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Western History

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The Grapes of Wrath

This is a wonderful novel about a family who is running away from a natural disaster called The Oklahoma dust bowl. The dust, depression, and the land owners have chased the family off their land. There is a depression happening and wages are few or none. Having lived all their lives on the same land as share croppers, this is devastating for the Joad family, they only have a few hundred dollars in their pocket. This paper will explain why this book is a traditional western. Life is not easy on the road; many perils happen to the Joads.

The book starts with Tom Joad walking down a dusty road toward his family's farm. He has just been paroled from prison where he was serving time for man-slaughter. He had gotten in a fight in a bar and killed a man with a shovel.¹ While on his way he meets up with the local preacher who says he has quit preaching, because there were too many women and not enough time.² The two men decide to walk together and head out to find the Joad place. When they finally arrive, they find that the family is missing, and the house has been damaged.³ While Tom

¹ John Steinbeck. *The Grapes of Wrath*. Penguin Group (USA) Inc. New York. 1939. 17

² Steinbeck 21

³ Steinbeck 41

is looking around a neighbor happens up and tells Tom that the family has moved to his uncle's house.⁴ This is like a scene in the movie Stagecoach, starring John Wayne.

John Wayne has just been released from prison and his horse has died. He is walking along a dusty road he does not know where home is, but any place is as good as another. He meets up with a stagecoach and the sheriff who arrested him. The stagecoach is filled with people from the last town Wayne lived in before going to jail. The local doctor who has fallen from grace due to alcohol, a prostitute who has been ran from town by the local ladies, a banker who has stolen money from his bank, a woman who is meeting her husband who is in the Calvary, and a gambler who just felt it was time to move on.⁵

Flashback to the Joads, the family has been living with the uncle, planning for a move to California. They have bought an old car and cut the back off to make it a truck, the men have built sides on the back, so it will hold the possessions they are carrying on the trip. After Tom arrives, they sell all their things they cannot fit on the truck and kill two hogs for food for the trip. They load the back with mattresses, cooking utensils, two barrels of salt-pork, and most of the family, beside the driver are two people.⁶ They set off for California, the land of plenty, jobs, and little white houses. They know there are jobs because Ole Tom, Tom's dad has a flyer that says there are. This is like the people who left the crowded east for land in the west, they loaded covered wagons.⁷

Patricia Nelson Limerick tells us about the life of the pioneer, they left the crowded east to head west toward the promised land. These people loaded all they could on a covered wagon and headed west. They had only hope, and a promise of a better life. The pioneers met many nice and

⁴ Steinbeck 44

⁵ Stagecoach the Movie, stars John Wayne

⁶ Steinbeck 70

⁷ Steinbeck 74

many not so nice people along the way. Somehow, they all became family, they helped each other get through the hardships.⁸

As the Joads moved west they met a lot of wonderful people, people who help bury Grandpa Joad. People who shared their food as little as they had. When the family got closer to California, they stayed in a camp sight that was set up next to a river. The men went swimming while the women cooked supper. A policeman stopped to see who was camped at the sight, and told Mama Joad that they had to be on their way before dark. The family sets off for the next Hooverville along the way.⁹ Mama Joad was the backbone of this family, she was tough enough to take on a county sheriff, calm when she had to prepare Grampa for burial, and took part in any plans or decisions the family had to make.¹⁰ Limerick say's that the western women were a lot like Mama Joad. These women took advantage of the Homestead Act, this act gave spinsters and widows the right to own land. The women worked just like the men and raised children, cooked, planted gardens and did all the paper work involved in running a farm.¹¹In the movie Stagecoach the lady is pregnant and delivers the baby in the stagecoach stop. The prostitute delivers it, with the help of the drunk doctor.¹²

The family is tired and looking for a place to camp, they see a lot of tents along the roadside and stop to see if they can camp. The first person they talk to will give them no information, the second man they see explains to Tom and Pa that the place is called Hooverville, a name the locals gave these camp sites. This is the time of the New Deal, and the Hoover administration, the government is battling a depression and trying to help the poor people of this great nation.

