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INDIANA'S THEATRE LAUREATE

Political dissent forever percolates in the American consciousness. The need to control one's own destiny sent the first settlers to this country, inspired the American Revolution and the Civil War, and brought thousands of immigrants here in the late 1800s. In the 1930s, the Depression inspired new levels of widespread dissatisfaction and dissent.

The Great Depression was an economic slump in North America, Europe, and other industrialized areas of the world that began in 1929 and lasted until about 1939. It was the longest and most severe depression ever experienced by the industrialized Western world.

The Great Depression may be said to have begun with a catastrophic collapse of stock-market prices on the New York Stock Exchange in October 1929. During the next three years, stock prices in the United States continued to fall, until by late 1932 they had dropped to only about 20 percent of their 1929 value.

Besides ruining many thousands of individual investors, this swift decline in the value of assets greatly strained banks and other financial institutions; by 1933, two out of five U.S. banks had failed. The failure of so many banks, combined with a general and nationwide loss of confidence in the economy, led to decreased spending and demand, and hence decreased production, thus aggravating the downward spiral. The result was drastically falling production and drastically rising unemployment; by 1932, U.S. manufacturing output had fallen to half its 1929 level, and more than a quarter of the work force was unemployed.

Elected in 1932, President Franklin D. Roosevelt introduced the New Deal, a number of major changes in the structure of the American economy, using

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Exploring

John Steinbeck's

THE GRAPES OF WRATH

by Frank Galati

February 16 - March 12, 2005 : Mainstage

The Great Depression Voices of Dissent

increased government regulation and massive public-works projects to promote a recovery. But despite this active intervention, mass unemployment and economic stagnation continued, though on a somewhat reduced scale, with about 15 percent of the work force still unemployed in 1939. After the outbreak of World War II in Europe that year, unemployment dropped rapidly as American factories were flooded with orders from overseas for armaments and munitions. The Depression ended completely soon after the United States entered the war in 1941.

At least in part, the Great Depression was caused by underlying weaknesses and imbalances within the U.S. economy that had been obscured by the economic over-

confidence and risky business attitude of the 1920s. The Depression exposed those weaknesses, as it did the inability of the nation's political and financial institutions to cope with the vicious downward economic cycle that followed the Crash.

The financial calamities brought about by the Depression gave strength to voices of dissent that had been brewing in America since the Russian Revolution. People felt betrayed by authority. They had trusted bankers and other community leaders, and now those trusted leaders were repossessing businesses and farms and throwing families out on the streets. People had believed in a community safety net that no longer existed, if it ever had. Thousands were uprooted from their homes and were transplanted to hostile communities. People who had led comfortable middle-class lives were now penniless. Other families were barely hanging onto the life they had known, and fear made them wary of outsiders.

John Steinbeck captures this hostility in *The Grapes of Wrath*. He saw how poverty and oppression made people question authority, and he documented this process in his novel. Widespread misery and poverty created mainstream support for labor unions and socialist ideals. And what had been a fringe idea, distrust of authority, crossed over to the mainstream culture. ★

TO LEARN MORE

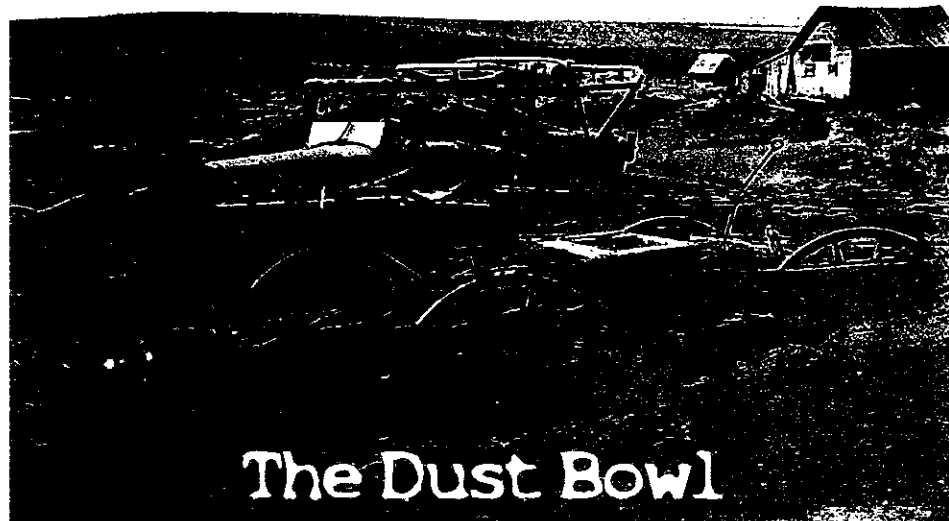
Visit these websites:

