

EXTENDED ESSAY

Topic: What was Great Depression's Effect on John Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath and
Of Mice and Men?

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ABSTRACT

John Steinbeck is an American author who is well known with the Pulitzer winning novels *Grapes of Wrath* and *Of Mice and Men*. He not only wrote enduring books but novels that can be considered as being a history book that covers the struggle of workers with a commentary quality. Although many critics have specified their imperfect body and flaws, they entered the worldwide classics. Each generation has found something new and relevant about themselves that speaks to their life. This is the quality of Steinbeck's works as it bespeaks to the reader. I have a huge interest on Steinbeck's works and after reading some of his novels, I have realized how Great Depression had a subversive effect on each characters of the book. This triggered my curiosity which then I have taken these two particular books *Grapes of Wrath* and *Of mice and Men* to examine the Great Depression's effects. The era that these books have been written is lately 1930's. In these times Great Depression had subversive affects on the relationships and individuals themselves. The gap between rich and poor, have widened resulting in the restlessness of workers and tenants. This caused Steinbeck to take this struggle of poor, as a subject. A camaraderie who tries to gain their personal independence and a family who tries not to fall apart under the pressure of poverty are the characters Steinbeck used to show the Great Depressions effects. The aspects I will put down while examining these effects are: belonging issue, the role of friends, importance of money, nurturing wife/mother role and society's pressure on individuals. While writing the essay I have tried to prove all the ideas I have put forth by giving evidences from books to justify my statements.

Great Depression has affected the economical values of world, the morals, family structures and the border layouts. In the novels *Of Mice And Men* and the *Grapes of Wrath* the main characters have been greatly affected by this and became alone and unemployed. As a result, a new world has been created which is dominated by money and power. The people who have survived like the Joad's in the *Grapes of Wrath* are the ones who have strong family bonds and strong companies. On the other hand the ones like George and Lennie from "*Of Mice And Men*" who have been individualised have lost the survival. The fellowship and bonds that are created at this time decides an individual's fate.

Great Depression was a severe economical depression started in the beginnings of 20th century and ended in the middle of it. It can be called as the longest economical crisis ever came. Although it's effects were so brutal in US, whole world was affected by it. It had devastating effects in nearly every country but particularly rich and poor. International trade plunged by more than 50% where as personal income, tax revenue, profits and prices dropped as a result. Unemployment in the U.S. rose to 25% whereas in some countries it rose as high as %33¹. The ones that have been affected mostly is those dependent on heavy industry. Because of the vast amount of people that are starving for work the crop prices fell around %60. As more labourers came, the opportunity to work them with less salary has occurred. With the invention of the tractors and machines that are used to crop, need of farmers become less. These tractors made the same work a farmer could do but in less time and in less money. The traders needed to overcome the deficit. So, the big companies and banks started to exile the farmers to other states. These hungry but ambitious farmers and families migrated to states that had the opportunity to work. The landowners were frightened of the coming danger because a horde of people that are starving to death could do everything to feed their people. These landowners found the solution to invite as many as people to crop their land so that they can set these people quarrelling. This would let the companies face bunch of farmers racing with each other to work for less price instead of a united group that have the control of opposing the low prices and inappropriate working conditions.

¹ <http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/depression/about.htm>

The *Grapes of Wrath* and *Of Mice And Men* are the books that are written in the spell of Great Depression. They both include the events of people struggling against the hard conditions of the Depression. Steinbeck underscored the situation of these people by using the main characters of the books: Joad family from the *Grapes of Wrath* and George and Lennie camaraderie from *Of Mice And Men*. If the bonds are weak -such as Lennie and George's- it breaks easily but if the bond is strong like Joad's it bends but stays straight. The key of the survival for Joad's lies in Tom's words "a man who have fallen needs another one's hand to rise up"². This hand is sometimes the hand of mother figure or the religious hand of Casy in the *Grapes of Wrath*.

Mother and wife figure plays a great role on the strength of the bond. The reasons for this, is that when Great Depression struck, men were searching for work everywhere. On the contrary, women were staying at home controlling all the men and nurturing the child, preparing food and cleaning the clothes. So, women have taken control of the family instead of men. The woman figure also knows how to earn more money but her ability to maintain the control of the family plays the head role. "Ma" in *Grapes Of Wrath* is the one that have taken the control of the family. Even though she works at farms and ranches her main role surpasses the others:"...have experienced all possible tragedy and to have mounted pain and suffering. [...] the citadel of family, the strong place hat could not be taken."³ This passage tells how woman is different from man on emotion control. Men can easily be hurt and burst the anger but woman is more cold-blooded while approaching the issues.

