

## ANALYSIS

### *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939)



John Steinbeck

(1902-1968)

“Your idea is the end the book on a great symbolic note, that life must go on and will go on with a greater love and sympathy and understanding for our fellowmen. The episode you use in the end is extremely poignant. Nobody could fail to be moved by the incident of Rose of Sharon giving her breast to the starving man yet, taken as the finale of such a book with all its vastness and surge, it struck us on reflection as being all too abrupt... As the end of the final episode it is perfect; as the end of the whole book not quite. It seems to us that the last few pages need building up. The incident needs leading up to, so that the meeting with the starving man is not so much an accident or chance encounter, but more an integral part of the saga of the Joad family. And it needs something else leading away from it so that the symbolism of the gesture is more apparent in relation to the book as a whole.... Again I repeat, all this seems like sacrilege. Now do as you think best.”

Pascal Covici  
Editor, Viking Press  
Letter to Steinbeck (9 January 1939)

“I’m sorry but I cannot change that ending. It is casual—there is not fruity climax, it is not more important than any other part of the book—if there is a symbol, it is a survival symbol not a love symbol, it must be an accident, it must be a stranger, and it must be quick. To build this stranger into the structure of the book would be to warp the whole meaning of the book. The fact that the Joads don’t know him, don’t care about him, have no ties to him—that is the emphasis. The giving of the breast has no more sentiment than the giving of a piece of bread.... The incident of the earth mother feeding by the breast is older than literature.... You know that I’ve never been touchy about changes, but I have too many thousands of hours on this book, every incident has been too carefully chosen and its weight judged and fitted. The balance is there. One other thing—I am not writing a satisfying story. I’ve done my damndest to rip a reader’s nerves to rags, I don’t want him satisfied. And still one more thing—I’ve tried to write this book the way lives are lived not the way books are written.”

John Steinbeck

Letter to Pascal Covici  
(January 1939)

“Californians are wrathful over *The Grapes of Wrath*... By implication, it brands California farmers with unbelievable cruelty in their dealings with refugees from the ‘dust bowl.’ It charges that they deliberately lured a surplus of workers westward to depress wages, deputized peace officers to hound the migrants ever onward, burned the squatters’ shacktowns, stomped down gardens and destroyed surplus foods in a conspiracy to force the refugees to work for starvation wages, allowed children to hunger and mothers to bear babies unattended in squalor. It implies that hatred of the migrants is fostered by the land barons who use the ‘Bank of the West’ (obviously the Bank of America) and the ‘Farmers Association’...to gobble up the lands of the small farmers and concentrate them in a few large holdings....

The experiences of the Joad family, whose misfortunes in their trek from Oklahoma to California Steinbeck portrays so graphically, are not typical of those of the real migrants I found in the course of two reportorial tours of the agricultural valleys.... Along three thousand miles of highways and byways, I was unable to find a single counterpart of the Joad family. Nor have I discovered one during fifteen years of residence in the Santa Clara Valley (the same valley where John Steinbeck now lives), which is crowded each summer with transient workers harvesting the fruit crops. The lot of the ‘fruit tramp’ is admittedly no bed of roses, but neither is it the bitter fate described in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

The Joad family of nine, created by Steinbeck to typify the ‘Okie’ migrants, is anything but typical.... Steinbeck’s Joads, once arrive in the ‘land of promise,’ earned so little that they faced slow starvation. Actually, no migrant family hungers in California unless it is too proud to accept relief. Few migrants are. There is no red tape about getting free food or shelter.... The U.S. Farm Placement Bureau...conducted an inquiry into the charge, aired in *The Grapes of Wrath*, that California farmers had distributed handbills through the dust-bowl area, offering jobs to lure a surplus of migrant labor to the State. Only two cases were unearthed, one by a labor contractor in Santa Barbara County, another by an Imperial Valley contractor. The licenses of both have since been revoked. At the Associated Farmers head office in San Francisco, I saw hundreds of clippings from Midwest newspapers—publicity inspired by the Association—advising migrants *not* to come to California....

Off to the south, some of the Okies are living in neat little three- to five-room cottages. The Okies of Little Oklahoma City are fortunate. They muscled into the lettuce-packing game and now have virtually a monopoly around Salinas... In that one community three thousand migrants have achieved a respectable standard of living. Their children are intermarrying with the natives. Outwardly, they are Californians. What they have done can be done by others. Their accomplishment is a challenge to shiftless Okies and an answer to the broad accusations hurled so heedlessly in *The Grapes of Wrath*.”

Frank J. Taylor  
“California’s *Grapes of Wrath*”  
*Forum CII*  
(November 1939) 232-38

“The farm migrant as described in Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*, Duncan said [O. B. Duncan, Head of Sociology Department, Oklahoma A. & M.] was the logical consequence of privation, insecurity, low income, inadequate standards of living, impoverishment in matters of education and cultural opportunities and a lack of spiritual satisfaction. ‘I have been asked quite often if I could not dig up some statistics capable of refuting the story of *The Grapes of Wrath*,’ Duncan related. ‘It cannot be done, for all the available data proved beyond doubt that the general impression given by Steinbeck’s book is substantially reliable’.”

Oklahoma City *Times*  
(5 February 1940)

“In Steinbeck’s passionate, salty masterpiece *The Grapes of Wrath* he returned to the plight of men desperately looking for a living. His scene was larger than California. The soil had been blown away by the winds in the Dust Bowl and starving farmers set out for California, where they were told they would be welcome. Steinbeck traveled over the route from Oklahoma, studying the conditions they left behind, the

hard details of the migration, their disillusionment at the end. Of course no people in possession of good lands have ever welcomed migratory tribes pouring in upon them. Men will fight as hard to hold land as to obtain it. But Steinbeck could not see this movement of Americans from Oklahoma as a migration on primitive terms. He believed that injustice had helped drive them from their farms, that injustice had helped keep them homeless beyond the desert.

Certainly here were hundreds of thousands of men and women destitute in plain sight of abundance. They were men and women, not mere factors in an economic situation. Statistics could not tell their story. Steinbeck told it as an intimate history of the Joad family in their wanderings. Readers who had thought of migrant workers as so many negligible thousands on the road or at work in masses, now suddenly realized they were not that at all. The Joads might have been any ordinary farm family uprooted and turned out to drift over the continent. This was not only a regional affair. The whole nation was involved. *The Grapes of Wrath* did more than any other depression novel to revise the picture of America as Americans imagined it. And *The Grapes of Wrath* had the benefit of the twenty years during which novelists had worked to make the American novel a full, free expression of human life.”

Carl Van Doren  
*The American Novel 1789-1939*, 23<sup>rd</sup> edition  
(Macmillan 1921-68) 365-66

“*Native Son* is the most impressive American novel I have read since *The Grapes of Wrath*. In some ways the two books resemble each other: both deal with the dispossessed and both grew out of the radical movement of the 1930’s. There is, however, a distinction to be drawn between the motives of the two authors. Steinbeck, more privileged than the characters in his novel, wrote out of deep pity for the, and the fault he had to avoid was sentimentality. Richard Wright, a Negro, was moved by wrongs he had suffered in his own person, and what he had to fear was a blind anger that might destroy the pity in him, making him hate any character whose skin was whiter than his own.”

Malcolm Cowley  
“Richard Wright: The Case of Bigger Thomas” (1940)  
*The Portable Malcolm Cowley*, ed. Donald W. Faulkner  
(Penguin 1990) 304

“*The Grapes of Wrath*...was praised for its swift action and for the moving sincerity of its characters. But its mystical ideas and the moralizing interpretations intruded by the author between the narrative chapters were condemned. Presumably the book became a best seller in spite of these; its art was great enough to overcome its philosophy....

It is not too much to say that Jim Casy’s ideas determine and direct the Joads’s actions.... Beside and beyond their function in the story, the ideas of John Steinbeck and Jim Casy possess a significance of their own. They continue, develop, integrate, and realize the thought of the great writers of American history. Here the mystical transcendentalism of Emerson reappears, and the earthy democracy of Whitman, and the pragmatic instrumentalism of William James and John Dewey. And these old philosophies grow and change in the book until they become new. They coalesce into an organic whole. And, finally, they find embodiment in character and action, so that they seem no longer ideas, but facts. The enduring greatness of *The Grapes of Wrath* consists in its imaginative realization of these old ideas in new and concrete forms. Jim Casy translates American philosophy into words of one syllable, and the Joads translate it into action...

Unorthodox Jim Casy went into the Oklahoma wilderness to save his soul. And in the wilderness he experienced the religious feeling of identity with nature which has always been the heart of transcendental mysticism: ‘There was the hills, an’ there was me, an’ we wasn’t separate no more. We was one thing. An’ that one thing was holy.’ Like Emerson, Casy came to the conviction that holiness, or goodness, results from this feeling of unity.... As Steinbeck writes: ‘The quality of owning freezes you forever into “I,” and cuts you off from the “we”.’...To a preacher of the oversoul, possessive egotism may become the unpardonable sin....

For this is the paradox of Protestantism: when we resist unjust and selfish authority, they themselves become ‘whole’ in spirit. But this American ideal of nonconformity seems negative: how can men be sure

that their Protestant rebellion does not come from the devil? To this there has always been but one answer—faith: faith in the instincts of the common man, faith in ultimate social progress, and faith in the direction in which democracy is moving. So Ma Joad counsels the discouraged Tom: ‘Why, Tom, we’re the people that live. They ain’t gonna wipe us out. Why, we’re the people—we go on’....

*The Grapes of Wrath*...traces the transformation of the Protestant individual into the member of a social group—the old ‘I’ becomes ‘we.’ And it traces the transformation of the passive individual into the active participant—the idealist becomes pragmatist. The first development continues the poetic thought of Walt Whitman; the second continues the philosophy of William James and John Dewey....Where formerly American and Protestant thought had been separatist, Steinbeck now faces the problem of social integration. In his novel the ‘mutually repellent particles’ of individualism begin to cohere.... A new social group is forming, based on the word ‘en masse.’ But here is no socialism imposed from above; here is a natural grouping of simple separate persons. By virtue of his wholehearted participation in this new group the individual may become greater than himself.... Unlike Emerson, who had said goodbye to the proud world, these latterday Americans must live in the midst of it. ‘I know now,’ concludes Tom, ‘a fella ain’t no good alone.’ [The protagonist of *To Have and Have Not* (1937) by Hemingway says the same thing when he dies in the end.] To repeat: this group idea is American, not Russian; and stems from Walt Whitman, not Karl Marx....

Disbelief in the sinfulness of sex converts Jim Casy from a preacher of the old morality to a practitioner of the new. But in questioning the old morality Jim Casy does not deny morality.... In place of the old, Casy preaches the new morality of Whitman, which uses sex to symbolize the love of man for his fellows. Jim Casy and Tom Joad have become more responsible and more purposeful than Pa Joad and Uncle John ever were: they love people so much that they are ready to die for them. Formerly the only unit of human love was the family, and the family remains the fundamental unit. The tragedy of *The Grapes of Wrath* consists in the breakup of the family. But the new moral of this novel is that the love of all people—if it be unselfish—may even supercede the love of family. So Casy dies for his people, and Tom is ready to, and Rose of Sharon symbolically transmutes her maternal love to a love of all people....

The evils of absentee ownership produce the mass migration, and the mass migration results in the idea of group action: ‘A half-million people moving over the country...’ Casy is a kind of transcendental pragmatist. His thought seeks to generalize the problems of the Okies and to integrate them with the larger problems of industrial America. His solution is the principle of group action guided by conceptual thought and functioning within the framework of democratic society and law. At the end of the story Tom Joad becomes converted to Jim Casy’s pragmatism. It is not important that the particular strike should be won, or that the particular need should be satisfied; but it is important that we should think in terms of action, and that they should think and act in terms of the whole rather than the particular individual.... The point of the whole novel is that action is an absolute essential of human life. If need and failure produce only fear, disintegration follows. But if they produce anger, then reconstruction may follow. The grapes of wrath must be trampled to make manifest the glory of the Lord....

To sum up: the fundamental idea of *The Grapes of Wrath* is that of American transcendentalism: ‘Maybe all men got one big soul ever’body’s a part of.’ From this idea it follows that every individual will trust those instincts which he shares with all men, even when these conflict with the teachings of orthodox religion and of existing society. But his self-reliance will not merely seek individual freedom, as did Emerson. It will rather seek social freedom or mass democracy, as did Whitman. If this mass democracy leads to the abandonment of genteel taboos and to the modification of some traditional ideas of morality, that is inevitable. But whatever happens, the American will act to realize his ideals. He will seek to make himself whole—i.e., to join himself to other men by means of purposeful actions for some goal beyond himself....

If the individual has identified himself with the oversoul, so that his life has become one with the life of all men, his individual death and failure will not matter.... For the first time in history, *The Grapes of Wrath* brings together and makes real three great skeins of American thought. It begins with the transcendental oversoul, Emerson’s faith in the common man, and his Protestant self-reliance. To this it joins Whitman’s religion of the love of all men and his mass democracy. And it combines these mystical

and poetic ideas with the realistic philosophy of pragmatism and its emphasis on effective action. From this it develops a new kind of Christianity—not otherworldly and passive, but earthly and active. And Oklahoma Jim Casy and the Joads think and do all these philosophical things.”

Frederick I. Carpenter  
“The Philosophical Joads”  
*College English* II (January 1941) 315-25

“The narrative chapters alternate with panoramic essays that show the social significance of the migrant labor problem. The Joads, expropriated Oklahoma farmers from the Dust Bowl region, set out in a dilapidated automobile for California, which they believe is a land of plenty. The family includes Gramps, a lusty old man who was never ‘house broke’; Granma, weary and fanatically religious; lonely Uncle John; Pa, who has tacitly surrendered the rule of the family to his wife; Ma, brave, strong, and patient, who dreams and plans for the others; dull-witted Noah; Tom, just released from a jail term for killing a man in a fight; Al, a cocky youth who admires Tom’s calm strength; Rose of Sharon, absorbed in love for her weak husband Connie, with her unborn child; and the children, Ruthie and Winfield. The caravan also includes Casy, an ex-preacher and rustic socialist.

