The Grapes of Wrath: Beyond the Obvious

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John Steinbeck ignited a firestorm in 1939 by pointing out what many Americans chose not to see: "There is a crime here that goes beyond denunciation," he asserted about the exploitation of migrant agricultural laborers, There is a sorrow here that weeping cannot symbolize. There is a failure here that topples all our success. The fertile earth, the straight tree rows, the sturdy trunks, and the ripe fruit. And children are dying of pellagra..." While most other well-known writers at the time kept their counsel--many of them afraid of being labeled radicals--he also declared it unambiguously wrong for children to starve in the richest agricultural region on earth.

When *The Grapes of Wrath* was published on April 14, 1939, the conditions with which many itinerants from the southwest and midwest--all generally called "Okies" at the time--lived became a national scandal. The novel's impact was immediate, and today it is acknowledged to be one of world's great novels as well as John Steinbeck's finest achievement in large measure because readers were able to see past the story's surface to its deeper moral core.

In 1939, indignation--feigned or genuine--on the part of those who felt maligned by the book led to hyperbole. An Oklahoma congressman, for example, called the novel a "black, infernal creation of a twisted, distorted mind." A congressman from Tulare declared, "it is the most damnable book that was ever permitted to be printed." The Kern County Board of Supervisors banned it from fall of 1939 until early 1941, and reading the novel wasn't much encouraged locally thereafter.
Before a movie of the novel was made in 1940, producer Darryl Zanuck sent agents into the field to see if Steinbeck had exaggerated. They reported that conditions were even worse than *The Grapes of Wrath* had shown. Nevertheless, W. B. Camp, President of the Associated Farmers of Kern County, said the story was all lies. "The Communist party wrote the outline and Steinbeck filled in the rest of the crap." He did a pretty good job with the crap apparently, winning the Pulitzer Prize, the National Brook Award and being elected to the National Institute of Arts & Letters.

As a matter of fact, most of the people I knew who complained about Steinbeck's novel had never bothered to read it. One neighbor said when she learned that I--a high-school boy-- wanted to read *The Grapes of Wrath*, "I don't have any interest in reading that filthy book, and you shouldn't either!" I read it anyway.

Who was this rabble-rousing, this dangerous, this disturbingly candid author? John Ernst Steinbeck, Jr., was born in Salinas on February 27, 1902 and died at Sag Harbor, New York, on December 20, 1968. His father was a miller who for eleven years served as treasurer of Monterey County; his mother, Olive Hamilton, was a school teacher. She read to her son daily, everything from fairy tales to children's classic to adult volumes, and he too became an avid reader. In high school he was an athlete and journalist, and was senior class president. He also developed the lifelong habit of writing daily; he would later say, "I write all the time. Writing is a sort of nervous tic with me. I would go crazy if I didn't write."

He didn't go crazy and he sure did write. From 1920 through 1925, John pursued classes at Stanford and studied intermittently with the noted writing professor Edith Mirrielees, then he spent a year in New York writing and doing day-labor before
returning to California. In 1929 his first published (though unsuccessful) novel, Cup of Gold, was released.

The next year the young author married Carol Henning who would remain his wife (and literary collaborator) throughout his most productive period, and he also met marine biologist Ed Ricketts, who became his closest friend and, like Carol, helped shape the author's personal philosophy. During the second half of that decade after having published another commercially unsuccessful novel, *To a God Unknown*, in 1933, Steinbeck stunned the literary world with a series of books: *Tortilla Flat* (1935), *In Dubious Battle* (1936), *Of Mice and Men* (1937), *The Long Valley* (1938), and finally *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939); that may constitute the finest brief creative burst ever enjoyed by an American author.

By the time he wrote the last of those, he'd been gripped by the plight of southwestern migrants, so he wrote a series of riveting newspaper accounts on their predicament for the San Francisco News. He also began work on an ambitious new novel that would use the plight of the migrants to examine history and current events and, most of all, explore the human spirit under duress.

The coming of migrants had, of course, rattled much of California: too many people were relocating to areas that could not comfortably absorb them. While "the Dust Bowl" was the focus of attention, the actual newcomers drifted in from a much larger area across the Great Plains, north and south, driven by economic collapse not dust. One Arkansas native later remembered, "We was 'Depressioned out,' not 'dusted out'." Somewhere between 300,000 and 500,000 people finally migrated to this state (and even more would join them in the 1940s). Near Bakersfield in April 1938 Paul
Schuster Taylor found at a squatters' camp auto licenses from Minnesota, Arizona, California, Nebraska, Mississippi, Utah, New Mexico, Oregon, Washington, Texas, Missouri, Arkansas and Oklahoma.

The unhappy fact for migrants and natives alike was that this so-called golden state had not avoided the Great Depression; it, too, had "busted" economically. In 1932, 200,000 more barrels of oil were produced in California daily than could be sold; agricultural revenues fell from $750 million in 1929 to $327 million in '32, and movies lost $83 million that year. A fifth of Los Angeles County's population was on relief that year, while San Francisco's unemployment rate reached 25%.

