

JOHN STEINBECK • *THE GRAPES OF WRATH*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

## JOHN STEINBECK (1902-1968)



J. Steinbeck

**John Steinbeck** was one of the most talented American social novelists. His various **labouring jobs** afforded him background material for his literary output, giving an objective analysis of life among depressed economic classes of the US, especially the itinerant labourers of California. Born in Salinas, California, into a family who was not **well off**, he soon started **to earn a living** through part-time jobs, working on nearby ranches and, later, with migrant workers on sugar beet farms. The impact with the severe aspects of the migrant life and the dark side of human nature contributed to inspire his social writings and develop a deep affection for humble and oppressed people.

After leaving university without a degree, he worked in NY as a free-lance journalist, but he failed in the attempt to establish himself as a writer, until, in 1935, he rose rapidly to fame publishing his novel *Tortilla Flat*, followed

by *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), which won the Pulitzer Prize and became a best-seller.

After the experience as a war correspondent in WW2, in the 1950s and 1960s he became more politically active, denouncing **McCarthyism** and supporting president Johnson against critics of American policy in Vietnam. Steinbeck continued to write in his later years and, in 1962, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

He died in NY in 1968.



## ABOUT THE NOVEL

### The Grapes of Wrath

*The Grapes of Wrath* is set in America during the Great Depression, following the stock market crash of 1929. That was a long period of **drought** and high winds which made the land infertile and which affected large parts of the Midwest, including much of the state of Oklahoma, creating what was called the **Dust Bowl**. Through the dramatic story of the Joad family, forced to move to California in the hope of finding at least subsistence, the novel deals with problems of rural population and the poor, whom the author felt had been abandoned by society.

The novel consists of thirty chapters, divided into three major sections: the drought in Oklahoma, the journey, and California. Fourteen chapters deal with the Joad story. The other sixteen chapters are essays dealing with the larger significance of the situation in which the Joads find themselves. Tom Joad, newly released from prison and making his way home, meets Jim Casy, a **former** preacher. He updates Tom on the critical financial situation of Tom's family, who he reaches while they are preparing to drive to California, as they have been **evicted** from their farm.

Then, the Joads and Casy join an exodus of poor tenant farmers heading west. They encounter many obstacles on the journey, as well as warnings that the jobs they expect in California are illusory. Grampa and Granma Joad die along the route, and Tom's elder brother, Noah, decides to abandon the enterprise.

Upon arrival in California, they find out jobs are scarce, available pay is poor, and families are literally **starving** to death in the migrant camps. Connie, the husband of Tom's pregnant sister, Rose of Sharon, abandons her. After moving from camp to camp and after being repeatedly in trouble with the law, the Joads are forced by the rainy season to escape the flooding. Meanwhile Rose's baby is **stillborn**. The novel ends when the Joads come upon a boy and his starving father: to save the man, Rose feeds him with her breast milk.

## THE TEXT

### Chapter 5

*The following is an extract from Chapter 5, which opens with the owners of the farmland (or their representatives) coming to kick the tenant farmers off the land. In search of higher profits, landowners disregard the basic human needs of their tenant farmers, even if it pains them to do so. This inhumanity is heightened by the use of machines like tractors, which do the work of dozens of people, without the same connection to the land.*

*Finally, the tractors come to plough through the land: even their drivers are described like machines. They do not care about the soil or how their actions affect the land, they just have to focus on their own family.*

The owners of the land came onto the land, or more often a spokesman for the owners came. [.....] The tenants, from their sun-beaten dooryards, watched uneasily when the closed cars drove along the fields. And at last the owner men drove into the dooryards and sat in their cars to talk out of the windows. [.....] Some of the owner men were kind because they hated what they had to do, and some of them were angry because they hated to be cruel, and some of them were cold because



