

The grapes of wrath: symbolic characters

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



The Grapes of Wrath: Symbolic Characters Struggling through such things as the depression, the Dust Bowl summers, and trying to provide for their own families, which included finding somewhere to travel to where life would be safe. Such is the story of the Joads. The Joads were the main family in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, a book which was written in order to show what a family was going through, at this time period, and how they were trying to better their lives at the same time. It wouldn't be enough for Steinbeck to simply write this story in very plain terms, as anyone could have simply logged an account of events and published it. Critics have argued, however, that Steinbeck was too artificial in his ways of trying to gain some respect for the migrants. Regardless of the critical opinions, John Steinbeck utilized symbolism as a forum to convey the hardships and attitudes of the citizens of America during the 1930's in his book *The Grapes of Wrath*. The first aspect of the novel that must be looked at when viewing the symbolic nature is that of the characters created by Steinbeck and how even the smallest facets of their person lead to a much larger meaning. The first goal that Steinbeck had in mind, was to appeal to the common Midwesterner at that time. The best way to go about doing this was to focus on one of the two things that nearly all migrants had in common, which was religion and hardships. Steinbeck creates a story about the journey of a family and mirrors it to that of biblical events. The entire family, in themselves, were like the Israelites. " They too flee from oppression, wander through the wilderness of hardships, seeking their own Promised Land" (Shockley, 91). Unfortunately, although the Israelites were successful, the Joads never really found what they could consider to be a promised land.

They were never lucky enough to really satisfy their dreams of living a comfortable life. But, they were still able to improve on their situation. Another symbolic character that was undoubtedly more religious than anyone else taking the journey was Jim Casy. He was a preacher that was picked up along the way by the Joads. Steinbeck manages to squeeze in a lot about this character, and a lot of the background he creates about Mr. Casy shows just how much of a biblical man he really is supposed to be. So much so, that Steinbeck uses Jim Casy to symbolize Christ. Oddly enough, his initials were not only the same as Jesus Christ, but much of his life is similar to the biblical accounts of Christ. Not only did he also begin his long trek after a stay in the wilderness, he also had rejected an old religion to try and find his own version of the gospel and convince people to follow him. His death, another aspect comparable to that of Christ, also occurred in the middle of a stream, which could represent the "crossing over Jordan" account. "Particularly significant, however, are Casy's last words directed to the man who murders him" (Shockley, 92-93). Jim's last words are to forgive the man who kills him with a pickax. He tells him "You don't know what you're a-doing," which is a simple allusion to the statement by Jesus to God when He is being crucified and asks his Father to forgive them, for they knew not what they were doing. In this novel, even the title is a Christian allusion. The title is "a direct Christian allusion, suggesting the glory of the coming of the Lord" (Shockley, 90). Looking at the main character of the story, Tom Joad, even more Christian symbolism is seen. Tom Joad is almost a direct fit for the story of the "prodigal son" from the bible. He is the son that must lead everyone across in a great journey, while symbolically already

wandering from the favor of God by killing a man in self-defense. Tom must find a way to forget about this event and continue to keep his goal of getting to California (and his Promised Land) in sight. He understands that he must stay determined and persevere because he is an example and a leader to his family and he cannot allow any internal event to slow him down. Rose of Sharon, the daughter of the family, also has a very religious connotation; her religious meaning is not so much symbolic of a specific person or event in the bible, but more of an example of Christian values. The great hardship in her life was the fact that the child she was pregnant with the whole story, and the one that kept her from doing work necessary to everyone's survival, was stillborn. Now, after going through all this, she had to face the reality of living without her child and the reality of her husband walking out on her. Even after all this when the Joads come upon the old man in the barn " the two women [Ma Joad and Rose of Sharon] looked deep into each other's eyes. Not my will, but Thine be done." (Shockley, 94) Rose knows that even though she had lost her own child, she must now take another, and the fact that Steinbeck has her say " Thine will be done" is because she knows that it is in fact God's will that she is serving, and that is much more important than any problem she has. Next, the women in the story are an example of the mentality of the " indestructible woman." The greatest example of this is the eldest, Ma Joad. " Ma Joad stands out in Steinbeck's work as a complete and positive characterization of a woman" (Gladstein, 118). She is the only character in the novel that appears to be flawless on every level, not just as someone who does monotonous chores throughout the story. She stands as a shining example of a woman who refuses to back down, no matter what

