellies of his children?" (pg. 237) Amidst this starvation, poverty, and desperation Steinbeck says, "the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy" (349). But it is Casy, a man who has left the corrupt and hypocritical life of the preacher for one of reflection, who concludes "I'm sure nobody got a right to mess with a fella's life. He got to do it all hisself. Help him, maybe, but not tell him what to do" (pg. 224).

Ultimately, Steinbeck crafts the progress of The Grapes of Wrath to force readers to confront the illegal murder of the deputy, but only once burdened with a hate for deputies and a rage against the injustice of the law. In the end, not only does the reader sympathize with Tom, he empathizes with him. Witnessing the face of starvation, it is easy to understand the migrant workers, to wish for them a better life, yet remain apathetic or willing to compromise on solutions to their plight. But once the reader feels empathy for Tom—even after he brutally murders an officer of the law—the reader is left fully committed and aligned with the migrant workers. And through this emotional and psychological alignment, Steinbeck creates a powerful work with far reaching implications in the struggle for the common man.

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*tournaments on the policy debate team and has started working at the Cornell University Agricultural Experimentation Station on a project to expand conservation and energy efficiency efforts here at CALS.*

*Early in 1939, Steinbeck reportedly told his editor that he had done his best “to rip a reader’s nerves to rags;” and that he wanted to “write this book the way lives are being lived not the way books are written.” Carefully describe one scene from the novel that you think fits this characterization. Then briefly say why, despite such scenes, the novel continues to appeal to so many people across several decades.*

## **Spencer Chen**

### **Fish Out of Water**

Steinbeck’s almost ever-present adherence to biblical allusions is no different in his work The Grapes of Wrath. However, to “write the way lives are being lived” Steinbeck has depicted the lives of the Joad family in an environment where God seems almost nonexistent. With such an approach, Steinbeck thrusts the reader into a world where man has to take responsibility for actions committed and such, a world where God is not present to be blamed.

The absence of God in Grapes is glaringly obvious. While the Joad family prays consistently at the dawn of the novel, spurned on by Granma’s “Grace fust, Grace fust” (80), with the death of Granma and Granpa comes a religious void in the Joad’s life. There is no more mention of grace before meals and none of the family members act remotely religious; with the burial of Granma, the Joads have discarded their religion. For the reader, Granma can be interpreted as not only a religious connection but also the Joad’s connection to traditional values of the past, including an honoring and reliance on God. The death in turn brings an end to these values. If there is anything beautiful about the death in this scene, it is the stoicism displayed by Ma as she rides silently with the fresh corpse, “a woman so great with love” as Casy puts it, and with this image, Steinbeck captures the strength and love that is so prevalent in the human spirit.

Steinbeck’s choice to present the readers with a Godless world is disconcerting and in many ways unusual. Despite this absence of religion, the Joad’s journey is above all, a testimony to well-known biblical stories; with the overall journey as a reference to the Israelite’s journey out of Egypt to the promised land, Tom as both a Moses and Jesus figure, and the novel’s ending with a flood as a nod towards the story of Noah, Grapes’ heavy reliance on biblical allusions combined with a scornful rejection of the basis of these allusions easily “rip a reader’s nerves to rags” and place the reader in unfamiliar territory, much like a fish out of water. As calamities befall the Joads, not once do they curse the heavens or pray for help, actions that seem so natural when their lives are nearly carbon copies of Sunday School stories; the disillusionment they face is not a result of God but rather, “a bad thing made by man,” (38) something the Joads must fight on their own. Steinbeck places the Joads in a place where they have no choice but to turn to their fellow migrants and in many cases, themselves.

Steinbeck rigidly follows this principle; whereas in the Bible, God is frequently seen as a force that communicates benevolently with the people, in Grapes, God’s presence and interaction with the characters of the story, is misplaced and counteracted with an omniscient narrator who carefully depicts the struggles of the migrants. Steinbeck’s choice to rely on a human voice,

contributes to the beauty of the book; after all, Grapes is above all, a story of the human experience. With its exploration of guilt, betrayal, love, cruelty, death, family, sacrifice, desperation, hope, and perseverance, Grapes is a novel that calls to every man, woman, and child. The experiences of the Joads combined with the careful inter-chapter narratives bring the book to a new level of understanding and connection spanning across generations of people struggling with problems of their era. Steinbeck, quite frankly mankind's biggest proponent, believes above all else in men and seems in his own way, to possess a true understanding of the day-to-day struggle that men face. As the Joads and migrants struggle with the havoc of environmental carelessness, so do people today as carbon emissions cloud the skies and pollution destroys natural resources around the world. Steinbeck's timeless Grapes continues to urge men to find strength to take responsibility for independence, to never underestimate the human spirit, and to value the beauty of human perseverance.

