

Humanist Masterpieces No 41

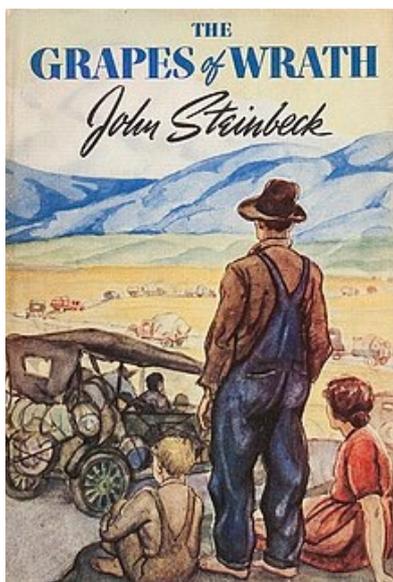
The Grapes of Wrath (1939)

Brian McClinton

WHEN John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* was published in April 1939, it met with a mixed reception. In Kern County, California, the Board of Supervisors banned it in schools and libraries. Members of the Associated Farmers, who called it 'communist propaganda', burned a copy in a symbolic act. The *San Bernardino Sun* said, "the fallacy of this (story) should not be dignified with a denial". The *Oklahoma Times* referred to its 'obscenity and inaccuracy'.

Congressman Lyle Borden of Oklahoma called it "a black, infernal creation of a twisted, distorted mind... Some have said this book exposes a condition and a character of people... but the truth is this book exposes nothing but the total depravity, vulgarity, and degraded mentality of the author". Steinbeck was widely seen as a dangerous communist activist using the book as a means of stirring up a revolution. Arthur D. Spearman, a Jesuit priest, called it 'an embodiment of the Marxist Soviet propaganda'.

Edmund Wilson, the literary critic, journalist and author of *To the Finland Station*, a classic history of the Left from Michelet to Lenin, described it as "a propaganda novel, full of preachments and sociological interludes". In *The Boys in the Backroom* (1941) he wrote: "The characters of *The Grapes of Wrath* are animated and put through their paces rather than brought to life; 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 stagy; and, in spite of Mr. Steinbeck's efforts to make them figure as heroic human symbols, one cannot help feeling that these Okies, too, do not exist for him quite seriously as people".



Wilson is otherwise complimentary. He praises the fundamental quality of Steinbeck's intelligence, which looks upon the hard world with robust and virile fearlessness. Eleanor Roosevelt was more fulsome, calling her reading of the novel 'an unforgettable experience'. Her husband, the president, declared that "there are 500,000 Americans that live in the covers of that book". Dorothy Parker, the American poet and critic, called it "the greatest American novel I have ever read". It became the top American seller of 1939 with 430,000 copies sold and in 1940 it was awarded a Pulitzer Prize.

Darryl Zanuck of 20th Century Fox snapped up the movie rights for \$70,000 and hot on the heels of the novel came the film, starring Henry Fonda as Tom Joad and Jane Darwell as Ma Joad. It was nominated for seven Academy Awards and won two: for the director John Ford and for Darwell as supporting actress. Although Steinbeck was left-wing, Ford was right-wing and stated that it appealed to him because it was about simple people and the story was similar to the famine in Ireland.

The Grapes of Wrath tells the story of a sharecropping family's forced trek from Oklahoma in search of a better life in the 'promised land' of California during the Dust Bowl. This was the name given to the drought-stricken Southern Plains region of the United States, which suffered severe dust storms during a dry period in the 1930s. The high winds and choking dust swept the region from Texas to Nebraska, people and livestock died and crops failed across the entire area. The Joads suffered the fate of thousands of others when the bank repossessed their farm – "tractorin' off the place", as a neighbour Muley Graves describes it, referring to the caterpillar tractor that 'bumped the hell out of the house'.

In particular, the novel focuses on the moral journey and transformation of Tom Joad. The story begins when he has been released from the Oklahoma State Penitentiary, where he served four years of a seven-year sentence for murder. He and another man were involved in a drunken brawl at a dance. The man stabbed him with a knife, and he replied by hitting him with a shovel that was lying nearby – "knocked his head plum to squash", he says.

On his way home he meets Jim Casy, a former travelling preacher he remembers from childhood. Casy tells him that he has lost his calling and finally concluded that "there ain't no sin and there ain't no virtue. There's just stuff people do. It's all part of the same thing. And some of the things folks do is nice, and some ain't nice, but that's as far as any man got a right to say". All that matters, he finally realises, is the spirit of love, not the love of Jesus because he doesn't know anybody named Jesus, but the love of people. Of course, it is hardly a coincidence that his own initials are 'JC' and, like Jesus, he wanders in the wilderness. Later, -->

while travelling with the Joads, he sacrifices himself, Christ-like, when he turns himself in to save Tom who has knocked a deputy unconscious. When he comes out of jail, he becomes a union activist and leads a strike in support of a living wage. He compares the workers' struggle for justice to that of Lincoln, Washington, and the martyrs of the French Revolution. He is soon killed by a vigilante with a pick handle. He has become a martyr for the Joad family and for the entire class that they represent. He paraphrases Jesus's last words – "forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do" – by crying, "You don't know what you're a doin'".