Moreover, farming here was agribusiness not agriculture. It was and remains dominated by what author Carey McWilliams labeled as "factories in the fields," industrial spreads, the most productive but perhaps least humane farming system in the history of the world. Californians, of course, did not cause the migration, but some certainly tried to take advantage of it, because agribusiness required large numbers of seasonal workers. Growers had traditionally found an abundant labor force, often non-whites. The arrival of the Okies did create an especially troubling social problem in agricultural communities: these migrants intended to settle down, not follow crops endlessly, and many were white, so they could not easily be racially isolated as had been Chinese or Black or East Indians.

In the company of Tom Collins, director of the Farm Security Administration's Weedpatch Demonstration Camp, Steinbeck visited desperate emigrants in the mid-30s. Together in an old bakery truck they called "the pie wagon," the two men visited Hoovervilles and ditch-bank camps like the one under the Kern River bridge between
Oildale and Bakersfield, Steinbeck seeing misery more desperate than he had ever imagined. For instance, disease wracked the homeless Okies: typhoid was common; smallpox epidemics occurred in the San Joaquin and Imperial Valleys; pneumonia, malaria, and tuberculosis, as well as internal parasites took heavy tolls, especially among children and the aged. Malnutrition was universal.

Then in 1937 rumors that the San Joaquin Valley cotton crop would require 25,000 additional pickers brought 70,000 migrants. Steinbeck wrote his agent that he feared a revolution was possible if something wasn't done to alleviate suffering. Meanwhile, his own initial efforts at a novel about this issue simply didn't work; he wrote and burned two manuscripts before finally settling on a satisfying story.

By 1938 the general public finally became sharply aware of Southwestern migrants in California after unusually heavy floods swept large portions of the Central Valley, leading to national coverage of desperate, washed-out migrants. The publication of *The Grapes of Wrath* the next year exposed to the entire world the execrable conditions with which they lived. In the Central Valley, defensiveness, dishonesty and purposeful misunderstanding characterized attacks on the novel, but so did charity and even sacrifice in behalf of the stranded Okies on the part of many.

Moreover, in the novel the author restates in simple, direct language, Ralph Waldo Emerson's notion of the "Oversoul." Doing so, he also suggests our deepest obligations to one another, which foreshadow the story's conclusion. Tom Joad tells his mother that the preacher Jim Casy:
Says one time he went out in the wilderness to fin' his own soul,
and he foun' he didn't have no soul that was his'n. Says he foun' jus' got
a little piece of a great big soul. Says a wilderness ain't no
good, 'cause his little piece of a soul wasn't no good 'less it was with
the rest and was whole.

Steinbeck's characters then begin the process of reassembling their collective soul.

Today the novel is celebrated worldwide by people who wouldn't know an Okie from an
oak tree, because it has transcended its subject while its theme--the stripping of illusion and
reassembling of the great soul--endures. Moreover, its unexpected conclusion still rivets: Just
when the Joads seem to have fallen to the nadir in that 1938 flood, Ma and Rose of Sharon
overcome their misery when, recognizing their responsibility to the human family, they agree
that the daughter nurse a famished stranger. This archetypal symbol of communion completes
the spiritual journey which parallels the physical journey of the Joads. The human community is
the Oversoul, so Ma and Rose of Sharon approach sainthood as the story ends. Savvy readers
have long seen beyond the immediate conditions of the story to deeper, universal truths.

John Steinbeck's novel did not then and does not now offer a social or economic
solution. In the corresponding reality, only World War II actually solved the nation's immediate
fiscal problems, but in the novel Rose of Sharon's act closed the mystic circle of life.

Steinbeck's career reached an apogee when he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature
in 1962. The Swedish Academy, in announcing his award, wrote, "He had no mind to be an
unoffending comforter and entertainer. Instead, the topics he chose were serious and
denunciatory.... His literary power steadily gained impetus...[until] the great work...the epic
As scholar Susan Shillinglaw has aptly noted, "the creation was greater than the creator." Steinbeck himself indirectly agreed when he wrote "Man, unlike any other thing organic or inorganic in the universe, grows beyond his work, walks up the stairs of his concepts, emerges ahead of his accomplishments." The author certainly did that in *The Grapes of Wrath*. He never again reached that level of creative achievement, but few if any others have either. Greatness doesn't come easy, and neither does the courage to confront ingrained social conditions that are drifting toward evil and showing, as Steinbeck did, how they remind us of universal challenges to the human condition.

As a student, one who hoped to become a writer, when I read *The Grapes of Wrath*, I viewed Steinbeck's great novel as a template for recognizing in local settings and actions the possibility of universal themes. The story's genesis of a new community—not only by Ma and Rose of Sharon, but also by Tom and Casy—seventy-five years later reflects collective human experiences and moves a simple narrative toward a sacred text, a social and economic version of the biblical Exodus. Steinbeck threw down a heavy gauntlet for future California authors, including me.