



THE GRAPES OF WRATH

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Westerns, set in the American West, these action-packed stories tend to take place in an isolated desert or beautiful mountain landscape. The main character of the tale is normally a tall, lean, handsome cowboy or gunfighter. The plots to the tales' range across multiple subjects. They all usually follow the good against evil scenario. Some are based off the construction of a railroad or telegraph line, an individual or family protecting their property, for example their family ranch, and revenge stories. All in all, the plot depicts a crime committed. Then, shows the pursuit of the wrongdoer, ending with revenge and retribution.

The novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, written by John Steinbeck, along with the animation of the movie directed by John Ford, do not fall under the category of a western when compared to the movie *Stagecoach*, also directed by John Ford. Yes, the story did take place in the West. The tale had its good guys and bad guys, with hardship along the way. But there never was just a villain and the outcome of the ending turnout to be very open. It never truly pointed out where or how the characters would end up, later on, down the road. The characters were not your average cowboys or gunslingers. Even the preacher within the story did not fit the mold. The story did not begin with an avenge story or tragedy. It may have begun with them fighting for their land but that was placed to give the reader an idea of where they started from. This novel was written instead to show, and to sway, Americans of the time to support and assist the migrants of the West. It is an American story, not just the Wests.

To begin, we'll cover one of the characters from the movie *Stagecoach*, Ringo the Kid. When thinking of a Western he is the perfect image of what the main character looks and acts like. He is a popular, tall, and lean gunslinger, with a past that will always follow him. He does

not judge and does good when he can. His journey begins with the murder of his father and brother, causing him to want revenge and creating the storyline for the movie.

Next, we'll talk about the main characters of the novel, the Joads, and how their tale began. They were a middle-class family of cotton pickers, who had lived in the Oklahoma dust bowl for generations. This land that they called home, had grown weak and tired from loss of nutrients within the soil. With this deficiency, the weather also took a toll on the land. From the wind, to the dust, to the crops, the profits for the farms were no more.¹ Though the Joads were trying to protect their land, they no longer had anything to protect. The lands were barren and they were barely getting by with the bank's assistance. They had nothing left to fall back on. The banks had found another way to make profit. As told by Steinbeck, "But—you see, a bank or a company can't do that. Because those creatures don't breathe air, don't eat side—meat. They breathe profits; they eat the interest on money. If they don't get it, they die the way you die without air, without side—meat. It is a sad thing, but it is so. It is just so."² This is the image of America throughout time, only the fittest survive. Steinbeck showed this through a farmer speaking with a tractor driver by stating, "Well, what you doing this kind of work for—against your own people?" "Three dollars a day. I got damn sick of creeping for my dinner—and not getting it. I got a wife and kids. We got to eat. Three dollars a day, and it comes every day."³

After the introduction into the storyline, many westerns would then move into a crime committed by a character, normally the villain of the tale. This can be seen in the beginning

¹ Pg. 2

² Pg. 32

³ Pg. 37

scenes of Stagecoach when Buck, the stage coach driver, is searching for his shotgun guard. Marshal Curly Wilcox informs him that the guard is off looking for the fugitive Ringo kid, who had broken out of prison after hearing that his father and brother had been murdered by Luke Plummer. But, *The Grapes of Wrath* novel did not. Instead it showed the path taken by the Joads after having lost all they ever had. Like many before and after them, the Joads packed up what they could and headed toward a better life. California is where it was at. Even though this novel took place in the west, it very easily could have gone to the east. Steinbeck explained through Ma Joad how they ended up going west because of a flyer that she had seen in the paper, stating that farms in California were needing pickers to pick grapes, oranges, and peaches for wages.⁴ Looking for a better life, the Joads pursued this dream the information described without knowing what was to come.