During the hard journey, Grampa and Granma die and Noah deserts, but the Joads drive on (‘It don’t take no nerve to do somepin when there ain’t nothin’ else you can do.’) In California they are hounded by sheriffs and labor contractors, Casy is jailed, and Connie runs away. Haunted by starvation, they spend some time in a government camp, but leave reluctantly to pick fruit at a blacklisted orchard. Tom meets Casy, who is leading the strikers, and during an attack by vigilantes Casy is killed, and Tom in turn kills his murderer. The Joads escape, and, while hiding Tom, work at picking cotton. Exhausted and fearful, Ma finally sends Tom away, and he plans to continue Casy’s work as a labor organizer. During a storm, Rose of Sharon gives birth to a stillborn child. Jobless, the Joads face starvation, but Ma cries, ‘We ain’ gonna die out. People is going’ on—changin’ a little, maybe, but goin’ right on.’”

James D. Hart  
*The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition  
(Oxford 1941-83) 294

“Out of his curiosity, the strength of the agrarian tradition in him, Steinbeck was able to invest the migration of the Joads, if not his monochromatic characters, with a genuinely tragic quality precisely because he felt so deeply for them and had seen at first hand the gap between their simple belief in life and their degradation. He did not confuse the issue in *The Grapes of Wrath*; he was aroused by the man-made evil the Okies had to suffer, and he knew it as something remediable by men. And where another social realist might have confused the dark corners he described with the whole of life, Steinbeck had the advantage of his Western training, its plain confidence in men....

It was these associations that contributed to the success of *The Grapes of Wrath* and made it the most influential social novel of the period. Though the book was as urgent and as obvious a social tract for its time as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* had been for another, it was also the first novel of its kind to dramatize the inflictions of the crisis without mechanical violence. The bitterness was there, as it should have been, the sense of unspeakable human waste and privation and pain... It was as if Steinbeck, out of the simplicity of his indignation, had been just primitive enough to call men back to their humanity, to remind depression America that a culture is only the sum total of the human qualities that make it up... It was this tonic sanity in a bad time that gave Steinbeck his distinction among the depression realists.”

Alfred Kazin  
*On Native Grounds*  
(Doubleday 1942, 1956) 307-08

“On December 6, 1939, the LaFollette Committee hearings opened in San Francisco in an atmosphere of tension, defiance, and considerable truculence. No sooner had Senator LaFollette announced that the committee was in session than Phil Bancroft, Associated Farmers leader, arose and demanded that the Senator cease ‘giving aid and comfort to the Communists,’ and that he return to Wisconsin and mind his own business. During the first week that the committee was in session, the Associated Farmers held their

annual convention. John Steinbeck was warmly denounced as the arch-enemy, defamer, and slanderer of migratory farm labor in California....

These notes by no means exhaust the LaFollette Committee transcript, but they will serve to illustrate, perhaps, the fact that Mr. Steinbeck, in *The Grapes of Wrath*, was not relying upon his imagination. One of the incidents I have described took place *after* the publication of the novel at a time when the Associated Farmers, by every resource at their disposal, were attempting to convince the public that there was not a shred of truth in the book. Had some of the leaders of the organization been trying out for parts in the [moving] picture, they could not have acted more in character than they did.”

Carey McWilliams  
“California Pastoral”  
*Antioch Review* II (March 1942) 103-121

“Most of us remember the sensational reception of *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), Mr. Westbrook Pegler’s column about the vile language of the book...Mr. Frank J. Taylor’s article in the *Forum* attacking factual inaccuracies, and the editorial in *Collier’s* charging communistic propaganda. Many of us also remember that the Associated Farmers or Kern County, California, denounced the book as ‘obscene sensationalism’ and ‘propaganda in its vilest form,’ that the Kansas City Board of Education banned the book from Kansas City libraries, and that the Library Board of East St. Louis banned it and ordered the librarian to burn the three copies which the library owned....

With such publicity, *The Grapes of Wrath* sold sensationally in Oklahoma bookstores. Most stores consider it their best seller, excepting only *Gone With the Wind*.... Most libraries received the book soon after publication in the spring of 1939. Librarians generally agreed that the circulation of *The Grapes of Wrath* was second only to that of *Gone With the Wind*, although three librarians reported equal circulation for the two books, and one...reported *The Grapes of Wrath* their most widely circulated volume.... After over two hundred students had signed the waiting list for the two copies in the University of Oklahoma library, faculty members donated several additional copies to the library.... When Professor J. P. Blickensderfer reviewed the book in the library at the University of Oklahoma, so many people were turned away for lack of standing room that he repeated the review two weeks later, again to a packed audience....

Numerous editorials in Oklahoma newspapers have refuted or debunked Steinbeck by proving that not all Oklahomans are Joads, and that not all Oklahoma is dust bowl.... Considerable resentment toward the state of California was felt in Oklahoma because California had stigmatized Oklahoma by calling all dust bowl migrants—even those from Arkansas and Texas—‘Okies’.... There are, I should say, two main bodies of opinion, one that this is an honest, sympathetic, and artistically powerful presentation of economic, social, and human problems; the other, the great majority, that this is a vile, filthy book, an outsider’s malicious attempt to smear the state of Oklahoma with outrageous lies. The latter opinion, I may add, is frequently accompanied by the remark: ‘I haven’t read a word of it, but I know it’s all a dirty lie’....

Any honest literary interpretation of a region seems to offend the people of that region.... A tremendous provincial self-consciousness expresses itself in fierce resentment of ‘outsiders who meddle in our affairs.’ One consistent theme in the writings of Oklahomans who attacked *The Grapes of Wrath* was that this book represents us unfairly; it will give us a lot of unfavorable publicity, and confirm the low opinion of us that seems to prevail outside the state. Rarely did someone say, ‘We should do something about those conditions; we should do something to help those people.’ Generally they said, ‘We should deny it vigorously; all Oklahomans are not Okies.’

Properly speaking, *The Grapes of Wrath* is not a regional novel; but it has regional significance; it raises regional problems. Economic collapse, farm tenantry, migratory labor are not regional problems; they are national or international in scope, and can never be solved through state or regional action. But the Joads represent a regional culture which, as Steinbeck shows us, is now rapidly disintegrating as the result of extra-regional forces. It may well be that powerful extra-regional forces operating the world today foreshadow the end of cultural regionalism as we have known it in America.”

Martin Shockley  
“The Reception of *The Grapes of Wrath* in Oklahoma”

“*The Grapes of Wrath* was circulated with official approval [in Nazi Germany] after Pearl Harbor, presumably on the ground that its picture of the Okies would serve as anti-American propaganda. Instead, what it proved to most of its readers was that American peasants at their most destitute could travel about the country in automobiles, and that American writers were free to speak their minds in epical novels, at a time when German literature was being stifled.”

Malcolm Cowley  
*Literary History of the United States*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition  
(Macmillan 1946-63) 1382

“It seems to us now that the 1930s were the great age of naturalistic fiction. They were also the depression years and a time of social bad conscience, so that most of the novels dealt with the undernourished third of the nation. If they ended with a hopeless strike or a parade of the unemployed, or with the hero risking his life by urging hungry men to unite, like Tom Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath*, they were known as proletarian or revolutionary novels. Most of these are remembered dimly for their political innocence and wooden writing, but among them were two powerful works that will continue to be read for a long time: one was of course *The Grapes of Wrath*, and the other was James T. Farrell’s *Studs Lonigan* trilogy.”

Malcolm Cowley  
*The Literary Situation*  
(Viking/Compass 1947-54) 77-78

“At times Steinbeck, with his curious combination of humanism and mysticism, seems to propose the substitution of agrarianism for industrialism as an antidote for what ailed the country.... This period saw also the growth of the back-to-the-farm movement and the proliferation of books guaranteeing independence and even security on five acres.... Naturally, the men in the agrarian group [in *I’ll Take My Stand*, 1930] had much in common, and certainly all of them drew upon Jeffersonian agrarianism. Because he had faith in the common man and thus gave his thinking a broad popular basis, Steinbeck was closer to Jeffersonianism than were the Southern Agrarians, who sought to resurrect not only an agricultural way of life but also the traditional cultural values of Europe. Steinbeck was concerned with democracy, and looked upon agrarianism as a way of life that would enable us to realize the full potentialities of the creed. Jefferson, of course, held the same belief....

The sterility of machine culture is emphasized by Steinbeck’s comment...on the languid, heat-raddled ladies, parasites on that culture, whose sexual intercourse is safe, odorless, and unproductive. The animosity to the city is emphasized in the bitter attitude toward business ethics, summed up best perhaps in the incident of the tire with the broken casing. ‘You go steal that tire an’ you’re a thief, but he tried to steal your four dollars for a busted tire. They call that sound business.’ Finally, Steinbeck remarks how the business men farmers, those who keep books but never follow the plow, buy up the canneries in California, cut off the small farmer’s market, and eventually take the property away from him. Chiefly in negative terms Steinbeck is showing us that the farmer is the productive, healthy member of society. He suggests a primitivistic conception of nature: that the farmer draws spiritual strength as well as sustenance from the soil. Antithetical to these notions is the aridity of the city-bred rich woman, the dishonesty of business, and the essentially inhuman and unproductive nature of the machine age....

The Okies argue...that occupying the land and devoting one’s labor to it are the criteria of ownership, and that these transcend the legal right to the land represented by the title. These two criteria are the backbone of the natural right argument current in the eighteenth century: men had a natural right to as much land as they could profitably use. This natural right assumption gave sanction to the squatter whose heritage passed down into the nineteenth century, and even into the twentieth. [Steinbeck’s position contrasts with that of James Fenimore Cooper, who spent much of his life trying to evict squatters from his land.] For when the Okies want to work a little patch of ground lying fallow, the California police chase them off. ‘You goddamned squatters. Pretty soon you’d think you owned it’....

There is a kind of mystic exaltation in the ownership of property which the farmer experiences. Crèvecoeur called it 'the bright idea of property.' Steinbeck's anonymous tenant knows it too.... When the tractor knocked over the elder Tom's house and drove him from the land, it took something out of him; he was never the same. Grampa can't survive the loss of the homestead. At the last moment he refuses to leave.... He is a broken man who must find solace in the past. Ma, too, recalls the dignity of the Joad heritage. 'We don't look up to nobody. Grampa's grampa, he fit in the Revolution. We was farm people till the debt. And then—them people. They done somepin to us...mad me feel mean. Made me feel ashamed.' They, the California police, the owners of the orchards—had worked on the spirit of the Okies and worn it down. The pride of the freeholder withers after dispossession, and his function in life disappears....

The Okies are Steinbeck's protagonists in a kind of revolutionary social action which is as American as Jefferson's successful efforts to abolish entail and primogeniture; and this action would yield the same results—a wider distribution of property. Thus it is that when Tom takes his last leave of Ma, going forth to carry on the work of Casy, who has died a martyr to the cause of social justice, he reflects on the Okie-run government camp where there was better order than the police had ever been able to establish in areas of their jurisdiction.... The democratic way for Steinbeck is to achieve through collective action the individual security on the land that Jefferson prized so highly. When men farm their own land they will run their own society.... The bankruptcy of Jefferson's ideal is only too well illustrated in the fact that the family size farm continues to disappear from the American scene."

Chester E. Eisinger  
"Jeffersonian Agrarianism in *The Grapes of Wrath*"  
*The University of Kansas City Review* XIV  
(Winter 1947) 149-54

"It is only in *In Dubious Battle* and *The Grapes of Wrath* that Steinbeck tries for some clarification of his social view. The latter was his most ambitious, as it proved his most fabulously popular, book. The design of that novel, long and verbose as it is, may be reduced to three observable strategies: the realistic, the symbolic, the philosophical. On the first level, Steinbeck was capable of effective writing. His representation in individual scenes (when viewed in isolation) is very impressive. For the most part, he resists the temptation to overreach his opportunities. The seriousness of human crisis and the comedy of everyday issues are often quite economically given....

Those sections of *The Grapes of Wrath* which remain free of large and false implication contain within themselves a remarkably well sustained narrative—held together as it is by the simple but convincing structural device of U.S. Highway 66. The next strategy is less successful, though even here it is sometimes quite well integrated with the first. The symbolic exertions of the author are, for the most part, violations of theme rather than successful extensions of it. The turtle carries too much of a burden... Rose of Sharon's gesture at the novel's end is a curiously inept survival of the sex-land mysticism of *To a God Unknown*. In general the symbols are embarrassingly and awkwardly intrusive; more than that, they are quite unnecessary Whitmanian raids upon the self-sufficient and concrete substance of the novel. Instead of emerging naturally and with due humility from the novel's material, they are added to it, or singled out from it for special, self-conscious attention."

Frederick J. Hoffman  
*The Modern Novel in America*  
(Regnery/Gateway 1951) 165-66

"*The Grapes of Wrath* has been widely considered a naturalistic novel, yet the last scene, where Rose of Sharon gives her breast to a starving man (though indebted to Maupassant), is sheer symbolism, and [critics are] quite right in calling attention to the 'rhythmical' and 'repetitive' elements in the novel as a whole, its affinities 'with poetry and folk-lore and the oral literature of the Continent, with popular tales, workers' songs, and even the spirituals.' Symbolism was nothing new to Steinbeck's novels. The moon and the valley, both often with a sexual signification, appear in his books again and again, and special symbols enter with special themes. When Tom Joad's captured tortoise is set free, it starts off toward the Southwest again because that is the way life is moving. Steinbeck uses color symbolism also, and he is evidently as sensitive to music as was Elizabeth Madox Roberts...



