

Fiction, Empathy, and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*

Elizabeth Ferreira

What is the continued value of the book in the information age?

In 2013, author Neil Gaiman wrote: “[F]iction gives us empathy: it puts us inside the minds of other people, gives us the gifts of seeing the world through their eyes. Fiction is a lie that tells us true things, over and over” (Gaiman, xvi). Arguably, no novel describes the hardships faced by economic migrants as powerfully as John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*. Written in 1939, the book follows a migrant family on their journey from Oklahoma to California in search of a better life. In the midst of the Dust Bowl climate crisis of the 1930s, the Joad family leaves their desiccated farm in an attempt to find the promised land in the California fruit industry. In their journey, the Joads, a white American family, face bigotry, police brutality, and cut-throat competition to find work. Readers empathize with their desperation, not to get ahead, but merely to survive. The book provides a window into human nature when dealing with scarcity and gives a face to migrants suffering at the hands of a capitalist society. While, in the age of information, websites can provide persuasive facts and opinions, novels generate empathy by creating both protagonists and antagonists to whom the reader can relate. Emotion can change our viewpoints if, as the reader, we can identify with multiple characters, closely follow them through the story and see how the decisions they make affect others in the world around them.

A well-crafted novel can allow the reader to look at social issues through an empathetic lens; Steinbeck examines the ills of the agricultural economy in California without directly laying blame at the foot of any particular character. When the Joads have difficulty finding work, it becomes apparent to the reader that both the workers and the landowners are suffering. The farmers are able to grow the food, but they cannot find a way to sell it. Steinbeck writes, “Men

who can graft the trees and make the seed fertile and big can find no way to let the hungry people eat their produce. Men who have created new fruits in the world cannot create a system whereby their fruits may be eaten.” (Steinbeck 448). Instead, their only choice is to “[d]ump potatoes in the rivers and place guards along the banks to keep the hungry people from fishing them out” (448). By illustrating the issues that both the landowners and workers face, Steinbeck blames only “the State” over whom, he writes, hangs failure “like a great sorrow” (448). Because Steinbeck faults the government rather than the people, the reader gradually develops empathy for both sides and comes to understand that a systemic change would benefit everyone.

Emotion is also a very important way to promote change. As the Joad family makes their way west, they encounter a man who is on his way back east. The man recounts that he had relentlessly tried to find work and to provide for his family, but despite his efforts his wife and children starved to death. After hearing this heartbreaking story, one of the men in the group suggests that the man was simply lazy: “Probably shif’less. They’s so goddamn many shif’less fellas on the road now” (246). Even though the remark is cruel, in the context of the story, the reader understands everyone who was listening was desperately clinging to the hope that they would be able to save their own families once they got to California. The callousness of the speaker makes less of an impression on the reader than the fact that all of the characters: the man who lost his family, the man who made the cruel remark, and the Joad family, are facing a humanitarian crisis. The reader is called on to consider the sacrifices that countless migrants make, and the prejudices they often face, when they leave their homes and move to a new place.

Novels are also able to use imagery to send their message, and toward the end of *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck offers his readers a harrowing scene. Throughout the story, Rose of Sharon was excitedly awaiting the birth of her child. When her baby is still-born, due to her

malnourishment, its corpse is placed in an apple box and given to Uncle John to bury. But instead of burying it he places the box into the swollen river “and steadied it with his hand. He said fiercely, ‘Go down an’ tell ‘em. Go down in the street an’ rot and tell ‘em that way. That’s the way you can talk’”(571-572). Steinbeck’s grotesque image, of the bloated corpse of an infant rotting in the road after the flood waters subside, is itself a message. He is showing the reader what can happen when those who are well off, turn their backs on other members of the human race.

Through Wikipedia we can learn facts about the Dust Bowl of the 1930s; through Netflix we can stream documentaries about refugee crises of the past; through Twitter we can shame those whose policies may be responsible for the humanitarian disasters of the present. But unlike these mediums, novels have a powerful ability to transform our point of view from within. *The Grapes of Wrath* was written by Steinbeck more than eighty years ago, to shine light on the experience of white Americans migrating within their own country. However, the book and its themes, and above all its plea for compassion, are still relevant today. The Joad family is certainly familiar. Yet we can also recognize elements of ourselves in so many of the characters in this book: in the naïve migrants, in the self-serving landowners, in the frightened, bigoted Californians and even, at times, in the brutal authorities. This self-recognition can lead us to understand the various sides of social issues more completely.

Works Cited

Gaiman, Neil. "Introduction." *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury, 1953, 60th anniversary ed., Simon and Schuster, 2013, pp. xi-xvi.

Steinbeck, John. *Grapes of Wrath*. New York: Penguin Books, 1976.