

## LITERARY ANALYSIS OF JOHN STEINBECK'S NOVEL "THE GRAPES OF WRATH"

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### ABSTRACT

This scientific literary article examines *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck as a powerful social and political critique of the Great Depression in America. The struggle between the powerful and the weak, family harmony, migration, and the delusion of the American Dream are among the main issues of the study. Biblical references, the symbolic meaning of important components (such as the turtle and Route 66), and Steinbeck's use of realism and naturalism to depict human pain and resiliency are all highlighted. Character development is given special consideration, especially Tom Joad's metamorphosis and Ma Joad's metaphorical power. The examination places the novel in its historical perspective by looking at how it reflects socioeconomic disparity, worker exploitation, and America in the 1930s. In the end, the book is seen as a timeless tale that opposes injustice and honors people's inherent worth despite hardship.

**Keywords.** Great depression, social critique, political critique, american dream, socioeconomic disparity, migration, family unity, symbolism.

### INTRODUCTION

Published in 1939, *The Grapes of Wrath* is a landmark novel in American literature. It chronicles the journey of the Joad family as they migrate from the Dust Bowl-stricken Oklahoma to California in search of a better life during the Great Depression. Steinbeck combines powerful storytelling with social criticism to paint a poignant picture of economic injustice, human resilience, and the struggle for dignity.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

The novel highlights the brutal conflict between landowners/banks and tenant farmers. The Joads, like thousands of others, are evicted by faceless banks ("the monster") that care little for the individuals they displace. This reflects Steinbeck's deep criticism of capitalism and institutionalized oppression. Despite the Joads' suffering, the family remains a symbol of strength and unity. Ma Joad emerges as the emotional center, showing that in times of crisis, family cohesion is both a survival mechanism and a source of hope. Steinbeck critiques the idealized notion of the American Dream. The migrants' journey reveals the broken promises of prosperity and the reality of exploitation. California, a supposed paradise, turns into a land of suffering and humiliation. The characters, especially Tom Joad and Jim Casy, demonstrate personal growth and moral clarity. Tom's famous final speech—"I'll be everywhere"—shows his transformation into a symbol of social justice and collective struggle. One of the most central and powerful themes in *The Grapes of Wrath* is the harsh divide between those who hold economic and social power and those who are at their mercy. Steinbeck vividly portrays

how large institutions—like banks, landowners, and agribusinesses—wield control over poor tenant farmers and migrant workers, often with devastating consequences.

Steinbeck illustrates that power is not just held by individuals, but by institutions and systems—banks, landowners, corporations, and law enforcement. These institutions are faceless, unaccountable, and function with no regard for the individual lives they destroy. The powerless, like the Joads and other "Okies," suffer from decisions made in boardrooms they'll never see. > Quote: "You'll have to go. But it's not me. There's nothing I can do. I'm just the tenant. The bank told me what to do. The bank gets orders from the East." This shows that even the small agents of power (landowners, tractor drivers) are themselves controlled by larger forces, reinforcing the idea of systemic domination.

## RESULTS

Steinbeck weaves biblical symbolism into the power dynamic. The powerless are depicted like the Israelites fleeing Egypt, while the landowners and corporations resemble Pharaoh's oppressive regime. Jim Casy, a Christ-like figure, sacrifices himself for the people, echoing Christ's death for humanity. Tom Joad, after Casy's death, becomes a prophetic voice for justice, symbolizing moral awakening and collective struggle.

"Wherever there's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there... I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad... I'll be there." Tom Joad, Chapter 28

The Turtle (Chapter 3): Slowly, painfully crossing the road, flipping back over after being knocked down, it symbolizes the migrant spirit—slow but unstoppable, crushed but never defeated.

The Dust: Represents both natural and economic destruction. It swallows homes, lives, and futures—much like the economic system swallows the powerless.

Steinbeck based his novel on real events of the 1930s:

The Dust Bowl (1930–1936) destroyed farms across the Great Plains, forcing over 2.5 million people to migrate west.

Agricultural labor camps in California were notorious for their poor conditions, low wages, and hostility to unionizing.

Steinbeck visited these camps himself and was deeply affected by the injustice he saw. Steinbeck doesn't only show physical suffering—he shows mental and emotional degradation. Men feel emasculated because they can't provide for their families; women bear the emotional weight of keeping families intact.

