

*The Grapes of Wrath* and the Modern Sustainability Conversation

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By *ROBIN CAPE*

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Thesis Director  
Dr. Blake Hobby

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Thesis Advisor  
Professor Eileen Crowe

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck, tells the story of a single family's troubles and simultaneously records and comments upon the pertinent issues of 1930's American society. This popular novel, heralded both for the compelling story of the Joad's, and for the social commentary that was woven into the work, is still relevant to the current conversation about the sustainability of modern society. Literature has long played a role in social dialogue, and *The Grapes of Wrath*, its structure and format, contains valuable insights into the ever-changing American culture, with ideas that transcend the time period in which it was set. Steinbeck used a literary mechanism called intercalary chapters, chapters set in between the ones that propel the continuous narrative story line, to offer a context for the circumstances and setting in which his characters and story are set. These chapters, not part of the family narrative, tell another story, the story of the larger issues that affect society. In them, the environmental, economic and social challenges that Steinbeck identified as the main factors affecting the lives of millions of "Joads", are presented in a variety of styles and formats, each designed to build the foundation that grounds his story in reality and gives it relevance to the social conversation.

Within the narrative chapters, Steinbeck tells the heart-wrenching tale of a single family, the Joads. This highly sentimentalized and personal story is the focused example of the devastating effects of the 1930's Depression and Dust Bowl. Steinbeck knew that the larger ideas contained within his work would be better understood if portrayed by protagonists who captured the interest and sympathies of his readers. To this end, he created characters whose lives provide an intimate illustration of the larger social issues.

The overview chapters offer a break from the sad, and very personal, story of the Joads. They move the reader out of the subjective focus and offer a more objective perspective on the social forces at play. Within these chapters, Steinbeck challenges the reader to disengage from

the story for a moment and recognize the magnitude of these issues. Steinbeck created this novel, with its format of parallel, objective chapters set between those that contained the primary narrative, so that he might speak to the grander social issues without bogging down the storyline. It is within these sixteen chapters that he challenges the reader to reflect on the central question within *The Grapes of Wrath*: is this exhaustion of land, economy, people, culture and spirit inevitable in a modern society? Though he himself doesn't answer this question, the story that Steinbeck tells us of the Joads, with their struggles and their hopes, begs an engaged and inquisitive consideration.

Throughout the book, Steinbeck asserts that no one single person or thing is to blame for the problems faced by the characters. Using the framework of the intercalary chapters, he defines the existence of cumulative cultural forces, and societal mindset, that are directing the larger social choices, actions and outcomes. The devastating effects of bad weather, social and cultural patterns, the banking system and unfettered corporate greed, all combined to produce the particular social crop of displaced families that is the focus of this story. And yet, though no single person or situation is at fault, there is an implication that choices and changes must be made to avoid a perpetuation of the circumstances that his characters face. The underlying premise of Steinbeck's most famous novel is that the problems faced by the Joads, and their peers, arise from society's patterned relationship to the environment and one another. This theme is still relevant in modern society.

Steinbeck engages the power of the written word to create a connection to his reader. Eco-critic Glen Love notes that literature can play a profound role in awakening an ecological and social awareness when the stakes of human survival are at hand. He writes in *A Practical Ecocriticism*, "the interconnections between human beings and nature...take on a heretofore

unprecedented significance at a period when the ...world ...is beset by profound threats of pollution, despoliation and diminishment” (66). The Dust Bowl drama offered a prime example of the ruination of the land by abusive farming practices and its concurrent impact on the people who depended upon that land for survival. Steinbeck saw the ecological and cultural diminishment all around him and understood the importance of individual action to preserve the American Dream that sees America as a land of unending promise and possibilities. *The Grapes of Wrath* offer real examples, in Tom Joad and Casey, the preacher, as individuals who actively engage themselves in an attempt to create positive responses to the negative circumstances they encounter. Frederick Carpenter, in his essay “John Steinbeck, American Dreamer” writes “*The Grapes of Wrath*...suggest[s] the possible realization of the American dream through courage and active intelligence” (69). The novel explores the interdependence of people and place and highlights the notion that a deeper connection to the fundamentals of sustainable living, through a healthy environment, economy and culture, could come from the choices and actions of individuals. Simultaneously, it challenges the idea that the America offers an endless opportunity for personal and material gain through the nonstop exploitation of natural and human resources. Joan Hedrick wrote, in “Mother Earth and Earth Mother: The Recasting of Myth in Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*,” that “the ideology of the American dream has been closely tied to the image of an abundant, tillable soil” and that this ideology has created a resistance to any discussion about social reconfiguration (134). The myth that the land is an inexhaustible source of wealth and resources is crumbling in the face of insurmountable evidence to the contrary. Steinbeck rings the bell to the awakening future and calls for a recasting of the American dream.