In *The Grapes of Wrath* the hope of amelioration is centered in government paternalism of the New Deal variety...the preacher Casy, in this novel, combines Emersonian transcendentalism with Whitman's 'earthy democracy' and the 'pragmatic instrumentalism' of William James and John Dewey. 'Jim Casy translates American philosophy into words of one syllable, and the Joads translate it into action'....

As of today...*The Grapes of Wrath* remains his most important novel, a book which none of its readers will ever forget. It has many faults: its characters, sometimes described formally, like studies in still life, range all the way from blanks, through symbols and grotesques, to solid reality; it has only a loose sort of unity, with no real climax or termination. Sometimes, too, Steinbeck analyzes where he ought to portray. The interchapters, directly influenced by...documentary films...enlarge the dispossession of the Joads by relating it to the experiences of thousands of their compatriots. The very violence of the reactions awakened by the book shows that, with all its faults, it had life in it. At the very lowest reckoning, it will be a permanent part of this generation's remembrance of a dark hour in American history, an hour whose bitterness is still an important part of our inheritance."

Edward Wagenknecht  
*Cavalcade of the American Novel:*  
*From the Birth of the Nation to the Middle of the Twentieth Century*  
(Holt 1952) 444-45, 448

"This famous novel about the Joad family's migration from Oklahoma to California in search of work represents the plight of all dispossessed people everywhere. First published in 1939, it electrified an America still not recovered from the Depression. Alexander Woollcott called it 'as great a book as has yet come out of America,' and Dorothy Parker said, '*The Grapes of Wrath* is the greatest American novel I have ever read.' Today, because of the eloquent conviction that John Steinbeck brought to the writing, it retains all its nobility and power."

Advertisement  
*East of Eden* by John Steinbeck  
(Penguin 1979)

"*The Grapes of Wrath* is epic in its recognition of the plight of American migratory workers—specifically, the 'Okies,' driven westward by the industrialization of their Oklahoma farms—as but one more symbolic event in man's eternal search for the promised land. A tract against social injustice, which aroused vigorous protest and defense from those who thought of it only as fictionalized propaganda, it remained, after the controversy had died down, an American epic, a culminating expression of the spiritual and material forces that had discovered and settled a continent."

Robert E. Spiller  
*The Cycle of American Literature*  
(Free Press/Collier-Macmillan 1955) 216

"The merits of *The Grapes of Wrath* were debated as social documentation rather than fiction. In addition to incurring the disadvantages of its historical position, coming as a kind of climax to the literature of the Great Depression, Steinbeck's novel also suffered from the perennial vulnerability of all social fiction to an attack on its facts and intentions. The passage of eighteen years has done very little to alter this initial situation....

The ideas and materials of *The Grapes of Wrath* presented Steinbeck with a problem of structure similar to that of Tolstoy's in writing *War and Peace*... There were the adventures of the Joads, the Wilsons, and the Wainwrights; there was also the Great Depression. And like Tolstoy, he had enough material left over to write separate philosophic interchapters.... There are in *The Grapes of Wrath* sixteen interchapters, making up a total of just under a hundred pages—almost one sixth of the book. In none of these chapters do the Joads, Wilsons, or Wainwrights appear.

These chapters have two main functions. First, by presenting the social background they serve to amplify the pattern of action created by the Joad family. Thus, for example, Chapter 1 presents in panoramic terms the drought which forces the Joads off their land; Chapters vii and ix depict, respectively, the buying of jalopies for the migration and the selling of household goods; Chapter xi describes at length a

decaying and deserted house which is the prototype of all the houses abandoned in the Dust Bowl. In thirteen such chapters almost every aspect of the Joads' adventures is enlarged and seen as part of the social climate.

The remaining interchapters have the function of providing such historical information as the development of land ownership in California, the consequent development of migrant labor, and certain economic aspects of the social lag. These three informative chapters make up only nineteen of the novel's six hundred-odd pages. Scattered through the sixteen interchapters are occasional paragraphs whose purpose is to present, with choric effect, the philosophy or social message to which the current situation gives rise. For the most part these paragraphs occur in four chapters—ix, xi, xiv, and xix....

Even a cursory reading will show that there is a general correspondence between the material of each interchapter and that of the current narrative portion. The magnificent opening description of the drought sets forth the condition which gives rise to the novel's action; Highway 66 is given a chapter as the Joads begin their trek on that historic route; the chapters dealing with migrant life appear interspersed with the narrative of the Joads's actual journey; the last interchapter, xxix, describes the rain in which the action of the novel ends. A more careful reading will make evident that this integration of the interchapters into a total structure goes far beyond this merely complementary juxtaposition.

There is in addition an intricate interweaving of specific details. Like the anonymous house in the interchapter (v), one corner of the Joad house has been knocked off its foundation by a tractor. The man who in the interchapter threatens the tractor driver with his rifle becomes Grampa Joad, except that whereas the anonymous tenant does not fire, Grampa shoots out both headlights. The tractor driver in the interchapter, Joe Davis, is a family acquaintance of the anonymous tenants, as Willy is an acquaintance of the Joads in the narrative chapter. The jalopy sitting in the Joads's front yard is the same kind of jalopy described in the used-car lot of Chapter vii. Chapter viii ends with Al Joad driving off to sell a truckload of household goods. Chapter ix is an interchapter describing anonymous farmers selling such goods, including many items which the Joads themselves are selling—pumps, farming tools, furniture, a team and wagon for ten dollars.... Every interchapter is tied into the book's narrative portion by this kind of specific cross reference, which amplifies the Joads's typical actions to the level of a communal experience.

Often, this interlocking of details becomes thematic or symbolic. The dust which is mentioned twenty-seven times in three pages of Chapter i comes to stand not only for the land itself but also for the basic situation out of which the novel's action develops.... One of the novel's most important symbols, the turtle, is presented in what is actually the first interchapter (iii). And while this chapter is a masterpiece of realistic description (often included as such in Freshman English texts), it is also obvious that the turtle is symbolic and its adventures prophetic allegory.... The indomitable life force that drives the turtle drives the Joads, and in the same direction—southwest. As the turtle picks up seeds in its shell and drops them on the other side of the road, so the Joads pick up life in Oklahoma and carry it across the country to California. (As Grandfather in 'The Leader of the People' puts it, 'We carried life out here and set it down the way those ants carry eggs.') As the turtle survives the truck's attempts to smash it on the highway, so the Joads endure the perils of their journey....

This symbolic value is retained and further defined when the turtle enters specifically into the narrative. Its incident with the red ant is echoed two hundred and seventy pages later when another red ant runs over 'the folds of loose skin' on Granma's neck and she reaches up with her 'little wrinkled claws'; Ma picks it off and crushes it. In Chapter iii the turtle is seen 'dragging his high-domed shell across the grass.' In the next chapter, Tom sees 'the high-domed back of a land turtle' and picking up the turtle, carries it with him. It is only when he is convinced that his family has left the land that he releases the turtle, which travels 'southwest as it had been from the first,' a direction which is repeated in the next two sentences. The first thing which Tom does after releasing the turtle is to put on his shoes, which he had taken off when he left the highway and stepped onto the land....

Because Steinbeck's subject in *The Grapes of Wrath* is not the adventures of the Joad family so much as the social conditions which occasion them, these interchapters serve a vital purpose.... The cross reference of detail, the interweaving symbols, and the dramatization are designed to make the necessary 'pictorial'

sections of the novel [interchapters] tend toward the 'scenic'... Steinbeck worked from both sides to make the two kinds of chapters approach each other and fuse into a single impression.... It could reasonably be expected that the greatest threat to the novel's unity would come from the interchapters' constant breaking up of the narrative line of action. But the very fact that *The Grapes of Wrath* is not organized by a unifying plot works for absorbing these interchapters smoothly into its texture....

Whatever the value the Joads have as individuals is 'incidental' to their primary function as a 'personalized group.' Kenneth Burke has pointed out that 'most of the characters derive their role, which is to say their personality, purely from their relationship to the basic situation.' But what he takes to be a serious weakness is actually one of the book's greatest accomplishments. The characters are so absorbed into the novel's 'basic situation' that the reader's response goes beyond sympathy for individuals to moral indignation about their social condition.... This conception of character is parallel to the fusing of the 'scenic' and 'pictorial' techniques in the narrative and interchapters....

The action progresses through three successive movements, and its significance is revealed by an intricate pattern of themes and symbols. *The Grapes of Wrath* is divided into thirty consecutive chapters with no larger grouping; but even a cursory reading reveals that the novel is made up of three major parts: the drought, the journey, and California. The first section ends with Chapter x. It is separated from the second section, the journey, by *two* interchapters. The first of these chapters presents a final picture of the deserted land... The second interchapter is devoted to Highway 66. It is followed by Chapter xiii which begins the Joads's journey on that historical highway... The journey section extends past the geographical California border, across the desert to Bakersfield. This section ends with Chapter xviii...and the next chapter begins the California section by introducing the reader to labor conditions in that state....

This structure has its roots in the Old Testament. The novel's three sections correspond to the oppression in Egypt, the exodus, and the sojourn in the land of Canaan, which in both accounts is first viewed from the mountains. The parallel is not worked out in detail, but the grand design is there: the plagues (erosion), the Egyptians (banks), the exodus (journey), and the hostile tribes of Canaan (Californians). The Biblical structure is supported by a continuum of symbols and symbolic actions. The most pervasive symbolism is that of grapes...[as in] the novel's title, taken from 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic'...itself a reference to Revelation...Deuteronomy...Jeremiah... Sometimes these aspects of the symbol are stated in the novel's interchapters: 'In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, heavy for the vintage'....

Although Grampa dies long before the Joads get to California, he is symbolically present through the anonymous old man in the barn (stable), who is saved from starvation by Rosasharn's breasts: 'This thy stature is like to a palm tree, and thy breasts to a cluster of grapes' (Cant. vii.7). Rosasharn's giving of new life to the old man is another reference to the orthodox interpretation of Canticles: 'I [Christ] am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys' (ii.1); and to the Gospels: 'take, eat; this is my body.' Still another important Biblical symbol is Jim Casy (Jesus Christ).... They are the people who pick up life in Oklahoma (Egypt) and carry it to California (Canaan) as the turtle picks up seeds and as the ants pick up their eggs in 'The Leader of the People.' These parallels to the Hebrews of Exodus are all brought into focus when, near the end of the novel, Uncle John sets Rose of Sharon's stillborn child in an old apple crate (like Moses in the basket), sets the box in a stream 'among the willow stems' and floats it toward the town saying, 'God down an' tell 'em'....

As the Israelites developed a code of laws in their exodus, so do the migrants.... Chapter xvii can be seen as the 'Deuteronomy' of *The Grapes of Wrath*. It is this kind of context which makes of the Joads's journey 'out west' an archetype of mass migration. The novel's Biblical structure and symbolism are supported by Steinbeck's skillful use of an Old Testament prose. The extent to which he succeeded in re-creating the epic dignity of this prose can be demonstrated by arranging a typical passage from the novel according to phrases, in the manner of the Bates Bible... 'The tractors had lights shining'... The parallel grammatical structure of parallel meanings, the simplicity of diction, the balance, the concrete details, the summary sentences, the reiterations—all are here... Except for the terms of machinery, this passage might be one of the psalms.... The Biblical resonance which gives [such passages] authority is used discreetly, is never employed on the trivial and particular, and its recurrence has a cumulative effect....

No other American novel has succeeded in forging and making instrumental so many prose styles. This rapid shifting of prose style and technique has value as Americana and contributes to a 'realism' far beyond that of literal reporting. Also, this rapid shifting is important because it tends to destroy any impression that these interchapters are, as a group, a separate entity... They have enough individuality of subject matter, prose style, and technique to keep the novel from falling into two parts, and to keep the reader from feeling that he is now reading 'the other part'....

The development of Jim Casy is similar to that of Tom. He moves from Bible-belt evangelism to social prophecy. At the beginning of the book he has already left preaching and has returned from 'in the hills, thinkin', almost you might say like Jesus went into the wilderness to think His way out of a mess of troubles.' But although Casy is already approaching his revelation of the Over-Soul, it is only through his experiences with the Joads that he is able to complete his vision. As Tom moves from material resentment to ethical indignation, so Casy moves from the purely speculative to the pragmatic. Both move from stasis to action. Casy's Christlike development is complete when he dies saying, 'You don' know what you're a doin'.' Those critics are reading superficially who, like Elizabeth N. Monroe, think that Steinbeck 'expects us to admire Casy, an itinerant preacher, who, over-excited from his evangelistic revivals, is in the habit of taking one or another of the girls in his audience to lie in the grass.' Actually, Casy himself perceives the incongruity of this behavior, which is why he goes 'into the wilderness' and renounces his Bible-belt evangelism for a species of social humanism, and his congregation for the human race... For like Emerson, Casy discovers the Over-Soul through intuition and rejects his congregation in order to preach to the world....

Because these themes of education and conversion are not the central, involving action of the novel, but grow slowly out of a rich and solid context, the development of Tom and Casy achieves an authority lacking in most proletarian fiction. The novel's thematic organization also makes it possible for Steinbeck successfully to incorporate the widest variety of materials and, with the exception of romantic love, to present a full scale of human emotions....

The last chapter compactly reenacts the whole drama of the Joads's journey in one uninterrupted continuity of suspense. The rain continues to fall; the little mud levee collapses; Rosasharn's baby is born dead; the boxcar must be abandoned; they take to the highway in search of food and find instead a starving man. Then the miracle happens. As Rose of Sharon offers her breast to the old man the novel's two counter themes are brought together in a symbolic paradox. Out of her own need she gives life; out of the profoundest depth of despair comes the greatest assertion of faith. Steinbeck's great achievement in *The Grapes of Wrath* is that while minimizing what seem to be the most essential elements of fiction—plot and character—he was able to create a well-made and emotionally compelling novel out of materials which in most other hands have resulted in sentimental propaganda.”

