

The Harvest Gypsies

Also published as: *Their Blood Is Strong*

John Steinbeck (1936)

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The idea for “The Harvest Gypsies” began in 1936 when *The San Francisco News* commissioned John Steinbeck to write a series of articles in order to document the lifestyles of the large number of Dust Bowl refugees who were migrating west to California hoping to find employment as agricultural laborers. Intrigued by the assignment, Steinbeck immediately purchased an old bakery truck to travel in and planned his route into middle California’s agricultural district, determined to live among the workers and experience their plight firsthand. What he found there shocked and outraged him, and his anger erupted as he composed the articles that became a seven-part journalistic series. Published between October 5 and October 11, 1936, the articles are often considered to be the source material that provided the facts Steinbeck later shaped into vignettes and episodes in the fictional *Grapes of Wrath*.

Based on careful eye-witness observations, the essays created violent reactions among conservative rural Californians, and Steinbeck soon found himself under attack by angry residents and especially by the powerful Growers Association, a conglomerate formed by the large corporate interests. Accused of being a communist agitator and fearing for his personal safety, Steinbeck soon became a “persona non grata” even in his hometown. The essays contained in “The Harvest Gypsies” were later collected and reprinted in 1938 in a pamphlet called *Their Blood Is Strong* by the Simon J. Lubin Society, an organization dedicated to the aid of migrant workers. At that time, Steinbeck appended an article entitled “Starvation Under the Orange Trees”, which had been published earlier that year in the *Monterey Trader*, and which now appeared as an epilogue to the newly published pamphlet. The text of *Their Blood is Strong* was accompanied by photos taken by the famous photographer Dorothea Lange, who was at the time working for the Farm Security Administration and was charged with providing a visual record of the Dust Bowl migration.

A fine example of the journalistic power of argument generally found in Steinbeck’s non-fictional work, “The Harvest Gypsies” is most important as an historical record and as evidence that the contentious criticism of the California growers found in *The Grapes of Wrath* was based on fact and not exaggeration. Most recently, Heyday Books, a publisher specializing in California history and literature, issued a reprint without the epilogue under the series’ original title *The Harvest Gypsies* in 1988. The new version contains an introduction by Charles Wollenberg that not only places the articles in the context of the historical era, but also helps the reader to see their place and importance in Steinbeck’s developing career as a literary artist and as a budding journalist.

The Harvest Gypsies

(from *The Great Depression and the Arts*: <http://newdeal.feri.org/nchs/docs02.htm>)

In 1936, *The San Francisco News* hired John Steinbeck to write a series of articles on the Dust Bowl migration. The seven article series, *The Harvest Gypsies*, provided the factual basis for *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Steinbeck began his research with an escorted two week tour of California's Central Valley visiting farms, labor camps, "Hoovervilles", and shantytowns. One camp visited was the Arvin Sanitary Camp—Weedpatch, built in fall 1935 as part of the New Deal's Resettlement

Administration.

On this tour Steinbeck met Tom Collins, manager of the Weedpatch Camp. According to Jackson Benson, a Steinbeck biographer, Collins became the most important single source for *The Grapes of Wrath*. Collins traveled with Steinbeck on three trips around California observing camp operations, talking to residents, going to meetings, and even attending a weekend dance.

Collins collected statistics on many aspects of camp life which Steinbeck used as primary material for his newspaper series and *The Grapes of Wrath*. After the publication of *The Harvest Gypsies* Steinbeck and his wife drove west on Route 66 through Oklahoma and on to California. In 1937, he and Collins worked in the fields harvesting hops. They stayed at ranches, camps for squatters, and visited such cities as Bakersfield, Barstow, Blythe, and Needles. Later Steinbeck went to Visalia to help in response to severe flooding.