Steinbeck’s own personal relationship with California and his first hand knowledge of its exploitation by corporate farmers and landowners was at the root of his environmental and social

principles. Freeman Champney in his essay “John Steinbeck, Californian” concludes that “more perhaps than any important contemporary American writer, except William Faulkner, [Steinbeck’s] writing has grown out of a special region...[where] the operators of this paradise have usually been able to use or usurp the sovereign powers of local or state government whenever necessary to wipe out a threat to their absolutism. Economically, socially, and culturally it has been an ugly state of affairs” (137). This sensitivity to the juxtaposition of the natural beauty and fecundity of the land, and the exploitation of resources that were perpetrated by the landowners, fueled the passion in much of his writing and is especially prevalent in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

The import and impact that the disintegrating American economic, environmental and social framework has on the individual psyche is at the core of the writing of *The Grapes of Wrath*. In his own words, writing in *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, Steinbeck says that “there is no loneliness like that which comes to a man when a perfect and certain pattern has dissolved about him” (310). Steinbeck successfully links these larger social issues to the individual and reminds us that we are not immune to what happens around us and that it is up to us to recognize our part in working with others to create a different reality. Warren French, in analyzing the impact that *The Grapes of Wrath* had on social dialogue, stated that “the message of the book is that cooperation can be achieved only through the willingness of individuals, of their own volition, to put aside special interests and work towards a common purpose” (204). This common purpose of uniting America around a morality-based economy that values people, places and work is another core element of *The Grapes of Wrath* that resonates today as strongly as it did in the 1930’s.

Steinbeck’s own views of the importance of man’s connection with the land are echoed today in the work of modern eco-critic, Ursula Heise. In *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: the*

*Environmental Imagination of the Global*, Heise explores the foundations for a healthy, interactive and engaged human relationship to nature: “local autonomy and self-sufficiency often present themselves as desirable goals at the level of either individual families or of larger communities...[and] such autonomy and self-sufficiency, in the view of many advocates of place, can only be achieved through prolonged residence in one place” (30-31). Steinbeck’s characters, illustrate the profound grief and loss that comes when people who have grown accustomed to a place and lifestyle of self-sufficiency are displaced. The themes of self-sufficiency, autonomy, and a land-based economy championed by Steinbeck in his work, continue to resonate today with those who would seek to find a balance and resiliency for American and global culture. These are the principles upon which the modern sustainability movement has been built and *The Grapes of Wrath* provide a visceral experience of their importance.

Like the contemporary writer and agrarian philosopher Wendell Berry, Steinbeck understood the importance of farmland preservation, community building, private property, wealth distribution and the value of protecting nature as a means of preserving American civil civilization. These ideals, at the core of sustainability, have continued to develop in the American values conversation and are reflected in Berry’s *Another Turn of the Crank*. Berry describes a healthy community as:

People who take a generous and neighborly view of self-preservation; they do not believe that they can survive and flourish by the rule of dog eat dog; they do not believe that they can succeed by defeating or destroying or selling or using up everything but themselves. They want to preserve the precious things of nature and of human culture and pass them on to their children. They want the world’s fields and forest to be productive; they do not want them to be destroyed for the

sake of production... They know that things connect—that farming, for example is connected to nature, and food to farming, and health to food—and they want to preserve the connections... They know that work ought to be necessary; it ought to be good; it ought to be satisfying and dignifying to the people who do it, and genuinely useful and pleasing to the people for whom it is done. (17-18)

Like Berry, Steinbeck saw the connections between sustaining the American Dream, American liberty, and American culture, and he roots them firmly in a healthy agrarian society. Steinbeck drives this idea home in his intercalary chapters, commenting on the social threats of large-scale agribusiness, opportunistic economic relationships, an abusive waste of natural resources and the basic needs of people. Steinbeck critiques Depression-era American society and offers a solution to its ills in the solace of human relations. This understanding of interdependence, one of the foundational principles of sustainability, makes *The Grapes of Wrath* a powerful, contemporary tool for social progress and change.

