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The Success and Controversy of *The Grapes of Wrath*

John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* fought major backlash from critics and battled grievances from offended readers on its way to becoming immortalized in literary history among the greatest works of all time. *The Grapes of Wrath*, at the time of its publication, was disliked by many Americans, who had lived the tumultuous lives portrayed in the book, but with age has become a prized, frequently-referenced description of life following the Dust Bowl. This essay follows *The Grapes of Wrath* along its bumpy path to ultimate success.

On Friday, April 14, 1939, *The Grapes of Wrath* hit bookstore shelves everywhere and immediately gained attention—from critics, farmers, historians, and even the First Lady (Chilton 2015). However, the attention was not for praise but for condemnation. The unethical descriptions of “okies” horrified consumers so much so that libraries banned it from being stocked. In particular, one seller went so far as to burn their entire Steinbeck inventory (Shockley 1944). Steinbeck's home state was by far the most outraged, due to the book's callous depiction of how Californians treated migrants. Critic Frank J. Taylor claimed that “by implication, [the book] brands California farmers with unbelievable cruelty in their dealings with refugees from the ‘dust bowl.’ It charges that they deliberately lured a surplus of workers westward to depress wages, deputized peace officers to hound the migrants ever onward, burned the squatters’ shacktowns [sic], stomped down gardens and destroyed surplus foods in a conspiracy to force the refugees to work for starvation wages, allowed children to hunger and mothers to bear babies

unattended in squalor.” Additionally, the Associated Farmers of Kern County California blasted the novel as “obscene sensationalism” and “propaganda in its vilest form.”

The perceived goal of this “propaganda” was supposedly anti-American and, more radically, communist. In fact, Soviet Union leader Joseph Stalin played the film adaptation of *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1949 as a pro-communism display, revealing the hardships that Americans faced under the most developed form of capitalism (Whitfield 2009). In an attempt to deflect the accusations, Viking Press reprinted the book with the inclusion of the first page of sheet music from Julia Ward Howe’s “Battle Hymn of the Republic” (the source for the book’s title) printed on the final pages, but the attempt was unsuccessful (DeMott 1992).

The controversy surrounding the accuracy of the Joads as Exodusters and the supposed subliminal communist messages consequently lead to an increase in sales. Steinbeck had no problem with his new wealth, but he was upset about how the book’s content was being received. Even his close friend and editor, Pascal Covici, told Steinbeck in a letter that, though Steinbeck should do what he thought was best, he believed that the ending lacked a grand lead-up, and he was not fond of how casual it was (Covici 1939). Steinbeck replied, “I am not writing a satisfying story. I’ve done my damndest [sic] to rip a reader’s nerves to rags, I don’t want him satisfied. And still one more thing—I’ve tried to write this book the way lives are lived not the way books are written.” Steinbeck had every right to be defensive about the work; after all, he had slaved to finish the book in a year—“Never worked so hard in my life nor so long before,” Steinbeck said—and the constant political badgering made Steinbeck want to never write fiction again (DeMott 1992).

Once the novel had been in circulation approximately a year, Steinbeck finally began to see people coming forward to defend the accuracy of his depictions. O. B. Duncan, Head of the

Sociology Department at Oklahoma A. & M told Oklahoma City *Times*, “I have been asked quite often if I could not dig up some statistics capable of refuting the story of *The Grapes of Wrath*. It cannot be done, for all the available data proved beyond doubt that the general impression given by Steinbeck’s book is substantially reliable.” My grandfather reflected on that time, providing descriptions dangerously close to Steinbeck’s. Having been part of the history that Steinbeck penned, he readily backed up Duncan’s testimony, proclaiming that Steinbeck’s lyrically descriptive “interchapters” painted the picture of the Dust Bowl even clearer than he remembered it (Pike 2018).

The release of the film adaptation in January 1940 sparked uprisings of people whose justice-seeking righteousness had not yet been satisfied by the surplus of critic reviews, now actually acknowledging *The Grapes of Wrath* as a work of fiction, not a political pawn. According to a letter addressed to Elizabeth Otis, when Steinbeck and his wife went to New York to see an exclusive early showing of both *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, they were told that the movies could not be released simultaneously because there was so much “hell being raised” about the author’s political intentions (Steinbeck, Wallsten, & Steinbeck 2001).

Steinbeck thought highly of the films, but did not wait for their release; he and Carol (his wife) left the country and toured Mexico, taking himself out of the eye of the media for a while. “I won’t do any of these public things,” he complied. “It isn’t my nature and I won’t be stampeded. And so the stand must be made and I must keep out of politics.” When he returned, the public’s opinion of *The Grapes of Wrath* had improved greatly, in part due to the First Lady (which would drag him right back into the scene of which he had just promised to stay out). Eleanor Roosevelt had, with impetus from political upset, toured migrant camps to inspect the living conditions and treatment of migrants. When a reporter questioned her, she replied, “I

never have thought *The Grapes of Wrath* was exaggerated” (Steinbeck, Wallsten, & Steinbeck 2001). Through letters, Mrs. Roosevelt and Steinbeck discussed the squalor and maltreatment that dust bowl escapees had to endure. “Thank you for your words,” he wrote her. “I have been called a liar so constantly that sometimes I wonder whether I may not have dreamed the things I saw and heard in the period of my research” (Steinbeck, Wallsten, & Steinbeck 2001).

This sincere publicity inspired a new fondness of *The Grapes of Wrath*; readers felt as though they had overlooked the underlying motive of the book: to find justice for Americans on whom bad times had fallen. In spring of 1940, Steinbeck was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, and at last he was able to speak proudly about the novel which he had worked so tirelessly to create. As Demott points out, “*The Grapes of Wrath* has resolutely entered both the American consciousness and its conscience,” and very few works can attest to that accomplishment.

By the end of the century, *The Grapes of Wrath* had sold fourteen million copies and had been translated into nearly thirty languages. Steinbeck’s crowning achievement in *The Grapes of Wrath* is its everlasting prominence in issues of social justice due to its ability to adapt to our constantly-changing political landscape. Steinbeck had remarked upon finishing the book that “it isn’t the great book I had hoped it would be. It’s just a run-of-the-mill book,” but the world thought it was much more (Steinbeck & DeMott 1990).

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