These experiences provided Steinbeck with the background needed to accurately depict the migrants and specifically a family like the Joads. Historians have provided evidence of the complexity of the migration story. James Gregory contends that the Dust Bowl migration was a media event of the 1930s. He argues for a distinction between the Dust Bowl and drought area and points out that only about 16,000 people from the Dust Bowl migrated to California. "While Steinbeck's Joad family were indeed an important element of migration—there were also many other participants who defied the popular image of the rural Dust Bowl migrant." [1] Gregory demonstrates that more than fifty percent came from urban and small town areas. He contends the migrants had a chain of connections (relatives) already in California and that the automobile trip posed few problems usually taking only four days.

Catherine McNicol Stock extends the drought affected area. Arguing that conditions in the Northern plains were the worst, she says that "by 1940, one third of all farmers who owned their land had lost it to foreclosure; tenancy had risen to nearly fifty percent; more than 150,000 people had left the region forever; and the Federal government had spent \$400 million to help those who stayed behind." [2]

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Steinbeck was born, raised, and lived most of his life in the lush Salinas Valley region of California, where he witnessed conflicts between laborers and owners of large farms. Many of his works are set in that locale, including *In Dubious Battle* (1936), which depicts the efforts of farm workers to unionize and strike for better wages, and *Of Mice and Men* (1937), an immensely popular novel and Broadway play. These works and *The Grapes of Wrath*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and was adapted into an acclaimed film by John Ford, secured Steinbeck's reputation as a major American writer and contributed greatly to his winning the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1962.

In autumn of 1936, Steinbeck helped publicize injustices faced by migrant workers in California by contributing an essay to the *Nation* and a series of seven articles under the heading "The Harvest Gypsies" to *The San Francisco News*. These pieces were collected in a pamphlet, *Their Blood Is Strong* (1938), which was expanded and reissued in 1989 as *The Harvest Gypsies: On the Road to 'The Grapes of Wrath.'* Based on Steinbeck's experiences in migrant makeshift settlements and in camps established by the federal government, the articles contain case studies, statistics, and recommendations as well as details of the miserable living conditions endured by migrants and their confrontations with large landowners. Steinbeck met Tom Collins, an official with the Farm Security Administration who managed a clean, well-run government resettlement area that served as the model for the Weedpatch Camp in *The Grapes of Wrath*. The novel is dedicated, in part, to Collins ("For Tom, who lived it"). Deeply moved and angered by the

hardships of migrant workers, Steinbeck was determined to dramatize their experiences, particularly after having witnessed death and destruction by flood in a Visalia migrant settlement. This incident is recreated in the final chapter of *The Grapes of Wrath* and exemplifies Steinbeck's artistic embellishment of actual events.

The novel begins with a description of the Dust Bowl, the Southwestern plains area devastated by drought, and the people most severely affected. The second chapter introduces Tom Joad, who is returning home to his family after having served four years of a seven-year term for manslaughter. Tom encounters Jim Casy, a lapsed preacher who, like Jesus Christ, underwent a meditative retreat to the wilderness. During the course of the novel Casy expounds a philosophy, similar to Christ's, that emphasizes the importance of developing from an individualistic to a collective outlook, or "from I to we." Tom and Casy reach the Joad homestead but find it abandoned and ravaged. They meet Muley Graves, a nervous and desperate ex-farmer being hunted by authorities, who informs them that the Joads, like other sharecroppers in the area, have lost their land to banks and are planning to relocate to California.

Shortly after the publication of his first major success, *Of Mice and Men* and prior to penning *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck left for Oklahoma. There he joined a group of farmers embarking for California. For two years Steinbeck lived and worked with the migrants, seeking to lend authenticity to his account and to deepen his understanding of their plight. Steinbeck originally wrote about the plight of the migrant workers in a series of seven articles commissioned by *The San Francisco News* and published between October 5 and 12, 1936. These were brought together in an activist pamphlet, noted Jack Miles in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, published by the Simon J. Lubin Society of California in 1938 and republished more recently under Steinbeck's original title as *The Harvest Gypsies: On the Road to the Grapes of Wrath*.

