

# **The Grapes of Wrath Film Summary**

## **The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck**

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## Context

*The Grapes of Wrath* is based on the classic novel by John Steinbeck about the Joad family's plight during the Great Depression. After Tom Joad is released from prison for murder, he returns to his family's land only to find them gone to California. Once Tom finds his family, he decides to join them on their way to California. They have received handbills announcing a surplus of jobs in the state, so they take a beat up old truck and a little money and head west with thousands of others. When they arrive, though, nothing is what they expected.

Casy, the Joad family's old preacher, goes with them, but he and Tom eventually get in trouble in one of the camps for killing a man. Casy is later murdered for helping start a strike at one of the ranches, and Tom kills his murderer. From that point, Tom has to leave the family, and he begins a journey to help others wherever they need it.

With almost 150 films and six Oscars to his credit, John Ford is widely considered one of the best directors of all time. He directed such films as *How Green Was My Valley* (1941), *December 7th* (1943), *The Battle of Midway* (1942), *My Darling Clementine* (1946), *The Quiet Man* (1952) and *The Searchers* (1956). He is also credited with directing Henry Fonda to fame.

Henry Fonda is best known for the honest men of high integrity that he played in his films. He was beloved by the Midwestern folk whom he resembled. Fonda appeared in such films as *Jesse James* (1939), *Drums Along the Mohawk* (1939), *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939), *The Lady Eve* (1941), *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1943), *My Darling Clementine* (1946) and *Yours, Mine, and Ours* (1968). Beloved by all, he achieved some of his greatest fame for this role as Tom Joad.

Jane Darwell stars as Ma Joad, the strongest of the Joad family. She appeared as Fonda's mother in numerous films and made a name for herself in Hollywood throughout her career as one of the best female actresses. Jane played roles in such films as *Jesse James* (1939), *Private Nurse* (1941), *The Devil and Daniel Webster* (1941), *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1943) and *My Darling Clementine* (1946).

*The Grapes of Wrath* received much praise and was awarded Academy Award nominations for Best Actor in a Leading Role for Henry Fonda; Best Film Editing for Robert L. Simpson; Best Picture for Darryl F. Zanuck and Nunnally Johnson; Best Sound, Recording for Edmund H. Hansen; and Best Writing, Screenplay for Nunnally Johnson. The film also won Oscars for Best Actress in a Supporting Role for Jane Darwell and Best Director for John Ford.



## Summary and Analysis

*The Grapes of Wrath* begins with a man walking down the center of a lonely highway. He walks up to a store and asks a man for a ride on his truck. Even though the man has a sign that he can't have any riders, he gives the guy a ride. The hitchhiker is on his way to his dad's place. The driver notices that the man has been swinging a pickaxe or sledgehammer, and the man goes ahead and admits that he was in jail for killing someone. The man lets him out and drives off quickly.

Tom begins walking to the forty acres that his dad sharecrops. He sees a man sitting on the ground singing and stops to talk. The man is Tom's old preacher, who says he no longer has the calling. Tom remembers the man's famous sermons where he was always acting crazy. Tom suggests that the man should have gotten a wife, but he says that he always ended up loving girls after he helped them. He saved their souls by sleeping with them. Tom says he sinned too; he killed a man in a dance hall while he was drunk.

Casy, the man, decides to go with Tom to see Tom's family. They remember the good times with Tom's Pa and Ma. Finally, a driving wind kicks up, and they arrive at the house. It's dark and empty. They light a match and take a look around. Casy didn't hear that the family was dead, but he doesn't know what happened. A moment later, Muley Graves knocks at the door and tells Tom that his parents have gone to see his Uncle John's family. After fifty years, everyone is leaving to go to California, except Muley.

The dusters came and told them that the cattle company wanted the families to get off the land. They can make a larger profit without all the people living there. The men don't know who is to blame, but they just tell the families to get off. As Muley tells the story, the audience sees the events replayed on the screen. In the end, Muley falls to the ground and claims the land as his because family has died on it.

In the present, Muley tells the men that the tractors came and pushed everyone off the land. A hundred folks were thrown off their land, and the only place they could go was onto the road. When the tractors came, Muley tried to shoot the man on the tractor, but it was someone he knew. The tractor driver is just worried about his own family, and then he rolls right over Muley's house.