- <http://www.amatecon.com/greatdepression.html>
- <http://newdeal.feri.org/>

Or check out these books:

- *Rethinking the Great Depression* by Gene Smiley
- *Hard Times* by Studs Terkel





Once called the “Great Desert” by European explorers, America’s plains states are extremely productive farmland today. But they confronted settlers with a tough, harsh climate, prone to extremes of temperature and periodic drought. Winds sweep across the flat, treeless landscape with special fury. Natural histories of the region show consistent and recurring cycles of drought, often lasting ten years or more, usually accompanied by dust storms of amazing size. Repeatedly in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, strong winds scoured the terrain and spread clouds of choking dust across the southwestern plains. None of these storms, however, approached the terrible “Dust Bowl” of the 1930s.

It began in 1931, when one of the cyclical droughts struck Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, and the eastern parts of Colorado and New Mexico, finding a changed landscape. In the 1920s, plains grasslands had been deeply plowed and planted to wheat. Disk plows, pulled in long rows by newly available tractors, cut the soil shallowly but more thoroughly, making it drier and

more vulnerable. During the years when there was adequate rainfall, the land had produced bountiful crops. But as the droughts of the early 1930s deepened, the farmers kept plowing and planting even though nothing would grow.

The Dust Bowl of the 1930s lasted about a decade, as drought, windblown dust, and agricultural decline plagued a once-fertile area. The ground cover that had once held the soil in place blew away. The plains winds whipped across the fields, raising billowing clouds of dust to the skies. The skies could darken for days, and even the most well-sealed homes could have a thick layer of dust on furniture. In some places the dust would drift like snow, covering farmsteads.

Farmers abandoned their land when the drought and dust storms showed no signs of letting up. Others were forced out when banks foreclosed on their land. In all, one-quarter of the population left, packing everything they owned into their cars and trucks and heading west toward California. What they found, unfortunately, was not always a better life. ★

Migrant Life

The Dust Bowl exodus was the largest migration in American history. By 1940, 2.5 million people had moved out of the plains states; of those, 200,000 moved to California. When they arrived, the migrants were faced with a life almost as difficult as the one they had left. Many California farms were corporate-owned. They were larger and more modernized than those of the southern plains, and the crops were unfamiliar to the migrants. Instead of the rolling fields of wheat they were used to, they found crops of fruit, nuts, and vegetables.

Life for migrant workers was hard. They were paid by the quantity of fruit and cotton picked, with earnings ranging from seventy-five cents to \$1.25 a day. Out of that, they had to pay twenty-five cents a day to rent a tar-paper shack with no floor or plumbing. In larger ranches, they often had to buy their groceries from a high-priced company store.

Those who could not find work built “Hoovervilles,” shanty towns made of scraps of tin and cardboard and named for the former President. As roadside camps of poverty-stricken migrants proliferated, growers pressured sheriffs to break them up. Groups or vigilantes beat up migrants, accusing them of being Communists, and burned their shacks to the ground, sending the people on the move again. ★

TO LEARN MORE

Visit these websites:

- <http://www.pts.net/user/museum/dust-bowl.html>
- <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/afct-shtml/tshome.html>

Or check out this book:

- *Out of the Dust* by Karen Hesse

Or listen to this CD:

- *Dust Bowl Ballads* by Woody Guthrie

The Grapes of Wrath

John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* was first published in 1939. The title comes from a phrase in “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” The novel tells the story of the Joad family of Sallisaw, Oklahoma. The Joads are sharecroppers—their land is mortgaged to a local bank, and they pay their annual debt with a share of the crops they grow.