Peter Lisca  
“*The Grapes of Wrath* as Fiction”  
*PMLA* LXXII (March 1957) 296-309

“*The Grapes of Wrath* is the story of itinerant farmers—the ‘Oakies’ of the Depression period—who are driven from the Oklahoma dust-bowl to seek a new prosperity. The Joad family are lured to California by leaflets promising easy and well-paying jobs; they load themselves and their possessions into a decrepit automobile and strike out for the west. The family, headed by Tom Joad, includes the lusty and indecent Grampa, the suffering and religious Granma, the hard-working and tenacious Ma, the children Noah and Connie, and Connie's wife Rosa of Sharon.

At the end of their hectic trip, during which Granma dies and is buried without formality, their arrival in the San Joachin Valley is a bitter disappointment. Jobs are ill-paying and hard to get, and the Oakies who crowd into the valley by the thousands are worse off than they were in the dust bowl. Violence, passion, and labor strife break out; Tom Joad is involved in a murder and after a while becomes a fanatic labor agitator. The most famous scene of the novel is the final one in which Rose of Sharon, her newborn baby dead, nourishes a dying man with her own milk; it is this scene which moralistic critics have found most objectionable.

Although the subject matter and dialogue of this novel are occasionally shocking, the total effect on most readers is moving and sympathetic. *The Grapes of Wrath*, which won Steinbeck a Pulitzer Prize in 1940, is generally considered his most important work; it is certainly his most controversial. Much of the sensation it caused was due to its subject matter, but apart from its lurid content it is still a remarkable book. In some respects it is Steinbeck's most naturalistic novel; its style is objective, it is highly detailed, and it shrinks from no banal or loathsome detail. It has, however, an underlying symbolic current which distinguishes it from American naturalism of the type of Dreiser; here it resembles Norris and Sinclair, although it is superior to anything these two authors have done.

The implied political attitude is similar to that in *In Dubious Battle*; the conclusion is that only through organization can the itinerant fruit-tramps and other workers better their condition. If the attitude is generally leftwing, however, the book is not communistic; actually it stands close to the social liberalism of the New Deal. The political aspects, however, are not here the main point of the novel as they were in *In Dubious Battle*; the interest is centered on the characterizations of the Oakies, the epic quality of the incidents, and the underlying symbolic motifs which break to the surface in such scenes as Rose of Sharon's feeding of the old man."

Donald Heiney  
*Recent American Literature* 4  
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 235-36

"Shockley's interpretation of Casy identifies him 'simply and directly with Christ' from the evidence of his new-found religion, his deeds, and his death, and from Tom's discipleship and Rosasharn's sacramental gift of herself in the final scene of the novel. In short, the major intended meaning, it is claimed, is 'essentially and thoroughly Christian'.... A closer examination of the novel as a whole, however, will lead to rather different conclusions, namely: (1) the Christian symbols and Biblical analogies function at best in a secondary capacity within a context of meaning that is so unorthodox as to be the opposite of what is generally considered 'Christian'; (2) the primary symbolic structure, as well as meaning, is naturalistic and humanistic, not Christian; (3) the main theme reflects not only this foreground of natural symbolism but also the author's philosophic perspective of scientific humanism. In other words, in *The Grapes of Wrath* a few loose Biblical analogies may be identified, but these are not primary to the structure and theme of the novel...

The title-phrase '*Grapes of Wrath*' is a good case in point. According to Shockley, it is 'a direct Christian allusion, suggesting the glory of the coming of the Lord, revealing that the story exists in Christian context, indicating that we should expect to find some Christian meaning.' One grants that the 'Battle Hymn of the Republic' expresses the spirit of militant Christianity, the sacrificial idealism and the retribution associated with the Calvinist legacy of the South. But except for fanatics like Grandma Joad and the Jehovites, the specifically Christian association of 'the grapes of wrath' has disappeared among the migrants, even as Casy abandoned his old-style revivalism in search of something better. From the first chapter to the last, the 'grapes of wrath' theme represents the indomitable spirit of man—that spirit which remains whole by resisting despair...

Jim Casy belongs to this deeply rooted American liberal-democratic tradition. Like Emerson, Casy gives up the church and becomes a humble free-thinking seeker of the truth, relying on observation, shared experience, natural sympathy, and natural introspection and insight.... As articulated by Casy, his new faith has four major beliefs: (1) a belief in the brotherhood of man, manifesting itself as 'love'—i.e., good will, compassion and mutualism; (2) a belief in the spirit-of-man as the oversoul or Holy Spirit shared by all men in their outgoing love; (3) a belief in the unity of man and nature; and (4) an acceptance of all life as an expression of spirit. To Casy these beliefs are ideal spiritual values and therefore 'holy'...when men strive together toward a worthy goal in harmony with nature (the way of life). Here we have the social theme again, with religious overtones associated by some readers with Christianity....

Like Emerson's Brahma, this is not the God of Christ—at least not to Casy and Steinbeck; and it is dubious semantics to insist on labeling 'Christian' so unorthodox a creed. Christianity without Christ is hardly Christianity. And although Carpenter concludes that 'a new kind of Christianity—not otherworldly

and passive, but earthly and active’—is developed from Steinbeck’s integration of ‘three great skeins of American thought’ (Emersonianism, Whitman’s democratic religion, and pragmatism), that integration is less a product and characteristic of Christianity than it is of the humanist tendency and character of the American experience and the modern climate of opinion.

But if Casy’s beliefs are not characteristically Christian, there is still a striking similarity to Christ in Casy’s initials and his dying words. In those final words—‘You don’t know what you’re a-doin’—the ideas of resurrection and redemption are conspicuously absent, however. His death is not the death of a redeeming Christ, any more than the death of Jim Conklin in *The Red Badge of Courage* is such a death, even if both have names beginning with J and C...the significance of Casy’s death lies in its indication of his love of man, a love that risked death even as Tom assumes Casy’s mission at the same risk. This love of man, channeled by a democratic sense of social justice and a realistic sense of pragmatic action, explains Casy’s compulsion to serve his fellow man, and his willingness to take the blame, after striking down the deputy, in order to save Tom from arrest.... After Casy’s death, Tom consciously accepts the mission of Casy’s practical humanitarianism as more inspiring and realistic than Christian resignation to circumstance and the promise of heavenly reward....

In Ch. 4 Tom picks up the turtle, strokes the smooth, clean, creamy yellow underside with his finger and then rolls it up in his coat, as if identifying himself with its sensitivity, previously described by the turtle’s sudden reaction when a red ant irritated the soft skin under the shell. A few pages further on in this chapter and also in Ch. 6 Tom and Casy find in the turtle’s fixed sense of direction and purpose—briefly reinforced by the sight of the shepherd dog trotting fast down the road, heedless of Tom’s whistle—a point of common meaning for the idea that people too have a right to ‘go someplace.’ This sort of Nature symbolism recurs throughout the novel but, as these first chapters have illustrated, the Nature symbols tend increasingly to relate to human situations and events that themselves have symbolic values. Among these we might note the tractor and its driver, Muley, the second-hand car dealer, Highway 66, the Joads’ truck, the empty abandoned houses, the federal camp, the Hooverville camp, Noah’s departure, the death and burial of Grampa, Casy’s death, and the flood.... Steinbeck’s Naturalism goes beyond both the mechanistic determinism of Dreiser and the mystic dualism of traditional Christianity. Steinbeck lifts the biology of stimulus-response to the biology of spirit....

Throughout most of the novel Rosasharn has been a weak, silly, and sentimental woman—an ironic contrast to the idealized Rose of Sharon of the ‘Song of Solomon.’ And yet in this closing scene common biology and psychology are transcended and transformed by a symbolic meaning that grows out of the natural, right, and compassionate quality of the action itself and out of the already developed structure of symbolism and meaning.”

Eric W. Carlson  
“Symbolism in *The Grapes of Wrath*”  
*College English* XIX, 2 (January 1958) 172-75

“Steinbeck has given *The Grapes of Wrath* momentum, an inner drive, which in its generation only Faulkner—and he only a few times—has equaled. It also has a sweetness which never once gets sticky.... [However] *The Grapes of Wrath* does not manage to transcend its political theme...To the story of Tom Joad and his family—their long, rickety journey westward, their exhausted efforts to make a living in California, and the bitter resistance they encounter among the rich, frightened, and greedy landowners—Steinbeck has added a large sky-blue vision of things which is not only like the vision of Emerson, it is straight out of Emerson. It is his notion of the over-soul, the world-soul of which each individual has his modest and particular share. Jim Casy, the former preacher and future martyr, pronounces this idea: ‘Maybe all men got one big soul and everybody’s a part of it.’”

R. W. B. Lewis  
“John Steinbeck: The Fitful Daemon”  
*The Young Rebel in American Literature*, ed. Carl Bode  
(Heinemann & Praeger 1959)

“The residue of experience that a reader brings away now from *The Grapes of Wrath* may be, must be, different from that in 1939, when the Naturalism of Zola and Frank Norris still carried prestige, and when

the memory of the evils of the Great Depression focused in brilliant bitter light Steinbeck's indictment of social injustice. *The Grapes of Wrath* still fulfills, of course, its original twofold function as Naturalistic novel and social tract. In the former function, it subjects its people (in Frank Norris's words) to 'terrible things,' from Tom Joad's return to an abandoned home to the stillbirth of Rosasharn's 'blue shriveled little mummy.' In the latter, it dramatizes the terrible plight of tenant families who have been 'tractored out'; it exposes a system of land monopoly as destructive as any set forth in *Progress and Poverty*; it holds our gaze unsparingly on the tragic attrition of the Joads as a family unity....

[His] people, while they sometimes act as individuals, at other times act as types or symbols, as do the figures in a medieval morality play. In much of Steinbeck's story, Tom Joad is just the individual man Tom Joad; toward the close he becomes an embodiment—a self-conscious, highly articulate embodiment—of the workingman's resistance to injustice everywhere. *The Grapes of Wrath* is not, then, a realistic novel, though it makes occasional use of the techniques of Realism. It is a parable; and toward the reader's full realization of the meanings of that parable are directed Steinbeck's unusual talents as a maker of myth....

Casy, of course, modestly disclaims Messiahship, but his very disclaimer is ingeniously made to set forth Steinbeck's own Messianic intention in creating him. 'I ain't sayin' I'm like Jesus....' Casy is made to observe.... Contrary to Christian dualism, man and man's world are looked on, Transcendental fashion, as part of one great Soul, universally holy except when some 'mis'able little fella' acts in arrogant self-assertion to 'bust the holiness.' Contrary to the Christian attitudes of moral selectiveness and self-discipline, in Steinbeck's secular religion there is no need for self-control; all is permitted. To act ethically, men have only to act naturally [liberal tradition of Rousseau, Emerson and Whitman]. They have only to forget the illusion of sin, practice a universal tolerance, and obey that impulse. According to the newly tolerant Casy, 'There ain't no sin and there ain't no virtue. There's just stuff people do'.... Steinbeck's secular religion is not, to put it mildly, much turned toward self-discipline. It sanctions any simple, easy, and natural indulgence. His Casy plans to cuss and swear and to 'lay in the grass, open an' honest,' with anybody that will have him....

[His people find pleasure] above all, in sex, a simple natural appetite that involves no responsibilities for possible children or for the feelings of one's sexual partner.... A reader who really 'buys' *The Grapes of Wrath* has bought, it would seem, something besides a plea for social justice. He has in fact bought an elaborately illustrated and reiterated philosophy of casual sex indulgence. He has also bought, along with a concept of sexual promiscuity, a humorous tolerance of the Tobacco-Road way of life once enjoyed by the Joads in Oklahoma. The reader's affections are to embrace Granma, who in a fit of religious ecstasy has ripped one of her husband's buttocks nearly off with a shotgun blast. They are to embrace even more warmly Grampa, who insists on going about with his fly open, and who, choked at table, sprays into his lap a 'mouthful of paste.' They are to embrace a social group where it is natural enough for a woman 'in a family way' to go raving, because the pig got in the house and 'et the baby'....

A California landholder is a 'fat, sof' fella with little mean eyes....' California deputies, servants of the middle class, are 'fat-assed men with guns slung on fat hips.' Of this insidious denigration of the middle classes, the core is the description of the people who ride the 'big cars' on Highway 66.... Such people are naturally looked on with contempt by Steinbeck's fine proletarian truck drivers and by his roadside waitress Mae, who speaks of them with obscene contempt.... And if we turn from *The Grapes of Wrath* to other books of Steinbeck—to *Cannery Row* or *The Wayward Bus*—we turn there only to discover the same obsessive hatred of the same class, the same insidious propagandist method, the same skillful aesthetic demagoguery. For many American readers, this discovery could be disconcerting, since they are themselves so likely to be, consciously or unconsciously, members of the middle class....

Even so brief a look into these interior meanings of *The Grapes of Wrath* suggests how incomplete is the customary view of Steinbeck's masterpiece—the view, namely, that the book is a Naturalistic novel aimed at the exposure of social injustice. For under cover of a pious social objective a number of other and quite different meanings are slipped past the reader's guard: those of hostility, bitterness, and contempt toward the middle classes, of antagonism toward religion in its organized forms, of the enjoyment of a Tobacco-Road sort of slovenliness, of an easygoing promiscuity and animalism in sex, of Casy's curious

Transcendental mysticism, of a tolerance that at first seems all-inclusive but that actually extends only so far as Steinbeck's personal preferences."