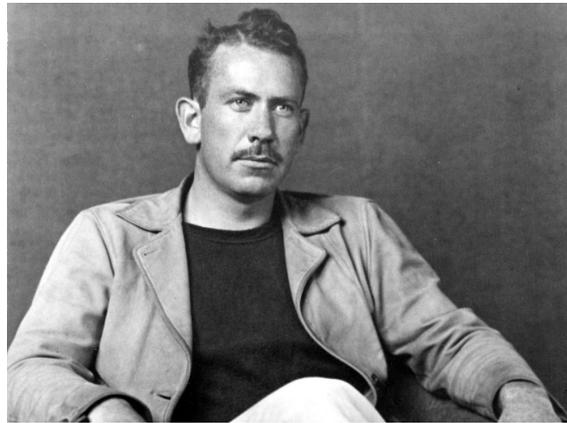
If Casy is a Christ figure then Tom is his disciple who experiences an 'education of the heart'. He begins as a cynic and progresses to a socialist humanism. When he witnesses the death of his grandparents, who are buried along the roadside, and the other hardships of his family on their journey, he assumes responsibility for them and for the community around him. As Steinbeck wrote in an article: "Man is a double thing – a group animal and at the same time an individual. And it occurs to me that he cannot successfully be the second until he has fulfilled the first" (*Some Thoughts on Juvenile Delinquency*, 1955).

The film critic Pauline Kael condemned the film as "a blur of embarrassing sentimental pseudo-biblical pseudo-documentary, a perfect representation of what Bertrand Russell called 'the fallacy of the superior virtue of the oppressed'". It is true that the novel uses copious biblical allusions. It has a religious title from *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* by the abolitionist writer Julia Ward Howe, a stirring call for victory over the racist forces repressing another downtrodden group. Moreover, the journey of the Joads is also a rerun of the Exodus story with Route 66 as the Judean wilderness, although it is a kind of reversal in the sense that the family move from a kind of freedom on the land in Oklahoma to bondage in California.

So, yes, Steinbeck employs biblical tropes and includes elements of

Christianity in promoting love and individual sacrifice, but the novel is not a mouthpiece of Christian doctrine. The humanist philosophy at the centre is active, not passive. Nor is his main protagonist perfect: he is implicated in two killings. Rather, he is saying that the resilience and courage of the oppressed in the face of extreme adversity is to be greatly admired, and they deserve to enjoy the same freedom from want and fear as everybody else.

Steinbeck was accused of being a communist. When preparing the work he wrote: "I want to put a tag of shame on the greedy bastards who are responsible for this" [i.e. the Depression and its effects]. His wrath is directed at the banks who drive farmers off the land and the



businessmen who exploit migrant labour and disband trade unions. And of course he wants the reader to feel this wrath too.

If Steinbeck's position is socialist, it is greatly tinged with rugged individualism and other American philosophies. The concept of the 'Over-Soul' developed by Ralph Waldo Emerson in an essay of that title in 1841 is clearly expressed by Casy who believes that everyone's soul is just part of one big soul. In Emerson's case, the latter is God's soul, what he calls 'the eternal one'. For Casy, however, the one big soul is humanity. He and Steinbeck share a Walt Whitman-like faith in humanity, which is for many the essence of Humanism.

The one big soul is thus the better part of ourselves. Tom sums it up when he tells his mother: "I'll be around in the dark - I'll be everywhere. Wherever you can look - wherever there's a fight, so hungry

people cant eat, I'll be there. Wherever there's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there. I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad. I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry and they know supper's ready, and when the people are eatin' the stuff they raise and livin' in the houses they buid - I'll be there, too".

There are also elements of Jeffersonian agrarianism in the novel. It maintains that the essential connection between humankind and nature should be protected and enhanced, and therefore the economy should be founded on farming, a rural way of life, and respect for the land.

Yet ultimately, what Steinbeck wants to emphasise is the Christian humanist message of loving one's neighbour. And it is the women above all who embody this compassion. Ma Joad says that "women can change better than a man". She welcomes strangers like Casy into the family and feeds the hungry children in the Hooverville camp. Like millions of women, she works selflessly for others and tries to instil the same attitude in her saucy eldest daughter Rose of Sharon. Ma ultimately succeeds in her mission when, after bearing a stillborn child, Rose bares her breast and offers her milk to a starving man (a scene not shown in the film).

The Grapes of Wrath became the cornerstone of John Steinbeck's Nobel Prize for literature in 1962, won "for his realistic and imaginative writings, combining as they do sympathetic humour and keen social perception". Although he wrote 16 other novels, notably *Of Men and Men* (1937), *Cannery Row* (1945) and *East of Eden* (1952), *The Grapes of Wrath* is undoubtedly his masterpiece.

It is certainly not a religious work. In a letter in 1964 he wrote: "I am not religious so that I have no apprehension of a hereafter, either a hope of reward or a fear of punishment. It is not a matter of belief. It is what I feel to be true from my experience, observation and simple tissue feeling". But the novel is imbued throughout with the spirit of an ethically Christian Humanism. □