

Social Appeals in *The Grapes of Wrath*
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John Steinbeck was an involved citizen who wished to see society change for the better. He tried to bring about these changes through his novels. One of his novels, *The Grapes of Wrath*, was particularly intended to cause change that would make society better for all individuals. Steinbeck hoped that *The Grapes of Wrath* would bring the American public to a heightened understanding of the migrant farmer. With this greater understanding, he wanted to change people's opinions about these families who were down on their luck. He accomplished this goal by accurately portraying the plight of one family as an example of the plight of all the victims of the Dust Bowl.

To change the way society treated the migrants left homeless by the Dust Bowl, Steinbeck first had to make America understand the migrant. He accomplished this by both giving a general description of life for the many families who lost their homes and their way of life during the Great Depression. He also went deeper by introducing in *The Grapes of Wrath* a particular family that the reader could associate with. The greater portion

of *The Grapes of Wrath* is about this family, the Joads of Oklahoma. This is an honest, likable family who has been run off their farm and who moves to California in hopes of finding work. Even if he has never seen one of the "Okies" who has been forced to roam the country in search of work, the average man could relate to Steinbeck's characters. If Steinbeck could get people to understand his characters, he could gain their sympathy.

Steinbeck did not only want sympathy for the downtrodden migrants of the Great Depression, he wanted to change the way these people were treated. To bring about this change he wrote about the injustices that the migrants suffered in great detail. He hoped that a picture of this struggle would make society change its attitude toward those who struggled. The big land owners, the employers, and the local law enforcers saw the migrants as untrustworthy and dangerous. Steinbeck refuted this claim through a clear picture of the character of the average migrant. The Joads were very honest people who did not want to hurt anybody else, but only wanted to be able to survive. Their only hope was to be able to eat and keep their family together. They had been run off their land in Oklahoma and were beaten off of any plot they settled on for the rest of the novel. Steinbeck hoped that those who read the book would feel sympathy for this family and want

to change the way these honest, hardworking, God-fearing people were treated. To be sure that his audience not only sympathized with the Joads, but with all of the families who were forced to humble themselves in the late thirties, Steinbeck also included chapters that related the Joad's lives to that of all of the migrants of the day. He hoped that this sympathy would make the American public do something about this tragic plight.

Specifically, *The Grapes of Wrath* was a campaign to end the exploitation and unfair treatment of the poor. In the novel Steinbeck describes how the Joads and many others are overcharged when buying necessities and are underpaid when they have to sell their possessions. They also are overworked for insufficient pay. The land owners and employees try to get hundreds more workers than they need, knowing that if there is competition for the job then they can hire workers for wages that wouldn't support one man, much less his family. Steinbeck wanted this unfair practice to end. He believed that the out of work farmers were exploited by the trusts and municipal governments. He hoped people would see this injustice and petition for change.

The Grapes of Wrath was the most important of the reform novels of the Great Depression. It was considered the "*Uncle Tom's Cabin* of the Dust

Bowl." Like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Grapes of Wrath* called for a change by educating America about those who were abused and enslaved by society. It is not clear if Steinbeck did influence the public to the point that of a mass call for redress of these grievances. However, many people were upset by the injustices in his writing, and with the help of other reformers, he convinced the government to come to the aid of the poor and exploited.