Tom doesn't feel that it should be possible to be kicked off the land like that. Muley couldn't bear to leave, so his family went on without him, and he sleeps wherever he finds. He feels like he's just a ghost now. Tom just can't imagine his parents taking this kind of treatment because they're so tough. Tom figures he'll spend the night and go to John's the next day. Suddenly, they see lights outside, and Muley says that they have to hide. They're trespassing on private property now. Tom finally agrees to hide when Casy reminds him that he's on parole. Tom can't believe he has to hide out at his own place.

At Uncle John's house, the entire family is crammed into one house. Grandpa and Grandma Joad are having a great adventure. They're ready to head to California and



eat grapes and make their fortunes at last. Tom and Casy arrive, and the family rejoices. Tom's Ma is worried about how people treated him in the prison because it could have made him mean. He reassures her that he's okay.

Then, Tom sees the rest of the family. Rose-of-Sharon is now married to a man named Connie Rivers, and they are expecting in a few months. While they are still celebrating, two men drive up to remind them that they must get off the land by sunup since the tractors are coming through the next morning.

The family has a couple of hundred dollars to buy a car and head out to California. Everyone works on getting things ready, and finally early in the morning they are ready to head out to California. Grandpa is missing, and as they look for him, Tom realizes that the truck is running on the wheels. Grandpa comes running out and claims that he's not going. He has decided that he's going to stay put; it's his land. The rest of the family decides to get him drunk enough that he'll pass out so that they can toss him in the truck. When Grandpa's finally ready, the family sets out and takes Casy along with them.

Ma tries to stay strong when she realizes that she has no choice but to move to California. She tells Al, Tom's brother, that she will do what she has to do. They make their way along Route 66 and finally stop off on the side of the road for a rest. Grandpa cries that he's not going to go, and they lie him down on the ground to rest.

Grandpa dies that night. During the night, Tom reads the note in the family Bible about Grandpa's stroke. They leave the note on him. Casy agrees to say a few words over Grandpa, even though he's not a preacher anymore. He says that Grandpa has the best thing, since he no longer has to suffer in life. The family weeps over his grave.

As the family continues traveling, they eventually come to a camp where they spend the night. Connie sings as the families in the camp relax. They are people from all over - Oklahoma, Arkansas and others - who are bonding together. They all believe that California can't be worse than home. A man laughs at them. He's just been there, and he's going back to starve at home. This man saw the handbills as well and points out that these owners print 5,000 copies, and 5,000 people see the handbills and set out to get 800 jobs.

The travelers get mad at the man, but he tells them that he just wanted to let them know now what it took him a year, two dead children and a dead wife to find out. His children died of heart failure as a result of starvation. Everyone gets tired of hearing his story and goes to bed. Tom is worried that the man is telling the truth, but he isn't convinced that this will be the case for them as well.

The family finally begins to have car trouble and stops to let it cool. The owner asks if they have money, and they get in trouble. Pa Joad goes in and asks for a loaf of bread, but the restaurant only wants to sell sandwiches. They want to buy a loaf for a dime, and the chef finally makes the girl sell him a loaf for that price. They still have a thousand miles left to go and have to be careful with the cost. The woman also gives



the children some candy at a bargain. After they walk out, a truck driver at the restaurant catches on that she's helping them out of her own pocket, and she tells him to mind his own business. He pays and leaves her enough change to cover the cost of helping the Joads.

When the family finally reaches the California state line, they stop to look over the lake. Connie isn't impressed, but Rose-of-Sharon tries to reassure him. Grandma's not impressed either, but everyone tries to remain optimistic. As they get back on to the road, the truck almost tips over, but they make it. They arrive in Needles and take baths in the lake.

At a gas station, the man tells them that he would never try to go across the desert in such a beat-up old car. Grandma is now lying in the back whispering that she wants Grandpa. Ma tries to soothe her, and they start back on their way. The men at the station feel like the Joads can't be human because no human being could stand to be so miserable.

As the Joad family crosses the desert in the night, the kids talk about cowboys and Indians. Grandma begins crying for Grandpa, but Ma tells her that the family has to get across. Rose-of-Sharon begins complaining, and Connie is upset that the couple went on with Rose-of-Sharon's family. He wanted to be a radio expert not a traveler.

Officers stop the car at the California boarder to inspect it. They want everyone out of the car, but Ma explains that Grandma is extremely ill. The men agree to let them go on so that they can stop to see a doctor a little further on. Of course they don't stop, and then next morning they are pushing their car. Finally, they come to a ridge where they can see down into a beautiful valley full of vineyards and orchards. Ma gets out of the truck last, and she looks completely exhausted. Tom goes over to her, and she's thrilled to finally be across. She tells him that Grandma's been dead since before the stop the night before.

