

The harbinger of tom joad: john steinbeck's approach to documentary reportage in ...

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



Nearly sixty years after John Steinbeck put pen to paper and wrote the series of San Francisco News articles that would later inspire *The Grapes of Wrath*, a renowned singer-songwriter from Freehold, New Jersey wrote a beautifully tragic song about the anguish of poverty and social injustice in contemporary America. Bruce Springsteen's 1995 album and title-track single "The Ghost of Tom Joad" aligned with Steinbeck's own documentary mission and gave voice to society's downtrodden through what *Rolling Stone* called "plaintive, bitter epiphanies" that resembled the "Depression-era sensibility" of Woody Guthrie. The magazine summarized Springsteen's decree as such: "These are times for lamentations, for measuring how much of the American promise has been broken or abandoned and how much of our future is transfigured into a vista of ruin. These are pitiless times." John Steinbeck explored this same break with the American promise in writing "The Harvest Gypsies," a series of articles published in the *San Francisco News* for one week in October 1936. The paper's editor, George West, hired Steinbeck to chronicle the hardships of migrant workers in rural California—and there was no paucity of material. From 1935 to 1938, roughly 400,000 Okies from Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, Missouri and other Lower Plains states arrived in California desperate for an improved life (Wollenberg 11). Driven from their homes by poverty, land foreclosures, and drought, many of the migrant workers faced even greater poverty—as well as oppression—in the fields of California. Working to assuage some of their problems was Tom Collins, manager of a federal migrant labor camp in central California. Collins saw Steinbeck's series as an invaluable opportunity to garner favorable publicity for the Resettlement Administration. Steinbeck saw Collins as a

knowledgeable and adept source for his research, “the grist of a writer’s mill” (Wollenberg 9). And so the two men toured the rural valleys of California in an old bakery truck, stopping at farms and ditch-side settlements to interview the Okies amidst the reality of their destitute milieu. Steinbeck immersed himself in the lives of the migrant workers, paying close attention to the minute details indicative of their cruel situation. He pored through reports on migrant life and became adroit at understanding both the formal policies and unwritten codes that governed the lives of the migrant workers. In his introduction to “The Harvest Gypsies,” Charles Wollenberg affirmed the importance of such documents to the validity and realism that shone through in Steinbeck’s writing: “The reports, which included social and cultural observations on migrant life and individual anecdotes sometimes told in Okie dialect, were extraordinary documents” (Wollenberg 9). The primary sources were crucial to Steinbeck’s underlying mission: to restore dignity to California’s migrant workers by treating them as individual and sovereign Americans. Steinbeck’s argument for the democratization of migrant labor was bolstered by factual and anecdotal evidence, subjective extrapolation, and a mastery of language that enabled him to waver between simple, concrete statements and elegant, literary prose. The articles in the series introduced California’s “new gypsies” as an impoverished and oppressed population of hard-working Americans. Steinbeck’s explicit aim was nearly as pluralistic as the individual lives he followed. He sought to see who the migrant workers were and how they lived. He also wanted to explore their living standard and uncover their problems—namely, “what is done to and for them” through the actions of

oppressive landowners and the federal government, respectively. Thus Steinbeck's project demanded a foundation of rich and exhaustive evidence on which to build bolder judgments and broader assertions about the rights of migrant workers. He delivered. In the seven-part series, Steinbeck covered nearly every aspect of Okie life. He wrote about the hardships faced by migrant workers at the camps, and the hierarchical class structure that existed even among society's most destitute. Steinbeck also addressed the genial relationship between small farmers and migrant workers and the ominous and oppressive nature of speculative farmers. Further, he discussed several New Deal policies and federal programs in a markedly favorable light, likely due to his own leftist political ideology and the influence of Collins. Steinbeck's accounts combined the writing styles of traditional journalism with beautifully-crafted prose that mirrored the poetic and often dramatic language of his novels. In the latter instances, Steinbeck perhaps realized that the style required by the newspaper medium simply could not handle his subject. Steinbeck conveyed the drifting existence of the workers in a brilliantly lyrical manner that nearly echoed the final lines of F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1925 novel, *The Great Gatsby*: "And so they move, frantically, with starvation close behind them" (Steinbeck 25). These graceful lines are the gems of Steinbeck's work in "The Harvest Gypsies." Much of Steinbeck's account of the migrant workers focused on the difficulty inherent in the "drifting" essence of their labor; however, he also identified the domestic realm as equally—if not more gravely—devastating. The average migrant worker made about \$300 a year, which was then used to "feed, clothe, and transport whole families" (Steinbeck 49). In his accounts of inadequate

housing, health problems, malnutrition, and child fatalities, Steinbeck painted a macabre scene in which the abominations that took place in the fields could not be insulated from the home. Steinbeck often used small yet significant details about the migrant workers and their families in order to demonstrate how their unfortunate condition had seeped into nearly every area of their lives. In one instance, he described the way in which a family of four arranged themselves like a puzzle just to fit in bed: “ If the mother and father sleep with their legs spread wide, there is room for the legs of the children” (Steinbeck 28). Intimate descriptions were crucial to Steinbeck’s rhetoric since his audience likely did not share in his views of the migrant workers, especially at first. It was imperative that he earned trustworthiness as a reporter before he extrapolated on the subject and imposed his own prescriptions and judgments on society. Steinbeck gained credibility and invoked sympathy through concrete facts and vivid descriptions that could not easily be ignored. Steinbeck was chiefly concerned with the loss of dignity that often accompanied the life of a migrant worker, believing wholeheartedly that “ the loss of dignity and spirit have cut down [the Okies] to a kind of subhumanity” (Steinbeck 31). He wanted to raise the Okies from subhuman to human, and eventually, from human to American. Inherent in each migrant worker, Steinbeck argued, was the capacity to be a socially responsible citizen within democracy. To draw attention to the plight of California’s migrant workers was not enough. Steinbeck wanted to dig deeper and retrieve something from their souls that had long been suppressed by a fateful condition. “ They are not migrants by nature,” he said. “ They are gypsies by force of circumstances” (Steinbeck 22). For this