Steinbeck saw clearly the socially damaging economic dynamics perpetrated by big business. The challenges of the American economic system are echoed in a 1995 book, *The Winner Takes All Society*. Robert Frank and Philip Cook evaluate American economics and define the path that has resulted in a centralized economic system and a winner-take-all mentality. The growing gap between the rich and poor is not a new phenomenon, and is supported by long lasting market, cultural, and educational structures. “As today’s young economists look back to the early years of the Great Depression, most are astonished to realize that, less than a lifetime ago, their predecessors thought that the cure for a stagnant economy was to reduce the supply,” thereby creating a winner-take-all situation (Frank and Cook 21). The economic modeling reflected in this statement is an essential part of the devastation that Steinbeck captures in his

story. Steinbeck foretells the environmental, economic and social justice impacts of this winner take all economic system that dominates the market place and the workers who rely upon it. George Bluestone recognized a deep social morality within Steinbeck's work and described it as defining a "love of the regenerative land; the primacy of the family; the dignity of human beings; the socio-political implications inherent in the conflict between individual work and industrial oppression" (84). Steinbeck's call for a reorientation of society, away from rampant individualism and self determinism toward a fuller understanding of humanity's needs, is summarized in James N. Vaughan's review of the novel. Vaughan described *The Grapes of Wrath* as "a monograph on rural sociology, a manual of practical wisdom in times of enormous stress" (qtd. in Bluestone 88). Our times could use that wisdom as well.

Steinbeck was a proponent of change and growth for this country. Not unlike modern social critics, he recognized that the path on which America was treading was insidious because of an unrecognized failure in understanding mankind's fundamental relationship to the earth. Barry Commoner, in his 1971 book, *The Closing Circle: Nature, Man and Technology*, defined four basic laws of ecology that govern natural systems. These basic concepts, he felt, were the foundation on which human systems must be developed in order to create a resilient and sustainable society. The four laws: 1) everything is connected to everything else, 2) everything must go somewhere, 3) nature knows best and, 4) there is no such thing as a free lunch, incorporate the same basic principles that Steinbeck speaks to so eloquently in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Steinbeck's awareness of these principles, incorporated in a compelling narrative and supported by the in-depth reflections of the intercalary chapters, presage a changing understanding of man's relationship to nature.

This message of interdependence was recognized at the time of the novel's publication by critics and audience alike. Louis Owen, in his essay entitled "Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*" notes that:

Steinbeck makes it clear that the source of the disaster is a failure to understand the ecological whole, not the culpability of individuals or even groups...Once we recognize this fact we will be freed to make the 'sensible attempt at ...change' which is indicated, and the change must be on a broad, national and global scale. We must, Steinbeck argues, radically alter the way we conceive of our relationship with the environment. (106)

Steinbeck used the platform of his novel to offer a wake up call to a world that he saw stuck in the destructive patterns of disparate forces. An awareness of the need for an ecological whole is found at the foundation of the sustainability movements that are growing in strength in the world today. Steinbeck's story provides an emotional and philosophical argument in support of an alteration in direction for human society.

Not surprisingly, not all critics responded positively to *The Grapes of Wrath* when it was first released. Frederic Carpenter, in his essay, "The Philosophical Jodes" describes the mixed critical reviews that *The Grapes of Wrath* received because it was perceived as more of a novel of ideas than as a work of art. "*The Grapes of Wrath*," Carpenter observes, "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" (241). Still, Carpenter continues to support the novel by placing it in a more "philosophical" context:

But in the course of time a book is also judged by other standards. Aristotle once argued that poetry should be more 'philosophical' than history; and all books are

eventually weighed for their content of wisdom. Novels that have become classics do more than tell a story and describe characters; they offer insight into men's motives and point to the springs of action. Together with the moving picture, they offer criticism of life. (241)

Despite his personal opinions of the book, Carpenter places *The Grapes of Wrath* in the catalog of great American novels. He posits that Steinbeck combines the “mystical transcendentalism of Emerson...the earthy democracy of Whitman and the pragmatic instrumentalism of William James and John Dewey” (242). For him, Steinbeck reduces the essential American philosophies into a simple language that the average American can understand. Steinbeck's characters come alive in a way that offers a new audience access to the “old philosophies [that] grow and change in the book until they become new. The ideas 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” (242). Steinbeck incorporates the old philosophies at the core of the American experience with the core concepts of sustainability to create a new American philosophy. He adds the ideas and principles of responsible economics, environmental stewardship and resilient society into both the intercalary chapters and the characters and storyline of the narrative chapters to successfully build the case for a reconsideration of American values.