According to Nicolaus Mills in his article for *The Nation*, in order to find material for his articles "Steinbeck traveled the California back roads in an old bakery truck." He was guided by the manager of a Federal Resettlement Administration's migrant labor camp whom he later used as the model for the manager of the Weedpatch camp in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Mills remarked that *The Harvest Gypsies* "contains some of Steinbeck's best journalism.... Unlike Agee and Orwell, Steinbeck did not make himself a central character in his writing. Rather...[he] was content to remain in the background and be a filter for his material. And what a filter! We may forget Steinbeck's presence...but we don't forget the sights the stark modesty of his prose conveys." William Kennedy, in his review for the *New York Times Book Review*, called the effort "a straightaway documentary: flat, narration of dismally depressing detail on the lives of immigrants, coupled to Steinbeck's informed and sensitive plea for change." "Even then," noted a *Bloomsbury Review* critic "it was evident that the last of these articles was only the beginning of a much larger battle."

At the end of 1937, Steinbeck first attempted to gain broader support and sympathy for the migrants' condition in a novel entitled *The Oklahomans*, which he abandoned early on. He followed that attempt with *L'Affaire Lettuceberg*, a satire that Steinbeck destroyed because he felt that it failed to promote understanding and came dangerously close to ridiculing the very people he wanted to help. "To make their story convincing, he had to report their lives with fidelity," Aaron explained, and Watt noted that Steinbeck's "personal involvement was intimate and his sympathies were strongly aroused by the suffering and injustice he saw at first hand." Critics contended that this combination of concern, first-hand knowledge, and commitment produced what a reviewer for the London *Times* termed "one of the most arresting [novels] of its time."

Steinbeck's journals, kept while maintaining the 2,000 words per day goal he had set for himself over the five month period in which he wrote *The Grapes of Wrath*, were published under the title *Working Days: The Journals of the Grapes of Wrath*. They "contain almost no meditations on the

process of conceiving and embodying characters and themes but confine themselves largely to the actual working days and hours of a novel': what time [Steinbeck] sits down to write, how much he hopes to accomplish, and sometimes whether or not he did it," stated Robert Murray Davis in *World Literature Today*. "However, the journals do reveal a good deal about Steinbeck's cast of mind and working habits." In this sense, Davis commented, "*Working Days* should prove consoling to all writers who have similar problems and doubts." A reviewer for *Time* wrote, "the fascination of this document rests in its portrait of an artist at the peak of his skills." Despite his tremendous daily output--"enormous...for any writer and ultimately a daily tour de force" noted Kennedy---Steinbeck was plagued by self-doubt and berated himself for laziness. Kennedy added that "[*The Grapes of Wrath*] would be [Steinbeck's] ninth work of fiction in 10 years, and he would be 37 years old at its publication."

One of the most prevalent themes in *The Grapes of Wrath* is the misuse and waste of lives and land. "The real power of *The Grapes of Wrath* is the savage anger at the impersonal process that uproots men from the land and rapes it, substituting rattletraps and highways for place and kindred," Nancy L. McWilliams and Wilson C. McWilliams wrote. Steinbeck was appalled at an economic system that, having collapsed, bankrupted and forced thousands of farmers from work on their own land to work on massive and impersonal farms concerned only with profit. On these highly productive "agricultural `factories,'" Aaron contended, the migrants "slaved and starved." Watt elaborated: "Here the land is not sick, but the system that is supposed to distribute the land's fruitfulness has broken down, and so in the midst of plenty men are starving: produce is being destroyed because it will not fetch the price of marketing, while the starving watch."

Steinbeck saw this "large-scale commercial and industrial exploitation of the land" as the end of "pioneer ideals," Watt commented. He opposed the continued growth of powerful private interest groups, such as "the growers and their ... financial allies," Aaron explained, at the expense of individual rights and dignity. "The Okies have had their ramshackle but cherished homes snatched away from them by the insatiable behemoth of big-scale agriculture," John S. Kennedy wrote. "What is wrong with this, it is suggested, is not the pooling of hundreds of family-farms, but the fact of the alien ownership of the amalgam." Steinbeck advocated what Aaron described as a "cooperative commonwealth" attitude, a return to "neighborly interdependence."