Ma Joad becomes the symbol of spiritual and emotional power. Though the men are crushed, she holds the family together, showing that sometimes true power lies not in domination but endurance.

## DISCUSSIONS

Voice as Power in *The Grapes of Wrath*. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, having a voice—the ability to speak out, organize, question injustice, and express shared suffering—is presented as a vital form of power, especially for the poor and oppressed. Steinbeck shows that those in power often try to silence the powerless, because when the marginalized speak together, they become dangerous to the status quo.

Silencing the Poor. Early in the novel, the Joads and other migrants are often voiceless, unable to affect the decisions being made about their lives. Land is taken, wages are slashed, camps are destroyed—all without their input. They're labeled "Okies," dehumanized, and treated as an indistinct mass of poverty. This lack of voice equals lack of power. Without speech, without a platform, they cannot organize, defend themselves, or even grieve properly.> Quote: "And the great owners, who must lose their land in an upheaval, the great owners with access to history, with eyes to read history and to know the great fact: when property accumulates in too few hands, it is taken away... when the majority is hungry and cold they will take by force what they need." This foreshadows the emerging voice of the people—a force that those in power fear.

Characters like Jim Casy and Tom Joad demonstrate that finding your voice means claiming your power. Casy begins as a former preacher searching for truth. He eventually becomes a labor organizer, realizing that the only way to fight oppression is through collective speech and action. His belief in the "oversoul"—that we are all connected—is the moral foundation for using one's voice not just for oneself, but for all. > "Maybe all men got one big soul ever'budy's a part of." He uses his voice to educate others, even though it ultimately costs him his life. Tom undergoes a transformation from an individualist to a spokesperson for the collective. After Casy's death, he decides to carry on his message—not just through action, but by becoming a voice for the voiceless.

Famous quote: "Wherever there's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there... I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad... I'll be there in the way kids laugh when they're hungry and they know supper's ready..." This speech is both spiritual and political—Tom is no longer one man, but a symbol of collective awareness and rebellion.

Steinbeck emphasizes that a shared voice—a unified people—is the most powerful force against injustice. In the migrant camps, when workers begin to organize, their voice becomes a threat. That's why authorities break up meetings and silence organizers: because a united voice becomes a political force.

Hoovervilles (informal camps) are dangerous to the powerful because they allow people to talk, share stories, and realize they are not alone.

In the government-run Weedpatch camp, dignity is restored partly because people govern themselves and are free to speak without fear.

Steinbeck's intercalary chapters (chapters that interrupt the Joads' story to speak broadly about the migrant experience) function as a collective voice of the people. These chapters reflect folk speech, collective suffering, and shared knowledge. They give voice to those who were erased from official history.

Example: Chapter 12, which describes the highway filled with thousands of cars, captures not a single story, but a shared experience: "66 is the mother road, the road of flight." It enables resistance: Once people understand and express their suffering, they can fight back. It enables solidarity: Through voice, the individual joins a group and finds strength.

Law as a Tool of the Powerful. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck demonstrates how the legal and law enforcement systems are not neutral or just, but are instead used to maintain control by the wealthy and powerful. The poor migrants, already victims of economic exploitation, are further suppressed by the very laws that are supposed to protect them.



Law Protects Property, Not People. The novel consistently shows that laws exist to protect property owners—not human dignity or survival. When tenant farmers like the Joads are evicted, the law supports the banks, not the families who've worked the land for generations.

### CONCLUSION

Throughout the novel, Steinbeck questions whether justice can truly exist in a system where wealth and power dominate.

The poor don't have access to legal representation.

Court decisions favor banks and big landowners.

Police are not held accountable for brutality or corruption.

Justice, in this world, is not blind—it's bought and enforced by those who already have power.

The government-run Weedpatch camp is the one place where the law seems to work for the people. It's self-governed, clean, and provides safety. The residents vote on matters and enforce rules fairly. This camp is Steinbeck's utopian example of what justice could look like—if law served human dignity instead of property.

The camp represents what is possible when power is decentralized and rooted in community needs, not corporate interests.

Steinbeck's novel shows that law, in the hands of the powerful, becomes a weapon—used not to protect justice, but to maintain economic inequality, silence dissent, and control the movements of the poor. But he also suggests that law can be reimagined and reclaimed—as shown in Weedpatch Camp—when it is guided by fairness, democracy, and compassion.

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