the obstacles at hand. Some of the obstacles included Grandma's death, the desertion of Noah, the leaving behind of the Wilsons followed by Connie's departure, the murder of Casy, Tom becoming a fugitive, Rose of Sharon's baby being stillborn, and being surrounded by starvation and depression. She uses all of her strength and willpower to help deal with these tragedies. One of the biggest examples of her undying strength and love is the way she helps Rose of Sharon deal with her pregnancy and the loss of her baby. She helps keep the family together, and if that meant giving every ounce of spirit and energy that she had, she'd do it because of the love she had for her family. Steinbeck creates her as that indestructible woman because he wants to convince the migrants of the 1930's to follow in the footsteps of Ma Joad, and ultimately, mirror the journey of the entire Joad family. Warren French explains exactly what Steinbeck's intent with having the characters, especially Ma Joad, develop the way they do throughout the novel: The story that Steinbeck sought to tell does end, furthermore, with Ma Joad's discovery that it is no longer the "family" alone that one must "give a hand," but "everybody." As I wrote in my own study of Steinbeck, answer the charge that the tale is inconclusive, the scene in the barn "marks the end of the story that Steinbeck has to tell about the Joads," because "their education is completed... What happens to them now depends upon the ability of the rest of society to learn the same lesson they have already learned." (93-94) Rose of Sharon is another woman who shows indestructibility. She also has to deal with her stillborn baby and all of what Ma Joad had to go through, but she still attempts to continue on and help Ma whenever she can. "Bedraggled and burdened, deserted by her husband, Rose of Sharon still drags herself

out of bed to do her part in earning money for support of the family" (Gladstein, 122). In the novel Steinbeck writes about her how because of the way she tried so hard to help, that she was constantly vomiting, just to keep up with regular chores, yet her spirit remained unwavering. With all of this occurring around her, one of the novel's greatest Christian allusions comes from her character. In the climactic event at the end of the novel, Rose of Sharon looked at the old man who needed her milk and just smiled. "This is my body," says Rose of Sharon, and becomes the Resurrection and the Life. In her, life and death are one, and through her, life triumphs over death" (Shockley, 94). She gives herself for that of another, and that is a major Christian principle. Besides the characters, the events in the story are also an example of how Steinbeck uses symbolism. This is the second major way that Steinbeck uses symbolism in this story. There are several examples which show how perseverent the human spirit could be in times of trouble. The trek itself shows how committed to their dreams the Joads were. They had to risk everything just to find work and a place to live. Also, the characters in the story had to adapt to the events that were happening to them throughout the journey. For example, Tom first got his idea of transportation when he saw the tractor at the beginning of the story and remembered that tractors were just now starting to cover the plains all the time, so they must be able to make it in some kind of machine. When Tom visits the car dealer, he comes away with a car that didn't quite fit their needs, but he made it work. Another example is how the family learns to use every item, they realize how valuable every single item they have is to their existence, and it becomes more and more clear every single day as the

situation becomes more and more harsh. Also, the kindness of the human spirit is shown in Steinbeck's novel through these events. The main example in the novel is when the waitress in the café lets the poor migrant have a free loaf of bread just to continue his journey. She is then rewarded with two big tips from the next customers, who are truckers that come through to eat. This is a shining example of the old adage "kindness breeds kindness" (Carlson, 97). Then, when Rose of Sharon took care of the old man in the barn, she ends up symbolically gaining a child where before she had lost her own. These two were both examples of human kindness and in both instances, the people were rewarded for their kindness. These examples are also examples of a major principle in Christianity which is to do unto others as you would like done to you. The third and final major aspect of symbolism shown in *The Grapes of Wrath* is the role that nature plays in the story. It is unquestioned that nature plays a big part in the lives of the Joads simply because their journey takes place in the middle of the plains where weather, such as rain, can easily become a harsh hazard since there is really no shelter from it and they really have no other option than to continue trudging forward as much as possible. Weather is shown in this as both a destroying and regenerative force. "Steinbeck goes on to depict in lyrical prose the disintegration of the house before the almost delicate onslaught of nature: rain, weeds, dust, wind" (Owens, 79). Nature then knows that the house is no longer useful to the Joads and "reclaims it as its own" (Owens, 79). One of the most interesting parts of this work is what is known by Steinbeck as the "interchapters." Steinbeck includes several chapters throughout the novel which simply act as a symbolic reference to some other idea, that at first