The family pushes the truck to a filling station in a small town. A cop stops them and talks to them. He is from near their home in Oklahoma and tells them that they should go to the camp during the night rather than parking in town. He tells them that whoever sent out the handbills should be locked up. At the transient camp, they see many families just like themselves. Everyone is sitting around, and the Joads set up their camp so that they can have some dinner.

A bunch of little children come up to Ma looking for food. Some of the families are waiting to find money for gas so that they can continue on to somewhere else, since there's no work in the area. Ma wants to help the children, but she has to feed the family first. Tom sends the children away because they don't have enough food to help them, but they all stand around. Ma sends the children to get plates so that she can help the children.

Later, a nice car pulls into the camp and ask some the Joads and the others if they want to work. The men won't give a specific price for the work, and one worker tries to get the



men looking for workers to give them a contract. The men refuse to give a contract, so one of the camp men tells everyone that these men get 5,000 workers when they only need 1,000, and they pay half what they suggest they'll pay. They try to take the protesting man into custody, but he runs away. A woman is shot by one of the men trying to get workers. Casy is concerned that Tom will get in trouble for breaking parole after he hits the guy who's shooting, so Tom runs to hide.

The police arrive in the camp and start looking for the perpetrators. Casy is standing by the policeman who Tom hit and claims that he did the job. The police also call a doctor for the woman that was shot, and they drive off with Casy in their car.

Tom finally returns to the camp and tells Al and the others that they have to leave immediately. Tom has heard that the camp is going to be burned out in the night, and they could all be killed. Connie disappeared in the evening and left Rose-of-Sharon. Inside the tent, Rose-of-Sharon is crying, and Tom tries to tell her that everything will be okay. She doesn't know how to live without Connie, but Tom knows that Connie will eventually show back up. The Joads and many other families pack up and leave the camp, but Rose-of-Sharon is afraid that they're leaving Connie behind. Tom is becoming full of hate because of the way they are being treated.

As the Joad family leaves the camp, they see a group of men with lights who are heading toward the camp. They stop the car and want to know where they're going. Tom says that he heard there was work, and the man informs them that they don't want any more Okies in town. He insists that they go north until the cotton's ready. The next day, they get another flat tire. Ma points out to the men that Rose-of-Sharon will be due soon, and they are almost out of food. A man stops on the side of the road and tells them where to go to find work picking peaches. They thank the man and hurry to the ranch.

When the family arrives, the Joads find that the police are there. People are standing around on the side of the road. They send the Joads to pull up in line so that they can get work. Tom doesn't like the situation, but they need work desperately. They finally get inside and are sent to a tiny house on the property along with all the other families. There are children standing around looking hopeless as the trucks drive through. The wages are five cents a box with no bruised fruit, and they get ready to settle into their house.

Two men come and get all the information they need on Tom and the rest of the family, and Tom feels extremely uncomfortable with all the questions. Ma is glad to finally have a floor. Two more men bring a wheelbarrow up and give the family buckets so that they can get to work. The family watches as even the women and children go to work in the fields.

That night at dinner, Ma feeds the family on what they made that day. The company store is more expensive than other stores, so they can't afford a lot. Tom wants to go find out what was going on earlier at the gate, but they warn him to be careful and not get into trouble. He tries to go for a walk, but one of the ranch men stops him and



threatens to take him back if he doesn't go on his own. Later, though, Tom sneaks out toward the front of the camp. He comes upon a bunch of men in a camp and finds Casy, who was run out of town by the police.

Casy and the others tell him that the workers are on strike. They all have been working there, but when more people came, the pay went down to 2.5 cents per box. If they end the strike, the prices will go down again, for the Joads and the rest as well. Tom believes that no one will strike while they have a chance to get some meat. Casy tells him that Tom needs to learn.

Tom feels uncomfortable, since he keeps thinking he hears something. Casy explains that the guards have been threatening to run them out of town. They all begin to hear something and realize that a lot of guys are coming after them. Casy, Tom and the others go to hide, but the guards surround them. One of them kills Casy, so Tom retaliates and kills him.

