

Modernism in context  
of 1930s america –  
the grapes of wrath  
by john steinbeck



A thought that is 'seeded' into an author's mind is outputted in his or hers work. That 'seeding' of thought could be initiated by the 'system' in which the author lives or lived. That is, the author observing the environment, persons, events etc, he/she faced will 'interpret' it in written forms. So, most times an author writes what he/she sees, feels and lives. Normally, human's lives are composed of incidents which are interesting, inspirational, 'injuring' etc, etc. The authors will bring these incidents into a written form by fictionalizing it.

Likewise, many authors have created fictional works influenced by the real life event of Great Depression, and importantly based those works on the depressing or 'injuring nature' of Great Depression. So, the important events of the 20th century, the World Wars and the Great Depression shaped the fictional works that came, Post-war, which in the process ended the reign of the classical English novels, and thereby gave rise to works based on Modernism. So, this paper will discuss the John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, by identifying how the historical issue of Great Depression was explored by the writer, maintaining modernistic leanings.

Great Depression The Great Depression, which had their beginnings in late 1920's, is the term given to the economic downturn that was witnessed all over the world, affecting all the sections of people in many countries. Even though, United States of America faced maximum repercussions of this occurrence, other countries of the world also faced a lot of difficulties. All the main industries, which provided livelihood for many, showed poor results, with many fully closing down. So, majority of the American people were stranded without job, food, shelter etc.

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So, with every aspect of their lives under threat, the American's mindset also went into a depressive mode, which got exhibited through various forms. Among the people, whose mindset seems to have been influenced by this event are the writers of those times. That is, the struggling and the depressive conditions that were prevailing then, got outputted in their works. And with Modernism taking roots, there was a clear break from the past, with everything presented in an all-new perspective including the fictional component of the arts and literature.

### John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath

The Grapes of Wrath, published in 1939, was set in the backdrop of Great Depression that was 'sweeping' the whole of America, particularly the western part. So, the plot, the setting, the characterization, etc is overtly inspired by the Great Depression. In stark and realistic fashion, John Steinbeck portrays the journey of a group of people towards California, to escape from depression, and seeking greener pastures in the Central valley. The pivotal characters in the novel are the members of the Joads family, who lose their tenant farm in Oklahoma due to the tough conditions initiated by the Great Depression.

Tom Joad, the main protagonist of the story, comes out of the prison after serving four years for a murder crime. Immediately, he goes to his childhood farm, where he sees a deserted farm without any scope for agriculture. With the Dust Bowl affecting the people particularly the farmers, and the resultant crop losses leading to a huge load of outstanding loans, the people had no option but to move in search of better opportunities

in California. The Dust Bowl of the 1930's lasted about a decade and the resultant agricultural damage further lengthened Depression.

At that time, through handbills California was 'promoted' as a beautiful place with many job opportunities with a good salary. So, hordes of people after seeing and reading the handbills, started to move to California. The Joad family also started their journey to California along with groups of people hoping for a better life there. They journeyed to California through Route 66, which was regarded as the "route of opportunity". "66 is the path of a people in flight, refugees from dust and shrinking land, from the thunder of tractors and ownership... From all of these the people are in flight, and they come into 66 from...side roads.... 66 is the mother road, the road of flight." (Steinbeck).

But, in reality that did not happen because, California was not able to actualize the tag of being the Promised Land, as it could not handle the huge inflow of immigrants. California was not the promised land, as hoped by the migrants because California and the Californians also did not escape the 'clutches' of Depression and they also felt its negative effects. So, when the central characters reach California after a lot of struggles, like losing many lives during their journey, the situation that beckoned them was not any good at all.

That is, due to the oversupply of workforce from the different parts of America, initiated by the Great Depression; the groups from Okalahoma including the Joad family got little opportunities. Even when they got the jobs, it was not very useful as it had low salaries without any additional

benefits. So, in the 'promised land' also, all the characters lived in squalor without any pleasure or pleasurable things. "The migrant people, scuttling for work, scrabbling to live, looked always for pleasure, dug for pleasure, manufactured pleasure, and they were hungry for amusement." (Steinbeck).

This unpleasant picture is common to all the places, where poverty rules. All the unwanted, nasty, dirty and unkempt things could be found in those places. This unpleasant picture was also seen in works originating in other side of world. That is, in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, the central character lives in one such unpleasant place. "The insufferable stench from the pot-houses, which are particularly numerous in that part of the town, and the drunken men whom he met continually, although it was a working day, completed the revolting misery of the picture".

The low salary, earned by the people working in California including the central characters of Tom Joad and Casy Joad, did not suffice to run a family and so there were further problems. Incomplete and unsatisfying work and salary, lead to the creation of unions, which in turn lead the workers to indulge in strikes, eventually leading to the destructions of their lives. So, Tom Joad's character also indulges in those violent activities and leaves the family with the intentions to fight for the freedom of the oppressed.

When there is constant oppression on someone or groups of people, they could 'break out' with repercussions. The character of Nora in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* after facing a lot of oppression at the hands of her husband finally breaks out, and leaves the home clearly symbolizing freedom. "I have been performing tricks for you, Torvald. That's how I've survived. You

wanted it like that. You and Papa have done me a great wrong. It's because of you I've made nothing of my life" (Ibsen). So, this novel borders on numerous problems and depressive things, as it is set in the Great Depression period.

Steinbeck's work mainly focused on the struggles of the central characters due to the historical event of Great Depression. That is, as Great Depression affected the common people mostly in the negative ways, the characters in the above discussed work also bordered on negativity and hopelessness. With the First World War also extending and heightening Great Depression, the sufferings of the common people accentuated to more inferior levels. Thus, Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, which came as part of Modernistic period, was mainly influenced by Great Depression.