

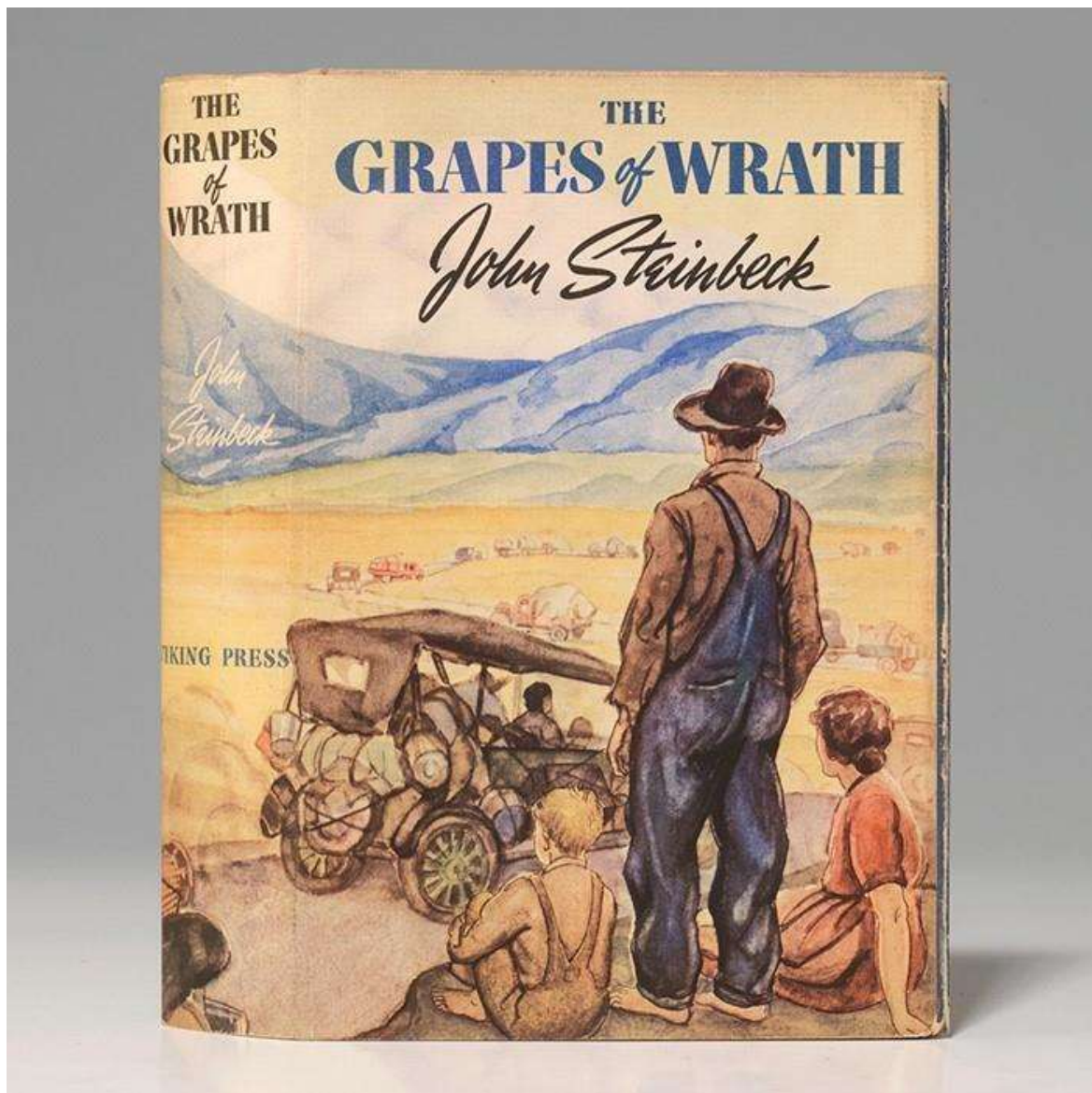
"The Grapes of Wrath" (1939) by John Steinbeck: A Canonical Book