*The Grapes of Wrath* has been repeatedly evaluated for its impact as a social and political analysis of American culture. Lloyd Willis, in his essay “*Monstrous Ecology' John Steinbeck, Ecology and the American Cultural Politics,*” suggests that Steinbeck employed the metaphor of America as “the monster land” to represent the horror, and import of America's cultural impact on the

world. Willis asserts that *The Grapes of Wrath* offered Steinbeck a platform to discuss the political, social and environmental dynamics of this country, creating “a narrative that overtly confronts the national problem of the Dust Bowl and... the increasingly more powerful culture of technology, progress and capitalism that is advanced by faceless conglomerates ... and by cyborg men who, merged with tank-like tractors, literally drive the family from their land” (359). Willis believed that Steinbeck viewed the general culture of the United States as a ‘lumpen’ mass violently committed to the preservation of ‘a status quo’ dominated by capitalism and consumption” (360). This sense of monstrosity is reflected in the pages of *The Grapes of Wrath*, both in the intercalary chapters and in the horrors of the intimate narrative of the Joads. Steinbeck’s monster reflects the challenges of the modern consumptive society, destroying not only the quality of life for all who came before us, but also for all those who will follow.

And while machines are described as part of the monstrous problem, Steinbeck also recognizes that technology in the hands of morally grounded people, can be of benefit to society. According to Robert Griffin and William Freedman, authors of “Machines and Animals: Pervasive Motifs in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck recognized the duality inherent in machines. To him they were “instruments, and in the hands of the right people they can be instruments of good fortune” (124). Steinbeck articulates the beauty that comes when technology and machines are utilized in harmony with nature, recognizing that a reverent interconnectedness is a quality to strive for in human-nature relationships. This is a core concept of the new sustainability movement and *The Grapes of Wrath* acknowledges this value.

*The Grapes of Wrath*, though now considered an American classic, was not necessarily received as such at the time of its publication. Peter Lisca, in his work *The Wide World of John Steinbeck*, noted that *The Grapes of Wrath* faced the challenge of being categorized as more of a

documentary than as a work of fiction. “From the very beginning it was taken as substantial fact and its merits debated as a document rather than as a novel” (148-149). According to Lisca, the public’s opinion of the book, and the social-political-economic controversy it sparked, overshadowed the literary critique. The novel dramatically points out the struggles of 1930’s America, and as such, entered the mainstream conversation. Lisca, writing again in *John Steinbeck: Nature and Myth* reported on the role the novel played in social dialogue. It was “debated in public forums, banned, burned, denounced from pulpits, attacked in pamphlets and even debated on the floor of Congress” (88). The same types of ideas; concerning environmental, social and labor justice, are finding a similar response in society today. Modern conservative critics rail at the ideas of climate change, living wages, and equal rights for homosexuals and immigrants. *The Grapes of Wrath* was written as a social critique of the ills of the 1930’s. Equally, the modern reader can find their society reflected in the example of the Joads and the social critique within the intercalary chapters.

The organizing method that Steinbeck employed combines his narrative and intercalary chapters to create the whole of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Weaving a continuous interplay of similar motifs, themes, and images, they reinforce an underlying message of interdependence and connectivity. Harry Thornton Moore describes Steinbeck’s format of combining the two types of literary techniques as fundamental to his success in creating an “atmosphere, strong descriptions and a sentimental response in his readers” (54). Moore further identifies the effectiveness of Steinbeck’s literary styling in achieving a subtext that called for social change.

The novel is also divided into three major sections. These three sections contain the whole of the story and use the narrative and intercalary chapters within them to reinforce the larger ideas of the novel with personal and intimate vignettes. This combination of expansive

overview and contracted storyline continuously draw the reader into a deeper understanding of the realities of the dysfunctional social system Steinbeck sought to illuminate. In the first section, the over-farming crisis comes to a head and the Dust Bowl decimates the crops, forcing the farmers from their land--land that they have had in their family for generations. In a typically passionate scene, Steinbeck allows the tenant farmers to speak for their deep connection with the land and their frustration with the economic system that is depriving them of their lifestyles:

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. Then a bad year came and he had to borrow a little money. An' we was born here. There in the door—our children born here. And Pa had to borrow money. The bank owned the land then, but we stayed and we got a little bit of what we raised....it's our land. We measured it and broke it up. We were born on it, and we got killed on it, died on it. Even if it's no good, it's still ours. That's what makes it ours—being born on it, working it dying on it. That makes ownership not a paper with numbers on it.

