

The Beginning: The Camera's Eye

The Grapes of Wrath is one of America's great novels and the zenith of John Steinbeck's career; it is a mature, extraordinarily ambitious and balanced statement of the major themes that dominated his life's work. Free of the heavy-handed symbolism and allegorism that could, at times, damage such lesser Steinbeck novels as the early *To a God Unknown* and the late *Burning Bright*, *The Grapes of Wrath* combines the precise craftsmanship of such shorter works as *In Dubious Battle* and *Of Mice and Men* with the scope and daring of an ambitious and sprawling novel such as *East of Eden*. The result is a tightly unified work of epic dimension whose focus moves smoothly from American people—the Joads and other migrants—to America itself and back again, and brings home to American readers both the intimate reality of the Joad's suffering and the immense panorama of a people's—the Dust Bowl migrants'—suffering. Malcolm Cowley accurately summed up Steinbeck's achievement in this novel when he declared, "A whole literature is summarized in this book and much of it is carried to a new level of excellence."³⁵

In responding to editors' criticism of the book's conclusion even before the novel was published, Steinbeck explained: "Throughout



Tom, and Pa
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I've tried to make the reader participate in the actuality, what he takes from it will be scaled entirely on his own depth or hollowness. There are five layers in this book, a reader will find as many as he can and he won't find more than he has in himself."³⁶ While this is a claim many authors would like to make and while authors' declarations are often best taken with large grains of salt, *The Grapes of Wrath* is, like another great American novel, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a work we can indeed keep peeling for ever more rewarding layers. Much excellent critical analysis has been brought to bear already by such careful readers as Warren French, Peter Lisca, Joseph Fontenrose, Frederic Carpenter, Chester Eisenger, and others. Much exploration, however, remains.

Surprisingly, little critical attention has been directed toward that most logical of starting places: the beginning of the novel. We will start there, with one of the most impressive stylistic accomplishments in American literature.

Paragraph one of *The Grapes of Wrath* opens with an impressionistic swath of color reminiscent of Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* as Steinbeck intones, "To the red country and part of the gray country of Oklahoma, the last rains came gently, and they did not cut the scarred earth." He continues:

The plows crossed and recrossed the rivulet marks. The last rains lifted the corn quickly and scattered weed colonies and grass along the sides of the roads so that the gray country and the dark red country began to disappear under a green cover. In the last part of May the sky grew pale and the clouds that had hung in high puffs for so long in the spring were dissipated. The sun flared down on the growing corn day after day until a line of brown spread along the edge of each green bayonet. The clouds appeared, and went away, and in a while they did not try any more. The weeds grew darker green to protect themselves, and they did not spread any more. The surface of the earth crusted, a thin hard crust, and as the sky became pale, so the earth became pale, pink in the red country and white in the gray country.(1)

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A reader familiar with Steinbeck’s fiction will note immediately a recurrent technique. Almost invariably Steinbeck begins his novels with a carefully realized setting before introducing his characters into the setting that will in a large part define them. Environment in Steinbeck’s fictional worlds imprints itself upon the human inhabitant, and man in turn impresses his character upon that environment. A close look at this paragraph, however, suggests that much more is being accomplished than a simple delineation of place or setting.

The opening line of the novel is broadly panoramic as it evokes “the red country and part of the gray country of Oklahoma. . . .” Following this panoramic, generalized opening, the paragraph begins to focus, to zoom in: “The plows crossed and recrossed the rivulet marks.” And finally, from the vague, impressionistic opening image our vision has closed the distance to focus very closely upon not just “the growing corn” but the “line of brown” that spreads “along the edge of each green bayonet.” At once the novel’s narrative eye begins to pan back to register broader details of clouds and generalized “weeds” until the paragraph ends where it began, with a panoramic image of the earth, which “became pale, pink in the red country and white in the gray country.” In the novel’s second paragraph, the camera’s eye again zooms in for a close-up: “In the water-cut gullies the earth dusted down in dry little streams.” And again this paragraph expands to end with a panorama: “The air was thin and the sky more pale, and every day the earth paled.”

In these first paragraphs, Steinbeck is showing us the dust-blown landscape inhabited by the Joads and all of the other sharecroppers who will soon become the migrants in this novel. By requiring that our first encounter in the novel be not with his protagonists or with any characters at all, but with nature, or environment, he is conveying a message: the primary forces to be contended with in this novel are enormous, irresistible, as great as the earth itself, which, in fact, is what in sum they are. Inexorability and inevitability brood in the constant winds and dry dust. When man appears in this environment he has already been reduced, made to seem powerless before the epic forces that blow across the land.