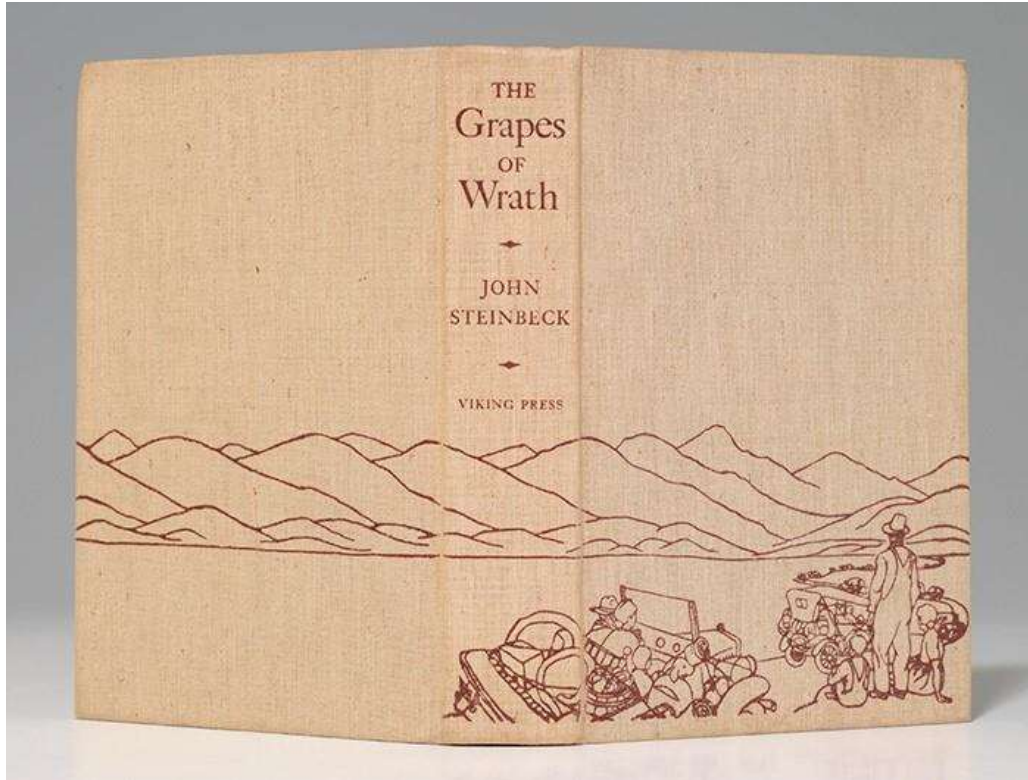
Curated by Stephen A. Batman

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Summary of this Particular Rare First Edition

John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, 1939





The Grapes of Wrath

And the tenant men came walking back, in pockets, hats pulled down. Some bought a pint and drank fast to make the impact hard and stunning. But they didn't laugh and they didn't dance. They didn't sing or pick the guitars. They walked back to the farms, hands in pockets and heads down, shoes kicking the red dust up.

Maybe we can start again, in the new rich land—in California, where the fruit grows. We'll start over.

But you can't start. Only a baby can start. You and me—why, we're all that's been. The anger of a moment, the thousand pictures, that's us. This land, this red land, is us; and the flood years and the dust years and the drought years are us. We can't start again. The bitterness we sold to the junk man—he got it all right, but we have it still. And when the owner men told us to go, that's us; and when the tractor hit the house, that's us until we're dead. To California or any place—every one a drum major leading a parade of hurts, marching with our bitterness. And some day—the armies of bitterness will all be going the same way. And they'll all walk together, and there'll be a dead terror from it.

The tenant men scuffed home to the farms through the red dust.

When everything that could be sold was sold, stoves and bedsteads, chairs and tables, little corner cupboards, tubs and tanks, still there were piles of possessions; and the women sat among them, turning them over and looking off beyond and pictures, square glasses, and here's a vase.

... well what we can take and what we can't ... a few pots to cook and wash in, and buckets, and a piece ... Know what ...