The men noticed a scar Tom has and expect to find him soon. He runs back to the house as the sirens begin squealing. They hide Tom while Ma tries to find out what the word is outside. Tom's cheek is busted, and the people know that the murderer was hit in the face. He apologizes to Ma, but she tells him it's okay. She understands that he had to do it. Ma knows that there's hardly anything to keep them all together now. They're not a family anymore. She's worried about Winfield and Ruthie and Al, who is ready to go off on his own. Ma asks Tom to stay and help her, and he finally agrees.

A car pulls up outside, and Ma hears a man outside being told that they will be paid 2.5 cents for a bucket of peaches. Tom finally realizes that Casy was right. He feels that Casy was a lantern, showing them the truth. Ma says that they'll leave in the night. Finally, they pack up and hide Tom under a blanket. Some of the guards stop them but let them go even though the "hitchhiker" that came in with them left separately.

After driving all night, the Joads pull over on the side of the road. The car is overheated, and there are some other problems now. Pa sees lights about a mile ahead, and Al says they'll have to try to coast the car in. The family arrives at the Farm Workers' Wheat Patch Camp run by the Department of Agriculture. A kind gentleman meets them and tells them where to go. This place has showers and washtubs. No cops come in, and the people choose their own rules. The women will come by to tell Ma about the schools. Tom decides that they should sign up and sends Al and the rest on ahead. The man asks for their name and how many there are in the family. The campsite costs a dollar a week, but they can also work off the money by doing chores. Tom is relieved to hear that normal people are running the camp, and the camp even has dances. The government runs the place, but the man can't tell him why there aren't more places like it.

When Tom gets in the camp, he can't believe all the children who are running around and playing. There's even running water available. Ma and the children are thrilled with the new camp; Ruthie and Winfield are especially impressed with the toilets and the sinks. They've never seen them before.





Tom finds work digging ditches, and he has a kind boss. The boss warns them that there is going to be a problem at the dance the next week. The people in the community want to burn out the camp because of the Reds. The men make plans to keep any fights to a minimum so that the cops can't get in.

Everyone is having a great time at the dance as friends come in, but a few rough-looking men make their way in. The men of the camp are concerned and decide to try to find out if they are really supposed to be there. Ma and Rose-of-Sharon sit quietly at the dance, and the men of the camp find out that the men standing behind them are strangers. They try to keep a close watch on the men, and a young boy reports that men are waiting outside the camp in cars. Tom doesn't understand why the cops won't just let them alone. They have a plan and get ready to put it in action.

While everyone is dancing, the strange men try to start a fight, but the men take care of the problem. The deputy sheriffs drive up then to announce that they're there to take care of the riot. The head of the camp won't let them in, and after checking their watches, they leave.

During the night, several men with lanterns walk around and look at the Joads' car. Tom wakes up and sees them writing down the license plate number. As Tom listens, the men talk about how they'll have a warrant for arrest as soon as they check with headquarters, and then they drive off. Tom begins quietly packing up his things until Ma asks him to tell her goodbye.

The audience hears a train in the distance, and Tom sits down with his mother. He wants to see the family settled someplace nice, but he wants the family to be safe. He's been thinking about Casey and wants to be like him. He then begins a monologue about how unfair things are for the poor. If he's already an outlaw, he might as well work toward a good cause. She wants to know where he is and what he's doing, but he tells her that she'll hear about him over time. Tom figures that everyone might be part of one big soul. He'll be everywhere - when people are fighting, eating, living and dying, he'll be there. She kisses him goodbye, and he says he'll try to find her someday when things blow over.

Pa, Ma, and the others pack up not too much later to go find work further north. Rose-of-Sharon isn't feeling well, but they tell her that she'll be okay. Ma feels like at one time they were almost beat, but not anymore. Pa tells her that she's the one that keeps them going; he can only think of home now. She explains that life is like a stream for a woman, but a man lives in jerks. They're tough, though, and she reminds him that they'll go on forever because they're the people.



# Characters

## Tom Joad, played by Henry Fonda

### Description

Tom Joad is a young man who has just been released from prison after a stint for homicide. His family has been forced off their land because of the Great Depression, so he finds them and goes along to California where rumor has it there are jobs aplenty for everyone. Tom joins them in an effort to help out and finds that the difficulties are much worse than he ever expected.

Tom also invites Casy to come along with them. Although Tom tries to stay out of trouble, it seems that he just can't completely avoid it. When a man is attacked in the camp, Tom attacks the policeman. He is able to stay with the family, though, because Casy turns himself in to the police instead.