*"From her position as healer, her hands had grown sure and cool and quiet, from her position as arbiter she had become as remote and faultless in judgement as a goddess. She seemed to know that if she swayed the family shook, and if she ever really deeply wavered or despaired the family would fall, the family would fall, the family will to function would be gone."*⁴

This passage shows how mother unites the family and keeps it functioning. These attributes sharpen the bonds of the family. Her mentoring of Rose of Sharon and efforts to keep family intact shows how strong the women figure in the novel is. Steinbeck criticizes the

² *Grapes of Wrath* p 418

³ *Grapes of Wrath* p 74

⁴ *Grapes of Wrath* p 74

dominant masculinity by creating such a strong woman more than every man in the novel. Another attribute of Ma has is that she nourishes Tom's lack of belief: by saying "we are different we go on"⁵. The reason for this is that she has faith in surviving. She is calm and cold blooded while approaching the issues. Ma doesn't only care for her own blood but for all the humanity. When family settles a camp, children from all around the place gather around Ma to make her feed them. Ma first feeds her own family and then feeds all the children around her⁶. Another example for this is her relationship to Sairy Wilson who is a migrant whom she met during the trip. She forces the Wilson's to come because she knows solidarity is the key of survival. Sooner, these two families become one. In *Grapes of Wrath* family is not a unit that shares only common genetics but a unit that shows respect and loyalty to each other. This is how Wilson's are easily accepted to family whereas Noah and Connie who left the family are forgotten. The reason is that whoever shows respect and dignity to other family members are approved and accepted. On contrary, ones who don't show the correct attitudes are considered being disloyal and condemned to be forgotten. There isn't any information about what happened to the quitters in the novel. This lack of info can be interpreted as: what is important is to fight against obstacles, the leavers are sentenced to be forgotten.

Another important place where women are considered as arbiter is the government camp where the people rule themselves like a normal democracy. This government can be considered as an utopia where people treat the others with respect. When migrants get away from the system, they actually be more "human" than landowners who call them Okies. The customer service in the camp is made up of three women. These three women are the one who controls the order and treats to each newcomers. The ladies present themselves as the "Ladies Committee of Sanitary Unit"⁷. These women greet Ma and inform her about camp. They are shown as the ones who control the order. Ma wasn't used to such events as she feels like "human again"⁸. How she was treated before is considered as inhuman. The idea of inhumanity of man to man is only true for people who are a slave of social system. The unfair treatment they have actually forces them to leave their humanistic properties. As it's seen in the government camp, if these migrants escape from the order, they actually create a new regime where everyone has the same rights; even women who control the men are acceptable in such regimes.

⁵ *Grapes of Wrath* p 238

⁶ *Grapes of Wrath* p 258

⁷ *Grapes of Wrath* p 312

⁸ *Grapes of Wrath* p 307

In the era of Great Depression relationships were so important that surviving alone was impossible. A man needed another one's hand to face troubles. During the journey of Tom, Casy has been the hand that Tom needed. He had been more than a friend to him; he guided him towards social awareness and political action. He showed him how people can achieve their personal independence.

*"He wasn't doing nothin' against the law, Ma. I been thinkin' a hell of a lot, thinkin' about our people livin' like pigs, [...]. An' I been wonderin' if all our folks got together an' yelled, like them fellas yelled, only a few of'em at the hooper ranch."*⁹

This quote shows the major reason for the tenants to rebel: the class difference; rich getting richer, poor getting poorer. Tom, Casy and all the other tenants enter the level of poor as the landowners and banks make them even poorer. Tom has been thinking of being "one body"¹⁰ with all the poor who shares the same will: to destroy the ongoing hierarchy. Where Tom had gained this intention of rebelling and uniting, is from Casy. This is seen in his words to Ma: "I'm talkin' like Casy. Comes of thinkin' about him so much. Seems like I can see him sometimes."¹¹ From this passage it is seen that Tom has been profoundly affected by Casy. Tom is a character who have been in jail for four years and when got out, found his family wounded and fallen apart. His family itself can't help Tom to get over the depression. Thus, he needed a company to gain his life energy back. The scriptures Casy had given had also played a huge role on leading him to understand the truth: "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, the one will lif' up his fellow, but woe to him that is alone when he falleth, for he hath not another to help him up."¹² This actually summarizes the way out the Depression: forming unity to rise against the companies restrictions. These are the aspects which Joad family uses to break the obstacles that are coming up. Even though the family bonds were strong enough the weak ones have left the unity such as Connie and Noah.