**"I'LL BE EVER'WHERE— WHEREVER YOU LOOK. WHEREVER THEY'S A FIGHT SO HUNGRY PEOPLE CAN EAT, I'LL BE THERE": BEAUTIFUL FIRST EDITION OF
*THE GRAPES OF WRATH***

First edition, first issue of Steinbeck's most important novel, his searing masterpiece of moral outrage and "intense humanity," winner of the 1940 Pulitzer Prize. "It is a long novel, the longest that Steinbeck has written, and yet it reads as if it had been composed in a flash, ripped off the typewriter and delivered to the public as an ultimatum... Steinbeck has written a novel from the depths of his heart with a sincerity seldom equaled" (Peter Monro Jack). "The Grapes of Wrath is the kind of art that's poured out of a crucible in which are mingled pity and indignation... Its power and importance do not lie in its political insight but in its intense humanity... [It] is the American novel of the season, probably the year, possibly the decade" (Clifton Fadiman).

First issue, with "First Published in April 1939" on copyright page and first edition notice on front flap of dust jacket. Goldstone & Payne A12a. Salinas Public Library, 29. Bruccoli & Clark I:354. Owner book label.

STEINBECK, John. **The Grapes of Wrath**. New York: Viking, (1939). Octavo, original pictorial beige cloth, illustrated endpapers, original dust jacket. Housed in a custom chemise and clamshell box.

Book fine, bright dust jacket very nearly fine with very light expert reinforcement to folds on verso. A beautiful copy.

Introduction

"The Grapes of Wrath," published on April 14, 1939, stands as one of the most influential American novels of the 20th century. John Steinbeck's masterpiece emerged from his firsthand observations of the devastating conditions faced by migrant workers during the Great Depression. The novel was directly inspired by Steinbeck's journalism work for The San Francisco News, which commissioned him to cover migrant labor camps in California's Salinas Valley. His seven-article series titled "The Harvest Gypsies," published in October 1936, documented the desperate conditions of Dust Bowl refugees, including hunger, squalid living quarters, and wage exploitation¹. These experiences provided the foundation for what would become his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel.

The cultural, economic, and political climate surrounding the publication of "The Grapes of Wrath" was one of immense struggle and transformation. America was still reeling from the Great Depression, and the Dust Bowl had devastated agricultural communities across the Great Plains. Millions of Americans had been displaced, with many migrating westward in search of work and a better life. This mass migration created social tensions, particularly in California, where local communities often viewed the newcomers with suspicion and hostility. Steinbeck's novel emerged as a powerful voice for these marginalized Americans, capturing their plight with unflinching realism and compassion.

Steinbeck wrote the 619-page opus in a remarkably short period—just five months—working in longhand while his first wife, Carol, typed the manuscript¹. The urgency with which he wrote reflects the pressing nature of the social issues he sought to address. His purpose in writing "The Grapes of Wrath" was to provide an observation of the struggle of migrant laborers and to "put a tag of shame on the greedy bastards" responsible for the Depression and the plight of workers²¹³. This explicit social mission made the novel both celebrated and controversial from the moment of its publication.

The Author

John Ernst Steinbeck Jr. was born on February 27, 1902, in Salinas, California. Raised in modest circumstances, his father worked various jobs to support the family, including owning a feed-and-grain store, managing a flour plant, and serving as treasurer of Monterey County. His mother, Olive Hamilton Steinbeck, was a former schoolteacher⁴⁵. Despite his humble beginnings, Steinbeck had a relatively happy childhood, growing up with three sisters in California's Salinas Valley—a region that would profoundly influence his later writing.

Steinbeck developed an early appreciation for literature and decided to become a writer at the age of 14, often secluding himself in his bedroom to write poems and stories⁴. In 1919, he enrolled at Stanford University, though this decision was made more to please his parents than out of personal academic ambition. Over the next six years, Steinbeck drifted in and out of school, eventually dropping out in 1925 without earning a degree⁴⁵.

Following his departure from Stanford, Steinbeck briefly moved to New York City, where he worked as a construction worker and newspaper reporter before returning to California. He took a job as a caretaker in Lake Tahoe and began his writing career in earnest⁴. His early struggles as a writer mirrored the hardships faced by many Americans during this period, giving him insight into the lives of working-class people that would later inform his most celebrated works.