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*Early in 1939, Steinbeck reportedly told his editor that he had done his best “to rip a reader’s nerves to rags;” and that he wanted to “write this book the way lives are being lived not the way books are written.” Carefully describe one scene from the novel that you think fits this characterization. Then briefly say why, despite such scenes, the novel continues to appeal to so many people across several decades.*

## **Laura Van Winkle**

One of the notable features of *Grapes of Wrath* is its painfully realistic portrayal of human nature. John Steinbeck, upon completion of the book, informed his editor that his intention was to “rip the reader’s nerves to rags” with a brutal account of the people really are, and not the way we technically “want” them to be in our light-hearted novels. While the whole novel is crafted in masterful adherence to this ideal, chapter fifteen manages to not only shred the heartstrings, but also carefully weaves them back together, a process repeated multiple times throughout the course of the story.

In chapter fifteen, we are introduced to Mae and Al, proprietors of a sandwich spot along Route 66 to California. Al, the stoic, silent cook, fulfills orders efficiently and flavorfully. Mae stands at the counter, taking orders and chatting up the customers. Their business runs fairly smoothly, considering the economic crisis, and they especially enjoy the patronage of truck drivers. The truckers pay well and appreciate Mae’s service, unlike the customers to whom Mae refers as “shitheels,” snotty passers-through who buy little more than a cool drink and swipe a stick of gum on the way out the door.

On the day that we watch Al and Mae, they receive visits from both types of people and add a third to their demographic: a father and his two small boys come into the store, asking to purchase a ten-cent loaf of bread. Mae insists that they cannot bread alone; buy a sandwich, sir. After some entreaty from the father and disgruntled badgering from Al, Mae sells the man a fifteen-cent loaf of bread for a dime and follows it up by taking only a penny for ten-cents-worth of candy. The man leaves, as do the truckers present for the interchange. The scene puts a bad taste in the drivers’ mouths, and they leave in a bit of a huff. However, both men leave fifty-cent piece on the counter for Mae, covering not only the cost of their sandwiches and tips, but all of and more than the cost of the bread and candy that the father purchased for his children.

For any salesperson, especially one unused to the notion of haggling, Mae’s confrontation with the father recalls feelings of anxiety and distress. When a customer comes in asking that you not only sell your precious supplies, but also knock off 30% of the profits you would normally received for it, the situation very stressful. We can see Mae, the sales-minded half of the couple, struggling to make a decision. She can’t abruptly turn this desperate family away, but it rubs her wrong to do what he asks. As an audience, we squirm. The situation invokes a just anger—why not sell him the bread? You’re doing fine, and they’re starving! Do a good deed! Steinbeck is, in this instance, tearing his pen through our nerves. We hear Al, who doesn’t need to deal with customers or balance the books, voicing our concerns from the kitchen. (“Al said snarlingly, ‘Goddamnit, Mae. Give ‘em the loaf.’”) Eventually she relents, taking the ten cents.

Steinbeck has set us up to like both proprietors, but from the beginning our affections teeter with Mae. She is selective about which customers she treats well, and this annoys anyone who has stood around while a cashier laughs with a school friend. When she stumbles with this father and gives him trouble over a little five cents, we bristle with vindication and indignation. We understand her motives, but her motives set us on edge. This exemplifies Steinbeck's goals of frazzling readers, presenting with a harsh actuality that we know and hate.

However, after stirring us up inside, Steinbeck pats our heads and tells us to watch. While we're on edge, the father asks about the peppermint sticks that his boys eye wistfully. This interaction follows:

“‘May soun’ funny to be so tight,’ [The father] apologized. ‘We got a thousan’ miles to go, an’ we don’t know if we’ll make it.’ He dug in the pouch with a forefinger, located a dime, and pinched in for it. When he put it down on the counter he had a penny with it. He was about to drop the penny back into the pouch when his eye fell on the boys frozen before the candy counter. He moved slowly down to them. He pointed in the case at big long sticks of striped peppermint. ‘Is them penny candy, ma’am?’

“‘Mae moved down and looked in. ‘Which ones?’

“‘There, them stripy ones.’

“‘The little boys raised their eyes to her face and they stopped breathing; their mouths were partly opened, their half-naked bodies were rigid.

“‘Oh—them. Well, no—them’s two for a penny.’

“‘Well, gimme two then, ma’am.’ He placed the copper cent carefully on the counter. The boys expelled their held breath softly. Mae held the big sticks out.”

Without provocation and with very little deliberation, Mae suddenly becomes soft and sweet, and Steinbeck starts braiding our nerves back together. Mae's change of heart is not unnatural or staged, but the emotional value of the gesture can be felt painfully at the base of your throat. The reality of the scene is only heightened when the drivers leave, not giving Mae anything like “You're a good lady” or “Them poor folks.” They slam the door with a “You go to hell” and leave exorbitant change.

Even as he digs for the nastier aspects of human nature, Steinbeck gives us a cool glass of water to wash it down. We do not return to check up on Al and Mae during the course of the novel, but the short vignette epitomizes the terrifying reality towards which Steinbeck strove, while simultaneously providing us with the sort of hopeful narrative that keeps audiences returning to this work. All signs point towards the bright light at the end of the journey: Casy's death redeeming his life, Tom's departure promising a zealous uprising, and Rose of Sharon's stillbirth giving way to the provision of life. The short scene in chapter fifteen, right in the center of the book, gives us the template for the whole tale. This feeling of unity and salvation for all

people is one of the many factors that maintains the popularity and universal appeal of this classic novel.

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