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Westerns are a uniquely American creation in literature and film. *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck is also a truly unique work of American literature and history. They are not the same genre, however, even though they have some overlapping themes. When one thinks of Westerns, one calls to mind the cowboy, gunslinger drawing a six-shooter at high noon to end his foe. Or the farmer turned outlaw to exact his revenge on behalf of his murdered family. When reading *The Grapes of Wrath*, none of this comes to mind. This story cannot be called a Western.

Many Westerns are set in a timeframe that most Americans would consider more historical than modern. Here too *The Grapes of Wrath* sets itself apart from the Western genre. It is set in the 1930s during both the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl. Even the technology, in the form of tractors, used to push the crop sharers off the land is far more advanced than anything in a typical Western. Literary themes can be transcendent of genres but does not combine them. The Joads took about two weeks or so to reach California from Oklahoma which if done by horse or wagon train would have taken months. Travelers in the old west would have faced much more severe odds to reach the land of opportunity they sought and often under direct threat of attack by the natives of any given region. The Joads and those they represented faced fairly simple trials by comparison. When Grampa Joad dies, and they receive help from the Wilsons during and after the death they repay that in kind by helping to fix the Wilsons' car and sharing

the burden of travel. Steinbeck wrote, "Thus it might be that one family camped near a spring, and another camped for the spring and for company, and a third because two families had pioneered the place and found it good. And when the sun went down, perhaps twenty families and twenty cars were there." (Steinbeck 193) In typical Western there wouldn't be help for days, weeks, or even months. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, help was another family away, and since there was a mass migration going on there were thousands of families who would hold each other up and push each other forward. There were roads already for them to travel on and places able, if not willing, to receive them in California. The times were drastically different as well as the technology used to pursue their goals. *The Grapes of Wrath* is a modern story, a part of modern history, survivors of which are still alive today. That difference in era is a big enough one to remove Steinbeck's novel from the realm of Western, though they share many themes.

The search for opportunity in the West, the desire for a better life, the willingness to brave danger and death; all of these themes can be found in many Westerns as well as *The Grapes of Wrath*. They can also be found in other genres that speak of Western Civilization, such as when the Pilgrims came to the New World. These themes do not define their stories, but they do play a part in them. The problem is that the themes in Westerns can be more easily molded to that genre without altering it. In *The Grapes of Wrath* these themes set it further apart. Tom Joad filled the justified outlaw build of a character but that's where similarity ends. Whether it was his character or the way Steinbeck writes it all, Tom Joad was not an empathetic character in that it was hard to get on his side of things most of the time. Ma Joad is the only one that could be considered a truly Western character but she can't carry the rest of them. Steinbeck paints a biased picture of authority figures in *The Grapes of Wrath* and their abuse of power. This appeal

to the rebelliousness found in other Westerns translates differently when attempted on a grander scale and in completely different circumstances. Portraying the land owners as greedy and corrupt because they behave in a way that is offensive to the “Okies” sets up a strawman that is never actually seen. Typical Westerns have a tangible enemy to be defeated, be it corrupt agents of the government, local or otherwise, or a band of renegades or murderous Indians that must be hunted down and confronted. *The Grapes of Wrath* has some tangible enemies in the various police officers and sheriff’s deputies but also the ambiguous “land owners.” The problem with this particular boogeyman is that when the Joads meet actual land owners they’re decent people just trying to survive. They then pass the buck up to The Farmer’s Association or some other unseen force. The owner of the last cotton farm the Joads go to said of declining wages, “Sure. I know. Little fella like me can’t do anything. The Association sets the rate, and we got to mind. If we don’t-we ain’t got a farm. Little fella gets crowded out all the time.” (Steinbeck 421) Then there’s the theme of benevolent big government. The nicest and most welcoming place the Joads stay is at the government camp. Many Westerns shun government intervention or outright make it dastardly. Steinbeck takes his novel in quite the opposite direction, embracing big government as a friend and ally of the protagonists. The character Casy leaves preaching because he won’t stop sleeping around and because he rationalizes sin as normal. It’s an anti-Western view of a man of the cloth.

The relative morality that is first exposed through Casy pervades the novel. Many Westerns have a cut and dry view of right and wrong and deal with it accordingly. *The Grapes of Wrath* approaches morality in a more relative but practical way. The preacher, Casy rationalizes

sin in his past but still distinguishes between the rights and wrongs of the abuses against the migrant workers.