Steinbeck's literary career reached its pinnacle with "The Grapes of Wrath," which won both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. The novel was later cited as a significant factor in his receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962⁶. Throughout his career, Steinbeck's works often dealt with social and economic issues, reflecting his deep concern for the marginalized and exploited members of society. His novels frequently explored the struggles of ordinary people against forces beyond their control, whether natural disasters, economic systems, or social prejudices.

Beyond his literary achievements, Steinbeck also served as a war correspondent during World War II, further demonstrating his commitment to documenting the human experience during times of crisis⁴. His life and work embodied the American ideals of compassion, justice, and the dignity of labor, making him one of the most beloved and respected authors in American literary history.

Why this is a Canonical Book

"The Grapes of Wrath" must be included in the canon of great American literature for its profound reflection of America's politics, governance, economics, and culture during a pivotal moment in the nation's history. Steinbeck's novel transcends mere storytelling to become what John Timmerman described as "the most thoroughly discussed novel – in criticism, reviews, and college classrooms – of 20th century American literature"[6](#). Its canonical status is affirmed by its recognition as a Great American Novel and its inclusion in numerous prestigious lists, including Time magazine's "100 Best English-language Novels from 1923 to 2005" and the BBC's survey of the "nation's best loved novels"[6](#).

The novel's significance lies primarily in its unflinching portrayal of the human cost of economic failure and environmental disaster. Through the journey of the Joad family, Steinbeck illuminates the systemic failures that led to the displacement of millions of Americans during the Dust Bowl and Great Depression. The novel exposes the harsh realities of American capitalism when unchecked by social responsibility, challenging readers to confront uncomfortable truths about economic inequality and exploitation. This critique of American economic systems makes the book essential reading for understanding the development of American social policy and labor rights.

Furthermore, "The Grapes of Wrath" captures a crucial moment of transformation in American identity. The mass migration depicted in the novel represents one of the largest internal population movements in American history, reshaping communities and challenging established social hierarchies. Steinbeck's portrayal of this migration illuminates tensions between individualism and collectivism, self-interest and community welfare—tensions that continue to define American political discourse. The novel's exploration of these themes provides invaluable insight into the evolving American character.

The book's impact extended far beyond literary circles. Upon publication, it was "a phenomenon on the scale of a national event," publicly banned and burned by citizens, debated on national radio, and, most importantly, widely read[6](#). It became the best-selling book of 1939, with 430,000 copies printed by February 1940[6](#). This widespread readership ensured that the plight of migrant workers entered the national consciousness, influencing public opinion and potentially contributing to policy reforms. The novel's ability to effect social change demonstrates its significance as a cultural and political document.

Moreover, "The Grapes of Wrath" inspired the creation of the Library Bill of Rights by the American Library Association, establishing a framework for intellectual freedom that continues to protect access to controversial materials in American libraries[11](#). This lasting institutional impact further cements the novel's place in the American canon as a work that not only reflected but also shaped American values regarding free expression and access to ideas.

In essence, "The Grapes of Wrath" earns its canonical status by serving as both a mirror and a lamp—reflecting the realities of Depression-era America while illuminating paths toward greater social justice and human dignity. Its enduring relevance to discussions of economic inequality,

environmental stewardship, and human rights confirms its essential place in the canon of books that capture the American experience in all its complexity.

Five Timeless Quotes

1. "In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage."[68](#)

This powerful quote, which appears in Chapter 25 and provides the novel's title, encapsulates Steinbeck's warning about the consequences of systematic oppression and exploitation. The metaphor draws from biblical imagery in Revelation, suggesting that continued injustice will inevitably lead to righteous anger and potential uprising. In our current times, as economic inequality reaches historic levels and workers across various industries organize for better conditions, this quote remains profoundly relevant. It reminds us that human dignity can only be suppressed for so long before resistance emerges. The "grapes of wrath" continue to grow whenever people face exploitation without recourse, making this quote a timeless warning about the consequences of unchecked power and the human capacity for resistance in the face of injustice.