Walter Fuller Taylor  
"The Grapes of Wrath Reconsidered"  
*Mississippi Quarterly* XII (Summer 1959) 136-44

"In this moving book, Steinbeck wrote a classic novel of a family's battle with starvation and economic desperation. The story also tells in vivid terms the story of the westward movement and the frontier. The Joads, Steinbeck's central figures, are 'Okies,' farmers moving west from a land of drought and bankruptcy to seek work as migrant fruit-pickers in California. They are beset by the police, participate in strike violence, are harried by death. The book belongs to the so-called proletarian literature that became more and more important in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and reflected growing economic and social unease. But Steinbeck was by no means committed merely to exploiting an ideology. His novel is one of absorbing interest, with many powerful episodes and vivid descriptions. The book was based on a careful study Steinbeck made in 1936 when he followed groups of work-seekers to California; he embodied his observations in some newspaper articles, later published as a pamphlet called *Their Blood Is Strong*. Malcolm Cowley regards it as the only American proletarian novel of the 30's to survive into the present era without losing its force."

Max J. Herzberg & staff  
*The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature*  
(Crowell 1962) 402

"*The Grapes of Wrath* has little plot in the ordinary sense; there is no complex involvement of character with character, no mesh of events. The story of the Joads could be the true story of a real family. But there is character development, as Tom Joad, 'jus' puttin' one foot in front a the other' at first, gradually reaches an understanding of Casy's message and takes up Casy's mission. And the Joads as a whole progress from an exclusive concern for family interests to a broader vision of cooperation with all oppressed people. Lisa has pointed out that the plot consists of two downward movements balanced by two upward movements. As the Joad family's fortunes decline, the family morale declines too: the family loses members and is threatened with dissolution. But as the family grows weaker, the communal unit of united workers, which came to birth in the roadside camps on the westward trek, grows stronger, and the upward movement is accompanied by the growth of Casy and Tom Joad in understanding of the forces at work. We can put the process another way: the family unit, no longer viable, fades into the communal unit, which receives from it the family's strength and values....

It can be read as a story of conflicts and interactions among several group organisms: the Joad family (representative of all Okie families), the Shawnee Land and Cattle Company (representative of all Oklahoma land companies), the California Farmers' Association (the organization of big California agricultural corporations, controlled by the Bank of the West), and the workers' union, still immature as the story ends. The Joad family is a democratic, cooperative organism; it is a cohesive group, and yet no member loses his individual character in the group. When the Joads act as a family, they act as a unit.... The Oklahoma land company is another sort of organism entirely. It is one of the monsters of Chapter Five which 'don't breathe air, don't eat side-meat.' Such creatures 'breathe profits; they eat the interest on money....' As Doc Burton said in *In Dubious Battle*, a group's ends may be entirely different from the ends of its individual members. The monster is the sort of organism that absorbs its members, drains them of their individualities, and makes them into organization men. The tractor is the monster visible: 'Snub-nosed monsters, raising the dust and sticking their snouts into it.... As the bank officer to the bank, so the driver to the tractor....

The monster is in fact Leviathan. In discussing *In Dubious Battle* I alluded to the relation of the group organism to Thomas Hobbes's symbol for the state as collective person, 'that great LEVIATHAN, or rather, to speak more reverently...that mortal god, to which we owe under the immortal God, our peace and defense.' Steinbeck's monster is as despotic as Hobbes's Leviathan, but hardly as beneficial to man. He is rather the original Leviathan of Isaiah 27 and Psalm 74, enemy of the Lord. When Casy saw what the tractor had done to the Joad farm, he said, 'If I was still a preacher I'd say the arm of the Lord had struck....' The Joad family fled the Oklahoma Leviathan, only to run into his brother, the California



Leviathan—the Farmers' Association and its typical member, the Hooper ranch, a veritable prison with its barbed-wire fences and armed guards—much the same sort of creature, but even meaner. It is the Growers' Association of *In Dubious Battle*, and its image is not the tractor, but the fat-rumped deputy carrying a gun in holster on his hip. In legend and folktale it makes little difference whether the hero faces a dragon or an ogre....

Shortly after lamenting that the family was breaking up, Ma Joad, soul of the Joad family, attained the larger vision, agreeing with Mrs. Wainwright that the Joads would help the Wainwrights if they needed help: 'Or anybody. Use' ta be the fambly was fust. It ain't so now. It's anybody. Worse off we get, the more we got to do'.... At the end of the book the new collective organism is still in its infancy. This is the child that has been born, not Rose of Sharon's that was conceived of the selfish Connie Rivers; and her final act symbolizes this truth. It is a ritual act: she who cannot be mother of a family adopts the newly born collective person as represented by one of 'the people [who] sat huddled together' in the barns when winter storms came. It is the family unity and strength imparted to the larger unit. In primitive adoption rituals the adopting mother offers her breast to the adopted child....

The agricultural corporations and big growers need pickers in great numbers to harvest their manifold crops. In the thirties they advertised everywhere for pickers with the object of bringing in more job-seekers than they needed; with too many men on hand they could lower wages and increase profits. When one crop was picked, the workers had to hurry on to another crop, if they were to make a bare subsistence. They never stayed long enough in one county to qualify for relief, and so the growers were saved higher taxes. When the time for the next harvest approached, the growers advertised again for pickers, sending handbills everywhere to bring workers back in great numbers. But there were flies in this ointment too: labor leaders, radical agitators, socialists, made the pickers dissatisfied with wages and working conditions, organized them in unions, promoted strikes, and were cordially hated by the growers.... Critics...have noticed the biological features of *The Grapes of Wrath*, but without realizing how literally the monsters, the family unit, and the workers' commune are meant to be real organisms....

The title suggests a Biblical parallel, since Julia Ward Howe's 'vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored' obviously alludes to Revelation 14:19, 'the great winepress of the wrath of God.' Peter Lisca has accurately pointed to the principal mythical model: the exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt to Canaan. He shows that the novels three well-marked divisions—drought (Chapters 1-10), journey (11-18), and sojourn in California (19-30)—correspond to oppression in Egypt, exodus, and settlement in Canaan: the drought and erosion are the plagues of Egypt; the banks and land companies are Pharaoh and the Egyptian oppressors; California is Canaan, a land flowing with milk and honey; and the Californians, like the Canaanites, are hostile to the immigrants. Lisca also indicates several specific parallels: the symbolism of grapes to indicate either abundance (Numbers 13:23) or wrath and vengeance (Deuteronomy 32:32); the migrants are 'the people,' and Ma Joad's words, 'we're the people—we go on,' suggest a chosen people; in the roadside camps the migrants, like the Hebrews, formulated codes of laws to govern themselves; finally, among the willows by a stream John Joad set Rose of Sharon's stillborn child afloat in an apple box, as the infant Moses was placed in a basket among flags in the river....

The name *Joad*, I am sure, is meant to suggest *Judah*. The Joads had lived in Oklahoma peacefully since the first settlement, as the Hebrews had lived in Egypt since Joseph's time. But 'there arose up a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph' (Exodus 1:18); and the monster, representing a changed economic order, and quite as hard-hearted as Pharaoh, knew not the Joads and their kin. In Oklahoma the dust filtered into every house and settled on everything, as in one of the Egyptian plagues the dust became lice which settled on man and beast (Exodus 8:17); plants were covered, as the locusts devoured every green thing in Egypt (Exodus 10:15); the dust ruined the corn, as hail ruined the Egyptians' flax and barley (Exodus 9:31); and it made the night as black as the plague of darkness in Egypt (Exodus 10:22 f.). On the eve of departure the Joads slaughtered two pigs, more likely victims in Oklahoma than the lambs sacrificed by the Hebrews on Passover (Exodus 12). But whereas the Hebrews despoiled the Egyptians of jewels before leaving (Exodus 12:35 f.), the Joads and other Okies were despoiled of goods and money by sharp businessmen in the land that they left....

Grampa and Granma Joad, like the elder Israelites, died on the way. Connie Rivers complained about the conditions into which the Joads had led him, and finally deserted them: the Hebrews continually murmured against their leaders on the ground that they were worse off in the desert than in Egypt, and Korah rebelled (Numbers 16). The migrants' fried dough was the unleavened bread of the Israelites, and both peoples longed for meat. The laws of the roadside camp, like the Mosaic law, forbade murder, theft, adultery, rape, and seduction; and they too included rules of sanitation, privacy, and hospitality. In the camps 'a man might have a willing girl if he stayed with her, if he fathered her children and protected them,' as in Exodus 22:16... The migrant lawbreaker was banished from all camps; the Hebrew lawbreaker was either banished or stoned. Steinbeck's repeated 'It is unlawful' echoes the 'Thou shalt not' of the Decalogue.

On the road west the Joads met men who were going back to Oklahoma from California. These men reported that although California was a lovely and rich country the residents were hostile to the migrant workers, treated them badly, and paid them so poorly that many migrants starved to death in slack periods. In Numbers 13, scouts whom Moses sent ahead into Canaan came back with the report that 'surely it floweth with milk and honey'; nevertheless they made 'an evil report of the land which they had searched unto the children of Israel'... The meanness of California officers at the border, the efforts to turn back indigent migrants, the refusal of cities and towns to let migrant workers enter, except when their labor was needed—in all this we may see the efforts of the Edomites, Moabites, and Amorites to keep the Israelites from entering their countries. In spite of the Canaanites' hostility the Israelites persisted and took over the promised land. The Book of Joshua ends with victory and conquest. But *The Grapes of Wrath* ends at a low point in the fortunes of the Joads, as if the Exodus story had ended with the Hebrews' defeat...

The migrant Okies met defeat because they had not learned to give up selfish desires for money and possessions: still too many wanted to undercut the pay of fellow-workers and had no feeling of a common cause. But they would accomplish nothing if they did not stand together. The issue is left there, and a happy ending depends on an 'if': if the migrants should realize their strength in union. Casy, Tom, and Pa Joad predict a change that is coming, a better time for the people, when they will take matters into their own hands and set them right. And the author foresees doom for the oppressors.... Only future events will tell us how the story ends: it had not ended in 1939.

Perhaps the most striking episode parallel to Exodus occurs near the end of the novel. When Tom killed the vigilante who struck Casy down and left the region when it looked as if he would be found out, he acted as Moses had done. For 'when Moses was grown' he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew laborer, and he killed the Egyptian and hid his body in the sand....And Moses, seeing that his deed was known, 'fled from the face of Pharaoh, and dwelt in the land of Midian.' In the Pentateuch this happened in Egypt before the Exodus; in *The Grapes of Wrath* it happened in California after the migration. It is another Steinbeck myth inversion.... So Moses' task of delivering his people from bondage is just beginning, not ending; it is now that he strikes the first blow. The migrants have gained nothing by merely exchanging one land for another; they must still deal with the 'mean thing.' Hence a stillborn child is set adrift upon a stream at the end of the story, rather than a living child at the beginning. It Was a 'blue shriveled little mummy.' This time the firstborn of the oppressed had died; yet it was a sign to the oppressors....

Tom Joad becomes the new Moses who will lead the oppressed people, succeeding Jim Casy, who had found One Big Soul in the hills, as Moses had found the Lord on Mount Horeb. As a teacher of a social gospel Casy is more like Jesus than like Moses, and nearly as many echoes of the New Testament as of the Old are heard in *The Grapes of Wrath*.... Jim Casy's initials are JC, and he retired to the wilderness to find spiritual truth...and came forth to teach a new doctrine of love and good works. One of the vigilantes who attacked him pointed him out with the words, 'That's him. That shiny bastard'; and just before the mortal blow struck him Casy said, 'You don' know what you're a-doin.' And Casy sacrificed himself for others when he surrendered himself as the man who had struck a deputy at Hooverville. Two Joads were named Thomas, and one became Casy's disciple, who would carry on his teaching. Tom told his mother, 'I'm talkin' like Casy,' after saying that he would be present everywhere, though unseen, 'If Casy knowed,' echoing Jesus' words, 'Lo, I am with you always....' Lisca and Shockley have also perceived the Eucharist in Rose of Sharon's final act, when she gave her nourishment (the body and blood) to save the life of a starving man.

The correspondences between the gospel story and Steinbeck's novel go still deeper than these critics have indicated. Thirteen persons started west, Casy and twelve Joads, who, as we have seen, also represent Judea (Judah) whom Jesus came to teach. Not only were two Joads named Thomas, but another was John; Casy's name was James, brother and disciple of Jesus. One of the twelve, Connie Rivers, was not really a Joad; he is Judas, for not only did he desert the Joads selfishly at a critical moment, but just before he did so he told his wife that he would have done better to stay home 'an' study 'bout tractors.... The tractor driver of Chapter Five got three dollars a day, and the extra money was a couple of dollars for '[caving] the house in a little.' Three dollars are thirty pieces of silver—remember Sinclair Lewis' Elmer Gantry, who received thirty dimes after his betrayal of the old teacher of Greek and Hebrew at the seminary. We should notice too the crowing of roosters on the night when Casy was killed—the only passage, I believe, where this is mentioned—and this at a time when the Joads had to deny Tom....

Casy's doctrine, however, went beyond Christ's. He had rejected the Christianity which he once preached, much as Jesus, starting out as John the Baptist's disciple, abandoned and transformed John's teachings. In *The Grapes of Wrath* John Joad, Tom's uncle, represents John the Baptist, who had practiced asceticism and emphasized remission of sins. John Joad, of course, has almost no literal resemblance to John the Baptist; but he did live a lonely, comfortless life in a spiritual desert, and he was guilt-ridden, obsessed with sin. He was a pious man, a Baptist in denomination; and we hear about his baptism... John, trying to atone for his 'sins,' was good to children, and they 'thought he was Jesus Christ Awmighty.' He was, however, the forerunner: for one greater than he had come.

