

The Grapes of Wrath

I knew the Great Depression was devastating to thousands of workers but I didn't fully comprehend the ordeal the workers went through until I read *The Grapes of Wrath*. Not only does Steinbeck put you in the shoes of the one specific family, he provides a perspective on the rest of the migrant workers.

The turtle interlude serves as a comparison and foreshadowing of the Joad family.

“And over the grass at the roadside a land turtle crawled, turning aside for nothing....not really walking, but boosting and dragging his shell along” (pg 14)

The movements of the turtle describe the way the Joad's family move. Ma Joad wouldn't let anyone or anything discourage her family from going to California, whether it was the death of Grampa Joad or the police trying to prevent the family from getting into California. But the family isn't really “walking” because if you're walking, you usually have a destination and have a general idea of what you are going to do once you get there. For the Joad's, they are more like wandering. They have no idea what will happen once they arrive in California and can only hope that they will be able to find jobs and live a decent live. Also, the Joad's are barely getting by on the journey and to make things worse, they have burdens to carry along the way. Family obligations get in the way when the Joads have to drug Grandpa to make him come along, take Granma to a hospital because she has the chills, take care of Noah because he is mentally retarded, cheer up Uncle John who is depressed and a pregnant woman named Rose of Sharon. The sad part

is that the only person who made it in the end was Rose of Sharon and even then her baby died.

“A sedan driven by forty-year-old woman approached ...the turtle and swung to the right...now a light truck approached and as it came near, the driver saw the turtle and swerved to hit it”(pg 14). Along the journey, they were people who got out of their way to help the Joad's like when Sairy Wilson helped Grandma Joad with her sickness or the government camp who provided a refuge for the migration workers. But, “along with the good, comes the bad”. You have people like the police who are corrupted and abuse the migration workers for their own greediness. The worst kind are the business owners who take advantage of the workers by offering low wages and then charging high for their products and services. One perfect example is how the car salesman sells unreliable cars at high cost to migrant workers and knows perfectly well the car is not going to take them all the way through.

The highway 66 serves as an introductory in which the family has to go through before they can reach their destination. “over the red lands and the gray lands, twisting up into the mountains... and down into the bright and terrible desert, and across the desert to the mountains again” (pg 127). This doesn't sound like your typical road trip in which you would want to drive though. Keep in mind that the family has a broken down car, only two hundred dollars, and sick people aboard. Also, the family is moving based on what they've heard or read. They don't know if they will find jobs or live better lives there. It takes a lot of guts of abandoning everything you own and going into the unknown. Either that or you're really desperate for something better. It also foreshadows of what is to come in the story.

“That’s what you think! Ever heard of the border patrol on the California line...turned you back. In California they got high wages....Baloney! I seen folks comin’ back.”(pg 130). As soon as they reached California, they almost got turned back by the border patrol and could barely find jobs since they were other people looking for jobs too. The story ends with them being homeless and also jobless.

My favorite background chapter was in when Steinbeck describe the bank as a “monster”. “The bank-the monster has to have profits all the time. It can’t wait. It’ll die. No, taxes go on. When the monster stops growing, it dies. It can’t stay one size.”(pg 40) It is funny how people sometimes try to blame on other people or things. In this case, the owners of the land blame the bank or the “monster” as they call it, for taking away the farmers land. In a way, the owners are right. I’m sure some of the owners wouldn’t want to take away the lands if they had a choice. But the way the capitalist system is setup, the bank becomes the monster in which it must eat up profits no matter the cost or else it dies. And when the bank dies, the owners and the employees of the bank become broke and homeless. Then you have this domino effect in which the next business that relies on the bank for money become broke and pretty soon, everyone is homeless. It is amazing how one flaw in our economic system can bring it down.

The conversation between the farmer and the bulldozer illustrates an important fact. “Who gave you orders? I’ll go after him. You’re wrong. He got his orders from the bank” (pg 40). The farmer thinks it is just a group of people who gave out this order. “Well, there’s a president of the bank. There’s a board of directors. I’ll fill up the magazine of the rifle and go into the bank”(pg 40). But the bulldozer responds saying its not even their orders but it comes from East and even says;

“Fellow was tellin me the bank gets orders from the East. Maybe there’s nobody to shoot. Maybe like you said, the property is doing it.” (pg 41). No matter how many people the farmer kills, he cannot kill the right person who is responsible for this atrocity. No body wants give orders to wreck a house in which men work so on. But in reality, it’s not the man who gives the order, but the society and the way the economy is that gives the order. So no matter how hard he tries to find the people who are responsible for this, he can only blame the capitalism. No matter what the farmer does, he will lose his home and everything he has ever known, will never get the satisfaction of revenge and the system in which he believes in will betray him.

It is amazing how everyone could come together and be on friendly terms right away. Laws and duties were established right away without anyone instructing or assigning. “In the evening a strange thing happened: the twenty families became one family, the children were the children of all. The loss of home became on loss, and the golden time in the West was one dream.”(pg 207)

Compared with the upper class where everyone is fighting and stabbing each other in the back in order to become rich, the poor take a different approach. “the right of hungry to be fed; the rights of the pregnant and the sick to transcend all other rights.” (pg 209).

They help others that are less fortunate than them; it’s amazing how a poor person will give up his or her food to feed someone else who is hungry. It shows how benevolent they can be towards each other unlike the business owners who take away people homes so they can own feed their own pockets.

The scene in the diner shows us even though the middle class are annoyed with the migration of the lower class, because of their dirty lifestyle and constantly harassing

them for food or money, they pity them and some even will go out of their way to help them. Others need to be coax in order to realize how much help the migration workers need. Like typical workers who don't want any trouble or hassle, Mae obeyed her boss and didn't make any exceptions. But Al, who probably was quiet all the time because he was depressed by how many families he saw who were homeless and hungry and couldn't much to help them, yelled at Mae until she finally sold the bread to the man. Even when Mae offered the man the bread for free, he refused. Unlike the rich who will take advantage of anyone if they had the chance, the man had integrity and principles. Towards the end of the scene, the truck drivers leave some change that obviously showed their guilt. They feel guilty because they work for the same monsters that make the poor homeless. I think after this incident, they probably be more gracious and kind to the migrant workers.

I have deeper understanding of how the workers survived or tried to survive. I also learn how one must keep hope against all odds. Ma Joad was positive and kept the family together the entire time. She didn't abandon family like Connie and Al Joad did, even stay till the end when Susan was about to drown. She made her family stay and help out Susan, who wasn't even part of the family. The final act of heroism was when Susan breast feeds a starving man on the verge of dying. It really shows how mankind can be at its brightest moment during a dark time.