2. "If he needs a million acres to make him feel rich, seems to me he needs it 'cause he feels awful poor inside hisself, and if he's poor in hisself, there ain't no million acres gonna make him feel rich, an' maybe he's disappointed that nothin' he can do 'll make him feel rich."[7](#)

This insightful observation on wealth and fulfillment speaks directly to our contemporary struggles with materialism and inequality. As wealth concentration reaches unprecedented levels globally, Steinbeck's words remind us that accumulation often stems from inner emptiness rather than necessity. In today's context of billionaire space races and conspicuous consumption amid widespread economic hardship, this quote challenges us to reconsider our definitions of success and fulfillment. It suggests that true wealth comes from within, not from possessions or power over others. This perspective remains essential in a society increasingly defined by consumption and status, offering an alternative vision of human worth based on character rather than capital.

3. "The quality of owning freezes you forever into 'I,' and cuts you off forever from the 'we.'"[7](#)

This profound statement on the isolating effects of possessive individualism resonates powerfully in our hyperindividualistic society. Steinbeck identifies how ownership and accumulation can separate people from community and shared humanity. In today's digital age, where social media simultaneously connects and isolates us, and where economic systems increasingly prioritize individual success over collective welfare, this quote offers a crucial counterpoint. It challenges the notion that freedom comes through ownership and suggests instead that true liberation might be found in connection and community. As societies worldwide grapple with loneliness epidemics alongside material prosperity, Steinbeck's insight provides a timeless reminder about the potential costs of prioritizing possession over participation in human community.

4. "I'm learnin' one thing good...If you're in trouble or hurt or need - go to the poor people. They're the only ones that'll help - the only ones."⁷

This observation on compassion and solidarity among those with the least material resources challenges conventional assumptions about charity and human nature. In our current context of growing economic polarization, this quote reminds us that generosity often flows most freely from those who understand hardship firsthand. Studies consistently show that, proportionally, lower-income individuals donate more of their resources than the wealthy, confirming Steinbeck's insight across generations. This quote encourages us to reconsider where true community support comes from and to recognize the profound humanity and dignity of those struggling economically. It offers a powerful counternarrative to stereotypes about poverty and suggests that authentic human connection might be found most readily among those who have experienced vulnerability.

5. "This is the zygote. For here 'I lost my land' is changed; a cell is split and from its splitting grows the thing you hate - 'We lost our land.'"⁷

This quote brilliantly captures the transformation from individual grievance to collective consciousness—a process fundamental to social movements throughout history. Steinbeck identifies the moment when personal suffering becomes recognized as shared experience, creating the foundation for solidarity and collective action. In our current era of renewed labor organizing, climate activism, and social justice movements, this insight remains profoundly relevant. It explains how isolated experiences of injustice can coalesce into powerful movements for change when people recognize their common struggles. The metaphor of cellular division suggests that this process is not just political but almost biological in its inevitability—a natural response to shared conditions. This understanding of how movements form continues to illuminate contemporary social and political developments worldwide.

Five Major Ideas

1. Humanity, Inhumanity, and Dehumanization

Steinbeck explores how systems and institutions can corrupt human behavior and lead to the dehumanization of vulnerable populations. Throughout the novel, the most brutal adversity faced by the Joads comes not from natural conditions but from other humans, particularly those wielding institutional power⁹. The novel shows how technological advances and bureaucratic systems can distance people from their humanity, enabling them to treat others cruelly. Police officers, bank representatives, and landowners all demonstrate how institutional roles can override personal compassion. This theme remains urgently relevant today, as we witness similar dehumanization in various contexts—from immigration enforcement to corporate labor practices. Steinbeck suggests that recognizing our shared humanity is essential to counteracting these dehumanizing tendencies, a message that continues to challenge readers to examine how systems shape human behavior and moral responsibility.

2. Dignity, Honor, and Wrath

The novel powerfully portrays how maintaining dignity and honor becomes a form of resistance for people experiencing extreme hardship. Despite their destitution, the Joads and other Okies demonstrate unwavering commitment to self-respect, refusing charity and insisting on repaying debts⁹. This preservation of dignity in the face of degrading circumstances represents a profound form of human resilience. However, Steinbeck also shows how this same sense of honor, when repeatedly violated, transforms into righteous anger—the "grapes of wrath" that grow in the souls of the oppressed. This transformation from dignity to justified anger illuminates patterns seen throughout history when people face persistent injustice. The novel suggests that this progression is natural and perhaps necessary, challenging readers to consider when patience becomes complicity and when wrath becomes a moral response to systematic exploitation.