When Casy gave himself up to the officers to save Tom, then John realized how unworthy he was beside Casy... It is John Joad's Christianity that Casy rejected. After worrying about his sexual backslidings, Casy came to the conclusion that 'Maybe it ain't no sin and there ain't no virtue. There's just stuff people do'.... Maybe all men got one big soul ever'body's a part of.' And so he arrived at the doctrine of the Oversoul [Emerson]. 'All that lives is holy,' he said, and this meant that he should be with other men... 'cause his little piece of a soul wasn't no good 'less it was with the rest, an' was whole.' In a California jail his doctrine took complete shape as a social gospel, and Casy's ministry became the organizing of farm workers into unions.

In colloquial language Casy and Tom express the book's doctrine: that not only is each social unit—family, corporation, union, state—a single organism, but so is mankind as a whole, embracing all the rest. It is, in effect, a transcendental version of the social-organism theory: Comte's religion of humanity with an Emersonian content... The wine of this new gospel is poured into the old bottle of Christian scripture.... Finally, the concluding theme, that family interests must be subordinate to the common welfare, that all individual souls are part of one great soul, corresponds to Jesus' rejection of family ties for the kingdom of heaven's sake: 'For whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother' (Matthew 12:50).

Tom, Casy's disciple, is a Christ figure, too. He seems at first just another Okie, a man quick to wrath who had killed another man in a brawl at a dance, often rough of speech, and not always kind to others. But we gradually become aware that he is different from his kinsmen... His cell-block mates called him Jesus Meek. The Messianic succession was complete when Tom said farewell to his mother, announcing his intention of taking up Casy's work and trying to induce 'our people...[to] work together for our own thing,' to take over all 'the good rich lan' layin' fallow...' When Tom Joad reproved the one-eyed man who reviles his employer, he was in effect saying, 'And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is thine own eye?'

Jesus is a dying god, and the dying god is the year spirit, the rituals of whose cult are entwined in this novel with rituals of migration and colony-founding. The sunset was red 'and the earth was bloody in its setting light' on the eve of the Joads' departure for California in summer drought; then the family congress went into session, and just after that two pigs were slaughtered. The slaughter is described in detail, as was the slaughter of cows in *In Dubious Battle*. The migrants were leaving the graves of their ancestors behind them, personified in Muley Graves. He was stubborn, as his nickname indicates, and he refused to leave the country, although he had no house to live in.... Then Grampa died before the Joads were out of Oklahoma,

and he was buried in his own country's soil. Granma died in the night that followed their arrival in California. The new venture is not for the ancestors; but the pauper's grave that Granma received in California links the old country to the new and the Joad family to another land: this is now their home. Finally, Casy made the supreme sacrifice at a moment when the Joads were down and out....

In no Steinbeck novel do the biological and mythical strands fit so neatly together as in *The Grapes of Wrath*. The Oklahoma land company is at once monster, Leviathan, and Pharaoh oppressing the tenant farmers, who are equally monster's prey and Israelites. The California land companies are Canaanites, Pharisees, Roman government, and the dominant organism of an ecological community. The family organisms are forced to join together into a larger collective organism; the Hebrews' migration and sufferings weld them into a united nation; the poor and oppressed receive a Messiah who teaches them unity in the Oversoul. The Joads are equally a family unit, the twelve tribes of Israel, and the twelve disciples. Casy and Tom are both Moses and Jesus as leaders of the people and guiding organs in the new collective organism. Each theme—organismic, ecological, mythical; and each phase of the mythical: Exodus, Messiah, Leviathan, ritual sequence—builds up to a single conclusion: the unity of all mankind.

To liken the Okies to the Israelites—this too may seem incongruous. Yet the parallel is really close. The oppressed laborers in Egypt were as much despised by their masters as the migrant workers in California. Moses was certainly a labor agitator, and Jesus appealed to the poor and lowly and called rude fishermen and tax-gatherers to his company. Again the mythical structure imparts a cosmic meaning to the tale. These contemporary events, says Steinbeck, are as portentous for the future as was the Hebrews' migration from Egypt, and for the same reasons.

The myth is accompanied by symbolic images. As the title would lead us to expect, the imagery of grapes, vineyards, and vintage is abundant. As Lisca has pointed out, the grapes mean abundance at first and then bitterness, which turns to wrath as abundant harvests are deliberately destroyed: 'In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage.' The turtle of the early chapters that persistently kept to his southwestward course has been noticed by nearly every reviewer and critic who has discussed *The Grapes of Wrath*. The snakes in this novel have received less attention. After their first view of the fertile California valley from Tehachapi, the Joads went down the road into it, and on the way down they ran over a rattlesnake (Tom was driving), which the wheel broke and left squirming in the road. This is an omen which betokens fulfillment of the behest spoken in the 'Battle Hymn of the Republic': 'Let the Hero, born of woman, crush the serpent with his heel.' The snake represents the agricultural system of California, which the immigrants are destined to crush. Later Al Joad deliberately ran over a gopher snake; when Tom reproved him, Al gaily said, 'I hate 'em... Hate all kinds.' The Okies do not yet know who their friends are....

Steinbeck left the conclusion of his story to events. How did it turn out? On September 1, 1939, fewer than five months after *The Grapes of Wrath* was published, Hitler invaded Poland and began the war which interrupted the course of events that Steinbeck foresaw. In 1940 American began to prepare for war and was in it before the end of 1941. This meant an end of unemployment. The Okies and Arkies came to work in the shipyards of San Francisco and San Pedro bays; they replaced enlisted men in industries and businesses everywhere; and many, of course, were enlisted, too. They found houses to live in, settled down, and remained employed when the war was over. Mexicans and Orientals once more harvested California's crops, and 'wetbacks' became a problem.... Disquieting reports have been coming from the fields: more Americans are now employed in migratory farm labor than a few years ago, the pay is low, and conditions are bad. Perhaps the story has not ended yet."

Joseph Fontenrose  
"The Grapes of Wrath"  
*John Steinbeck: An Introduction and Interpretation*  
(Holt 1963)

"Those who do not like the novel contend that it exemplifies Steinbeck's most blatant artistic weaknesses: lack of character development, imperfect conception of structure, careless working out of theme, and sentimentality. The last two chapters of the novel have been considered especially illustrative of these weaknesses....

In their powerlessness, the Joads and their neighbors first choose the road of illusion, and they pursue their particular Western version of the American dream across Route 66. In their heads dance visions of plenty in California—their Canaan of the Golden West—but their map is an orange handbill, and soon their luxurious dreams of ripe fruit and white houses are changed to nightmares of hunger and Hoovervilles. Even in California, the Joads are merely individuals driven by forces they do not understand until, in wrath, they learn their lesson. The lesson they learn forms the thematic base of *The Grapes of Wrath*, and although the Joads do not accept it fully until the end of the novel, the solution has been suggested quite early in the narrative. This theme—that strength can be achieved through a selfless unity of the entire community of Dispossessed—is first suggested when Tom and Jim Casy meet Muley Graves, a kind of mad prophet, on the old Joad place, and Muley is asked whether he will share his food. ‘I ain’t got no choice in the matter,’ Muley says....

Casy’s role is central to the structure of *The Grapes of Wrath*, for in him the narrative structure and the thematic structure are united. This role is best seen when set against the Biblical background which informs both types of structure in the novel. Peter Lisca has noted that the novel reflects the three-part division of the Old Testament exodus account (captivity, journey, promised land), but that the ‘parallel is not worked out in detail.’ Actually, the lack of detailed parallel seems to be deliberate, for Steinbeck is reflecting a broader background of which the exodus story is only a part. Steinbeck makes the incidents in his novel suggest a wide range of Old and New Testament stories. As the twelve Joads (corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel) embark on their journey (leaving the old order behind), they mount the truck in ark fashion, two by two.... The frequency of allusion suggests the basic similarity between the plight of the Joads and that of the Hebrew people. Rather than paralleling a single section of Biblical history, the novel reflects the broader history of the chosen people from their physical bondage to their spiritual release by means of a messiah....

Tom... is a Moses-type leader of his people as they journey toward the promised land. Like Moses, he has killed a man and has been away for a time before rejoining his people and becoming their leader. Like Moses, he has a younger brother (Aaron-Al) who serves as a vehicle for the leader (spokesman-truck driver). And shortly before reaching the destination, he hears and rejects the evil reports of those who have visited the land (Hebrew ‘spies’—Oklahomans going back). But soon the parallel ends. Carried out carefully at the beginning, it does not seem to exist once the journey is completed. Granma, not Tom, dies just before the new land is reached, and Tom remains the leader of the people until finally (and here a different parallel is suggested) he becomes a disciple of Casy’s gospel. This, in the miniature of one character, is what continually happens in *The Grapes of Wrath*. The scene changes, the parallel breaks; and gradually the context shifts from a basically Old Testament one to a New Testament one....

In effect, Steinbeck collapses several hundred years of Hebrew history into the single year of his story; the entire history of man (according to the Judeo-Christian tradition) is reflected in the long hungry summer of one persecuted family. This span of centuries is focused in Casy, whose ideas bridge the gap from Old to New Testament (according to the Christian concept of Biblical thought as developmental). Parallels between the life of Jim Casy and the messiah whose initials he bears are plentiful. He embarks upon his mission after a long period of meditation in the wilderness; he corrects the old ideas of religion and justice; he selflessly sacrifices himself for his cause, and when he dies he tells his persecutors, ‘You don’ know what you’re doin’....

Casy had been a typical hell-and-damnation evangelist who emphasized the rigidity of the old moral law and who considered himself ultimately doomed because human frailty prevented his achieving the purity demanded by the law. His conversion to a social gospel represents a movement from Old Testament to New Testament thought, an expanded horizon of responsibility. The annunciation of Casy’s message and mission sets the ideological direction of the novel before the journey begins (just as the messiah concept influences Jewish thought for centuries before New Testament times), but only gradually does Casy make an impression upon a people (Jews-Joads) used to living under the old dispensation. Over Route 66 he rides quietly—a guest, a thirteenth—and only as time passes does the new idea blossom and the new order emerge; and the outsider—the thirteenth—becomes spiritual leader of a people to whom he had been a convention, a grace before meals....

In *The Grapes of Wrath* the modern and mythic are peculiarly at one, and the story of a family which, in the values of its contemporary society, is hardly worth a jot, is invested with meaning when viewed against a history of enduring significance. Casy's gospel is reinforced thematically in *The Grapes of Wrath* by the panoramic...chapters, which translate the plight of the Joad family into larger terms. Structurally, these chapters usually anticipate (in general terms) the particular actions which follow, and stylistically they often recall the King James Bible, particularly the prophetic books such as Isaiah and Jeremiah. Thematically, the most significant of these essays is Chapter 14...

Though the movement from 'I' to 'we' is imaged several times throughout *The Grapes of Wrath*, the Joads do not really commit themselves to the new mode of thought until very late in the novel. Before their belated commitment, they show their limited view in many ways. Al cannot understand the men's cooperation in job-hunting.... Rose of Sharon and Connie think only of themselves and of how they will break from the group, and when difficulties arise Connie wishes that he had stayed in Oklahoma.... Even the children show a teasing selfishness. Ruthie ears her crackerjacks slowly so that she can taunt the other children when theirs are gone, and at croquet she ignores the rules and tries to play by herself.... Ma's one aim is keeping the family together, and when she says, 'This here fambly's going' under,' she is lamenting the disintegration of her entire world....

Conversion to a wider concern comes rapidly toward the end of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Tom is the first Joad to extend his vision. In wrath, he moves to commitment beside the broken body of Jim Casy. A few days later, when he meets Ma in the dark cave, his dedication is complete.... He has seen the folly of a narrow family devotion like that of tractor-driver Willy Feely ('Fust an' on'y thing I got to think about is my own folks...') and plans to work for a cause transcending family lines.... Al, whose only concern has been a good time, also moves toward what is, for him, an acceptance of larger responsibility (marriage to Aggie). Even Ruthie, on a child level, shows a change....

Rose of Sharon's sacrificial act represents the final breakdown of old attitudes, and climaxes the novel's thematic movement. The final bastion of the old order, Rose of Sharon had been the most selfish of the remaining Joads; her concern had never extended beyond herself and her immediate family (Connie and the expected child). In giving life to the stranger (symbolically, she gives body and wine: Song of Songs 7:7—'They breasts [are like] to clusters of grapes'), she accepts the larger vision of Casy, and her commitment fulfills the terms of salvation according to Casy's plan....

The Biblical myth informs the final scene through a cluster of symbols which emphasize the change and affirm the new order. As the Joads hover in the one dry place in their world—a barn—the Bible's three major symbols of a purified order are suggested: the Old Testament deluge, the New Testament stable, and the continuing ritual of communion. In the fusion of the three, the novel's mythic background, ideological progression, and modern setting are brought together; Mt. Ararat, Bethlehem, and California are collapsed into a single unit of time, and life is affirmed in a massive symbol of regeneration.... The grapes of wrath have ripened, and in trampling out the vintage the Dispossessed have committed themselves (like Casy) to die to make men free. In despair they learn the lesson; in wrath they share the rich red wine of hope."

J. P. Hunter

"Steinbeck's Wine of Affirmation in *The Grapes of Wrath*"

*Essays in Modern American Literature*

eds. Richard E. Langford, Guy Owen and William E. Taylor

(Stetson U 1963)

"Once the hubbub over John Steinbeck's 'propaganda tract' began to die down—there are still those who refuse to let it die completely—critics began to pay serious attention to *The Grapes of Wrath* as a work of art.... Lisca's treatment of the criticism...centers on the lamentable preoccupation with Steinbeck's social and philosophical attitudes and the consequent neglect of his artistry.... Such aspects of the novel as characterization (whether or not the Joads are 'cardboard figures'), the prose style (actually the several prose styles, but particularly the poetic effectiveness of the descriptive passages), and the interrelationship of the different kinds of chapters have been discussed at some lengthy....