reason, Steinbeck condemned the social conditions of the workers, but not the workers themselves. “[I]f these men steal, if there is a developing suspicion and hatred of well-dressed, satisfied people, then reason is not to be sought in their origin nor in any tendency to weakness in their character” (31). Steinbeck pardoned the Okies and urged his readers to do the same. Throughout the series, Steinbeck was clearly most enraged and preoccupied by the loss of dignity that occurred among the migrant workers: “[The word ‘dignity’] has been used not as some attitude of self-importance, but simply as a register of a man’s responsibility to the community ... We regard this destruction of dignity, then, as one of the most regrettable results of the migrant’s life” (Steinbeck 39). Steinbeck contended that the “dignity of men [was] under attack” by speculative and absentee farmers who stripped the Okies of their fundamental human—and democratic—rights. Men who worked on large farms were “herded like animals” so that landowners could “make them feel inferior and insecure,” he said. These powerful landowners ruled with violence, intimidation and terrorism; “[T]he will of the ranch owner ... is law” (Steinbeck 35). According to Steinbeck, these owners employed a “system of terrorism that would be unusual in the Fascist nations of the world.” Steinbeck’s fixation on the oppressive nature of the land owners and his willingness to label them as “fascists” reflected the historical context in which he was writing. By 1936 dictatorial regimes were gaining strength throughout Europe under the leadership of Adolf Hitler in Germany, Benito Mussolini in Italy, and Ferdinand Franco in Spain. Steinbeck wanted to eradicate such a trend in America, and thus he proposed the establishment of a state agricultural labor board that would uphold the migrants’ right to

organize unions. More importantly, he urged federal and state authorities to begin a program of resettling the Okies on small family farms in order to restore their individualism and self-reliance. Steinbeck wanted to strengthen the pillars of democracy. Perhaps the most devastating blow to migrant workers was their loss of practical sovereignty. According to Wollenberg, “the Dust Bowl migrants still considered themselves independent farmers and found it difficult to give up their traditional rural individualism” (11). Both Steinbeck and Collins saw the workers as “Jeffersonian yeomen farmers” who exemplified the most important tenants of American democracy, if only in their dreams. Steinbeck found hope at the newly built Arvin camp, which improved the conditions of migrant workers through better-equipped facilities and a more democratic organizational structure. Steinbeck lauded the management for “restoring the dignity and decency that had been kicked out of the migrants by their intolerable mode of life.” Armed with this newfound dignity, the men at the Arvin camp governed themselves within a “simple and workable democracy” (Steinbeck 39). “The result of this responsible self-government has been remarkable,” Steinbeck said. “There is a gaze and a self-confidence that can only come of restored dignity” (40-41). For Steinbeck, the Arvin camp presented a feasible alternative to large farms ruled by domineering land owners—an alternative that would allow dignity and democracy to once again flourish in the fields of rural California. Steinbeck concluded his series with a call to arms: “The old methods of intimidation and starvation perfected against the foreign peons [were] being used against the new white migrant workers” and could not be tolerated. American labor would inevitably demand a higher standard of living (56-7).

Steinbeck further contended that the Okies are of “ the best American stock, intelligent, resourceful; and, if given the chance, socially responsible.” He believed that the masses of migrant workers were at a momentous crossroads. The workers could either reclaim their status as upstanding citizens within a democratic society, or turn into “ an army driven by suffering and hatred to take what they need” (Steinbeck 56). Steinbeck’s cautionary ultimatum underscored the fundamental argument of his series, that democracy must be upheld in rural California—and in all places that suffer similar adversity. And his warning was valid. Five years later the United States would enter World War II to ensure the survival of democracy at home and in democratic nations abroad.“ The Harvest Gypsies” represented the very best in Depression-era documentary reportage. Steinbeck transcended the boundaries of ethical journalism with his overt bias and willingness to present an argument and a solution from the information he collected. The orthodox journalist would condemn the liberties Steinbeck took in writing the series, but the author would likely argue that his intent was not to objectively report the waves of migrants in California as an indifferent observer. Steinbeck had a vested interest in changing the situation for the better. Therefore, true to 1930s documentary form, Steinbeck used language as a vehicle for social change. His efforts and the efforts of countless other documentary writers established a powerful precedent for future generations of writers and songwriters—one that likely inspired Bruce Springsteen 60 years later. Waitin’ for when the last shall be first and the first shall be last
In a cardboard box ‘neath the underpass
Got a one-way ticket to the promised land
You got a hole in your belly and gun in

your hand
Sleeping on a pillow of solid rock
Bathin' in the city aqueduct
The highway is alive tonight
But where it's headed everybody knows
I'm sittin' down here in the campfire light
Waitin' on the ghost of Tom Joad—Bruce Springsteen, "The Ghost of Tom Joad" Works Cited Gilmore, Mikal. "The Ghost of Tom Joad." Rolling Stone. 11 January 1996. Issue 724/725.

Steinbeck, John. "Harvest Gypsies." Harvest Gypsies: On the Road to the Grapes of Wrath. Heyday Books: Berkeley, 1988. Wollenberg, Charles. "Introduction." Harvest Gypsies: On the Road to the Grapes of Wrath. Heyday Books: Berkeley, 1988.