The story begins with the return of the family’s second son, Tom, from four years in prison. On the road, he meets Jim Casy, a former itinerant preacher who has had a change of thinking and has left his ministry. Jim has found the rules of organized religion to be in conflict with his feelings about humanity, and has just returned from a journey into the wilderness, trying to work out these issues.

Tom and Jim arrive at the family homestead to find it empty and falling off its foundations. Muley Graves, an old friend, tells them how the Depression and the drought have created conditions that

make it difficult or impossible for families to pay their debts. The banks have forced many families, including the Joads, off their land, in order to consolidate individual farms into large corporate entities. When the authorities come to search for Muley, who has become a renegade, Tom finds himself forced to hide in his own home.

Tom and Jim continue down the road to his Uncle John’s place, where the family is gathered for the imminent move. Based on handbills they have seen promising job opportunities in California, they have decided to move west. The entire family of twelve—Grampa and Grandma; Pa, Ma, and Uncle John; and the children, Noah, Tom, Rose of Sharon (and her husband, Connie), Al, Ruthie, and Winfield—pile all their belongings into a broken-down old jalopy. They add the preacher, Jim Casy, to their load, and they head down Route 66 towards California.

Along their journey, the Joad family is depleted by death and desertion. They encounter friendly fellow travelers and harsh, unwelcoming strangers. They are lied to by greedy businessmen and betrayed by corrupt policemen. They lose almost everything they possess except their human decency. Time and again they see that the individual is helpless against the forces of corruption and greed; and finally they begin to learn that only when good people band together to demand what is rightfully theirs will justice be served.

Published at the apex of the Depression, Steinbeck’s book about dispossessed farmers captured the decade’s angst as well as the nation’s legacy of

fierce individualism, visionary prosperity, and determined westward movement. It was informed in part by documentary zeal, and in part by Steinbeck’s ability to trace mythic and biblical patterns.

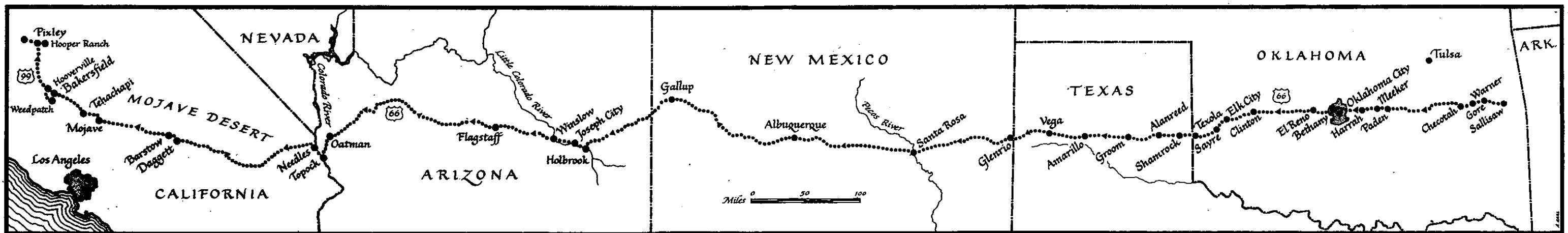
Lauded by critics nationwide for its scope and intensity, *The Grapes of Wrath* attracted an equally vocal minority opinion. Oklahoma Congressman Lyle Boren called it a “dirty, lying, filthy manuscript,” while Californians claimed it was a scourge on the state’s generosity. The self-righteous attacked the book’s honest language and frank images.

Time, however, has decreed *The Grapes of Wrath* to be one of America’s greatest novels. Frank Galati’s Tony Award-winning stage adaptation brings new life to this revolutionary masterpiece. ★

FOR DISCUSSION

- What are Ma’s feelings about the concept of family at the beginning of the play? How do her views change, and what does this change suggest?
- Discuss the characters’ interactions with institutions such as banks, businesses, and law enforcement. How are the characters’ attitudes changed by these experiences? How do they meet the challenges presented by these institutions?
- What elements of allegory do you find in this story? How do characters, settings, and events have both literal and symbolic meaning?
- How does the concept of “home” change as the story moves along?
- What is the significance of water in the story, both real and symbolic?
- What are the implications of the title *The Grapes of Wrath*?

