



# The Grapes of Wrath

John Steinbeck  
**Context**

John Steinbeck was born in Salinas, California, on February 27, 1902. He attended Stanford University without graduating, and though he lived briefly in New York, he remained a lifelong Californian. Steinbeck began writing novels in 1929, but he garnered little commercial or critical success until the publication of *Tortilla Flat* in 1935. Steinbeck frequently used his fiction to delve into the lives of society's most downtrodden citizens. A trio of novels in the late 1930s focused on the lives of migrant workers in California: *In Dubious Battle*, published in 1936, was followed by *Of Mice and Men* in 1937, and, in 1939, Steinbeck's masterpiece, *The Grapes of Wrath*.

During the early 1930s, a severe drought led to massive agricultural failure in parts of the southern Great Plains, particularly throughout

western Oklahoma and the Texas panhandle. These areas had been heavily overcultivated by wheat farmers in the years following World War I and were covered with millions of acres of loose, exposed topsoil. In the absence of rain, crops withered and died; the topsoil, no longer anchored by growing roots, was picked up by the winds and carried in billowing clouds across the region. Huge dust storms blew across the area, at times blocking out the sun and even suffocating those unlucky enough to be caught unprepared. The afflicted region became known as the "Dust Bowl."

By the mid-1930s, the drought had crippled countless farm families, and America had fallen into the Great Depression. Unable to pay their mortgages or invest in the kinds of industrial equipment now necessitated by commercial competition, many Dust Bowl farmers were forced to leave their land. Without any real employment prospects, thousands of families nonetheless traveled to California in hopes of finding new means of survival. But the farm country of California quickly became overcrowded with the migrant workers. Jobs and food were scarce, and the migrants faced prejudice and hostility from the Californians, who labeled them with the derisive epithet "Okie." These workers and their families lived in cramped, impoverished camps called "Hoovervilles," named after President Hoover, who was blamed for the problems that led to the Great Depression. Many of the residents of these camps starved to death, unable to find work.

When Steinbeck decided to write a novel about the plight of migrant farm workers, he took his task very seriously. To prepare, he lived with an Oklahoma farm family and made the journey with them to California. When *The Grapes of Wrath* appeared, it soared to the top of the bestseller lists, selling nearly half a million copies. Although many Oklahomans and Californians reviled the book, considering Steinbeck's characters to be unflattering representations of their states' people, the large majority of readers and scholars praised the novel highly. The story of the Joad family captured a turbulent moment in American history and, in the words of critic Robert DeMott, "entered both the American consciousness and conscience." In 1940, the novel was awarded the Pulitzer Prize and adapted to the screen. Although Steinbeck went on to have a productive literary career and won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962, none of his later books had the impact of *The Grapes of Wrath*. He died in 1968.

Today, readers of *The Grapes of Wrath* often find fault with its excessive sentimentality and generally flat characterizations, which seem at odds with Steinbeck's otherwise realistic style of writing. However, in writing his novel, Steinbeck attempted not only to describe the plight of migrant workers during the Depression but also to offer a pointed criticism of the policies that had caused that plight. In light of this goal, Steinbeck's characters often emerge as idealized archetypes or epic heroes; rather than using them to explore the individual human psyche, the author presents them as embodiments of universal ideals or struggles. Thus, the novel stands as a chronicle of the Depression and as a commentary on the economic and social system that gave rise to it.