

**WOLFNOTE SUMMARY OF...**

**JOHN STEINBECK'S  
GRAPES OF WRATH**



**CONTEXT**

Tom Joad is paroled from the State Penitentiary after serving four years for manslaughter having killed a man in self-defense.

He returns to Oklahoma in the midst of the Depression to find the land and crops wasted by a prolonged drought.

He meets Jim Casy, a former preacher at Tom's church when he was a child.

Casy explains that he no longer has the calling to be a preacher, although he still believes in the Holy Spirit, which for him is love. He maintains that all people are holy, everyone being a small part of the whole soul, which is mankind. Tom and Casy walk back to the Joad's farm.

They find it abandoned having been 'tractored' by the bank, which was standard practice when land was repossessed.

They meet one of Joad's neighbors Muley Graves who tells them that the family has moved to their Uncle John's home and they are preparing to leave for California to find work.

The next day Tom and Casy arrive at Uncle John's to find the family busy packing their belongings in preparation for the long trek to California. Casy asks if he can travel with them, and they agree. They sell their valued possessions for a meager return of funds, but this is needed in order to purchase food for the journey.

All are keen to make the journey and leave the Oklahoma Dustbowl, apart from Grampa who wants to stay and live off the land. The family finds it necessary to spike Grampa's coffee in order to get him onto the truck. The roads out of Oklahoma are full of migrant farmers seeking a new life in the West.

They come across the Wilson family whose car has broken down and they offer to help. The Wilson's say that Grampa can use their tent, as he has not fully recovered from the drug he had been given. Grampa has a stroke and dies.

Tom and his brother Al fix the Wilson's car and the two families set off together.

However, their car breaks down again and the families are forced to stop. Granma's health deteriorates and Tom suggests that they should split up, but Ma refuses to allow this. She is becoming the foundation of the whole family.

They approach the desert bordering California and Sairy Wilson is ill with cancer as well and is unable to continue.

The Joad's make their own way across the California desert at night, but Ma knows that Granma will not survive much longer. They cannot stop in the desert even although Granma has died and when they eventually climb out of the desert May tells the family that Granma is dead. The family has no money to bury her properly and they leave her body with the coroner.

The Joad's stop at the first camp they come to which is poorly run and squalid comprising of tents and makeshift shelters.

One of the young men from the camp, Floyd Knowles, is trying to obtain a contract in writing concerning the wage they have been offered to pick crops. The police are called in who accuse Floyd of being a troublemaker. Tom trips up one of the cops and Casy kicks him. Casy takes the blame for the argument as Tom is still on parole. Casy is arrested.

The Joad's travel on and eventually arrive at a Government-run camp where the community governs itself electing committees and taking responsibility for sanitation, discipline and entertainment. For a few weeks the Joad's are comfortable, but they are still not able to find regular work and they must move on again.

They hear that there is work, picking peaches in Tulare. When they arrive there is much unrest in the town and there is a large group of men shouting and waving at the newcomers. At the camp they are told that they will be paid 5 cents a box if the whole family works. This is barely sufficient to feed the whole family. After the first day's picking, Tom wanders out of the camp and meets up with Jim Casy. Jim advised Tom that the owners only want to pay 2 ½ cents a box and that he is leading a strike against the landowners. Tom is annoyed to learn that he is in fact strikebreaking. The police surprise the group of men and without provocation Casy is hit on the head and killed. Tom retaliates by killing the policeman who had killed Jim. Tom manages to escape, but he receives a broken nose for his trouble and has to hide to avoid detection.

Tom has become a fugitive until his scarred face and broken nose heal.

The Joad's decide to flee the peach ranch and they manage to find work, picking cotton and they share a boxcar with the Wainwright family. Tom hides in a nearby cave and Ma brings him food on a regular basis.

One day, Ruthie, Tom's younger sister becomes involved in a fight with another child and she lets it slip that her big brother is hiding because he has killed two men.

Ma warns Tom who leaves for his own safety with a plan to carry on the work that Jim Casy had begun.

Al gets engaged to Agnes Wainwright and the two families have a brief celebration.

Heavy rains descend on the area making it impossible to pick cotton and the water levels start to rise. The men try to build a dam to stop the water flooding the boxcar and Rose of Sharon, another sister of Tom goes into labor and gives birth to a stillborn child.