Certain groups, however, misinterpreted this message and charged Steinbeck with writing a Communist tract. "Publicists for the big California growers and the right-wing press denounced [*The Grapes of Wrath*] as a pack of lies," Aaron reported. "Spokesmen for the Association Farmers, incorporated in 1934 to combat unionism and other `subversive activities,' accused Steinbeck of writing a brief for Communism."

In reality, Steinbeck "was a conservative, a man who valued and even clung to the old America," McWilliams and McWilliams noted. What he wrote, Aaron remarked, was "the insider's plea to the popular conscience, not a call for revolution." While Steinbeck criticized what he believed were evil and immoral institutions, he offered what critics contended was an optimistic picture of the American ideal. He presented the migrants as the "preservers of the old American verities, innocent of bourgeois proprieties, perhaps, but courteous, trusting, friendly, and generous," Aaron commented. "What preserved them in the end, and what would preserve all America, was a recovery of a neighborly interdependence that an acquisitive society had almost destroyed." Although Steinbeck recorded "the symptoms of his sick society," Aaron continued, "[he] did not regard himself as one of its gravediggers."

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, as well as in his other novels, Steinbeck took a "biological view" towards man. He did not look for the causes or motives behind a given situation. Instead, he sought to objectively observe the actuality of a situation rather than what that situation could or should have been. Frederick Bracher described this as "a way of looking at things characteristic

of a biologist."

Because he held a biological view of man, Steinbeck believed that the evolutionary concepts of adaptation and "survival of the fittest" applied to men as well as animals. "The ability to adapt to new conditions is one of man's most valuable biological attributes, and the loss of it might well lead to man's extinction," is an important concept in Steinbeck's work, according to Bracher. Although Steinbeck is sympathetic toward the migrants in *The Grapes of Wrath*, "he is not blind to [their] defects," Warren French noted. "He shows clearly that he writes about a group of thoughtless, impetuous, suspicious, ignorant people." As such, French suggested, they too are bound by the laws of nature and "must also change if they are to survive." Thus, French described the book as "a dynamic novel about people who learn that survival depends upon their adaptability to new conditions." Jackson L. Benson noticed an example of this evolutionary concept in *Of Mice and Men*, a short novel concerning two itinerant farm hands, George and Lennie. George, the "fittest" of the two, is compelled to shoot the strong but feeble-minded Lennie after the latter inadvertently kills their employer's daughter-in-law: "Lennie kills without malice--animals and people die simply because of his strength. Lennie himself must die simply because within the society of man he is an anomaly and weak."

The concept of "group-man" was another aspect of Steinbeck's biological view. This idea was later outlined in *Sea of Cortez*, Steinbeck's and marine biologist Ed Ricketts' account of their expedition to the Gulf of California. According to Peter Shaw: "The book took each day's observations of sea life as an occasion for the drawing of biological parallels with human society. The most striking parallel for Steinbeck was the seeming existence of a group instinct in man similar to that found in schools of fish and colonies of marine fauna. Man, Steinbeck suggested, ... could be regarded as a group phenomenon as well as an individual one. Accordingly, it might be possible to discover more about an individual by studying his behavior as it related to the group than by studying him in isolation." Steinbeck took this premise one step further by suggesting that man as an individual has no identity and that mankind as a whole is the only reality. This idea is expressed by Doc Burton in Steinbeck's novel about a fruit picker's strike, *In Dubious Battle*: "I want to watch these group men, for they seem to me to be a new individual, not at all like single men. A man in a group isn't himself at all; he's a cell in an organism that isn't like him any more than the cells in your body are like you." Kennedy found the concept of group-man to be "the central point in Steinbeck's concept of life." He added: "Permeating his works is this idea, which is the very heart of his philosophy of life: that the concrete person is in himself virtually nothing, whereas the abstraction 'humanity' is all."