(45)

This technique of infusing the words and feelings of an individual into the larger social context of the intercalary chapters continues throughout the book. Passion and partiality blend taking the reader into the dynamics of social disintegration. Not content to just tell a story, Steinbeck's skillfulness at manipulating emotions for a larger end are found throughout the novel.

The second section follows the Joads on their travels across the country as they join the mass exodus of Midwest farmers to California in the 1930's where the promise of new work and a new life await them. It is here, along the highways that the families meet up with others who

share a similar journey. The way is challenging; family members die; possessions are discarded; and the hardships of the trip and a fear of the future bond the disparate travelers together:

The cars of the migrant people crawled out of the side roads onto the great cross-country highway, and they took the migrant way to the West. In the daylight they scuttled like bugs to the westward; and as the dark caught them, they clustered like bugs near to shelter and to water. And because they were lonely and perplexed, because they and all come from a place of sadness and worry and defeat, and because they were all going to a new mysterious place, they huddled together; they talked together; they shared their lives, their food, and the things they hoped for in the new country. (264)

Steinbeck sets the scene to put forth the idea that the answers to social ills will only be found in a co-mingling of interests and shared experiences. The socio-political debate about socialism, communism, and capitalism was raging in the 1930s. Steinbeck's personal history, witnessing the labor abuses of his home region, had created in him a willingness to evaluate the moral effectiveness of different systems. Not unlike the political debate raging today, a chasm existed between those who would supported a free market approach and individualism and those who championed a role for the government and social cooperation. *The Grapes of Wrath* tackles this issue and raises the question of whether independence or interdependence is of the greatest value. Interdependence is a primary foundation of the sustainability philosophy.

In the third and final section of the novel, the families arrive in California and face the realities of unmet dreams and an inhospitable social environment. The Promised Land is an illusion, the dreams of work and a new life thwarted before they even start, and new conflicts and disasters await them. "And in California the roads full of frantic people running like ants to pull,

to push, to lift to work. For every manload to lift, five pairs of arms extended to lift it; for every stomachful of food available, five mouths open” (324). Steinbeck points out the underlying greed that can twist economies from the mechanism of wealth and well-being, into tools of human bondage and degradation. Recognition of the power and necessity of balance in economic, environment and social relations is at the root of sustainability.

*The Grapes of Wrath*, in its totality, uses the three sections of the story to compare the journey of the Joads to that of their Biblical counterparts, and the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt to Canaan, according to H. Kelly Crockett in the essay “The Bible and *The Grapes of Wrath*.” As Crockett notes, the novel is effective in more than just telling a story; it uses “symbolism [to] identify its elements with human experience and tradition, and by this and other means, makes a strong appeal to the reader’s imagination, intellect, and emotion” (106). The strength of literature like *The Grapes of Wrath* lies in bringing emotional depth and awareness to society’s issues and can bring that same depth to the understanding of sustainability.

The intercalary chapters broaden the scope of the novel and allow *The Grapes of Wrath* to escape the time and storyline of the Joads and their travails. The ideas expressed in these chapters also expand the import of the work and give it a lasting and continuous social relevance. Like other artists of his time, Steinbeck used his art to blur the line between fact and fiction and to draw his audience into a conversation on social, ecological and economic issues. This conversation is still important in a society seeking answers to their own looming sustainability challenges. Can *The Grapes of Wrath* play a role in diverting mankind from yet another headlong path toward disaster? Exploring the intercalary chapters one by one, we can assess whether or not this novel can awaken a social and environmental consciousness today as it did when it was first published in the 1930’s.