The Joad's abandon the boxcar in favor of higher ground and they find an old barn already occupied by a young boy and his starving father. The father has not eaten in six days and is unable to keep down solid food.

Rose of Sharon offers him the breast milk no longer needed for her own child. The others leave as she cradles the dying man to her breast.

## The Author

**John Steinbeck** was born on 27<sup>th</sup> February 1902 in Salinas, California to a well-established miller and local politician and his mother who was a schoolteacher.

Mainly encouraged by his mother, John Steinbeck always had the ambition to be a writer. His mother influenced the young Steinbeck providing a good selection of books for him to read.

He loved the great outdoors and would rather walk in the countryside than concentrate on his schoolwork.

He soon had articles published in his High School paper and later in the Student paper at Stanford University. His studies often took a back seat to his work, which he took on in order to obtain an understanding of the common man. He worked on ranches, in factories, on construction sites and was even part of a road building gang. After five years of interrupted study he left Stanford without a Degree.

He traveled to New York in 1925 to see if he could make a living as a writer. His first novel was on a historical subject entitled 'Cup of Gold' and this was published in 1929 just two months before the stock market crash which was bad timing for the burgeoning author.

He eloped with a local girl named Carol Henning and with his father's help was able to set up home in the small community of Pacific Grove. Here Steinbeck met Ed Ricketts who was to become a lifelong friend and great influence on his life and work. They would have lengthy discussions on the philosophies of life, which would enable him to produce future successful novels.

It wasn't until 1934 that he achieved national recognition when his short story 'The Murder' was published and received the O. Henry Prize. The novel was popular enough for him to sell the movie rights for \$3,000, which was a good sum of money at that time. With further inspiration from Ed Ricketts he wrote 'In Dubious Battle' a powerful study of a labor strike, which stirred up considerable controversy and was published in 1936.

He also finished several short stories and was commissioned to write a series of articles for the San Francisco News about the conditions in California migrant worker camps. These were later gathered together under the title 'Their Blood was Strong' and published in pamphlet form in 1936. This would form the foundation of his novel 'The Grapes of Wrath'.

Steinbeck became an international celebrity with the publication of 'Of Mice and Men' in 1937 which became a best seller on both sides of the Atlantic.

Although enjoying huge success both financially and critically, Steinbeck remained a man of the people. He continued to base his writing on actual experiences, often living and working among the very people he would write about.

'Of Mice and Men' opened on Broadway, but Steinbeck was not there to see it as he was in a squatters' camp with a group of migrants with whom he had traveled from Oklahoma.

'The Grapes of Wrath' was published in 1939 immediately causing intense controversy and it became the top selling novel of that year, winning the Pulitzer Prize and the American Booksellers' Award. Steinbeck was elected as a member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters. A movie version of the novel was filmed shortly after and received international accolades.

It is not clear the extent of Steinbeck's income at that time, but his first wife received a settlement of \$220,000 when suing for divorce.

Steinbeck remained a prolific writer during the war years, being commissioned to publish such books as 'Bombs Away' for the Army and Air Force.

He married for the second time Gwyn Verdon, but this only lasted a few years and he was divorced in 1948.

He also lost his closest friend, Ed Ricketts, in an automobile accident in that year.

In 1950 he married for the third time Elaine Scott and this seemed to invigorate Steinbeck and he began work on a new novel called 'East of Eden' which was published in 1952.

In 1961 he published a further book 'The Winter of our Discontent' and in 1962 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Always being happiest on the road, in 1961 he went on a trek with an elderly poodle named Charlie and his adventures are recorded in his last work 'Travels with Charlie'.

He died on 20<sup>th</sup> December 1968 after a glittering literary career.

## **Main Characters**

### **Tom Joad**

He is the novel's main character. The book follows Tom's growth from hardened ex-convict to a humane man who cares for those around him.

### **Jim Casy**

He was Tom's former preacher who had lost his calling, but still believed that all men were holy. His theory was that there was one big soul, which represented mankind, and every person was a small part of the whole. He is Steinbeck's mouthpiece providing a vehicle for the author's views on life and the inadequacies of the rich landowners. He traveled with the Joad's to California trying to represent those that were oppressed.

### **Ma Joad**

She is the foundation of the Joad family, strong-willed and determined to make the trek to California as a complete family unit. She has an infinite capacity to love both her family and those that they come in contact with.

