

Darek Thomas Sr.
Dr. Rees
History 412
November 17, 2018

Defining Westerns in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*

If one were to take the four principles of Western history laid out in Patricia Limerick's book *The Legacy of Conquest*, it would be hard to refute the claim that John Steinbeck's book *The Grapes of Wrath* is in every way a Western. Limerick claimed that continuity, convergence, conquest and complexity were all essential in Western history. This paper shall argue that these are all essential concepts in Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* as well. The continuity of the frontier, the convergence of various people, the conquest of land owners, and the complexity of the unfamiliar situation the Joads were thrust into, all place Steinbeck's book in what should be considered a "Western."

Turner may have closed the frontier in 1890; however, Limerick insisted that the frontier is an unstable concept with no clear indication of a beginning or an end.¹ Limerick did claim that the concept of frontier, itself, had a role in shaping the national consciousness. This is true for most of Western history, whether it be the cowboys and Indians of the Turner frontier, or the Joads and Okies epitomized in Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*. The West has always given people certain ideas about America. Sometimes these ideas are fruitful and help to create a better America i.e. the plight of migrant workers in the 1930's helping to push sweeping government reforms such as the New Deal; however, other times these ideas can be

¹ Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest*, (New York, Norton, 1987) 25.

destructive and destroy the lives of entire civilizations, i.e. the buffalo hunts of the 1860's.

This continuity of history is significant in Limerick's historical view of the American West.

Steinbeck, like Limerick, saw the American West as a continual shaping and reshaping of the frontier. "And then the dispossessed," Steinbeck wrote, "were drawn west from Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico; from Nevada and Arkansas families tribes dusted out, tracted out. Carloads, caravans, homeless and hungry; twenty thousand and fifty thousand and a hundred thousand and two hundred thousand."² The Joads and the rest of the displaced families headed West to California to replace the "imported slaves," as Steinbeck calls them, Mexican, Chinese, Japanese and Filipinos that the owners of the California farms had become distrustful of. This uneasiness, or distrust for migrants, has much to do with the fluidity of the frontier itself. "once California belonged to the Mexicans," Steinbeck wrote, "and a hoard of tattered feverish Americans poured in. And such was their hunger for land they took the land—stole Sutter's land, Guerrerros's land, took the grants and broke them up and growled and quarreled over them, those frantic hungry men; and they guarded with guns the land they had stolen."³

Stolen land and conquest would become cornerstones of Western culture. Patricia Limerick explained that, "Conquest was a literal, territorial form of economic growth."⁴ Steinbeck's Joads were the typical Western family be it Native American, Spanish, Mexican or Anglo-American they were all displaced by power and technology. The Natives, Spanish

² John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, (Penguin Books, New York, 1939), 233.

³ Ibid. 231.

⁴ Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest*, (New York, Norton, 1987) 28.

and Mexicans had their cowboys, colt 45's and howitzers, and in *The Grapes of Wrath* it was tractors, rich land owners, dust and the banks. "Pa borrowed money from the bank," Steinbeck wrote, "and now the bank wants the land. The land company—that's the bank, when it has land—wants tractors, not families on the land."⁵

Once displaced from their land the Joads were thrust into a series of subjugation, a series—no doubt—common to all western culture. In an article titled "Starvation Under the Orange Trees," Steinbeck better explained, "Faced with the question of starving or moving, the dispossessed families came west. 'To a certain extent they were actuated by advertisements and handbills distributed by labor contractors from California. It is to the advantage of the corporate farmer to have too much labor, for then wages can be cut.'"⁶ As aforementioned it was the custom of the rich land owners to pit the foreign migrants against each other; however, this all changed, and the American migrants became a temporary solution to an ever-existing problem.

The fact that the migrants were American did not fare them any better than the migrants that came before them. When they reached California, they were dehumanized and subjugated as well. "These goddamned Okies are thieves," Steinbeck wrote, "And the defending people [landowners] said, They bring disease, they're filthy. We can't have them in the schools. They're strangers. How'd you like to have your sister go out with one of 'em?"⁷ Steinbeck explained that, although the residents of California were displeased with the migrants, the

⁵John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, (Penguin Books, New York, 1939), 151.

⁶ John Steinbeck, "Starvation Under the Orange Tree" *Monterrey Trader*, 15 April 1938.

⁷ John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, (Penguin Books, New York, 1939), 283.

landowners were all too happy to have low wages and high profits. In fact, they liked the large influx so much so that they sent out another wave of handbills, bringing in more migrant families. Wages were low, and the landowners knew that the people would argue amongst themselves rather than turn in on them, if they were pit against each other. “S’pose a nickel’ll buy at leas’ sompin for them kids. An’ you got a hundred men. Jus’ offer ‘em a nickel—why, they’ll kill each other fightin’ for that nickel.”⁸ When all was said and done hundreds of thousands of migrants converged on California looking for work and opportunity.

This convergence of people was something unique to Western culture. From the early days of the Santa Fe and Oregon trails people have descended on the western frontier in search of hope and opportunity. “Tom,” Jim Casy, one of Steinbeck’s characters commented, “they’s hundreds a families like us all a-goin west. I watched. There ain’t none of ‘em goin’ east—hundreds of ‘em. Did you notice that?”⁹ The stagecoaches and beaten path of the early frontier may have been replaced with beat-up old trucks, jalopies and paved roads, however, the people and their movements were the same. “One man drove each truck,” Steinbeck wrote, “and his relief man slept in a bunk high up against the ceiling. But the trucks never stopped; they thundered day and night and the ground shook under their heavy march.”¹⁰ They moved, just as the migrants before them, as a single unit.

Understanding this coalition of cultures is necessary to understanding Western history. Limerick stated, “One of the skills essential to the writing of western American history is a

⁸ Ibid. 245.

⁹ Ibid. 173.

¹⁰ Ibid. 138.

capacity to deal with multiple points of view.”¹¹ Hundreds of thousands of people left the dustbowl for California, all with different backgrounds and different parts of speech.

“Everybody says words different,” said Ivy, in Steinbeck’s novel, “Arkansas folks says ‘em different, and Oklahomy folks says ‘em different. And we seen a lady from Massachusetts an’ she said ‘em differenest of all. Couldn’t hardly make what she was sayin’.”¹²

Understanding the complexity of the situation, in both *The Grapes of Wrath* and in Western culture is just as essential as understating the convergence of various cultures. Many people sought government relief against the backdrop of an individualistic culture. And even if government relief was awarded it was never satisfactory. In an article titled “California’s Grapes of Wrath,” Frank J. Taylor argued that Okies fared better in California than they did back in Oklahoma due to government relief. “Records of the FSA grant offices,” Taylor wrote, “indicate that many migrants earned under \$200 a year back home-or les than one third the relief allowance in California. Thus thousands of Okies, having discovered this comparative bonanza, urge their kinfolk to join them in California.”¹³

¹¹ Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest*, (New York, Norton, 1987), 39.

¹² John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, (Penguin Books, New York, 1939), 135.

¹³ Frank J. Taylor, “California’s Grapes of Wrath” Associated Farmers of Fresno County, 1939.