Chapter one opens in Oklahoma in the 1930's as the Dust Bowl days are transforming the landscape. Steinbeck sets the reader firmly upon the land by invoking strong visual descriptions; "To the red country and part of the gray country of Oklahoma, the last rains came gently, and they did not cut the scarred earth...the surface of the earth crusted, a thin hard crust, and as the sky became pale, so the earth became pale, pink in the red country and white in the gray country" (3). Utilizing simple colors and textures, he paints the picture of the transformation of the once rich farmland to a weather-beaten, dry, and dusty landscape with simple action filled imagery. Steinbeck deftly crafts a scene that touches a natural chord within the reader and evokes a connection to something deeper than just a description of a place. He describes a land defenseless without its protective top soil; the farmers, defenseless against the dust and wind. Steinbeck's use of clear, simple language builds like the wind itself and gives power to the role that weather had in the making of this particular disaster. He reminds us that we are not in complete control of our lives, that we too, might face challenges that are beyond the scope of our personal power. Steinbeck suggests that without careful planning to balance uncontrollable factors, we are left as defenseless as his characters.

In the first chapter of the book, Steinbeck manipulates the emotional depth of the human connection to nature by providing a description of a beautiful, green and nourishing landscape slowly being transformed into a grim reality of dust-smothered fields and disheartened farmers. This sets the stage for the disasters that follow; once fertile land grows barren and the people know their lives are forever changed. Steinbeck points out that man and the land are inextricably linked in the primary relationship that determines mankind's fate. This interdependence between man and land is one of the essential themes of *The Grapes of Wrath* and a basic component of the modern ecology-based sustainability conversation.

Chapter three focuses on the power and importance of a single place to an individual's life. Like much of John Steinbeck's best work, this chapter is based in an acknowledgement that people put down roots in a specific place and that becomes home. The reader can sense that Steinbeck spent a lot of time exploring the particulars of place and understood the import of that primary connection. In this chapter he highlights a single country roadway and bears witness to all of nature that exists alongside man's drama. He recreates the enchantment that is found along the edges of society, within the wilds of nature. Steinbeck asserts that without deeply knowing the place where we live, we can not know ourselves and make meaning of our lives. He masterfully connects man and land in a symbiotic relationship that creates something larger than just a place to live. Steinbeck foretells our current valuation of the local over the global and echoes it throughout this work. Woven between the intercalary chapters and the narrative is the importance that the Joads and other farmers place on having their own land. His characters, themselves the salt of the earth, embody the notion that owning a piece of land is at the core of the pursuit of happiness promised in the American dream. With these characters and ideas, Steinbeck reminds the reader that an underlying connection with the land is a quintessential American value at the core of the American psyche and at the foundation of sustaining human culture.

Steinbeck's own love of the land anchors his writing and is yet another linkage to modern readers today. His sense of the particulars of a place and their relevance to human relationship is also found within the metaphors of the next intercalary chapter. Here, in chapter three, he draws the reader's attention downward to a single land turtle that will find itself, in the next accompanying narrative chapter, wrapped tightly in Tom Joad's coat. It makes its own arduous climb up the hill toward the road at the top where it encounters the concrete barrier of the paved

surface, claws its way over and finally lands on the flat and open road. A woman driving a sedan approaches and swerves to avoid the turtle; the next vehicle, a small truck, swerves and tries to hit it. It is “spun... like a coin and rolled...off the highway” (22). Undeterred, it rights itself and moves onward on its path. Steinbeck’s use of the turtle is an interesting metaphor. Is it life itself that lumbers on despite the obstacles it faces? Is it modern society, impenetrable and almost mechanistic in its goal-seeking pursuits, not deterred from its path by kindness or brutality? Steinbeck plays with images and metaphors throughout the book to continuously link his larger ideas to the storyline. The turtle is but one example of the thematic weaving found throughout the book and an appropriate metaphor for the tenaciousness necessary to survive. This resiliency, is fundamental to sustainability; the turtle an apt representative.

Steinbeck opens chapter five with the land again. But this time the land is not a living thing, but something reduced to an asset line on a balance sheet. Moving from the land and nature to society and commerce, Steinbeck takes the story into the hard realities of the modern corporate world. Banks, land holding companies, and the men who represent them, cease to be a part of any natural system. They “don’t breath air, don’t eat side meat. They breathe profits; they eat the interest on money” (43). The men, women and children who live on and farm the land are, like the turtle in the chapter two, simply in the path of the whims of the bigger machines. Steinbeck tells of men turned cold by greed and fear. Men, who, once a part of the community themselves, wreak havoc on neighbors for a few dollars a day. Their hearts hardened, they take the last possession that their neighbors own, their lands and homes, without a single emotion. Steinbeck shows the cost to the human spirit that comes with such work.