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Just as importantly, and more subtly, in these opening paragraphs Steinbeck is introducing the pattern upon which his entire novel will be structured: a pattern of expansion and contraction, of a generalized panoramic view of the plight of the migrants in the interchapters, followed, in the narrative chapters, by a close-up of the plight of the representative individuals, the Joads. As early as the novel's opening paragraph the reader is subliminally programmed for this movement in the novel and introduced to the idea that beyond the Joads is the larger phenomenon of the migrants and the Dust Bowl as a whole; beyond the seeming tragedy of the drought and the cropped-out land is the panoramic earth itself. The shifting focus is designed to remind us that the individual tragedies are played out against a backdrop of enduring life. In teleological terms, as defined by Steinbeck and Edward F. Ricketts in *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, the drought, the Dust Bowl, and the tragedy of the migrants seem immeasurable disasters for which blame must be assigned; in nonteleological terms, however, we are reminded by the panoramic sweep of the author's brush that we are seeing only part of the picture, partial indices of what the *Log* defined as "all reality, known and unknowable."³⁷

Paradoxically, such a nonteleological perspective serves to make the Dust Bowl a tragedy only insofar as it is judged according to transient, human values. From a distance, the drought-wasted land is lovely, a sweeping panorama of pastels; up close, the picture becomes one of horror, but only in human terms. For the sharecroppers this is a tragedy; the larger picture suggests that the tragedy is limited, transient, that the earth abides beyond man's errors and short-sightedness. To believe, as the croppers and land owners in this novel do, that one can "kill the land" is to see only part of the picture; they commit the error Joseph Wayne commits in Steinbeck's early novel *To a God Unknown*—that of believing that the land can die. The biblical prose style of these opening paragraphs, recalling the incantatory force of Genesis, also underscores the power of primal creation that precedes man and exists beyond man's ability to affect or effect. Like the people who, drawing their strength from the earth, "go on," as Ma Joad will say later in the novel, the earth cannot be destroyed, and Steinbeck's

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style and tone in these first paragraphs is designed to reinforce that message.

If Steinbeck's message here is that the land cannot die, he nonetheless begins as early as the first paragraph of the novel to subtly imply a degree of human responsibility for the Dust Bowl disaster. In the novel's second sentence, he tells us that "The plows crossed and recrossed the rivulet marks," superimposing an ultimately self-destructive human pattern—the erosion-inducing furrows—upon the natural watershed pattern. The rivulet marks are a sign of the earth's flow, cycle, continuum; their crossing and erasure is a sign of a failure of human understanding. The wheels that "milled the ground," and the hooves that "beat the ground" until "the dirt crust broke and the dust formed" further underscore man's responsibility for the disaster that is depicted in the first paragraphs and developed throughout the novel. By the novel's end, the rain will come again in a great, destructive, cleansing flood, erasing in its turn the pattern of human failure impressed upon the Edenic valleys of California.

Steinbeck also foreshadows the fate of the migrants in these opening paragraphs. The "weed colonies," which are "scattered . . . along the sides of the roads," suggest the colonies of migrants that will soon be scattered the length of Route 66; and the minuscule ant lion trap, a funnel of finely blown sand from which the ant simply cannot escape, is a naturalistic image that serves to define the situation of the sharecroppers. (In chapter 19 the mass of migrants will be compared explicitly to "ants scurrying" across the West.) The sharecroppers have no future in the cropped-out region of blowing dust and sand; they have sealed their fates should they stubbornly struggle to remain. Muley Graves, whose name hints strongly at his character and fate, chooses to remain in the trap, a "graveyard ghos'" without a future.

Through this burnt country cut the tracks of walking men and men's machines, which raise dust clouds as signs of their passage. When Tom Joad appears, he will be the representative walking man, the individual who must learn to accept responsibility for what man has done to himself and to the earth. Along with Tom, the Joads and all of the migrants will be sent on the road on a quest to rethink their

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relationship with both humanity and the land itself. It is a process that Steinbeck critic Warren French has aptly termed the "education of the heart."

Thus, in a few paragraphs, Steinbeck has set the stage for his characters, introduced ingeniously the structural pattern of his novel, defined the dimensions of the forces with which his characters must contend, and suggested man's responsibility for the place he inhabits. Immediately we will see the novel's structure laid out in the movement between narrative chapter—the story of the Joads—and interchapter—the story of the people as a whole. We will see the inexorability of the sharecroppers' eviction from this land, the irresistibility of the forces arrayed against them and the unmistakable culpability of the croppers. All of this is foreshadowed in one of the most brilliant beginnings in American literature.