Throughout his work, Steinbeck maintains what R. W. B. Lewis called "a celebrational sense of life." This quality, critics have remarked, set him apart from his contemporaries and accounted for much of his popular appeal. "He has a generous indignation at the spectacle of human suffering," Walter Allen noted. "But apart from this, he is the celebrant of life, any kind of life, just because it is life." Alfred Kazin claimed that while other Depression era authors "saw life as one vast Chicago slaughterhouse, a guerrilla war, a perpetual bomb raid," Steinbeck displayed "a refreshing belief in human fellowship and courage; he had learned to accept the rhythm of life." This is not to suggest, however, that Steinbeck held any unrealistically optimistic illusions. Kennedy noted: "He depicts human existence as conflict, unremitting and often savage battle. But he suggests that life is worth living, flagellant and baffling though it may be.... In a time when the prevalent note in creative literature is that of despondency and abandonment to malign fate, ... Steinbeck's assertion of the resiliency and tough durability of life has set him off from the generality."

Although Steinbeck possessed a "moving approach to human life," as Kazin described it, he was generally unsuccessful at bringing his characters to life. Reviewers frequently criticized his people for appearing to be manipulated, stage-like creations. "Nothing in his books is so dim,

significantly enough, as the human beings who live in them," Kazin wrote, "and few of them are intensely imagined as human beings at all." Edmund Wilson found that the characters in *The Grapes of Wrath* "are animated and put through their paces rather than brought to life." He added: "They are like excellent character actors giving very conscientious performances in a fairly well-written play. Their dialect is well managed, but they always sound a little stogy."

Steinbeck's descriptive ability, on the other hand, has been widely praised. The *Time* critic contended that Steinbeck wrote with "cinematic clarity." Aaron compared the effects of the images and descriptions in *The Grapes of Wrath* to those rendered by a "camera eye." He found that the novel "unfolds cinematically almost as if Steinbeck had conceived of it as a documentary film."

Critics have suggested that Steinbeck's best novels are those set in his birthplace, northern California's Salinas Valley. "He was a Californian," McWilliams and McWilliams remarked, "and his writings never succeeded very well when he tried to walk alien soil." They defined his California as "a very special one, ... sleepy California that time passed by." Bruce Cook noted that while Steinbeck was "a writer of international reputation, he was almost a regionalist in his close concentration on the 50 miles or so of California that surrounded his birthplace. The farming towns up and down the Salinas Valley," Cook continued, "and the commercial fishing port of Monterey just a few miles across the mountains provided the settings for most of his best books."

Steinbeck often used this setting to stress his theme of the importance of the "relationship between man and his environment," Shaw claimed. "The features of the valley at once determined the physical fate of his characters and made symbolic comment on them." Moreover, while Steinbeck dwelled on the beauty and "fruitfulness" of the valley, he "did not make it a fanciful Eden," Shaw commented. "The river brought destructive floods as well as fertility, and the summer wind could blow hot for months without let-up." Thus, "Man struggled within a closed system that both formed and limited him; there he was responsible for his acts and yet unable to control the larger forces."

After *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck's reputation as a novelist began to decline. Although his later works, such as *The Moon Is Down*, *East of Eden*, and *The Winter of Our Discontent*, have been public favorites and best sellers, they have also been considered critical disappointments. Too often, the reviewers contended, Steinbeck's later work is flawed by sentimentality, obvious symbolism, and the inability to achieve the power and statement of *The Grapes of Wrath*.

If the husband hits every harvest without delay and works the maximum time, he may make four hundred dollars this year. But if anything happens, if his old car breaks down, if he is late and misses a harvest or two, he will have to feed his whole family on as little as one hundred and fifty. But there is still pride in this family. Wherever they stop they try to put the children in school.Â The local sheriff makes a. The harvest gypsies. [Contents]. 12.