3. The Evolution from "I" to "We"

One of the novel's most profound themes is the transformation from individualism to collective consciousness. Steinbeck traces how the Joads evolve from focusing solely on their family's survival to recognizing their place within a larger community of struggle. This shift is embodied in Tom Joad's famous speech about being "everywhere," suggesting a transcendent form of solidarity that extends beyond physical presence⁷. The novel portrays this evolution as both necessary for survival and morally elevating, challenging the American myth of rugged individualism. This theme speaks directly to contemporary debates about social responsibility versus personal liberty. Steinbeck suggests that true freedom might paradoxically come through recognizing our interdependence rather than asserting independence—a radical proposition that continues to challenge dominant American ideologies about success and self-reliance.

4. Faith and Guilt in Times of Crisis

Through characters like Jim Casy, Steinbeck explores how traditional religious frameworks may fail during profound social crises, necessitating new spiritual understandings. Casy abandons conventional Christian dogma for a more holistic vision of human unity and the sacredness of life itself, declaring that "all that lives is holy"⁷⁹. This reimagining of faith responds to circumstances where traditional religious institutions seem complicit with or irrelevant to widespread suffering. The novel also examines how guilt functions in communities under stress, particularly through Uncle John's character, whose past actions haunt him throughout the journey. This exploration of faith and guilt in times of social upheaval remains relevant as contemporary societies face climate crisis, pandemic, and economic disruption, prompting similar reconsiderations of spiritual frameworks and moral responsibilities.

5. Powerlessness, Perseverance, and Resistance

Steinbeck examines various responses to seemingly hopeless situations, from Muley Graves' stubborn refusal to leave his land to the organized labor resistance that Tom eventually joins⁹. The novel suggests that while individual perseverance has dignity, collective resistance offers the only real hope for systemic change. This theme is embodied in the land turtle from an early chapter, which persists despite obstacles—a metaphor for the migrants' determination⁹. The

novel's climax, where Tom kills a policeman who murdered Casy, represents his full commitment to workers' rights over individual or family interests¹⁰. This exploration of how powerless people can effectively respond to overwhelming forces remains profoundly relevant in an era of growing economic inequality and environmental crisis, offering insights into both the limitations and possibilities of resistance against seemingly insurmountable powers.

Three Major Controversies

1. Accusations of Communist Propaganda

From the moment of its publication, "The Grapes of Wrath" faced fierce opposition from those who viewed it as dangerous communist propaganda. Steinbeck was attacked "as a propagandist and a socialist from both the left and the right of the political spectrum"⁶. The most vehement criticism came from the Associated Farmers of California, who were outraged by the novel's portrayal of California farmers' treatment of migrants. They denounced the book as "a pack of lies" and "communist propaganda"⁶¹¹. This reaction reflected broader anxieties about radical politics during a period of intense labor organizing and economic upheaval. The controversy became so heated that Steinbeck received death threats and began carrying a gun in public¹. Bill Camp, head of the local Associated Farmers and an opponent of organized labor, campaigned to ban the book in Kern County, California¹¹. This controversy reveals how literature that challenges economic power structures can provoke extreme reactions from those whose interests are threatened, a pattern that continues with controversial works addressing inequality today.

2. Book Banning and Burning

"The Grapes of Wrath" has faced extraordinary censorship efforts throughout its history. In many communities, the novel "was banned and burned, both for its occasional obscene language and its general themes"¹⁶. Kern County, California—where the fictional Joad family settles—was particularly hostile to the book, with officials branding it libelous and burning copies while banning it from libraries and schools¹³. These censorship efforts were so significant that they directly inspired the creation of the Library Bill of Rights by the American Library Association in 1939, establishing principles to protect intellectual freedom in American libraries¹¹. The controversy surrounding the book's content and its subsequent censorship illustrates the power of literature to threaten established interests and the lengths to which authorities may go to suppress challenging ideas. This aspect of the novel's history remains relevant as book banning continues in American schools and libraries today, often targeting works that address social injustice or challenge dominant narratives.