This leads into the next difference between the two movies. One that plays a role both in the dream of the West, but also is a key factor in the American dream. This difference was the things the characters chased. In the Stagecoach the characters seem to be running to or from people. For example, Marshal Curly is chasing Ringo and Ringo is chasing Luke Plummer. While in *The Grapes of Wrath*, the Joads are chasing after a dream, an impossible dream. To start again. To purchase new land, to begin again in a new place that is fertile and open to possibilities. To make a new life where hunger is gone, and hardship does not exist. The endlessness of opportunities. Then again, as phrased by Steinbeck, “But you can’t start. Only a baby can start. You and me—why, we’re all that’s been. The anger of the moment, the thousand

⁴ Pg. 90

pictures, that's us. This land, this red land, is us; and the flood years and the dust years and the drought years are us. We can't start again."⁵ But they did.

As both stories moved further west, the hardships of the groups increased. The stagecoach was robbed and then attacked by Indians, killing and injuring some of the party. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, members of their party begin to pass away as well. But their hardship goes much deeper. With every mile they saw more desperation, depression, and loneliness. The roads were lined with families searching for a place to stay. Food was scarce, and they had a budget to stick to. Work, with decent pay, was just as difficult to find. On top of all of this: racism, judgement, and frustrated locals seemed to surround them as they went. Steinbeck captured this in a discussion between two boys. "Well, you and me got sense. Them goddamn Okies got no sense and no feeling. They ain't human. A human being wouldn't live like they do. A human being couldn't stand to be so dirty and miserable. They ain't a hell of a lot better than gorillas."⁶ But even so, the family pushed on.

Then, like all stories, they each must come to an end. But it was in these endings, of these stories, that truly pulled them apart. The Stagecoach's ending was nothing of a surprise, if anything it was expected. As the Indians closed in on the stagecoach and its occupants. The cavalry soon arrived to save the day and take the passengers back to the town of Lordsburg. There Ringo was able to take his revenge and drive off into the sunset with the women he loved.

⁵ Pg. 87

⁶ Pg. 221

The ending for *The Grapes of Wrath* was a different tale. In fact, though the novel and the movie had its similarities, they ended up ending completely different from one another.

In the movie of *The Grapes of Wrath*, Tom Joad left his family on his own with his mother begging him not to go. He did this willingly to protect his family, and so he could follow what was in his heart. Trying to make the world a better place for not just his people, but for everyone. As the movie came to an end, the Joads family had packed up and was heading toward work in a new place. It showed the open road, giving a presence to an endless amount of possibilities and creating a feeling of hope for the family. That by giving a little, can go a long ways for someone else.

In the book of *The Grapes of Wrath*, Ma Joad sadly urges Tom to leave, for his secrets had been revealed. He agrees that he must go, but for a different reason. He leaves to fight for social justice. The fate of the Joad family is unknown, for the book did not end with any direction, giving a gut dropping, sinking feeling. Making you wish you somehow could have helped.

Though having different endings, there was one major similarity that the author Steinbeck pushed, and the director Ford kept. The idea of finding a way for all people to live out of hardship. They present this through Tom Joad. Written by Steinbeck, Tom Joad states, “I been thinkin’ how it was in that government camp, how our folks took care a theirselves, an’ if they was a fight they fixed it theirselves; an’ they wasn’t no cops wagglin’ their guns, but they was better order than them cops ever give. I been a-wonderin’ why we can’t do that all over. Throw out the

cops that ain't our people. All work together for our own thing—all farm our own lan'."7 They then pushed the subject through Tom Joad (also written by Steinbeck). "Then it don' matter. Then I'll be aroun' in the dark. I'll be ever'where—wherever you look. Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever they's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there."8 Both in the book and through the movie, they pushed the need to help one another, to be there for one another, and to not judge one another. To connect and united, not define and outcast. A Western would not show the main character, or the hero, through this. For the cowboy or gunslinger would not have this dilemma. They would have a plan or a way to fix the problem at hand. Except this problem was not just an owed bill, evil person, or payback. It was a bigger problem that existed throughout America. And these men wanted the world to see it.

Westerns, action-packed stories with heroes and villains, cowboys and gunfights. The plots range across deserts and mountains. Involving crimes, pursuits, and revenge. This describes the John Ford movie *Stagecoach*, because it has a handsome cowboy with a vendetta, who is searching for revenge. But this definition does not define the novel, or the movie, *The Grapes of Wrath*.

⁷ Pg. 419

⁸ Pg. 419