⁹Grapes of Wrath p 419

¹⁰ Grapes of Wrath p419

¹¹ Grapes of Wrath p 419

¹² Grapes of Wrath page 418

On the other hand in the book of *Of Mice And Men* the friendship of George and Lennie lies dependent on profit. Lennie needed a brain to live and George needed Lennie's monstrous power to find work at the camps. This relationship can be summarized as a slave and master relationship: one does the foot works, the other leads. This deficient relationship is seen all the time when Lennie and George are together: "...Then he replaced his hat [...]. Lennie, who had been watching, imitated George exactly."¹³ This imitation shows how inadequate characteristic Lennie has. He doesn't have his own ideas to put forth or decisions to make. The language between George and Lennie is another aspect showing how this relationship shapes. George often uses words of commandment while talking to Lennie such as "give it here!"¹⁴ or "look!"¹⁵. The humiliating tone George mostly uses towards Lennie also shows how this two people are separate from each other despite their appearances as friends. From the grammar mistakes and word choices these characters have, it is clearly seen that they are uneducated laborers. Great Depression struck them too and forced them not to think but work continuously. This over-work made these two man to be against each other. "I was alone I could live so easy[...] I wisht I could put you in a cage with about a million mice an' let you have fun."¹⁶ In this quote George compares Lennie with a mouse; a mice that does nothing but rises trouble. If he had left Lennie behind and live only the day, his hopes of achieving independence will be perished too. Having Lennie with him helps George think of having a higher purpose than just living the day. This aspect helps these two from falling apart.

From the word choice and behaviors of George towards Lennie it can be said that the relationship is not long lasting. However, George doesn't care about anyone else and doesn't talk as much as he does to Lennie throughout the book. This can be interpreted as George actually loves Lennie but doesn't show his feelings too much. He shows it only when he talks about his dream of owning a land and being independent. George knows he can't achieve the American dream without Lennie. This dream grows stronger during the book as after a point, it attracts other characters. Unlike the Joad family in *Grapes of Wrath* the family aspect is shown from the point of view of a two guy that has no one else but themselves. This has changed the meaning of family as it shaped differently from the Joad's:

¹³ Of Mice and Men p 4

¹⁴ Of Mice and Men p 6

¹⁵ Of Mice and Men p 13

¹⁶ Of mice and Men p11

“Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guy in the world. They got no family. They don’t belong no place.[...] They ain’t got nothing to look ahead to. With us it ain’t like that. We got a future. We got somebody to talk to that gives a damn about us..”¹⁷

This passage shows how people are alienated from each other because of the Great Depression. All of the laborers were so obsessed with earning money as they miss what’s going on around them. They are so much sank into the system that they can’t escape from it. In this quote, George separates him and Lennie from these people and puts them apart. He supports that their relations are actually based on mutual understanding. Joad’s family relationships were based on commitment and loyalty however, George and Lennie’s relationship based on common will. George and Lennie will stick to each other because this is the only way to achieve their dream of owning a land and doing whatever they want. The relationship is not strong because of the difference perspectives they have. Lennie takes life as a game whereas George is more serious towards approaching the issues. This will end up with their separation in the end of the book.

In the spell of Great Depression, relations were also worn vigorously. The benefits were more important than emotions such as friendship and love. People’s needs changed from higher levels to the basic levels¹⁸. This is the reason why people can’t look at events logically as the problems have become vital for an individual. This is the reason why Lennie and George stays together despite their different characteristics. The destruction of emotions and logic is also seen in the society. Slim’s questions to George if he is trying to take his pay away from Lennie or not explains how societies understanding about friendship have changed.¹⁹ The peer pressure forces George and Lennie’s friendship to the inevitable end. The ones in ranches hardly understand how a “cuckoo” and a “smart guy”²⁰ like George ever travel together. Lennis is like a dog who listens to his master’s commandments all the time. Although George says he doesn’t use Lennie he actually uses Lennie to achieve his dream of “owning a land”. This different characteristics of Lennie and George prevents them from being friends. This is a camaraderie created only because they share the same history and

¹⁷ Of Mice and Men p13

¹⁸ Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is a theory in psychology, proposed by Abraham Maslow in his 1943 paper *A theory of Human Motivation*. The pyramid starts with human’s basic needs (physiological needs) and goes to the top self actualization level. “<http://psychology.about.com/od/theoriesofpersonality/a/hierarchyneeds.htm>”

¹⁹ Of Mice and Men p 22

²⁰ Of Mice and Men p 39

same will. At the time when one starts to restrict the other this bond would be broken which is also seen at the end of the book.

