

## FILM

*The Grapes of Wrath* (1939)

John Steinbeck

(1902-1968)

adaptation by Nunnally Johnson & John Ford (1940)

## ANALYSIS

*The Grapes of Wrath* made a great social impact that was enhanced by this movie adaptation. John Ford was the ideal director, an artist legendary for his picturesque westerns. Like many directors, Ford believed that he could tell any story with images alone. He tended to disregard scripts and film the story as he felt inclined, giving an improvisational spontaneity to the acting that increases realism. Ford's cinematic style is most evident in his long takes, in the many panoramic shots, in recurrent shots of a small lone figure in a vast flat landscape. In his westerns the beautiful desert backgrounds of mesas and rock formations contribute to a mythic grandeur. In this film the land is hostile with dust storms, a bleak prospect ahead, many long hills to climb, a vast arid desert to cross, and then, finally, a lush green valley of orchards in California—the Garden of the West.

The opening panoramic shot of a tiny figure approaching in a vast landscape establishes the theme of human insignificance in the universe, a characteristic of literary Naturalism. The turtle crossing the road in the novel is a parable that did not make it into the film. The figure turns out to be Tom Joad as played by the dry laconic Henry Fonda. To a great extent Ford tells the story through expressions on the faces of Tom Joad and his Ma, who have a touching relationship. Jane Darwell as Ma Joad is the heart of the film and gives the most compelling and moving performance. Her eyes convey the anguish and suffering common to migrant women in all times and places. She is the archetypal mother whose mission is to keep her family together in order to survive. Pa tells her, "You're the one keeps us together, Ma." She attributes her endurance to her gender, to the capacity of a woman to ride with the stream of events the way she has ridden the overloaded, piled-high, overheating, broken-down, rickety old truck carrying her family from the dust bowl of Oklahoma all the way to California. By the end she has become the voice of the common People, affirming the irrepressible human spirit. The long journey of the Joads is Steinbeck's inspirational contrast to the journey of the Bundrens in *As I Lay Dying* (1930) by Faulkner and his Ma Joad is the living center holding her family together in contrast to the dead burden Addie Bundren. In both novels the mother is the center and the family represents the human family as a whole.

Tom Joad has just been paroled from prison, where he was sent for killing a man with a shovel in self-defense, introducing the theme of social injustice. Tom finds that his family has been forced to move off the land, another social injustice caused by big business buying up all the land and replacing workers with automation. Sharecroppers like the Joads might have survived the dust storms. They are driven off the land not by Nature but by Society—by a corporation and beyond it by the banks so much hated during the Great Depression of the 1930s. The dust storm symbolizes the pall cast over the poor and the working class by impersonal corporate capitalism. Soon after the Joad family gathers and prays at the dinner table of Uncle John, five big caterpillar tractors roughly abreast come growling through a dusty field toward them and smash down the ramshackle house—machines in the Garden destroying their lives.

California had been a magnet for dreamers since the Gold Rush of 1849. Through the 19<sup>th</sup> century corporate advertising contributed to the allure of California and by now it had become the mythic Garden of the West. But the handbills that persuade the Joads and other Okies that there is plenty of work for fruit pickers in California with high wages are deceptions by the false prophets of advertising. Steinbeck uses biblical rhythms and allusions to give his novel a mythic dimension retained in the film. When they have overloaded their rickety old truck, Pa asks "Will it hold?" The preacher replies, "It'll be a miracle out of

scripture.” When Pa first sees California he equates it with the Promised Land in the book of *Exodus*: “There it is, folks. Land of milk and honey.” Ma says, “Thank God, and we’re still together.”

The spiritual dimension of the novel is established in the beginning of the movie before Tom even gets home when he encounters Jim Casy, the former preacher who has lost the Spirit because he loves his neighbors and cannot bear to see their suffering. Casy is so brokenhearted he has lost his faith—“I ain’t so sure of things.” His doubt gives him depth and authority. In the novel Jim Casy (J.C.) is a Christ-evoking figure who sacrifices himself for the cause of the workers. The film first makes him a John the Baptist figure—“I baptized you, boy.” Casy defines the spirit of both the novel and the film when he declares to Tom that “the Holy Spirit is love.” Both the novel and the film are infused with that spirit, most of all in the depiction of the Joads as generous warmhearted individuals and as cooperative members of a loving family. The Joads show Christian charity in inviting the preacher to join their impoverished family of ten on their overloaded tipsy truck. At a stop for gas along Route 66 they are so poor that Pa cannot afford to buy a loaf of bread. The waitress resists selling them the loaf at less than cost because she needs it for sandwiches but the kind owner tells her to give Pa the bread. Then Pa asks the price of candy sticks he wants to buy for the two children with him and the waitress gives them the candy for only a penny each instead of the price of five cents. Then two roughneck customers who notice her generosity give her big tips. Charity in return for charity fulfills the teachings of Jesus.

At the beginning of the film, Tom is belligerent and defiant—an insignificant figure in a vast landscape. He becomes significant when he commits to staying with the family to help his Ma hold it together. All the deceptions, prejudice against Okies, exploitation and abuse they suffer in California confirm Ma’s point that people who do not behave toward others as members of a family are “like animals.” Ma Joad embodies the priorities and values rejected by Feminists. After he learns the truth about conditions for workers in California, Tom is inspired by Casy, who has regained the Holy Spirit and persuades him that the workers should go on strike: “Casy was like a lantern. He made me see things.” Christ is the light. When Casy is killed, Tom becomes the Christ-evoking exemplar. Steinbeck is affirming an activist Christianity in pursuit of social justice, as later exemplified by Martin Luther King, Jr. When the social justice movements abandoned and even inverted traditional religious values they rejected the Holy Spirit. That is why their vehicles will never reach their Promised Land. Feminists crucified Ma Joad.

Tom is falsely accused of killing Casy, threatening the corrupt social order, and he will be “crucified” if he is caught. No longer feeling insignificant, by the end of the film Tom becomes heroic when he dedicates his life to fighting against social injustice, declaring that he will be “a little piece of the big soul that belongs to everybody,” an expansion of Ma’s devotion to family--“We was all one.” His humility deepens his dignity. When he declares that he will be “everywhere” in spirit, he is in effect identifying himself with Jesus. Tom is clearly prepared to sacrifice himself like Christ and Casy for the salvation of “the People.” The film ends with him setting out to improve the world rather than with the downbeat last scene in the novel, making the film more inspirational. The title from the “Battle Hymn of the Republic” affirms faith in God and dedication to truth and justice while linking the cause of labor in general to the cause of slaves and the possibility of another Civil War. Steinbeck’s earlier novel *In Dubious Battle* (1936) dramatizes the labor movement that followed the Okie migration into California.

Michael Hollister (2015)