⁸ Patricia Nelson Limerick. *The Legacy of Conquest*. W.W. Norton & Company. New York. 1987. 28

⁹ Steinbeck 139

¹⁰ Steinbeck 127

¹¹ Limerick 53

¹² Stagecoach

The young man explains to Tom that, “everyone in the camp is looking for work, the grapes aren’t ready or the cotton, there is no work here. He say’s that if the immigrants stay in one place to long, they get a visit from the police, and are told to move on.” The police say that the camps are unsanitary, and breed disease and are not wanted in their town unless they are needed to pick the produce. The land owners send out three thousand flyers and they only need a thousand pickers. They can pay any amount they want, because there are two thousand men waiting for that job. When the fruit is picked, they want the pickers to move on.¹³ Limerick writes, “the west was structured by the drawing of boundaries. From macrocosm to macrocosm, from imperial struggles for territory to parceling out of townsite claims, Western American history was an effort first to draw lines dividing the West into manageable units of property and to persuade people to treat those lines with respect.”¹⁴

Later that evening a man showed up at the Hooverville asking if any of the men want work. One man named Floyd speaks up and tells the man they all want work, if the man will tell him how much they are paying. The land owners can pay what they want from one day to the next. A fight breaks out and Tom Joad hits a deputy.¹⁵ The family decides to move on to keep Tom out of jail, they loaded the truck and head out looking for the government camp. They arrive, and the guard tells them that it cost a dollar a day that can be worked off by helping to keep the place clean. When they reach their camp sight to their amazement there is running water, showers, and flush toilets. Tom finds out that the local police are not allowed in this camp, the people are in charge. The camp has dances, and a committee to set the rules. Life will be quite different for the Joads while they are here.¹⁶ The next morning the kids go exploring and find the bath house, the

¹³ Steinbeck 246

¹⁴ Limerick 55

¹⁵ Steinbeck 263

¹⁶ Steinbeck 286

boy flushes the toilet and thinks he has broken it. When Mama Joad sees the showers, she must try one, it is so wonderful she showers every day. Tom gets a job the first day, the family will eat for a while.¹⁷ Tom's job does not last long, and the family is out of money, Ma looks at the kids and decides that it is time to move on. Tom has heard about an orchard that needs pickers, so the family leaves the running water, hot showers, and flush toilets, for a chance of getting work. When they arrive at the orchard, they find it surrounded by police and a lot of people looking for work. The guard asks if they can all work and says no bruised fruit and five cents a box. They ask if they will get paid at the end of the day, the man says no but they can get credit at the company store. To get food they use the credit and then owe what they make to the store. They wind up owing their soul to the company store. Tom gets involved in a strike, and gets his face smashed in, over better wages and the family must move on.¹⁸

In order to keep Tom out of sight until his face heals the family takes work picking cotton. There are twelve railroad cars, six in a row just off the cotton field.¹⁹ Tom decides to hide out in a brush thicket, Mama Joad will take him food each day and leave it in a culvert not far from the thicket.²⁰ The family is making three fifty a day in the cotton fields, so everyone is eating, and they have a roof over their heads.²¹ Things go fine for a while until the rains come, it rains for several days and a flood occurs. The railroad cars are on the river bank and soon get flooded out. The men try to build a bank at the back of the railroad cars to no avail.²² The family had to move to higher ground and end up in somebody's barn. In the barn is a man that is starving, the Joads

¹⁷ Steinbeck 301

¹⁸ Steinbeck 373

¹⁹ Steinbeck 408

²⁰ Steinbeck 406

²¹ Steinbeck 410

²² Steinbeck 429

oldest girl has just given birth to a still-born baby, she lays down beside the man and tells him to nurse, this is survival.²³

The Joad family has always fought for survival. Ole Tom borrowed money from the bank and could not pay it back, the bank took possession of their land, now they are share croppers. They get a share of the yield each year. The dust storms have stopped the yield, and the family has been told to move. The dust storms were not just natural disaster, they were caused by over planting the fields with the same crop. All the nutrients have been drawn from the soil, leaving only dust. These storms covered several states, Steinbeck choose Oklahoma to write his book.

The Joads decide to head west because the east coast is already overcrowded, and the flyers say there is work in California. The pioneers headed west because of the overcrowding in the east. Humans always seem to dream about owning their own home, and prosperity, the Joads were no exception. California was their promise land, the answer to a dream. They head out in an overloaded truck, and only a few dollars in their pockets. They lose grandpa and grandma along the way, they bury them themselves and just move on. A lot of the western pioneers buried loved ones in the prairie and the dessert. They just buried them and went on their way, they had no choice.

The Joads ran into class prejudice in a huge way in California. The landowners only wanted them to gather the yield of the field or orchard. The local people did not want them because they were different. Class prejudice is the worst natural disaster that can happen to a race of working-class people. If the land owners had made sure the people had a living wage, and the locals had welcomed them they would have survived. All the human race really wants is to survive.

²³ Steinbeck 454

