

# Grapes of wrath

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



Grapes of Wrath “ If a young man is about to commence in the world ... we say to him publicly and privately, go to the West. There, your capacities are sure to be appreciated and your industry and energy rewarded.”, were the words of the former lead editor of the New York Tribune Horace Greely, regarding the necessity of expansion of the United States of America to the Western coast. Beginning with the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 during the Democratic Jefferson Era, the concept of America’s right to reach the western coast became more obvious than ever during the nineteenth century. During the 1830’s as well as the 1840’s these “ god given” rights were introduced to a concept known as “ Manifest Destiny”. Many expeditions and annexations of states in the far west soon gave all Americans throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the idea that the West was a symbol of equal opportunities for all, both economically and socially. However, these perceptions were only materialistic hogwash and in fact resulted in the exact opposite. Corporate systems and discrimination ultimately defined the West during these times, and weren’t able to be known to the individuals out back East. These unlawful lands were open to the opinion of the writer, thus resulting in works that helped to speak out against the corrupt “ utopia” of the West. One of the most famous works to help unfold the diabolical actions done in this territory was the American Classic novel, Grapes of Wrath written by John Steinbeck. The idea of going west had been a central part of the American consciousness for a long time, however, Steinbeck was able to take this stream of consciousness and beat it with an iron fist by making the journey west one of the central themes of the novel. Before the Joads make the journey to California, Steinbeck

foreshadows the unknown, uncharted territory the Joads are about to enter, saying, " Only the unbalanced sky showed the approach of dawn, no horizon to the west, and a line to the east" (Page 67). These descriptions of the sky ahead plant an idea of misery and desperation to all of those headed to the western valleys of California. Steinbeck further in the novel, describes another aspect of the western sky, saying " The stars went out, few by few, toward the west. " (Chapter 10). The more deep you head west; it seems the sky is slowly losing its glimmers of light amidst the night sky. These bleak observations soon open their way to darker clouds upon the horizon, so to speak for the Joad's. When they enter a gas station in the beginning of their journey, their dog is struck by a car. This can be seen as a symbol for the difficulties to soon follow the family. Only to aid this idea is after it being barely an entire day, Grampa suffers a stroke and dies. At one point, he was the most enthusiastic for this journey and his death only opens up more of the harsh realities the family awaits. Before the Joad's even set foot on its soil, California proves to be a land of vicious hostility rather than of opportunity. The police officers and border police pollute the idea that California is a symbol of wealth and opportunity, something taught to all of us from the journeys of Louis and Clark to the Gold Rush. The system of farming has stood throughout time as being able to be the basis of the economic systems all around the world. It is a craft of cultivation, life, and growth. However, it is during this time in American history that there is a war in the farming system trapped between old and new, human work and technological work. Farmers in the west were having their farms being taken over by these machines, such as tractors. These farmers felt that, " the

machine man, driving a dead tractor on the land he does not know and love, understands only chemistry; and he is contemptuous of the land and of himself. When the corrugated iron doors are shut, he goes home, and his home is not the land" (Page 65). The tractors thus become the " snub-nosed monsters, raising the dust and sticking their snouts into it, straight down the country, across the country, through fences, through dooryards, in and out of gullies in straight lines" (Page 66), as told by Steinbeck. As a result of this, the tenant farmers of the west act these " monsters" on the tractors why their land is being taken from them. The men on the tractor simply reply, " Fellow was telling me the bank gets orders from the East. The orders were, " Make the land show profit or we'll close you up" (Chapter 5). Does that mean the west which has promised before in history to have its own identity and freedom economically wise is actually monopolized by Eastern banks? These hungry banks in the East show that the west was never a land of equal opportunity to all. Steinbeck helps to properly show this " larger monster" by rooting the socio-economic turmoil's to the farmers, who he has great sympathy for. In conclusion, the prosperity of the west shown in centuries of history textbooks was in fact a hoax to invite individuals to fall slave to the competitive capitalist dogma of the economic, political, social, and work lives that stricken the lives of many. " It is America's right to stretch from sea to shining sea. Not only do we have a responsibility to our citizens to gain valuable natural resources we also have a responsibility to civilize this beautiful land." were the words of former president Thomas Jefferson, essentially the catalyst behind the movement to the western American seaboard. What was intended to be an expansion of the common man only

became a reward for the rising business class during the late nineteenth century into twentieth century. Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* however, helps to satirize and serve example, putting a new, dark spin on the American ideal of moving westward and seeking fortune.