### **Pa Joad**

He was the head of the family, but is unable to come to terms with the destruction of his world in Oklahoma. His position slowly declines and Ma is the one that takes over the running of the family making all the major decisions.

### **Rose of Sharon**

The eldest daughter, she is married to Connie Rivers and is pregnant. She is preoccupied by her pregnancy and often escapes into a dream world in order to block out the harsh surroundings in which she finds herself. On the birth of her stillborn child she suddenly loses her immaturity and is finally represented as a life-giving force.

### **Muley Graves**

One of the Joad's' neighbors in Oklahoma he too has been 'tractored' off his land. He has stayed behind after his family left for California and he is an illustration of the loss suffered by those that have been driven away.

### **The Wainwrights**

They share the boxcar with the Joad's when they are all involved in cotton-picking. Their co-operation with each other is an example of the strength that the migrant communities had arising from their common need. This also happened with the Wilson family earlier in the book. Their 16 year-old daughter becomes engaged to Al Joad

## **Chapters 1 – 4**

### **Summary**

Tom Joad released from McAlester State Penitentiary after serving four years for manslaughter returns to a barren Oklahoma barely recognizable to him. There has been a prolonged drought and the crops have failed and turned to dust and have been blown away together with the topsoil to form a desert land. This area was to be known as the Dustbowl. The farmers wear handkerchiefs over their mouths and noses in order to breathe. An air of doom and gloom is everywhere as those who live off the land watch helplessly as their livelihood is blown away in the endless wind.

Dressed in a cheap suit Tom hitches a ride with a trucker he met at a roadside rest. Tom is going back to his father's farm and the driver is surprised that the Joad's have not been driven off their property by the 'cat'. This is a slang word for a large bulldozer, which is sent in by the landowners via the bankers as agents to force the destitute farmers off their property in pursuance of the foreclosure.

The truck stops at the road leading to Joad's farm and Tom gets out. He spots a turtle at the side of the road and decides that he will take this with him to give to a child. This turtle has made the perilous journey across the road where cars have veered to avoid it and truckers have failed to squash it.

Close by is a man sitting under a tree and Tom recognizes him as Jim Casy who used to preach in Tom's church when he was a boy. Casy tells Tom that he has lost his calling to be a preacher mainly due to a sexual affair he had with a young woman in the congregation. He believes he can still do God's work by being among his fellow man, which is a Holy vocation in its own way.

Tom has not seen his family in years since his imprisonment. He was stabbed by a man and retaliated by hitting him with a shovel and killing him. Prison was secure for Tom in so much as he got good food and a bath every day.

When they arrive at the farm they realize that it is deserted.

### **Interpretation**

Steinbeck chose this subject for the *Grapes of Wrath* because he felt it was important to tell the tale of the Dustbowl and its victims and this is the main theme throughout the novel. This severe act of nature, the drought, the wind and the loss of crops with their topsoil have forced the farmers to migrate from certain starvation to an unknown future elsewhere. The story is a mix of plot narration and almost documentary fact telling of the historical and social factors in 1930's Oklahoma and the fruit and cotton fields of California. So we follow the Joad family through various traumas and also get an insight into the bigger picture of mass migration. The book is full of emotion and Steinbeck provides a sensitive touch through the description of the characters and their misfortunes. This is against the background of the dirty, squalid and unpleasant existence they have to endure.

Steinbeck sometimes goes over the top in sentimentalizing the sometimes too good to be true characters. He has them portrayed as heroes in an attempt to rouse the reader's sympathy for the Joad family.

Grampa Joad may be dirty and uneducated, but he is nevertheless a charming hot-tempered man designed to delight the reader. Tom's position allows him to make admirable moral growth throughout the story. Jim Casy is designed to be the mouthpiece for Steinbeck in relation to moral themes.

Ma Joad is the foundation stone giving strength to her men folk and comfort to the women and children in her family and friends.

Their speech is written in a thick farmer's dialect, which seems unflattering. As a result when it was first published it did not receive a good reception from the Oklahoma State. They resented the portrayal of them being slow-witted hicks plagued by ignorance and poverty.

Such criticism failed to see below this fascia where it can be seen that Steinbeck makes the farmers to be admirable, heroic victims of a malicious world.