Later, Tom runs into Casy while in a new camp. Casy is leading a strike outside the ranch to help the workers get fair pay. While Tom speaks with him, he learns of all the terrible actions of the ranch. When Casy is attacked, Tom kills the attacker and then commits himself to following in Casy's footsteps.

### Analysis

Tom believes that there will be jobs out West and is happy to help the family on their way. Over the years, he has become hardened to difficulties, and he is strong for the family. Tom ends up becoming the main leader of the family next to his mother.

Tom decides at last to follow in Casy's footsteps. He believes in Casy's ideals after experiencing the hardships of life on the road and the injustice to the poor. As he tells Ma goodbye, he explains that he will live on anywhere that there is hardship and injustice.

## Ma Joad, played by Jane Darwell

### Description

Ma Joad is the head of the Joad household. She is strong and brave and keeps everyone in order. Ma helps everyone make the decision to move West when they have no way left to survive at their homes.

On the road, Ma remains calm in every situation. When the family is trying to cross the line into California, she realizes that they cannot be stopped. She tells the guards that



there is a very sick woman in the truck, even though Grandma has already passed away during the night. No one knows the truth until they stop later the next morning.

## Analysis

Ma is calm and collected in every situation. Pa feels like a failure, but she keeps pushing him to believe in himself and in their lives. She refuses to give up on anyone, and even when the older people die, she remains in control of the situation, making sure everything goes as planned.

Ma and Tom have a special relationship. They understand each other well, especially since they are the two primary supports of the family. As they work to keep everyone together, their private conversations reveal more about their personalities and beliefs than anything else in the film.

## Casy, played by John Carradine

### Description

Casy is the former preacher that often visited Tom and his family. He was a revival man who lived on the money collected from the people. Casy finally quit that way of life because he felt that he wasn't living what he preached. He meets up with Tom again when Tom returns home.

Casy travels with the family out to California. He continues encouraging them along the way. After Tom attacks a man, Casy takes the blame so that Tom can stay with his family. Tom meets him again as Casy is leading a strike outside a ranch where workers are being cheated.

Casy preaches to Tom and the other men about honesty, integrity and justice. The guards at the ranch find the little group, and Casy dies trying to protect them all. When Tom finally has to leave the family, he tells his mother that he plans to follow in Casy's footsteps to help the weak and downtrodden.

### Analysis

Casy becomes a Savior figure for the story. He dies for others and causes others to want to keep his legacy going. Casy wants everyone to be happy and to be treated fairly. Because of this, he sacrifices himself for Tom to keep the family together, as Tom is one of the stronger members.

Casy continues his preaching not necessarily in the name of Jesus, but on behalf of the people who need help. With thousands out of work and trying to find jobs, he believes that they should still be treated fairly. Casy speaks out for justice and encourages Tom and others like him to do the same.



## **Grandpa Joad, played by Charley Grapewin**

### **Description**

Grandpa Joad is a strong, stubborn man. He has spent years on his land, and he doesn't want to leave. Instead of just dealing with the facts, he insists on being allowed to stay on his own terms. Rather than going willingly, he forces his family to drag him along and then dies along the way instead of going to California.

### **Analysis**

Rooted in tradition, Grandpa Joad refuses to give up his way of life. When he is finally left with no choice, he chooses to die rather than live on anyone else's terms.

## **Rose-of-Sharon Rivers, played by Dorris Bowdon**

### **Description**

Rose-of-Sharon Rivers is Tom's sister. She is pregnant and married to a young man named Connie. Rose-of-Sharon seems to be one of the weaker siblings, and she is completely distraught when her young husband abandons her and her child.

### **Analysis**

Throughout the film, viewers are able to observe a change in Rose-of-Sharon. She begins as a weak young woman who has no backbone and turns into a true woman. She becomes strong as she works alongside her mother through the family's hardships.

## **Pa Joad, played by Russell Simpson**

### **Description**

Pa Joad is the weaker half of the couple. He wants to take good care of his family, but the bosses and banks have left him with few ways to care for everyone. He finally packs everyone up, and they start out West. Although they make it to California, Pa is terribly disappointed by the prospects.

### **Analysis**

Pa needs Ma's support more than anything. Pa wants to take care of his family, but when things aren't perfect, he has difficulty dealing with the consequences. Ma is constantly giving him encouragement, and viewers see that she is truly the stronger of the two.