*The Grapes of Wrath* makes the connection between the growing dominance of economic centric agriculture and the cost to the small scale farming in the 1930’s. “The bank—the monster

has to have profits all the time. It can't wait. It'll die... When the monster stops growing, it dies. It can't stay one size" (44). Steinbeck is warning the reader of the power of the monster society and showing just what that uncontrolled power can do. As the century has unfolded, the size and scale of corporate agricultural farming has increased with additional consequences to small family farms, local economies and the health and welfare of the environment. Steinbeck's words ring clear today as reminders that bigger is not always better, efficiency not the only value.

Chapter seven opens in the world of depression-era commerce. Steinbeck draws the story out of the cornfield and into the cities. In "towns, in fields, in vacant lots," the used car sales are booming (83). Commerce, once again, shows no mercy as the "owners with rolled-up sleeves, salesman, neat, deadly, small intent eyes watching for weaknesses" ply their trade on the naïve and desperate (83). Steinbeck uses the used car salesman as the individualized face of the materialistic and opportunistic greed that he saw in American culture. This chapter sets the stage for the emergence of this theme throughout the novel as Steinbeck explores the different ways in which men take advantage of one another men for their individual personal gain. He offers the idea that in a whole and healthy society people would not treat others the way they are treating them in his story. He articulates the social justice that is one of the major components of sustainability.

As the book continues, Steinbeck focuses more directly on the people and the exodus that is unfolding. Chapter nine describes the painful process that the families must undergo to rid themselves of the possessions they have built up around their lives. Emotions run high, memories surround every item that must be picked through, kept, discarded or sold. In detailed language, Steinbeck himself picks through the items piled high in the yards, describing each of them lovingly and telling the stories that each contain. "How can we live without our lives? How will

we know it's us without our past?" (118). This attention the shedding of the personal drives home the impact of cultural change on individual lives.

In chapter eleven, Steinbeck gives voice to the loneliness of the land and homes that are left behind when the people leave. He sets a dark tone of the desolate, empty landscape. "The houses were left vacant on the land, and the land was vacant because of this" (157). Steinbeck speaks to the interdependence of land and human and shows how the failures and success of our systems impact more than our individual lives. He alludes to the emptiness of an American value system that forces people from maintaining their deep relationship with the land. He warns us loudly and clearly that this is not a healthy situation.

As chapter fourteen opens the readers' sights are set on the west and on the trouble that is brewing in that Promised Land. Again, Steinbeck creates the framework for the narrative tension that his characters will face and that is paralleled in the social-political landscape of American politics. His character's struggles represent the growing dissatisfaction with the cultural, economic and environmental changes the country faces, both then and now. Steinbeck studied the American psyche and knew that men have a need to feed and care for themselves and their families and to also find good and meaningful work. Steinbeck builds upon this idea of the value and importance of the work ethic in chapter fifteen. In this chapter he weaves a new narrative into his overview and gives the reader a glimpse of a functioning American middle class. He alludes to the comfort and freedom that having steady work and financial security provides. This look into mainstream American society, in a roadside diner along the highway, unfolds outside the main drama of the Joads and offers a counterpoint to that harsh story. The waitress and cook, the truck drivers and customers, all travel the same road as the Joads, but the experiences of their lives are completely different. Apathetic, fearful, kind or helpful, they all react differently to

the hardships of their less fortunate fellow travelers. We see these same reactions today from the middle class toward the homeless and impoverished who fill the streets. Steinbeck reminds the reader that alongside our comfortable lives; others, migrating, homeless or disenfranchised families, face challenges and troubles that we may not fully understand.

Steinbeck recognition that interdependence is crucial to human society finds voice in chapter seventeen. Here the independent family units begin to blend into larger groups. They make alliances, bind together; support and help in each other through their common miseries. New relationships and structures are created; new rules define these emerging societies. One car finds a good camping spot and is soon joined by others until a small village forms and the nighttime camping rituals begin. Steinbeck says it simply, that “the worlds were built in the evening. The people, moving in from the highways, made them with their tent and their hearts and their brains” (267). He hints at the naturally occurring human relations that are an important component of society. Like nature, people need support systems to survive. Strength and resiliency comes in numbers and shared experiences.