There is good symbolism throughout the novel. The reference to the turtle that crosses a dangerous road slowly and with great effort only to fail and then be picked up to try again symbolizes the farmers who must do the same, battling against their malevolent environment.

Our hero, Tom, is clearly a good guy who has had the misfortune of being harshly dealt with by the establishment, having to serve four years in jail for merely an act of self-defense.

Casy, on the other hand, is clearly Steinbeck's mouthpiece for the main moral themes of the novel, which are the righteousness of people, the virtue of their inequality and the common purpose of all moral endeavors.

### **Chapters 5 – 9**

#### **Summary**

The repossession of the farms by the banks is normally a standard procedure. Despite the farmers' pleas that they have no place to go, or that the crops will be better next year, once the machine is in motion there is no stopping it, no reprieve. They are given Notice to Quit and on the appointed day, a giant tractor is sent to plough a line across the land often right through the farmhouse. A neighbor usually drives the tractor for a few dollars. The farmers are livid. They want to take revenge on anybody, but the banks are impersonal and they cannot find anyone to blame.

Tom notices that his farmhouse is strangely untouched although part has been crushed, but there has been no looting which indicates that the surrounding farms must be deserted as well.

They meet Muley Graves who is rummaging about the farm looking for food. He tells him that the Joads have all moved in with Tom's Uncle John and they are currently picking cotton in order to earn enough money to buy a car so that they can go to California.

Apparently a large Company has bought all the land in the area forcing the tenant farmers out. Muley explains that his own family has already been forced off the land and he has decided to fend for himself and shares a rabbit with Tom and Casy.

The headlights of a police car approach and despite Tom's reluctance about trespassing on his own farm he is persuaded to move away to Muley's cave where they sleep for the night. Tom sleeps in the open air rather than in the confined space of the cave.

Throughout the area farmers are trying to purchase cars from used car salesmen so that they can migrate to California. They charge exorbitant prices for clapped-out cars imposing high rates of interest for those that can't purchase them straight away.

Tom is reunited with his family who are Pa Joad, who is working on their 'new car', Ma Joad who is in the kitchen, his grandparents, his slow-moving brother Noah, his younger brother Al who knows a bit about repairing cars. He learns that his two youngest sisters, Ruthie and Winfield are in town with Uncle John and that Rose of Sharon; another sister is married to Connie and is expecting a child.

His parents worry that he has broken out of jail, but he explains that he has been paroled. They tell him that they are about to leave for California. Ma Joad is worried that Tom has turned out cruel and insane due to his stay in prison, but he assures them that he is fine.

The tenant farmers prepare for the journey to California initiated by the spread of handbills by California landowners promising work in the West.

In order to make the trip, the farmers are forced to pawn all their belongings for a mere handful of change, but everything must be sold before the family can leave for California.

### **Interpretation**

These chapters give more depth to the hopeless position that the farmers find themselves in. Forced to migrate to California because the life they have known has been blown away with the crops and dust, their homes leveled and the land repossessed by the new owners via the bank. A pack of vultures pick over the corpse that are the farmers of the Dustbowl, selling them clapped-out cars from used car lots for all of their money and giving them small change for their valued possessions.

The farmers are at the mercy of a vindictive world and they have no allies, no choices and no hope.

Steinbeck goes into great detail concerning our hero Tom, now reunited with his large, eccentric, jinxed but loveable family who are the main characters of the book. So that the reader can immediately relate and sympathize with the numerous players they all have specific characteristics -

Grampa's mischievousness, Granma's devoutness, Ma Joad's inner strength and love, and Al's boyishness and hero-worship of his older brother Tom.

The characters may be standard and found in many different walks of life, but these live in a confusing, harsh world and Steinbeck does nothing to shield the reader from that fact.

### **Chapters 10 – 15**

#### **Summary**

Tom and Ma discuss the trip to California, in particular the handbills advertising work, and hope that it will be a wonderful place. Pa returns with just \$18 in exchange for all their valuables. He is very depressed. They decide that Casy can come with them and they make preparations to leave. They have managed to gather together a fair amount of meat, which they salt in order to preserve it for the journey. Casy insists in helping Ma with this work although she thinks it is women's work.

At first, Grampa wants to stay and live off the land like Muley so Ma decides to drug him so that they can load him onto the truck unconscious.