Very few of the tropes of the novel—the metaphors, similes, and allusions—make use of machinery as such. ‘Tractored out’ is of course a prominent figure of speech repeated several times to express the Okies’ plight in being forced from their plots of land by the mechanical monstrosity of industrialized farming.... While there are very few machine tropes, animal tropes abound. Often animals are used to characterize the human sex drive.... Animal tropes frequently serve to denote violence or depravity in human behavior: fighting ‘like a couple of cats; a tractor hitting a share-cropper’s cabin ‘give her a shake like a dog shakes a rat’.... But the most frequent and significant use of the numerous animal tropes is to characterize the Okies’ plight: the Joads are forced off their forty acres, forced to live ‘piled in John’s house like gophers in a winter burrow’; then they begin an abortive trip toward what they hope will prove to be a ‘New Canaan’ in California, and Casy uses this tacit analogy to describe the impersonal, industrial economy from which they are fleeing: ‘Ever see one a them Gila monsters take hold, mister?’...

Consequently the roads to California are ‘full of frantic people running like ants’... In California the Okies work, when they can get work, ‘like draft horses’; they are driven ‘like pigs’ and forced to live ‘like pigs.’ Casy has been observing and listening to the Okies in their misfortunes and he knows their fear and dissatisfaction and restlessness: ‘I hear ‘em an’ feel ‘em; an’ they’re beating their wings like a bird in an attic. Gonna bust their wings on a dusty wind tryin’ ta get out’... That [they] must behave like the lower animals is not their fault. Their animalism is the result of the encroachments of the machine economy. Machines, then, are frequently depicted as evil objects: they ‘tear in and shove the croppers out’; ‘one man on a tractor can take the place of twelve or fourteen families; so the Okies must take to the road, seeking a new home, lamenting, ‘I lost my land, a single tractor took my land.’ Farming has become a mechanized industry, and Steinbeck devotes an entire chapter (nineteen) to the tragic results....

The Okies are conscious of vehicles as status symbols and automatically distrust anyone in a better car. When a new Chevrolet pulls into the laborers’ camp, the laborers automatically know that it brings trouble. Similarly the condition of the Okies’ vehicles provides perfect parallels for their own sad state.... In the development of the novel their vehicles are so closely identified with the Okies that a statement of some damage to the vehicles becomes obviously symbolic of other troubles for the owners.... Pets...serve as symbolic indices to human situations; and other animal symbols are used to excellent advantage.... Probably Steinbeck’s most famous use of the symbolic epitome is the land turtle. The progress of the Okies...is neatly foreshadowed in the description of the turtle’s persistent forward movement: he slowly plods his way, seeking to prevail in the face of adversities, and he succeeds in spite of insects, such as obstacles in the highway, motorists’ swerving to hit him (though some swerve to avoid hitting him), Tom’s imprisoning him for awhile in his coat, the attacks of a cat, and so on... There are, for instance, similarities between Tom’s progress along the dirt road and the turtle’s....

Animal epitomes, such as the turtle and the ‘lean gray cat,’ occur several times at crucial points. And frequently a person’s character will be represented by his reaction to or treatment of lower animals.... Here is a vivid parallel for the plight of the share-cropper, caught in the vast, rapid, mechanized movement of the industrial economy (the great highway is persistently the bearer of symbolic phenomena): ‘A jackrabbit got caught in the lights and he bounced along ahead...’ While the wary mongrel at the camp represents the timorous doubts of the Okies, the arrogant skunks that prowl about at night are reminiscent of the imperious deputies and owners who intimidate the campers. The Okies are driven like animals, forced to live like animals, and frequently the treatment they receive from their short-term employers is not as good as that given farm animals.... The banks are seen as monstrous animals, but *mechanical* monsters: ‘the banks were machines and masters all at the same time’....

The Okies—through a fault not really their own—have been unable to adjust to the machinery of industrialization. Toward the very last of the novel Ma pleads with Al not to desert the family, because he is the only one left qualified to handle the truck that has become so necessary a part of their lives...The animal motif in *Grapes* does not at all indicate that man is or ought to be exactly like the lower animals. The Okies crawl across the country like ants, live like pigs, and fight amongst themselves like cats, mainly because they have been forced into this animalistic existence. Man can plod on in his progress like the turtle, but he can also become conscious of his goals and deliberately employ new devices in attaining those goals. Man’s progress need not be blind; for he can couple human knowledge with human love, and

manipulate science and technology to make possible the betterment of himself and all his fellows. Steinbeck does not present a picture of utopia in his novel, but the dominant motifs do indicate that such a society is possible.”

Robert J. Griffin and William A. Freedman  
“Machines and Animals: Pervasive Motifs in *The Grapes of Wrath*”  
*Journal of English and Germanic Philology* LXII  
(April 1963) 569-80

“The [American] dream motivates the ‘Okies’ in *The Grapes of Wrath*, the dispossessed sharecroppers of Oklahoma who pour in their broken-down old cars across the mountains and the desert into the rich valleys of California, the promised land where there’s a little white house standing in its own few acres at the end of the trail. Their progress is in a sense a repetition of that which brought their ancestors across the Atlantic from Europe to the Eastern seaboard; and the promised land of California is to be proved no less delusive than America itself.

*The Grapes of Wrath*...includes within itself a considerable part...of the experience of a considerable number of Americans during the thirties; and though it can be faulted in many ways—it is at times pretentious, at times sentimental, and the characters never quite become three-dimensional—it is still a novel that deserves respect and even admiration. It is, for one thing, superb simply as narrative; and many of the incidental things in it, the inter-chapters which enhance the significance of the migration by setting it in a larger context of history, are brilliant. There is, admittedly, a tendency to inflate in these chapters, but Dos Passos himself in *U.S.A.* did nothing better than, for instance, Chapter Seven, the Impressionistic rendering of the used-car lots where the migrants plead to be allowed to buy their wretched vehicles and spares.... What one is observing in *The Grapes of Wrath*, one can’t help feeling, is a whole species on the move... They are group-man, a species in which the individual counts for as much and as little as an individual cell in the human body.

And this impression of group-man is further strengthened by being felt to exist within the whole order of nature...one species among a host of species. There is, for example, the very fine third chapter, which describes the progress of a turtle climbing a wall and crossing a road. The turtle exists in an obvious symbolic relation to Tom Joad, just out of jail, returning to his family and about to set out with them on the long trek to California. But, having said that turtle and Tom exist in a symbolic relation to each other, one has to discriminate. Each exists in his own right and dignity, so that, even if one were to equate Tom with the turtle, one couldn’t say he was diminished in consequence. The turtle, for all he appears only for a page or two, is as fully realized as any human character in the novel, and rendered with no less empathy and love.... On its publication *The Grapes of Wrath* was commonly compared with *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and perhaps had a similar influence in spotlighting social injustice. Beyond that, they seem adequate no longer.... What the personages do and say is monotonously predictable from page to page. They are all too simply conceived, much too close to the popular stereotypes of poor-whites and hill-billies to be found in comic strips and cartoons.”

Walter Allen  
*The Modern Novel in Britain and the United States*  
(Dutton 1965) 164-65

“Only those who were on the scene at the time can fully understand the impact that this book made upon a public hungering for good news about the oppressed and the exploited. For hundreds of thousands of Americans, *The Grapes of Wrath*, with its rough and coarse but essentially kindly and courageous migrants, descendants of the men and women who built America, and themselves the last pioneers, seemed to sum up the tragic but enriching experience of the entire decade. In its monumentality (the vicissitudes of the Joad family are interrupted from time to time with chapters...on the social implications of the collapse of midwest agriculture) and its ‘scientific’ veneer (the author had studied marine biology at Stanford after growing up around Salinas), it accorded with the American desire for an account of their experience that would be both rational and optimistic, both radical and affirmative. It is easy for us now to see that, despite his Nobel Prize, the art of John Steinbeck has been irremediably flawed by sentimentality and oversimplification of character. But it is important for us to understand the magnetic power of the writer who could exclaim, in his grandest book: ‘The decay spreads over the State, and the sweet smell is a great



sorrow on the land... In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage'."

Harvey Swados, ed.  
*The American Writer and the Great Depression*  
(Bobbs-Merrill 1966) 118-19

"John Steinbeck has received countless accolades for his novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. It is structured in chapters alternating between plot and social comment. Chapter III is 'The Turtle,' an allegory in which the turtle symbolizes the Okies.... Steinbeck's powers of observation are acute. Each detail in this chapter is sharply defined under the microscope vision of the author."

Thomas E. Sanders  
*The Discovery of Fiction*  
(Scott, Foresman 1967) 86-87

"The hard-pressed farmer had to borrow money; the bank or finance company assumed title to the land; and the one-time owner became a share-cropper.... Deprived of their means of livelihood, a few of the former sharecroppers took laboring jobs on the new giant farms. But there was no work for most of them, and the only spark of hope came in news of the opportunities for migrant labor in California.... Many more laborers were drawn to California than were needed. Steinbeck believed that this was a matter of cynical calculation on the part of the owners. Because of the surplus of workers and their desperate poverty, the employers could cut wages ruthlessly....

During the fall of 1936, Steinbeck lived in migrant camps and worked in the fields near Salinas and Bakersfield. In articles published in *The Nation* and the *San Francisco News* he reported upon the appalling poverty and dangerous discontent of the workers.... Why had these suffering people come to California? In 1937, Steinbeck sought an answer. Having bought a car in Detroit, he drove to Oklahoma, where he saw for himself the combination of economic forces and natural disasters that were uprooting the farm population. He joined a group of migrants and shared their hardships on the long trek to the Pacific coast. The power and passion of *The Grapes of Wrath* is derived from this intense experience....

*The Grapes of Wrath* was a shocker. Even in 1939, after a decade of depression, middle-class Americans were still clinging to the myth of unlimited opportunity. They wanted desperately to believe that honest and industrious people would not suffer—or not for long, that men who really wanted work would ultimately find it, that effort and thrift would provide adequate security, that employers would deal justly with their employees, that local authorities would dispense even-handed justice. Above all, they wanted to believe that small farmers were still God's special favorites, the proud and independent yeomen of venerated tradition. In denying these pieties, Steinbeck brought down upon his head a tempest of angry denial. Although guardians of morality in many different parts of the country condemned the novel, the local patriots of Oklahoma Governor Leon C. Phillips refused to read the book, but denied its truth.... California boosters responded to *The Grapes of Wrath* with even greater resentment....

Before making his motion picture, the producer Darryl Zanuck sent private detectives out to test the novel's accuracy. These investigators reported that conditions among the migrants were even worse than Steinbeck had described. When the movie was released controversy once again flared up, and *Life* magazine sent Steinbeck out with a photographer to make a new record of conditions among the migrants. The resulting picture story confirmed the essential truthfulness of both the novel and the film."

Nelson Manfred Blake  
*Novelists' America: Fiction as History, 1910-1940*  
(Syracuse U 1969) 140-41, 144, 149, 159, 162

"The seeds of the symbolic use of house and home, like the prefigurement of many events and situations in the novel, are found in the description of the turtle—whose symbolic importance in *The Grapes of Wrath* has been recognized by many interpretations. Griffin and Freedman call the turtle episode a 'symbolic epitome' and state that 'the progress of the Okies, representative of the perseverance of 'Manself,' is neatly foreshadowed in the description of the turtle's persistent forward movement: he slowly plods his way,

seeking to prevail in the face of adversities, and he succeeds in spite of insects, such obstacles as the highway, motorists' swerving to hit him (though some swerve to avoid hitting him), Tom's imprisoning him for a while in his coat, the attacks of a cat, and so on. They find that similar descriptions are given of the turtle dragging its shell and of Tom dragging his heels in the dust and further note that Casy specifically remarks on the indomitability of the turtle in likening it to himself.... Peter Lisca...terms this tenacious quality 'the indomitable life force' and the turtle's adventures 'prophetic allegory'.... The turtle, like the migrants, takes its home along with it...

By the end of the novel... 'home'—that spirit of community and solace spoken of by Casy—has become completely dissociated from material possessions and physical structure and is described as the 'family.' In this context, the final scene, always controversial and powerful, gains the accumulated significance of 'home' which has been building and developing throughout *The Grapes of Wrath*. The 'rain-blackened barn,' little more than a shelter from the rain, may be a mockery of the 'little white house' of the Joads' dreams, but it becomes a transfigured symbol of 'home' through the human warmth and concern which Ma and Rose of Sharon share with the miserable occupants. The lingering, closing image of the book, Rose of Sharon's gift, not of material possessions but literally of herself, exemplifies the 'home' to which Casy hoped to lead the people—that mutual support and concern which alone can protect the migrants from annihilation (like the turtle's shell) and offer them hope in the face of despair."

Betty Perez

"House and Home: Thematic Symbols in *The Grapes of Wrath*"

*John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath: Text and Criticism*, ed. Peter Lisca  
(The Viking Critical Library/Penguin 1972,1977) 853

"The social problems around which the story is organized can indeed remind us, if we want them to, of the war on poverty [policy of President Lyndon Johnson], or perhaps of the divisive issue of prejudice, the judging of a man's worth and qualities simply on the basis of the group one arbitrarily identifies him with: as Californians prejudged 'Okies,' so do whites and blacks pre-judge each other. The social questions probed by the novel are certainly still with us... Also important are the images of man's existence made vivid through the novel. Tom Joad's journey toward social maturity, climaxed by Tom's rebirth as the successor to Preacher Casy, grips the imagination of most readers. Tom, becoming a man, transcends the simple practicality of his father and sees, as Casy saw, the large implications of corporate ownership as it cancels out considerations of human need and human feeling....