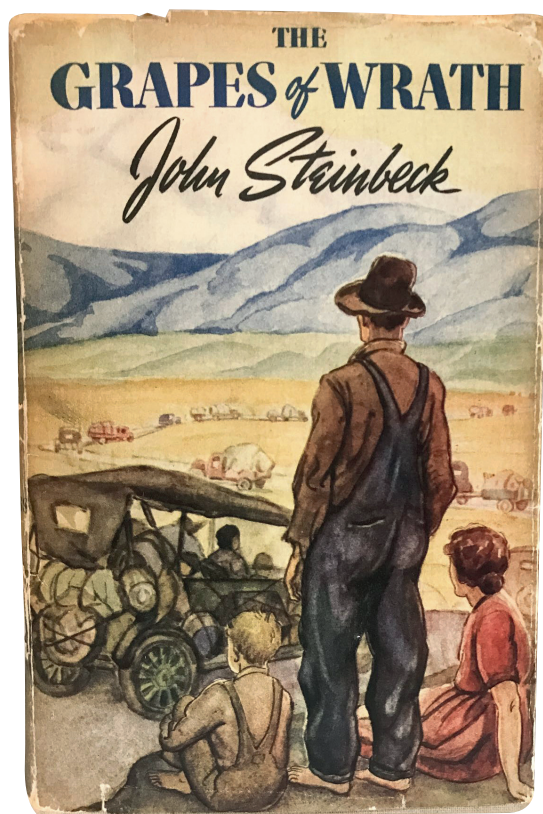


they had long ago found that one could not be an owner unless one were cold. And all of them were caught in something larger than themselves. The Bank – or the Company – needs – wants – insists – must have – as though the Bank or the Company were a monster, with thought and feeling, which had **ensnared** them. [.....] You know the land's getting poorer. [.....] 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. [.....] And at last the owner men came to the point. The tenant system won't work anymore. One man on a tractor can take the place of twelve or fourteen families. [.....]

The tenant men looked up alarmed. But what'll happen to us? How'll we eat? You'll have to get off the land. The **plows**'ll go through the dooryard. And now the **squatting** men stood up angrily. Grampa took up the land, and he had to kill the Indians and drive them away. And Pa was born here, and he killed weeds and snakes. [.....] The bank is something more than men, I tell you. It's the monster. Men made it, but they can't control it. [.....] The tractors came over the roads and into the fields, great **crawlers** moving like insects, having the incredible strength of insects [.....] They did not run on the ground, but on their own roadbeds. They ignored hills and **gulches**, water courses, fences, houses. The man sitting in the iron seat did not look like a man; gloved, **goggled**, rubber dust mask over nose and mouth, he was a part of the monster, a robot in the seat [.....] "I built it with my

hands. [.....] It's mine. I built it. You **bump it down** – I'll be in the window with a **rifle**". [.....] "It's not me. There's nothing I can do. I'll lose my job if I don't do it". [.....]

The driver sat in his iron seat and he was proud of the straight lines he did not will, proud of the tractor he did not own or love, proud of the power he could not control [.....] The tenant sat in his doorway, and the driver thundered his engine [.....] And back he came. The iron guard **bit into** the house-corner, crumbled the wall, and **wrenched** the little house from its foundation so that it fell sideways, crushed like a **bug**.



**to bite into:** agganciare

**bug:** cimice

**to bump down:** buttar giù

**crawler:** creatura che si muove lentamente; cingolato

**drought:** siccità

**Dust Bowl :** tempesta di sabbia

**to earn a living:** guadagnarsi da vivere

**to ensnare:** intrappolare

**to evict:** sfrattare

**former:** ex

**goggled:** provvisto di occhialini

**gulch:** gola

**labouring job:** lavoro di manovalanza

**McCarthyism:** maccartismo,

*movimento di avversione al comunismo*

**plow:** aratro

**rifle:** fucile

**squatting:** accovacciato

**to starve:** morir di fame

**stillborn:** nato morto

**well off:** benestante

**to wrench:** estirpare

## COMPREHENSION

### 1 Match these words to their meaning.

- |                |  |
|----------------|--|
| 1. Crawler     | a. The bed or foundation for the track of a railroad.                          |
| 2. Doorway     | b. To sit in a crouching position.   |
| 3. Fence       | c. To pull or twist suddenly and violently.                                    |
| 4. Gulch       | d. To (cause to) break into small fragments.                                   |
| 5. Roadbed     | e. To start making a loud, rumbling noise.                                     |
| 6. Sideways    | f. To capture or entrap.   |
| 7. Tenant      | g. The passage or opening into a building.                                     |
| 8. To crumble  | h. A deep, narrow valley.  |
| 9. To ensnare  | i. Facing to the side.   |
| 10. To squat   | j. Barrier, or other upright structure enclosing an area of ground.            |
| 11. To thunder | k. A person who farms rented land.   |
| 12. To wrench  | l. Slow-moving thing; a heavy tractor propelled on endless caterpillar tracks. |

### 2 Read the text and answer the questions.

- Who pays a visit to the tenants from time to time?
- How are the owner men described?
- Who created the Bank?
- Can men master the Bank?
- What may compromise the Bank's power?
- Why doesn't the tenant system work any longer?
- Does the tractor driver wear any personal protective equipment?
- What happens to the tractor man if he doesn't destroy the tenant's house?
- Whose feeling of helplessness is described?

## ANALYSIS

### 3 Read the text again and answer the questions.

- What expressions highlight the tenants' uneasiness and the owner men's superior attitude?
- What verbs are associated with the idea of profit logic?
- Does the author use any figures of speech?
- What does this scene emphasise?
- What do the landowner and the tractor man have in common?
- Is there any relationship between the tractor man's and the tenant's situation?
- Apart from safety reasons, may the rubber mask and the goggles have a hidden meaning?

## DISCUSSION

**4 Banks are portrayed as monsters, mastering the economy and the destiny of millions of ordinary people. Surf the Net to look for significant examples of similar devastating effects nowadays.**

**5 How could you imagine a different ending to the novel?**