The land soon becomes empty, devoid of people as the migration gets under way, their empty houses damaged by the tractors will soon fall and decay into dust.

Long lines of cars and trucks crawl along Highway 66, a human procession of misery and despair. All along the way are more vultures ready to prey on them, charging high prices for spare parts for their vehicles.

They stop at a service station where Al argues with the attendant who accuses them of trying to avoid paying for gas. In the confusion their dog runs out onto the road and is hit by a car and dies most gruesomely. The attendant, feeling somewhat guilty, offers to bury the dog, but Rose of Sharon takes this as a bad omen for her unborn child.

On the road they meet a couple called the Wilson's, whose car has broken down, and they agree to stop and help them. Grampa has never really regained full consciousness from his drug and whimpers. They take him to the cool of Wilson's tent where he later has a stroke and dies.

The Joad's have no alternative but to bury Grampa's body without advising the authorities, which is illegal.

The Wilson's agree to travel with the Joad's to California.

The people of California do not understand what has happened in the mid-west Dustbowl and they view the flow of migrant farmers with disdain. All along the road camps spring up and the citizens of the western states are frightened concerning this invasion.

However, at a coffee shop, a waitress named Mae and her husband show kindness to a man who says he only has a single dime to feed his entire family and asks for water and a loaf of bread. He is told that this is not enough and is given more bread and some candy, for far beneath the normal price. Two truck drivers who observe the scene leave a large tip for the kind-hearted couple.

### **Interpretation**

We are obtaining a real picture of the plight of these mid-west farmers in particular the Joad family. They have no choice but to try and seek a new life in the West and to throw themselves at the mercy of others. So far everyone outside of their own communities has exploited them. There are kind people who do help. Steinbeck's description of the coffee shop scene being an example.

Fleeing refugees from a disaster whether it is war or famine all look the same – a long line of cars and trucks ferrying people and possessions.

The first tragedy hits our family when Grampa dies after never fully regaining consciousness from being given his spiked coffee. He had requested living off the land with Muley, but like the land he is now dead.

The Joad's invite the Wilson's to join them hoping that there will be greater strength in numbers, as a problem shared is a problem halved, so they are forming their own traveling community.

They get into the habit of performing acts of kindness to each other, which again strengthens the bonds between them all.

The Wilson's are merely the first people with whom this relationship takes place and this will be an important feature of their survival.

### **Chapters 16 – 20**

#### **Summary**

Granma's health now worsens after Grampa's death.

The Wilson's car breaks down again and Tom and Casy suggest they stay behind to try and fix it, but Ma Joad refuses to split the family up. Instead the whole family waits together while Tom and Al go to the nearest town to find parts for the car. Al idolizes his brother and wants him to tell about his life in prison, but Tom wishes to keep this private.

They arrive at a crowded camp where the main conversation of course is about the work to be had in California. One of the men says that the wealthy farmers needed around 800 workers so they thought that printing 5,000 handbills would provide them with enough labor. Instead, 20,000 are going to California looking for these few hundred jobs.

The man says that his family starved to death because there was no work for them and this worried Pa, but he may be just telling lies to put people off going.

These traveling communities were like the first pioneers who opened up the West. After the hot days of traveling they would sit around their campfires discussing mutual acquaintances, family histories, the state of the local water and singing songs.

At the border of Arizona guards tell them stories about how the migrant farmers are being treated cruelly in California. The farmers are given the derisive nickname 'okies'.

The Joad family is fast running out of money. Granma is near death and Sairy Wilson is dying of cancer.

Noah leaves the family telling Tom that he knows his parents do not love him as much as the other children.

They are now at the edge of the desert and must prepare for this arduous crossing. They are getting short of supplies and money and have no option but to go forward. Although Granma and Sairy are too sick to travel, they cannot stop so they start the trip while Rose of Sharon and Connie lie in the back of the truck and make love.

They eventually reach the lush pastures of western California where Ma informs the rest of the family that Granma is dead. They leave Granma's body at the Coroner's Office and go to a large dirty camp full of hungry families.

One of the young men Floyd Knowles encourages Tom to act stupid when they encounter the police. In this way the police will think he is an unthreatening idiot. The man tells Tom that there are no jobs and he wonders why the men don't organize the labor force against the landowners. Floyd says anyone seen to be causing trouble by the police who works for the rich landowners will be dragged away to prison.