While surviving the Great Depression the first aspect was bond within individuals. The other aspect is the bond with the land. The belonging issue plays a great role on the human lives. The place where they lived and their ancestors lived has actually become a part of them. Leaving the land is like leaving their souls behind:

*” You and me—why we’re all that’s been. The anger of a moment, the thousand 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. [...] And when the owner man told us to go, that’s us; and when the tractor hit the house, that’s us until we’re dead.”*²¹

By listing the memories, this quote shows how hard would that be to leave everything behind. These people not only exiled from their house but also their life. The land they live is beyond earth. It is their lives with all the memories and problems they have. The words of tenant man in *Grapes of Wrath* summarizes this issue: ”How can we live without our lives? How’ll it be not to know what land’s outside the door? [...] that’s you.”²². This passage shows the importance of the place they live and how hard it is to leave it. Grandpa in the story of *Grapes of Wrath* is a great example who can’t hold on because of this land problem. While the family decided to migrate to California, Grandpa declines to go. In other words, declines to leave his soul and life behind.” This here’s me country. I’d belong here. [...] This country’s ain’t no good, but it’s country. I’ll just stay right here where I b’long.”²³ However the family comes out against Pa’s demand and they take him with them. Hence, grandpa dies before arriving to California. Tom’s words about Grandpa dying the minute when they have taken him out off the place they left²⁴ explain how vital the belonging issue is. Significance of land plays a huge role on uniting the family. If the bond with the land is broken, the family starts to fall apart. Many families were collapsed as banishment has started in the middle of twentieth century. On the other hand, unlike Joad family, Muley who was a friend of Joad’s stayed at the land they lived. Seeing the transformation of the place they live also results in the transformation of the individuals. Muley is an example for this:

²¹ *Grapes of Wrath* p 87

²² *Grapes of Wrath* p 89

²³ *Grapes of Wrath* p111

²⁴ *Grapes of Wrath* p 146

*“ I was mean like a wolf. Now I’m mean. When you’re huntin’ somepin you’re a hunter, an’ you’re strong. Can’t nobody beat a hunter. But when you get hunted—that’s different. Somepin happens to you. You ain’t strong. I been hunted now for a long time. I ain’t a hunter no more.”*²⁵

When the tractorising started the die is cast. There are two options: to stay like Joad’s and feel lost but stay united or stay like Muley and see the destruction of all your memories and lose yourself. Muley had become someone else unlike what he was before. The both ends are not beneficial for the individual.

In *Of Mice And Men* we see the belonging issue different from *Grapes of Wrath*. This problem shapes as the main characters have no family or no land but themselves and the ranches they stay. Changing the place they live and having no roots on earth makes them even lonelier and hungry for relation. This is seen in the speech between Lennie and Crooks the stable buck: “A guy goes nuts if he ain’t got nobody. Don’t make no difference who the guy is, long he’s with you .”²⁶ In this kind relationships the bond is not strong, it is created at the time when you arrive and broken when you leave. When two people talking to each other, what they talk or what they say to the other, doesn’t matter. What matters is only the talking action. No one can face the Great Depression alone. Each individual who works in ranches actually shares the same problem. Even though their stories are different, the problem doesn’t change. This is seen in the speech between George and Lennie and people they have met in the ranches. Who ever they talk with, mourns about the same problem: earning their freedom. Candy’s situation talking about how he has been working in Curley’s ranch for all of his life, cropping their seeds, cleaning their ranch not his own, shows how Candy is also a victim of this issue. In the speech of George to Lennie, belonging issue is clearly seen: “Guys like us... They don't belong no place.[...] They ain't got nothing to look ahead to.”²⁷ By using words they “don’t belong no place” it can be understood that the itinerant man of *Of Mice and Men* live in the constant stress of losing their job for they couldn’t live without money. From the words they “ain’t got nothing to look ahead to”, the unreliability of workers have been seen for they are a potential threat to take their job from their hands. Inhumanity of man to

²⁵ *Grapes of Wrath* p 58

²⁶ *Of Mice and Men* p 87

²⁷ *Of Mice and Men* p17

man is occurred because of Great Depression. Desperate need for money and food forced these people to be like this.

