

Characters of jim casy and tom joad in john steinbeck's the grapes of wrath

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



John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* follows a poor family of Oklahoma tenant farmers, the Joads, who migrate to California to pursue a better future. The novel's protagonist, Tom Joad, is shown to be a man who likes to keep himself anchored to the present. He avoids thinking about anything that has no immediate effect upon himself or his family. But Tom's early characterization clashes with the person he becomes by the end of the novel. Tom develops into a social activist, ready to fight for the rights of the wandering laborers in California. This change is brought about by his interactions with one of the other major characters in the story, Jim Casy. And it is largely Casy's death that causes Tom to rise above the boundaries he had first set for himself. Tom eventually follows in Casy's footsteps by becoming a social activist. Jim Casy's character and death are important to understand the development of Tom Joad.

Tom Joad undergoes a significant transformation over the course of the novel. Early on the reader learns that Tom spent four years in jail for homicide. Released on parole, he hitchhikes home to his family. Tom unashamedly tells the man he rides with what he had done: " Means I killed a guy. Seven years. I'm sprung in four for keepin' my nose clean". Tom also meets Jim Casy, a former preacher, during his journey homewards. When his past is brought up in conversation with Casy, Tom speaks of the crime he committed very similarly to the way he had described it to the driver he hitchhiked with. " I'd do what I done — again. . . I killed a guy in a fight. We was drunk at a dance. He got a knife in me, an' I killed him with a shovel that was layin' there". Tom's lack of remorse is justified in that it was self-defense. But it is his inability to be ashamed or reflective at all that is

indicative of someone who lives only in the present. His desire to avoid looking too deeply into the past or future is shown in his response to a question of Casy's concerning the number of jobs available in California: "How'd I know? I'm jus' puttin' one foot in front a the other. . . This here little piece of iron an' babbitt. See it? Ya see it? Well, that the only goddamn thing in the world I got on my mind". Tom later breaks his parole to travel west with his family. This action also shows his disregard for any future consequences.

Jim Casy is the reverse of Tom Joad's initial characterization. While Tom concerns himself only with the now, Casy constantly looks towards the future, often puzzling over the state of humanity and divinity. Casy's overall thoughtfulness is illustrated well by a theological theory of his: " Maybe it's all men an' all women we love; maybe that's the Holy Sperit — the human sperit — the whole shebang. Maybe all men got one big soul ever'body's a part of". But his tendency for future thought is not what separates him from Tom. It is his moral character and selflessness that distinguishes him from any other person in the novel. When Tom gets into an altercation with a deputy, Casy takes the blame, telling an officer that he had " knocked out your man there". This brief moment shows the difference between the men well. Tom, giving into a moment of passion, does not think of the consequences his possible arrest would have on his family or himself. Casy, on the other hand, realizes the gravity of the situation immediately. He understands Tom's importance to his family: " Somebody got to take the blame. I got no kids. They'll jus' put me in jail, an' I ain't doin' nothin' but set

aroun’’. Casy’s morality and concern for the future contrasts heavily with the early characterization of Tom Joad.

Tom Joad’s interactions with Jim Casy are vital in understanding his change as a character. Towards the beginning of the story, Tom is shown to care only for his family and the people in his immediate surroundings. But his way of thinking changes drastically by the end of the story. He sheds this day by day philosophy and gains a new sense of purpose: the betterment of the lives of the western migrants. Tom tells his mother that he’ll “ be ever’where — wherever you look. Wherever they’s a fight so hungry people can eat, I’ll be there. Wherever they’s a cop beatin’ up a guy, I’ll be there”.

This change was brought about by the teachings of Casy. Casy, during his time in jail, learns about the power of mobilization of popular support. With this realization, he begins to organize migrants workers for a wage protest. Tom later stumbles into Casy and his band of men, where he learns about Casy’s time in jail. “ Well, one day they give us some beans that was sour. One fella started yellin’, an’ nothin’ happened. . . Then another fella yelled. . . By God! Then sompin happened! They come a-runnin’, and they give us some other stuff to eat”. After their brief conversation, the men spot flashlight beams, and two policemen approach them, recognizing Casy as the workers’ leader. Casy protests that the men “ don’ know what you’re doin’. You’re helpin’ to starve kids”. In the middle of his protest, one of the policemen sinks a pick handle into Casy’s skull, killing him instantly. This moment serves as the catalyst for Tom’s change from content bystander to activist.

After Casy is attacked, Tom retaliates and kills one of the policeman. The killing of a police officer, although immoral, is still a far cry from the drunken murder that had landed him in prison four years earlier. Here, by standing up for the rights of the western migrants, he begins to fight for a cause far greater than just himself or his family. In effect, Tom is taking Casy's place. Surely, his methods are different (he is far more confrontational and unpredictable), but he is now fighting for the same goal as Casy: equality for the suffering laborers. Tom even ascribes his change in character to Casy himself: " God, I'm talkin' like Casy. Comes of thinkin' about him so much. Seems like I can see him sometimes". And when his mother asks him what he plans to do with himself, Tom replies that he will do " what Casy done". At this point, Tom's characterization has taken a complete 180. He is prepared to take Casy's place and fight for better conditions, not only for his own family, but for all other migrant families in California.

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Tom Joad is introduced as a former convict who lives by a day-to-day philosophy, concerning himself only with the wellbeing of himself and his family. Tom's character differs heavily from another major character in the novel: Jim Casy. Casy, unlike Tom, cannot help but speculate about the future. He often thinks about the conditions of the migrant laborers and eventually leads a wage protest. Casy serves as the impetus for Tom Joad's major transformation, from that of a somewhat selfish family man to social activist. And Casy's final moments, in particular, are important to understand the radical changes seen in Tom. His death leads Tom to kill a police officer. This brash act of violence, possibly born out of rage, finally

shows Tom stand up for something bigger than himself. In the end, Tom picks up where Casy left off, ready to lead a life of public action.