Even more to our contemporary point may be Casy's sense---to which Tom also comes---of mankind as 'one big soul,' a kind of at-one-ment that anticipates the ideal behind the recent Haight-Ashbury community (1960s countercultural hippies), and others like it. This is real, and worth looking at, but the clearest pattern of the book's action concerns the journey and the struggle of the Joads, and all the others, to go to California because they want to find work.... The Joads meet a man on his way back from the coast, going back in order to starve in familiar surroundings rather than among strangers. His haunted description of the jobless nightmare that befell him—no work to be had at any price, and his family starving—arouses fears so deep that blank incomprehension and then fury greet him. Pa Joad can only reaffirm his innocent willingness to work....

*The Grapes of Wrath* 'lives on, as it always will,' not primarily because it speaks to the pressing social dilemma of jobless Americans in the 1930's, but because—through the artistry exemplified by the breakfast passage—it makes vividly real the satisfactions men derive from work, satisfactions that an affluent society will have to provide or else see all its wealth turn to a dust as arid as that which inundated...and drove the Okies to their vintage."

Pascal Covici, Jr.

"Work and the Timeliness of *The Grapes of Wrath*"

*Text and Criticism* (1977) 814-17, 824

"The hysterical reaction that *The Grapes of Wrath* aroused in part of the American public, and notably in its politicians and self-appointed guardians of morality, was reflected in book reviews and literary essays. Most of these were emotional reactions to the social message of the novel. Curiously, as public excitement over the novel subsided, so too did literary interest, and there would be fewer critical essays on

*The Grapes of Wrath* for the next fifteen years.... By contrast...between 1954 and 1969 there appeared at least forty essays, short and long, on *The Grapes of Wrath*, most of which considered some technical aspect of the novel....

In its first fifteen years...there was Malcolm Cowley's statement that 'in the Joad family, everyone from Grampa—"full a' piss an' vinegar," as he says of himself—down to the two brats, Ruthie and Winfield, is a distinct and living person.' And, there was Edmund Wilson's statement that 'it is as if human sentiments and speeches had been assigned to a flock of lemmings on their way to throw themselves into the sea.' It is toward one of these two poles that almost all assertions gravitated. Thus Joseph Warren Beach: '...it is notable as a work of fiction by virtue of the fact that all social problems are so effectively dramatized in individual situations and characters'....

Arthur Hobson Quinn, as late as 1951, found all but Ma Joad to be 'puppets with differentiating traits.' Alfred Kazin, who thought Steinbeck's people in general were at least 'always on the verge of becoming human,' withheld this charity from the Joads, whom he called 'symbolic marionettes.' Similar assertions were made by Max Eastman, John S. Kennedy, W. M. Frohock, and Kenneth Burke, to name only well-known figures [mostly New York urbanites]. The voices of moderation were few.... Leon Whipple observed that '...on the whole Steinbeck is interested in people as symbols in his design' and 'of necessity he makes inarticulate people articulate, but within the conventions we must grant a novelist'....

Malcolm Cowley simply found most of the interchapters 'too shrill, too evangelistic.' At the other pole, we have such statements as...that the interchapters are, in some respect, the best parts of the book, and Joseph Warren Beach's approval of them as, in the most part, 'ingenious and effective means of dramatizing the thought of a whole group of people.' Although Beach did not use the word, he described some of these interchapters in terms of cinematic montage techniques. Howard Baker found these chapters a 'brilliant structural effect,' imposing form on an 'intrinsically formless narrative. Slochower found them necessary 'because his characters by themselves, *do not know* and therefore cannot "tell" the wider meaning of their story'.... Bernard DeVoto...found these interchapters 'necessary because no one could have stood the painfulness of the story without some tranquilizing relief'!....

As might be expected, the vehement polarity of opinion concerning another aspect of the novel, its sociological message, gradually subsided as the proletarian thirties gave way to the national unity of the forties.... *The Grapes of Wrath* is not spontaneously irresponsible in its observations about American life, but has sure roots in our native American tradition: the mystical transcendentalism of Emerson, the earthy democracy of Whitman, and the pragmatic instrumentalism of William James.... [Another critic] found a fourth 'skein of American thought' in the novel—Jeffersonian agrarianism....

It is curious that although some reviewers and several subsequent critics made general remarks concerning certain similarities of the novel to the Bible, no essay appeared in which this similarity was explored further. In his study of Steinbeck, Moore remarked in passing that 'the exodus of the dispossessed looking for their promised land' had a familiar ring, and suggested that Tom Joad may be 'the Joshua to come.' Moore also noted the biblical flavor of the prose style... It was precisely with an exploration of this symbolism that productive analysis of *The Grapes of Wrath* was to begin its second fifteen years in the winepress of criticism....

Reacting against the denial of Casy as a Christ figure...Shockley stated: 'I propose an interpretation of *The Grapes of Wrath* in which Casy represents a contemporary adaptation of the Christ image, and in which the meaning of the book is revealed through a sequence of Christian symbols.' Earlier critics had pointed to some possible parallels to the Bible, usually the Old Testament, but Shockley was the first to make so bold and inclusive a statement.... He also saw Tom Joad as a disciple and pointed to Rosasharn's last action as representing the 'resurrective aspect of Christ,' the 'multifoliate rose' image of T. S. Eliot.... Others brought new parallels, such as Tom's being a Moses figure or even a St. Paul, or the number of Joads corresponding to the 12 disciples, or 12 tribes of Israel, or Ma Joad's being a Deborah, or Casy's being really an Aaron figure, or Rosasharn's milk being a symbol not of communion but of the manna which the Jews ate in the wilderness. Etcetera!

This growing flood of biblical criticism crested in 1963 with the appearance of Joseph Fontenrose's chapter on the novel and J. P. Hunter's essay, 'Steinbeck's Wine of Affirmation in *The Grapes of Wrath*.' Fontenrose provided such a wealth of detailed, convincing parallels with both the Old and New Testament as to make any further doubt about their organic relationship to the novel irresponsible. Fontenrose further provided a larger scheme within which these symbols and references could be assimilated. He proposed that the book's 'concluding theme that family interests must be subordinate to the common welfare, that all individual souls are part of one great soul, corresponds to Jesus' rejection of family ties for the kingdom of heaven's sake.... To this, J. P. Hunter added even more specific biblical parallels, such as, for example, the Joads climbing into the truck two by two while Noah stands on the ground watching.... The ending of the novel becomes truly organic because it is Rosasharn, who had been the most self-centered, who now, out of necessity, adopts the human race as her family. For Hunter the book's ending telescopes the Old Testament deluge, the New Testament stable, and the continuing act of communion; Mount Ararat, Bethlehem, and California....

'Steinbeck's intricate and masterful manipulation of the various references to machines and animals is an essential factor in the stature of *The Grapes of Wrath* as one of the monuments of twentieth-century American literature.' Concerning the novel's themes, French, in his 1961 study of Steinbeck, demonstrated in detail an earlier thesis that the main theme is 'the education of the heart,' the movement of the Joads from regarding themselves as a 'self-important family unit' to their regarding themselves 'as a part of a vast human family.' In this respect, French rightly compared Steinbeck to Hawthorne, for in this light *The Grapes of Wrath* is not a political or sociological novel, but a moral one, substantially more than 'a period piece about a troublesome past era'....

Perez enlarges the meaning of home in the novel from the purely physical house which the turtle carries with him to the aura which emanates from Ma Joad, Casy, and finally Rosasharn. Reed points out how masterfully Steinbeck transforms the naturalistic and even vulgar details of poverty into esthetically effective contributions."

Peter Lisca ed.

"Editor's Introduction: The Pattern of Criticism"  
*Text and Criticism* (1977) 695-706

"The representative from Oklahoma, Lyle H. Boren, addressing the 76<sup>th</sup> Congress of the United States in 1942, angrily dismissed *The Grapes of Wrath* as a false and foul novel. 'Take the vulgarity out of this book,' he said, 'and it would be blank from cover to cover.' For a time, much of the criticism of Steinbeck's most popular novel pointed to the unsavoriness of its details and the crudeness of its speech.... Language means less than the spirit in which it is used. Casy sees the innocence of the Okies' raw talk, while we are forced to recognize the malice of their antagonists. Earthy speech, under these circumstances, becomes an insignia of honor.... Just as derogatory language becomes more vile in the mouths of the middle class than among the migrants, so unpleasant details are more savage in the established community....

Details which seem gratuitous at the beginning of the novel are gradually transformed to meaningful adjuncts of a higher mode of existence. This transformation results from a growing emphasis upon human dignity and an increasingly broad and symbolic fictional context.... Other details are presented with equal economy and with the same sort of accretive transformation. They reveal the movement of mind among the Joads and the Okies from self-concern to a broader, more exalted consciousness.... The migrants, having lost everything, inadvertently discover the meaning of their transformation from I to We, and in this transformation they achieve their highest dignity, for they become aware of abstractions that bind together lives that are otherwise squalid and debased....

Casy and Tom's concerns become less personal and more universal as their energies are channeled away from sensual gratification toward the achievement of an ideal. In fact, there is little actual description of sexual activity in *The Grapes of Wrath*, and when it occurs, it is discreet. Steinbeck is not writing a mere apology for the sensuous life. Primarily he is opposing the full-bloodedness of the Joads to the mechanical existence against which they must struggle. The vitality of the Okies is demonstrated in their faults, but more nobly in their love for the land, which has ancestral and personal value....

Steinbeck is not romanticizing the passions of the Okies, as the constant animal imagery indicates; he is simply demonstrating that they retain a sensuous and vital force that has gone out of the business and managerial classes. Like Thoreau, Steinbeck believes that the less encumbered a man is by possessions, the more easily will he find his own soul. Possessions, for Steinbeck, are accretions that smother the spiritual life, as his often-quoted picture of middle-class tourists indicates.... These representatives of the acquisitive middle-class do not display the crude faults of the Okies, but neither do they reveal a capacity for the greatness of heart and spirit that Steinbeck confers on his ostensibly ignoble migrants....

As the vulgar details of their way of life assume a part in a developing pattern and are exalted by identification with an ideal, so references to pride and dignity among the Okies become more prominent. The shift in emphasis from physical to spiritual concerns becomes obvious with the death of the earthy old Grampa.... The clumsy and sometimes humorous details of the burial are dignified by Casy's clear identification of Grampa with the land the Joads are leaving. His death becomes a symbolic gesture and, significantly enough, it is at this point that the Joads and the Wilsons decide to combine their forces and travel together, taking another large step from I to We. Gradually the movement West is enlarged and ennobled,....

Casy, the wandering, homeless preacher, becomes the attendant spirit of these wandering and homeless people, and it is this human spirit of idealism that will leaven and transform commonplace people like the Joads.... When the vigilantes murder Casy, it is difficult not to observe that 'Casy's crushed head' resembles Herb Turnbull's head that Tom had knocked 'plumb to squash.' Tom once more reacts defensively when he strikes down Casy's murderer. The identical act that was initially an unfortunate event in Tom's case, becomes an outright premeditated murder on the part of the vigilante, and is instantly transformed to a gesture of liberation by Tom. As with the other details in the novel, all value is conferred by the meaning that surrounds them....

Casy has both preserved his dignity and achieved a higher end; moreover, occurring at a moment of jeopardy, his act assumes greater significance. Yet it is only one of several important preparations for the final cancellation of I in favor of We. When Rose of Sharon witnesses a similar jeopardy, she discards outmoded notions of shame and self in favor of a selfless dignity by offering what she can of herself for another, and, like Casy, 'her lips came together and smiled mysteriously.' It is the smile of an even higher conquest.... Rose of Sharon's act, though dignified by various religious and mythic allusions, needs only its own power to demonstrate nobility. The transformation of her nature in a moment of crisis merely epitomizes the general movement of the novel from concerns of the flesh to concerns of the spirit."

John R. Reed

*"The Grapes of Wrath and the Esthetic of Indigence"*  
*Text and Criticism* (1977) 825, 827-39

"When the Christ figure is surrounded by exactly twelve companions—as in *The Grapes of Wrath*, where Preacher Jim Casy (J.C.) is surrounded by exactly twelve Joads when he makes his trip to California...then it seems likely that the author has counted disciples on his fingers, and two besides....

For the clearest expression of the age in its successive moods of anger, millennialism, and discouragement, one must turn to three big novels... The three novels are *U.S.A.*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.... *The Grapes of Wrath*...is an optimistic tragedy. We know from the beginning that the Joad family, starving like the Jews in the land of Egypt, is making a hopeless pilgrimage. We know that the Joads will starve in the land of Canaan too. We are not surprised when some of them die on the journey through the wilderness or when others become disheartened and wander away. Memories of the New Testament are mingled with those of the Old.

After Preacher Jim Casy, the Christ figure, is cornered and killed by vigilantes ('That's him. That shiny bastard'), Tom Joad takes up the preacher's mission like another Saint Paul. We know that he will not surrender, but that he is certain to be tracked down and martyred. Tom, though, is willing to face death for the great sin of bringing the people together. After death, 'I'll be ever'where—' he says to Ma Joad,

‘wherever you look. Wherever they’s a fight so hungry people can eat, I’ll be there. Wherever they’s a cop beatin’ up a guy, I’ll be there.’

Tom has completely merged his life in that of the people. When many others have done the same—when the people finally come together for defense, with every ‘I’ merged in a great ‘we’—then they will triumph over the oppression and Tom, though dead, will be with them. That was his faith, or Steinbeck’s faith at the time. Although the book was not published until 1939, it expresses the dream that many writers shared in the middle of the decade, that of linking arms with the dispossessed and marching by a bridge over the gulf into the golden mountains.”

Malcolm Cowley  
--*And I Worked at the Writer’s Trade:*  
Chapters of Literary History, 1918-1978  
(Penguin 1979) 108-09

Michael Hollister (2015)

