

# Four pages of fear, hostility, and exploitation

[Literature](#), [American Literature](#)



Steinbeck's intercalary chapters in *The Grapes of Wrath* have nothing to do with the Joads or other characters of the novel, but help describe the story in different terms. They are similar to poems, offering different viewpoints of the migration, and clarifying parts of the story that the reader might not understand. An excellent example of this use can be seen in chapter 21, where an examination of the attitudes of migrant Okies and the residents of California reveals the changing nature of land ownership among the changing population of California and gives greater meaning to the fierce hostility that the Joads meet in California. The first section of chapter 21 explores the plight of the Okies, who are simple people forced to leave their homes when industrial change complicates their lives. Steinbeck writes, "Their senses were still sharp to the ridiculousness of the industrial life. And then suddenly the machines pushed them out and they swarmed on the highways." This statement relates the beginning of the novel, with particular emphasis on the death of Grampa and Granma. When industrial farming hits the agrarian midwest, the Joads are forced off their land and driven to migration, deserting the house in which they have lived for so long. Before long, Grampa dies of stroke. His life is tied to the land and cannot keep up with such rapid change, and when he dies Granma is sure to follow. The paragraph continues: "The movement changed them; the highways, the camps along the road, the fear of hunger and the hunger itself, changed them. The children without dinner changed them, the endless moving changed them. They were migrants." Steinbeck emphasizes the anguish which characterizes change in the Okies, particularly Jim Casy and Tom Joad, who will eventually form workers' unions to rebel against landowners in

California. They suffer the anguish of losing their farms and their homes, of being forced to move endlessly and painfully in search of work on someone else's land. The anguish caused by sudden change in land ownership is a major aspect of the novel. The next section of chapter 21 offers an explanation of the hostility that the migrants meet upon arrival in California. Steinbeck describes: "Men of property were terrified for their property. Men who had never been hungry saw the eyes of the hungry. Men who had never wanted anything very much saw the flare of want in the eyes of the migrants. And the men of the towns and of the soft suburban country gathered to defend themselves; and they reassured themselves that they were good and the invaders bad, as a man must do before he fights." The mild people of California find in the Okies what they have yet to experience - fear and desperation. Sensing the extent to which the migrants are willing to work, the locals begin to fear for their own jobs, and most importantly, for their own property. In fearful defense, they attack the Okies as marauders who mean to destroy both populations through their desperation. This fear transforms into hostility, which reveals itself in the story through the deputies and managers who abuse and assault the Joads, as well as other migrant families in the workers' camps. Steinbeck goes on to write: ". . . wages went down and prices stayed up. The great owners were glad and they sent out more handbills to bring more people in. And wages went down and prices stayed up. And pretty soon now we'll have serfs again." While the citizens of California are engulfed in fear, the business owners see opportunities to make profit off of both the migrants and the natives. The next paragraph displays the situation in which large fruit canneries drive the

small farms out of business by exploiting the desperate workers. As more and more farmers are forced to sell their land, the highways become more and more crowded with migrants, not only from the midwest, but from California as well. This phenomenon only gives credence to the accusations of the natives, fearing for their jobs and their land. The final section of the chapter is an ominous paragraph which depicts the greed of the companies as the cause of conflict between the workers in California, and the inevitable cause of the companies' downfall. The paragraph reads: " And the companies, the banks worked at their own doom and they did not know it. The fields were fruitful, and starving men moved on the roads. . . The great companies did not know that the line between hunger and anger is a thin line. . . On the highways the people moved like ants and searched for work, for food. And the anger began to ferment." The consolidation of land under large companies is ultimately the cause of strife among the Okies and the Californians. However, it will ultimately become a cause of strife for the companies. The fermenting anger is evident throughout the novel within conversation among the Okies, especially that which involves Jim Casy and Tom Joad. When Casy dies and Tom leaves the family to carry on his work, Steinbeck foreshadows that Tom will lead his people to unite against oppression, and this action is what most frightens the companies and banks. The ' fermenting anger' which Steinbeck describes also relates to the novel's title, as grapes serve as a symbol of the migrants, and the wrath represents their anguish and hardship. The thin line between hunger and anger is broken by the changes in land ownership, and retaliation of the workers is the inevitable result. Within four pages, Steinbeck greatly clarifies and

expands upon his story by examining the different emotions and reactions of his general character groups. He takes two sides of an argument and applies them to a third body rather than pit them against each other. By mastering the use of the intercalary chapter, he is able to enrich his story with deeper thought and explore it outside the boundaries of his main characters. In this manner, Steinbeck is able to write a four-page chapter which holds great meaning to a 581-page novel.