Casy and Tom have a long discussion concerning the injustice being suffered by the migrant farmers and that there is nobody in authority to assist them.

Connie becomes frustrated at the events saying that he could have stayed in Oklahoma and got a job driving tractors. He decides to leave.

Ma manages to get some food together and cooks a stew and she is able to feed the children.

Word goes around that there is work available in Tulare County and then they meet a contractor from this area and Knowles asks if there is a work agreement that they can sign. The contractor summons the police, and Tom shows his annoyance by tripping up one of the cops, but Casy manages to take him away, reminding him that he is still on parole. Casy takes the blame for Tom's actions and he is arrested and taken away.

Uncle John, feeling the pressure, goes off and gets drunk. When he is later found by Tom in a ditch he is forced to knock him unconscious in order to get him home. Things are starting to fall apart for the Joad family and it is only Ma who is able to keep them all together.

### **Interpretation**

The Joad's are coming up against the reality that California is not the Promised Land, and all that they encounter is hostility and prejudice. Wherever they turn, there is no work and very little money left to buy food. People in the same position more and more crowd their surroundings.

Granma and Grampa are now both gone and Granma's body is left at the Coroner's office without a family funeral.

As Okies they have no control over their lives and their status is as the bottommost rung of society. The term Okie today seems almost a term of endearment, but in the 1930's it was an insult, almost a racial remark.

There is deep resentment from the locals to the migrant workers, but originally this land was part of Mexico, taken over by squatters who came from the East. They became rich owning large tracts of fertile land, but now need workers to harvest their crops, and as there is a surplus of labor, they can pay as little as they like. It is their own greed and thoughtlessness that has contributed to the current situation where there are thousands of people for every hundred jobs that become available.

There are also the beginnings of an organized workers' union as illustrated by the scene with Knowles, Tom and Casy. The landowners using the police rigidly suppress this movement and Steinbeck sees this as the great moral challenge for Tom and others to face. For this cause, Jim Casy will die and Tom Joad will devote the rest of his life.

The Joad family is becoming smaller with deaths of the grandparents and the departure of Noah and Connie.

## **Chapters 21 – 25**

### **Summary**

Finally the Joad family comes across a decent Government-run camp where there are no cops, and the farmers are able to establish their own rules. There are good facilities on the camp and Tom is eventually able to get a job, but not Pa.

Ma Joad meets with the Women's Committee that has been formed in the camp and has a conflict with a Mrs. Sandry who is a religious fanatic. She tells Rose of Sharon that the babies of sinners are born black and withered.

The local landowners are concerned about this camp and they incite the police to try and break the camp up. There is to be a dance on Saturday night and men will infiltrate this event with a view to causing trouble.

Ezra Houston, Chairman of the Camp Committee, hires 20 men to prevent this trouble taking place. Rose of Sharon decides not to attend the dance because of her advanced state of pregnancy.

Tom and the other men quickly spot the three hired to create trouble. They quickly remove them without instigating any trouble and thus quash the police's plan to clear the camp.

That night a few men get together and tell tales, one of the usual pastimes.

One of them tells a story about how a group of mountain people who joined a union was mistreated by the local townspeople. They decided to stage a 'turkey shoot' where they marched through the center of town carrying guns as a show of force. After that the townspeople left them to get on with their lives. He suggests that the migrant farmers should do the same in California and that this could dramatically improve their working conditions.

### **Interpretation**

The Government Camp is a model for all such communities showing what can be done when the migrant farmers are allowed some freedom to run their own lives. Being all in the same boat of no work, money and food, they pull together and support one another.

This makes them stronger and has a positive effect on their morale despite the seriousness of their situation.

The dance is a release from their day-to-day drudgery and the well-organized Camp Committee thwarts the threat of disruption.

In order to break the vice-like grip that the landowners have on the Okies they need to organize a labor force that will resist the poor pay.

The landowners appreciate that such an organization could come from this Government-run Camp and that is why they wish to destroy it, so keeping the power they have over the workers.

There is a stark contrast between the greedy landowners descended from squatters and the Okies who themselves are peaceful and moral.

There are also problems between the local small farmers and the large landowners who oppress them. They monopolize the fruit and canning industry and are able to force prices low, so much so that the small farmers cannot afford even to harvest their own crops. In the hearts of many people, anger swells and surges – the grapes of wrath grow heavy and ripe.

