

# The role of steinbeck's women in the grapes of wrath (the movie): when the wind o...

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



It is hard to ignore the fact that up until the beginning of the XX century, most of the deeds that the history ended up caring about were men.

For quite long, the role of women was restricted to household and child upbringing; however, in the first decades of the twentieth century, the stereotypical image of a humble housewife seemed to have started wearing out, which a number of the writers like Steinbeck expressed at the time.

Though the emphasis on the social, political and economical changes that gripped the South of the USA in 1930ies, John Ford in his adaptation of Steinbeck's novel offered the audience completely new images of women and made it clear that women started gaining new social roles. The above-mentioned meant that female characters in literature were no longer the bland housewives or damsels in distress, but original characters with unique personalities.

First and foremost, Ma Joad must be mentioned. Allowing a character like this on a screen truly heralded the beginning of the feminist era. Even though Ma Joad is portrayed as a typical housewife, she does as much as any male protagonists in the movie. On the one hand, she is a perfect supportive mother who takes care of her family:

Sometimes they do somethin' to you, Tommy. They hurt you - and you get mad-and then you get mean - and they hurt you again - and you get meaner, and meaner - till you ain't no boy or no man any more, but just a walkin' chunk a mean-mad. Did they hurt you like that, Tommy? (The Grapes of Wrath)

On the other hand, she is into the social and political changes that happen to the state. As a matter of fact, at certain point, she summarizes the entire movie, if not the entire era, quite in a nutshell:

Rich fellas come up an' they die, an' their kids ain't no good an' they die out. But we keep a'comin'. We're the people that live. They can't wipe us out; they can't lick us. We'll go on forever, Pa, 'cause we're the people. (The Grapes of Wrath).

Compared to the previous character, Rose of Sharon, or, as her friends and family call her, Rosasharn, is quite a downgrade. She does have a personality, too, but she comes nowhere near energetic Ma Joad. Instead of being protective like Ma Joad, she whimpers and moans: " Ma... all this, will it hurt the baby?", while her mother reasons with her: " Now don't you go gettin' nimsy-mimsy" (The Grapes of Wrath).

Grandma Joad is not given much screen time, unlike Ma or Rosasharn. However, it would be wrong to leave Grandma Joad out of account. According to what the characters who used to know her as she was younger say, she deserves to be mentioned as a female character whose personality was groundbreaking for the American cinematography of the time: " Your granma was a great one, too. The third time she got religion she go it so powerful she knocked down a full-growed deacon with her fist" (The Grapes of Wrath).

It is worth mentioning that, despite a new portrayal of women and establishing their new role in society, the movie still contains the clichés of the time. Even the leading female character, Ma Joad, is pretty much a staple

of a typical housewife and the mother of the family. From the given perspective, she can be considered the typical caring mother of the family whose main concerns are her children and her household chores.

However, Ma Joad's character is much more complex than that. She does possess certain features that were characteristic of female characters of the time, yet she takes actions, makes choices and decisions, which, in turn, makes her a complex and compelling female lead. The features that make Ma Joad somewhat stereotypical serve only to make her real; otherwise, Ma Joad would have lost half of the credibility and likeability that she has.

Finally, Mae, who is given a rather peculiar role in the movie, does not look as strong as Ma Joad or Mrs. Wainwright. Though she has a scene in which she makes a decision, giving children candies "two for a penny" (*The Grapes of Wrath*), she still does not have that much of personality, since her decision, as well as the rest of her actions are based on what Bert tells her: "Go ahead - Bert says take it" (*The Grapes of Wrath*).

Another female character in the movie who quite honestly should be considered a solid step back in the development of women perception in literature, is Granma Joad. Apart from the fact that she does or attempts to do little to nothing, she becomes so grief-stricken with the death of her husband that she loses her will to live, which results in her untimely death in the middle of a desert.

At one point, the audience can see her taking responsibilities and acting like a mature person would; however, her religiousness and the tendency only to

supply color commentaries brings the significance of her character a few notches down: "Praise the Lord!" (The Grapes of Wrath). Therefore, out of all female characters, Ma Joad seems the most complex, challenging and well-rounded one.

It is essential that she is not portrayed as a completely out-of-epoch feminist and the person who always does the right thing and knows what to say; she has her sad moments, and the moments when she would rather have someone help her: "I dunno what to do. I got to feed the fambly.

What'm I gonna do with these here?" (The Grapes of Wrath). She gets angry, happy, and even irritated, like an everyday person does: "You can't make us wait!" (The Grapes of Wrath), which altogether makes her a very believable and compelling new character.

Though it would be wrong to say that Ma Joad pulls the role of a self-sufficient woman alone, since there are a couple of other female characters who display similar qualities, Ma Joad definitely leaves the greatest impression. She truly represents a new female character in the American literature, a self-sufficient woman who, while caring about her family, also is socially active and engages into the activities that are typically considered the realm of men.

Apparently, Ford's, as well as Steinbeck's, intent was to focus on the social issues that affected the lives of the American farmers on the large scale, i. e., the events that occurred at the time of the Great Depression, as well as personal dramas that evolved in this environment. However, together with

the aforementioned issues, Steinbeck also touched upon a very peculiar feminist issue. To be more exact, whether he did it intentionally or not, Steinbeck offered the readers a completely new portrayal of women.

It would be a mistake to say that the women that the author depicted did not exist before; nevertheless, Steinbeck was one of the first to notice the tendency for women to try new social roles, and Ford in his adaptation was the first to display, which *The Grapes of Wrath* should be given credit for.

*The Grapes of Wrath*. Dir. John Ford. Perf. Henry Fonda, Jane Darwell and John Carradine. 20th Century Fox, 1940. Film.