glance, have no meaning to the story, but these stories symbolically prove a point for Steinbeck. The first, and most famous, of these is the journey of the turtle. Steinbeck opens a chapter by simply describing a turtle that is struggling to cross a highway. Steinbeck goes through great detail to explain much about the turtle and its own little journey, but he really doesn't say much about the purpose. That is because it is so clear. The turtle is simply heading somewhere and must cross the road. It struggles and struggles and when it finally gets close to the other side a truck comes by and knocks it across the road anyway, unharmed. The moral is that the turtle made it across, but if it had tried any less, it might have been hit by the tire instead of just being brushed aside by it. Another story symbolic of the plight of the farmer is the ant lion trap which is analogous to the fact that most farmers were scurrying around trying to acquire land and supplies to live but avoid being caught at the same time. Of course, not everyone can succeed, so Steinbeck inserts the story of the Joad's dog being hit by the truck. Not everyone is going to be as lucky as the turtle in their efforts, and this lesson comes at a price to the Joads. Machines played a major part in this story in the way was created because of the fact that machines were taking over everything in the farming community and workers weren't really needed anymore. Not only were machines one of the causes of the migration in the first place, but they also directly cause several deaths in the story. It is stated in the novel that "one man on a tractor can take the place of twelve or fourteen families." Through this manner, Steinbeck shows in the plot itself how machines add to the complexity of the situation. He then uses the interchapters to show how much effect they had on nature and animals as

well as humans. " Tom sees the ' No Riders' sticker on the tractor as an example of how inhuman machinery has become" (Griffin, 222). It is then very symbolic when they meet at the beginning of the journey westward and must meet at the truck, which is seen as the only " real" thing left, since the house is demolished. The truck was never meant to be of any " real" significance in the first place, for it is a machine. Lastly, Steinbeck made great reference to animals throughout the story. He used them repeatedly to show how people were acting and to describe things and events, as well as foreshadow future happenings. One example of the description of people was the reference to Muley Grave's sex drive in his younger days, when " he describes his first experience as ' snorting like a buck deer, randy as a billygoat" (Griffin, 220). Then a reference to nature again being like farmers is when the moths circling the fire are pointed out, they are just like the farmers circling a town, looking for opportunity and waiting to enter. Then, animals are also used in foreshadowing death (be it the dog or Rose of Sharon's baby) by the circling of buzzards overhead. Steinbeck loved to use more minor events in nature to explain the trials and tribulations of the Joads. Although Steinbeck created this highly acclaimed world of symbolism, it is not without its fault, at least according to some interpretations. Steinbeck goes to great lengths to create this world of symbolism with very intricate characters which he wants the reader to understand to be his representation of the public during the 1930's. Unfortunately, some found his book to be all too artificial. " Complete literalness in such matters doesn't necessarily simulate life in literature" (Moore, 59). The dispute here is whether or not Steinbeck is attempting to overglorify the attempts or the

migrants. Many Midwesterners did feel quite a bit of harshness enter their lives when trying to live through the 1930's, but it is hard to say if the Joads had life as tough as most. However, Henry Moore states that the shining examples of good symbolism and truth in *The Grapes of Wrath* come in the interchapters, such as the turtle and tractor tales. The problem though, as he states it, is that " the contrapuntal chapters about the Joad family don't always have the continuous strength to carry them" (Moore, 60). Basically Dr. Moore is saying that if Steinbeck really wanted to use symbolism in this story to show the trials and tribulations of the migrants in the 1930's, he should have kept the story more realistic and down- to-earth in its approach to the topic. Overall, John Steinbeck did appeal to the Midwesterners through his book *The Grapes of Wrath*. He won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1962 while *The Grapes of Wrath* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1939. He managed to explain many events of the current time period through his use symbolism, and obviously, many readers enjoyed it. By using characters, nature and events for forms of symbolism, Steinbeck keeps the reader interested and at the same time