At the beginning of the story, Tom's main priority was getting back to his family and trying to help them with their troubles. Now he is concerned about the bigger picture and the general plight of all the migrant community.

Ma maintains her position as the foundation on which the Joad family is built.

On the other hand, Pa has shown a general decline, so much so that he has lost his position as head of the family, as Ma makes all the major decisions. If he could only obtain work this would improve his own self-esteem.

Rose of Sharon seems to be reverting to her childhood, the closer she comes to giving birth the worse she gets, talking with a perpetual whine.

## Chapters 26 – 30

### Summary

Food is now very short and there is very little work to be had.

Ma decides that their best option is to move on again and they hear that there is work picking peaches only 35 miles away.

They arrive at the town and note that there is a great deal of unrest. There are police everywhere and they learn that they will only receive 5cents a box for picking peaches, provided that the whole family works. After the first day they have only managed to earn \$1 and their meal costs exactly that, and they are still hungry afterwards.

Al decides to see if he can find a girlfriend and Tom is curious to know what the trouble is in town. When he gets to the camp gate he is prevented from leaving by the police, but he sneaks under the fence and shortly after meets Casy. Casy tells him about his experience in prison and how he is now organizing the migrant farmers. He tells Tom that they only got 2 ½ cents a box and so they went on strike.

The police are determined to come down hard on the strikers as they wish to break up all types of organized labor.

Shortly after, police ambushes them and a fight takes place. Casy's head is crushed with a pick handle and the enraged Tom reacts by striking the cop. As Tom escapes he is hit in the head, but he manages to make it back to the Joad's camp. He tells the family he must leave because he will be spotted as having been in a fight, but Ma refuses to allow him to go and so they hide Tom.

They hear of some work picking cotton nearby, so they leave the camp and Tom hides in a cave close to the cotton plantation.

In order to do the work in the cotton field, cotton sacks are required and workers that do not have these have to buy them from the landowner on credit. Many of the workers are unable to do enough work to pay for their sacks. Also, the workers suspect that the weighing machines are rigged.

The Joad's are fortunate that they make enough money to keep the family fed.

They and the Wainwrights live in a boxcar near the cotton fields.

Ma Joad is able to buy some crackerjacks for Ruthie and Winfield, but a big girl bullies Ruthie to get some and Ruthie responds by boasting that her brother has killed two men and is now hiding. Ma goes to warn Tom that the secret is out and with great sorrow urges him to leave.

Tom has been pondering about what Jim Casy told him before he died – that every man's soul is part of the greater soul. Tom sees his vocation is to unify his soul with the greater soul by working to organize people in a fight against oppression.

Ma warns Tom that Casy died for his efforts and Tom promises that he will watch out for himself.

Ma meets a man who owns a small farm and finds out that he needs pickers for his 20 acres the next day. However, so many people hear about this that the work is done in ½ a day and they all receive a small amount – hardly enough to buy a meal.

Al tells his family that he wants to marry Agnes Wainwright, the daughter of the family that share the boxcar, and there is a celebration of the two families.

The weather changes for the worse and the rain pours down. Rivers overflow and the boxcar are in danger of being engulfed. The men make a dam to try and divert the water, but when a tree falls into the dam, water pours into the boxcar.

Rose of Sharon starts her labor, but she gives birth to a stillborn child, shriveled and blue.

Uncle John goes out to bury the baby. He places it in a box and the stream washes it away.

The rains continue and Pa spends the remainder of their money on food. It is clear that the floodwater will overtake the boxcar so Ma decides that they must leave.

Al decides to go with the Wainwrights.



The Joad's find a barn that is at least dry, but inside is a man lying on his back, sick and dying. A small boy, his son, is watching over him saying that he has not eaten in six days, and when he did find some bread he vomited it out – he needs soup or milk.

Ma tells the boy not to worry and Rose of Sharon realizing what her mother's intentions are lies down beside the starving man and breast-feeds him.

### **Interpretation**

We see the final phase of Tom's moral development brought about by the death of Jim Casy.

Before his death Jim had given details of his life in jail that had strengthened him in his resolve to represent the oppressed migrant workers. It is probably at this time that Tom decided that he would continue the work that Jim had begun.