The Joads begin their epic journey in Sallisaw, near the eastern border of Oklahoma. They travel westward across Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona, seeking work opportunities and a new life in California.





John Steinbeck

them *The Moon Is Down* (1942), a novel of Norwegians under the Nazis. He also served as a war correspondent.

With the end of World War II and the move from the Great Depression to economic prosperity, Steinbeck's work softened somewhat. While containing the elements of social criticism that marked his earlier work, the three novels Steinbeck published immediately following the war—*Cannery Row* (1945) and *The Pearl* and *The Bus* (both 1947)—were more sentimental and relaxed in approach. Steinbeck also worked in the movies. He wrote the original story for Alfred Hitchcock's *Lifeboat* (1944) and he wrote the screenplay for Elia Kazan's *Viva Zapata!*, a biographical film about Emiliano Zapata, the Mexican peasant who rose to the presidency.

Steinbeck's later writings were comparatively slight works of entertainment and journalism, but he did make conscientious attempts to reassert his stature as a major novelist in *Burning Bright* (1950), *East of Eden* (1952), and *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961). Although none of these works received the critical reception of his earlier novels, Steinbeck received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1962. He died in New York City in 1968.

Steinbeck's reputation depends mostly on the naturalistic novels with proletarian

themes he wrote during the Depression. It is in these works that Steinbeck is most effective in his building of rich symbolic structures and his attempts at conveying the archetypal qualities of his characters.

As an artist, Steinbeck was a ceaseless experimenter with words and form, and often critics did not see quite what he was up to. He claimed his books had layers, yet many claimed his symbolism was cumbersome. He loved humor and warmth, but some said it slopped over into sentimentalism. He was, and is now recognized as, an environmental writer. He was an intellectual, passionately interested in odd little inventions, in jazz, in politics, in philosophy, history, and myth.

"In every bit of honest writing in the world," he wrote in 1938, "there is a base theme. Try to understand men, if you understand each other you will be kind to each other. Knowing a man well never leads to hate and nearly always leads to love." ★

TO LEARN MORE

Visit this website:

- <http://www.steinbeck.org>
- Or check out these books:
- *The Portable Steinbeck*
published by Penguin
- *John Steinbeck, Writer*
by Jackson J. Benson

John Steinbeck was born in Salinas, California, in 1902, and attended Stanford University intermittently between 1920 and 1926. He did not graduate from Stanford, but instead chose to support himself through manual labor while writing. His experiences among the working classes in California lent authenticity to his depiction of the lives of the workers who are the central characters of his most important novels. Steinbeck spent much of his life in Monterey County, which later was the setting of some of his fiction.

Steinbeck's first novel, *Cup of Gold*, was published in 1929, and was followed by *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932) and *To a God Unknown* (1933). These first three novels were unsuccessful both critically and commercially. Steinbeck had his first success with *Tortilla Flat* in 1935, an affectionate story of Mexican-Americans told with gentle humor. Nevertheless, his subsequent novel, *In Dubious Battle* (1936), was marked by an unrelenting grimness. This novel is a classic account of a strike by agricultural laborers and the pair of Marxist labor organizers who engineer it; it is the first Steinbeck novel to encompass the sharp social commentary of his most notable work. Steinbeck received even greater acclaim for the novella *Of Mice and Men* (1937), a tragic story about the strange, complex bond between two migrant laborers. His crowning achievement, *The Grapes of Wrath*, won Steinbeck a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award. It was also adapted into a classic film directed by John Ford that is number 21 on the American Film Institute's list of 100 Greatest Films.

After the best-selling success of *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck went to Mexico to collect marine life with the freelance biologist Edward F. Ricketts, and the two men collaborated in writing *Sea of Cortez* (1941), a study of the fauna of the Gulf of California. During the Second World War, Steinbeck wrote some effective pieces of government propaganda, among

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