3. Disputes Over Factual Accuracy

Many critics attacked "The Grapes of Wrath" for alleged inaccuracies in its portrayal of conditions in California and the attitudes of landowners. Some argued that Steinbeck exaggerated camp conditions to make a political point⁶. Novelist John Gardner later criticized Steinbeck for "not knowing anything about the California ranchers," claiming that this lack of knowledge prevented the book from achieving greatness⁶. These accusations of factual distortion were part of a broader attempt to discredit the novel's social critique by questioning its

authenticity. However, Steinbeck had extensively researched his subject, visiting migrant camps and documenting conditions firsthand through his journalism¹³. This controversy highlights the common strategy of attacking the factual basis of socially critical works rather than engaging with their moral arguments—a tactic still employed against journalistic and creative works that expose social injustices. It also raises important questions about the relationship between literal truth and artistic truth in literature with explicit social purposes.

In Closing

Civic-minded Americans should read "The Grapes of Wrath" because it offers profound insights into our national character, challenges, and possibilities that remain urgently relevant today. Steinbeck's masterpiece is not merely a historical document of the Great Depression but a living text that continues to illuminate contemporary issues of economic justice, environmental stewardship, and human dignity. The novel "evokes quintessentially American themes of hard work, self-determination, and reasoned dissent" while speaking "from assumptions common to most Americans whether their ancestors came over in a stateroom, in steerage, or were already here to greet the migrants"¹².

For citizens concerned with economic inequality, the novel provides a powerful framework for understanding how systems can create and perpetuate poverty despite individual effort. As wealth concentration reaches historic levels in America, Steinbeck's depiction of how financial institutions and large agricultural businesses exploited vulnerable populations offers valuable perspective on similar dynamics today. The novel challenges readers to consider their own positions within economic systems and their responsibilities toward those who struggle within those systems.

Environmental concerns also make this novel essential reading for today's citizens. Steinbeck's portrayal of the Dust Bowl—an ecological disaster partly caused by human agricultural practices—resonates powerfully in our era of climate change and environmental degradation. The novel demonstrates how environmental and economic crises intersect, with the most vulnerable populations bearing the heaviest burdens of ecological collapse—a pattern that continues globally today.

Perhaps most importantly, "The Grapes of Wrath" offers a vision of American identity that emphasizes compassion, solidarity, and collective action in the face of injustice. In an increasingly polarized society, Steinbeck's portrayal of how diverse individuals can recognize their common humanity and work together for mutual benefit provides an alternative to divisive politics. The novel's exploration of how people maintain dignity and hope during extreme hardship offers inspiration for confronting contemporary challenges.

Reading "The Grapes of Wrath" is also an act of democratic participation. The novel has been contested, banned, and celebrated throughout American history, making engagement with it a way of participating in ongoing national conversations about our values and direction. By reading works that have provoked strong reactions across the political spectrum, citizens develop the critical thinking skills necessary for democratic participation.

Finally, civic-minded Americans should read this novel because great literature expands our capacity for empathy and moral imagination. Through Steinbeck's vivid characters and situations, readers experience perspectives they might never encounter directly, developing deeper understanding of diverse American experiences. This expansion of empathy is essential for democratic citizenship, which requires considering the welfare of all community members, not just those who share our backgrounds or circumstances.

In sum, "The Grapes of Wrath" remains essential reading not as a historical artifact but as a living text that continues to challenge, inspire, and illuminate the American experience. Its enduring power to provoke thought and feeling makes it an invaluable resource for citizens seeking to understand both our past and our present. The novel's final scene—where Rose of Sharon nurses a starving stranger—perfectly encapsulates Steinbeck's vision of human dignity and interconnectedness. This conclusion, which Steinbeck himself refused to change despite editorial pressure, represents the culmination of the novel's moral journey^[2]. As Steinbeck wrote in his journal, this ending was "huge and symbolic toward which the whole story moves," representing "the dignity of the effort and the mightyness of the theme"^[1]. In this final act of selfless compassion, we see the transformation of Rose of Sharon from a "silly pregnant girl" to someone who embodies the novel's central message: that our humanity depends on our willingness to care for one another, especially strangers in need^[15]. This message of hope, compassion, and moral courage remains as vital today as when Steinbeck first penned it, making "The Grapes of Wrath" not just a great American novel, but an essential text for civic-minded citizens.

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