We see Pa's final decline and Ma's assumption of the leadership role within the Joad family. Pa has lost his human dignity because he is unable to obtain work in the new land. All that he knows is back in Oklahoma, but that has been blown away by the wind.

Throughout the novel, Ma has been the driving force forcing the others in the family to confront their situation, and it is her that decides when to stay and when to move on.

When they obtain work picking cotton their spirits are lifted and compared to what they have been through previously, times are good, and at least they are able to put some meat on the table.

They suspect that more misfortunes are around the corner, so they make the most of these good times.

It is necessary for the family to hide Tom when he has plenty time to consider the recent events. He, therefore, reflects on the words of Jim Casy and experiences a rebirth when he decides to carry on Jim's work. The concept that all people share the one soul and cannot exist in solitude, but require human love for survival makes Tom convinced that this is the path he must take.

With this understanding he realizes that he has a responsibility to help all those in need.

You will recall that Tom refused to share the cave with Muley at the start of the novel, preferring to sleep in the open. Now he is confined in a cave, which Steinbeck uses as a symbolic womb from which Tom emerges spiritually reborn, leaving the Joad family in order to embrace the greater family of man.

At the start of the book, the landscape was gripped by drought where the wind had blown away the crops and topsoil. Now the Joad's are faced with floods and rising water preventing them from working in the cotton fields. Steinbeck uses the continuing theme that people's lives are ruled by forces that they cannot control, but despite these seemingly unstoppable forces, life will find a way. In Chapter 3 the turtle managed to cross the road despite the forces trying to stop it, and finally Rose of Sharon is able to provide the gift of life-saving milk to the starving man. In giving this chance of life to a stranger she experiences a spiritual sensation beyond herself, which unifies her not only with this man, but also with the whole of humanity.

We can sum up Steinbeck's main theme by the words that Ma said 'It used to be the family that was first. It isn't so now. It's everybody. The worse off that we get, the more we got to do'.

**Questions for study with ideas for answers :**

**Q :** Steinbeck wanted to do more than merely tell the story of the Joad family's migration to California. What did he want to achieve, and how did he accomplish this?

**Ideas :** Having traveled himself with a group of migrating farmers from Oklahoma to California, he wanted to draw a complete picture of the events that took place. He used the character of Jim Casy as his mouthpiece when he wanted to make a specific statement concerning the injustices suffered and the morals of the people in power. 'The Grapes of Wrath' is therefore part narration dealing with the trials and tribulations relating to the Joad family, and part documentary dealing with the actual history and circumstances regarding the Dustbowl in Oklahoma, and the slavery of the migrant workers in the fruit and cotton fields of California.

**Q :** What techniques does Steinbeck use in order for the reader to quickly identify with the numerous characters in the novel?

**Ideas :** Each character is given a main characteristic to enable the reader to distinguish them in his mind e.g.

- Granma's piety
- Grampa's mischievousness
- Ma Joad's determination, strength and love
- Tom's high morality
- Rose of Sharon's girlish immaturity
- Jim Casy's determination and drive
- Al's idolization of his older brother Tom
- Noah's slow-wittedness
- Pa Joad's short temper

Although this tends to be unsophisticated and results in the characters being too sentimental at times, it has the desired effect especially when the reader has to contend with the broad Oklahoma dialect.

**Q :** Symbolism is used throughout the novel. Give some examples of this.

**Ideas :** The turtle's struggle to cross the highway at the start of the novel gives the reader a foretaste of the struggles that the migrant farmers will face in their journey across America to California. Tom's rebirth taking on the mantle of Jim Casy's work is symbolized by the fact that he hid inside a cave representing the womb.

Rose of Sharon's last act in giving sustenance to the starving man symbolizes the land in Oklahoma that was unable to give sufficient succour to the farmers and their families.

**Q :** What makes Steinbeck such a good author of works relating to the common man?

**Ideas :** Steinbeck throughout his life lived and worked beside the common man, sharing his work and obtaining an understanding of the problems he faced. He actually traveled with a group of migrant farmers from Oklahoma to California and produced a pamphlet called 'Their Blood was Strong' in 1936. He had been commissioned by the San Francisco News to cover this topic. This was to become the foundation for 'The Grapes of Wrath' published in 1939. It is clear that he would not write about a subject unless he had lived through the experience personally.