Sharing the same will and intention is the last aspect for the bonds to be stricken. This is the migrant's same desire while leaving the place they leave: being just like before, owning a land and cropping what they have planted. This is the characteristics of human life: owning and feeling belonging. I belong here, I belong there, everybody is looking for this. This is the essential and the major need for every individual's life. The migration of the tenants is an example for this dream. Tenants were released to the roads "streaming over mountains hungry and restless" and "scurrying for work"²⁸ The life the farmers had used to do is to crop what they have planted and eat it. When the tractorisation had started, this habit has come to an end. So the tenants "humbly looked for pleasure on the roads"²⁹. The solution for all the problems occurred because of the Great Depression, lies deep inside the solidarity. This quote from *Grapes of Wrath* explains Great Depression's effects on the tenants and the reason why tenants should unite:

*"[...]For here "I lost my land" is changed; a cell is split and from its splitting grows the thing you hate—"We lost our land." The danger is here, for two men are not as lonely and perplexed as one. And from this first "we" there grows a still more dangerous thing: "I have a little food" plus "I have none". If from this problem the sum is "We have a little food," the thing is on its way,[...] This is the thing to bomb. This is the beginning—from "I" to "we". Of you who own the things people must have could understand this, you might preserve yourself. If you could separate causes from results, if you could know that Paine, Marx, Jefferson, Lennin were results, not causes, you might survive. But that you cannot know. For the quality of owning freezes you forever into "I" and cuts you off forever from the "we"."*³⁰

²⁸ Grapes of Wrath p 238

²⁹ Grapes of Wrath p 330

³⁰ Grapes of Wrath p152

Marx³¹, Paine³² and Jefferson³³ wrote about the situation of social economic status of their society. What they have written was not an idea just came up suddenly, it was a result of events happening. The sum of all the events and the struggles the society had, made these men's write their manifesto. The subjects they have taken are the problems of all the societies. They haven't created something that belongs totally to them; actually they have been the voice of the people. This passage explains how "I", must turn to "we" to survive the Great Depression. Pressure is not a constructive but a destructive power. What landowners did actually helped the tenants to understand that their real enemy wasn't each other but the ones who have money and power but doesn't use it for the good.

In the adventure of George and Lennie this American dream increases its importance throughout the book. This is seen with the newcomers to their group: Candy and Crook. In every moment when George convinces Lennie not to go and stay with him, he tells a story. A story where they are the owners of their land: planting what they want, cropping all and selling all as they prefer. In other words: owning something that they can hold on to. George words to Lennie "We'd just live there. We'd belong there³⁴" is an example how belonging somewhere is a huge problem. This dream is like their God. They suffer all the pain just to achieve this intention. This is their hope to go out of this miserable life. When they meet with Candy who is also a lost character it is found out that he also shares the same dream too: "[...] Sure they all want it. Jus' somethin' that was his. Sometin' he could live on and there couldn't nobody throw him off of it."³⁵ From this passage the meaning of American Dream is clearly seen: owning somewhere and belonging there. Crooks the stable also offers to join their dream. We can understand that all the farmers and laborers share the same intention. This is the primary hope for tenants and workers to go on their lives.

³¹ Karl Heinrich Marx (5 May 1818 – 14 March 1883) was a German philosopher, sociologist, economic historian, journalist, and revolutionary socialist who developed the socio-political theory of Marxism. <http://www.historyguide.org/intellect/marx.html>

³² Thomas "Tom" Paine (February 9, 1737 [O.S. January 29, 1736] – June 8, 1809) was an author, pamphleteer, radical, inventor, intellectual, revolutionary, and one of the Founding Fathers of the United States. <http://www.ushistory.org/paine/>

³³ Thomas Jefferson (April 13, 1743 – July 4, 1826) was the principal author of the Declaration of Independence (1776) and the third President of the United States (1801–1809). http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Jefferson

³⁴ Of Mice and Men p 57

³⁵ Of Mice and Men p97

Great Depression's effect was huge on the tenants and farmers. The intention to achieve the status they were before had made the ongoing hierarchy to be broken. The roads were full of migrants who were starving to death. This chaos had made many families and friendships to ruin. The belonging issue and deaths forced lots to insanity. The hope to accomplish the dream of owning a land, belonging somewhere and living in humanistic conditions helped the families and individuals get over the Depression. The bonds created and the decisions made, shaped the individual's future.

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