Chapter nineteen introduces the reader to California and places the events of the 1930's within the context of history. Steinbeck understands the irony of a system where the current land owners, once the “horde of tattered feverish Americans [who] poured in” to that state (315), now resist the new immigrants that are coming to California. Farmers competing with one another in this new economy recreated the landscape from small, sustaining family farms to large monocropped, corporate businesses. This trend has continued throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century completely altering the types of crops grown on most American farms. Farming has become a major economic engine in America with profound impact on the economic, social and environmental state of this country. By chapter twenty one, Steinbeck's once proud mid-western

farmers are reduced to displaced migrant workers scouring the countryside for whatever meager work they can find. Human dignity is diminished as this mass immigration of workers forces down wages to below subsistence levels and the power and land ownership becomes concentrated in the hands of a few. Finally, even the land itself falls victim to greed.

In the final intercalary chapter, chapter twenty-five, Steinbeck returns once more to the land. This time that land is California; ripe and fertile, fragrant with fruit blossoms. Steinbeck describes the beauty of a landscape in harmony with mankind as he details the art and craft of caring for fruit trees and vineyards. Still he can not resist reminding the reader of the insidiousness of greed and unfettered commerce. People die of hunger while the cold-hearted landowners dump the harvest in the fields and douse it with kerosene. *The Grapes of Wrath* paints a brutal portrait of waste and hopelessness. The story ends with a depleted society, landscape and economic system. The redeeming values are found only in the connections between the people, forging relationships so that they might survive. The combined despair and hope that the story leaves us with girds us with the strength to reevaluate our choices and make better ones.

The intercalary chapters of *The Grapes of Wrath* paint a picture of a society heading down the wrong path. The underlying story told within *The Grapes of Wrath* is one of an exhaustion of systems; environmental systems exhausted by greed-based farming; economic frameworks exhausted by the cold heart of corporate commerce; social networks exhausted from the harsh reality that comes with struggling for subsistence. Steinbeck warns all of us, across time, of what can happen when greed replaces our connection to the earth and one another. The stories within *The Grapes of Wrath* can still be found today in the neglected inner cities, the underpaid migrant and undocumented workers from Central and South America, and citizens of the resource exploited countries around the world. Today, global economic, social and environmental

practices have forced millions from their homes and a new crisis of displacement, homelessness, and social collapse has emerged.

The intercalary chapters within Steinbeck's 1930's novel, *The Grapes of Wrath* illustrate the value and importance of literature on the global stage and again speak to society in a manner that can encourage a more sustainable and resilient response to modern challenges. As Lee Rozelle posits in his ecocritical treatise, *Ecosublime*, the use of the imagination and emotion in literature can move a reader to a new relationship with nature. "The ecological referent in literature...can be understood...so that sustainability...might be more effectively employed" (3). Reading *The Grapes of Wrath* can awaken us to the challenge that Steinbeck saw before his own society and inspire us, today, to change course toward a brighter, more sustainable future. Steinbeck's descriptions of the emerging practices in the social and business world prophetically describe today's economic and social realities. His pointed example of the Joads and their particular story in history cuts across the boundaries of time and place. He warns us to be careful with what we have.

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The Grapes of Wrath was published while the American Great Depression "in which the economy went into freefall, destroying lives and livelihoods" had the country fully in its grip. This historical backdrop without a doubt amplified the number of people who could directly relate to the destitution Steinbeck describes. Several notable books from this period include Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906), which was an exposé of the lives of low-wage immigrant workers in the meatpacking industry; and Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), which offered a photojournalistic account of life in New York City's miserable tenements. Additionally, events in *The Grapes of Wrath* are often parallels to biblical themes or occurrences, which adds gravity and universality to Steinbeck's work. *The Grapes of Wrath* has also been translated into nearly thirty languages. One way or another, it seems that Steinbeck's words continue in Warren French's apt phrase "the education of the heart." To execute *The Grapes of Wrath* he drew directly and indirectly on the jump-cut technique of John Dos Passos's U.S.A. trilogy (1938), the narrative tempo of Pare Lorentz's radio drama *Ecce Homo!* and the sequential, rapid-fire quality of Lorentz's documentary films *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936) and *The River* (1937). Steinbeck transformed these ancient, classical, and modern resources (especially biblical themes, parallels, analogies, and allusions) into his own kind of combinatory textual structure.