## **Al Joad, played by O.Z. Whitehead**

### **Description**

Al is Tom's younger brother who stays with his family. Al knows a lot about cars, and he does most of the driving and taking care of the cars as the family travels West.

### **Analysis**

Al has missed his older brother in the years Tom has been gone. Now that Tom is back, the two work together with the family to survive the tough times and the trip to California.

## **Muley Graves, played by John Qualen**

### **Description**

Muley Graves is one of the Joads' neighbors. They have known him for years, and Tom is surprised to find him at the empty house. Muley let the rest of his family leave without him, since he just couldn't stand the thought of leaving the home he has known for so long.

### **Analysis**

Muley is committed to staying with his land. Although his house has already been destroyed by the tractors, he continues to stay in other peoples' homes. Muley perseveres against the powers that be, even though his hopes of success are minimal.



# Themes

## Desperation

The Great Depression was a time of desperation among many families in America. As banks and large corporations took over most of the farmland in the Midwest, these families, commonly known by the degrading term "Okies," fled to California to find jobs advertised by handbills.

The Joad family has seen these handbill, and like all the others, they are convinced that there is ample work in California. They receive some warnings along the way about the dire conditions, but their desperation keeps them going. They have no other choices. They want to stay together and survive any way they can.

Desperation is a driving force for this large family. Even after the grandparents both die on the road, they keep going, their persistence never flagging. Although they are disappointed by California, they are committed to staying together and surviving in any way possible.

## Importance of Family

The Joads know all about the importance of family. When Tom returns home, the first place he goes is to visit his family. He realizes that they are the most important people in his life, and he and Casy find them as quickly as possible.

Throughout the Joads' long journey, the family relies on one another to make it through. After both grandparents die, everyone struggles to see the light at the end of the tunnel, but they work together to survive.

As Ma reminds Rose-of-Sharon after Connie leaves, family is the only thing you can count on, and he was just a bad egg. The family eats, works, laughs and cries together. Even though they are separated because of Tom's actions, they believe that they will always be a family.

## Changing the World

Casy is the former preacher who goes with Tom and the Joads to California. He has spent his life preaching to others but feels like a hypocrite since he can't live the life he tells them to live. He is depressed and lonely when he and Tom meet again at the Joads' old home.

When Casy arrives in California and sees how terribly everyone is treated, he is upset. After being arrested in Tom's place, Casy is kicked out of town and begins to lead strikes around the state asking for rights for workers.



Casy is finally murdered by some guards at a ranch where he is picketing, but first he tells Tom that he believes they can change the workers' lives and the world one action at a time. After Tom is forced to run away, he tells Ma that he also plans to go out and change the world, following in Casy's steps.

## Style and Cinematography

*Grapes of Wrath* is a classic film based on the novel by John Steinbeck. Unlike many films, this film follows the book closely. Although some things are changed or removed for the purposes of time and tone, the main narrative of the novel is followed. Just like the novel, this film pushes for change in the ideas of the general public and the actions of the government.

*The Grapes of Wrath* is filmed in black and white because of the time period in which it was made, but the use of black and white is actually more effective for this film. The dramatic effects are often achieved through the shades of black, white and gray. Darker scenes often reveal danger or mystery, while lighter scenes represent hope and joy.

The acting in the film is also exceptional. The characters come to life in all the fullness of John Steinbeck's characters. Fonda creates one of his most memorable characters in the form of Tom Joad, while Jane Darwell gives one of the greatest performances of her career as the strong, stable Ma Joad.



# Motifs

## The Great Depression

The Great Depression was the worst financial disaster in American history. When the stock market crashed, the banks closed, and suddenly everyone was broke and out of work. John Steinbeck's novel and the film based on it chronicle the life of one family caught in this disaster.

The Joads lose their home as the Great Depression begins. Although they have been hard-working sharecroppers for years, the bank is forced to turn the land over to corporations in order to get out from under the debt caused by this disaster.

As with so many other families, the Joads are forced West to find work. When this film came out, the country was just coming out of the Depression, and they remembered it vividly. Viewers could easily relate to the Joads, and many had been in their same situation at one point or another.

## Stops Along the Way

As the family makes their stops along the way, their story and those of others are told vividly and dramatically. Viewers also see that there are warning signs along the way about the prospects in California, but the Joads and other families remains stubborn, believing that things will be different for them.

One of the first stops for the Joads is at the diner along the highway. There, they explain to the woman that they are trying to keep their costs as low as possible. She gives them food for less than it is worth and even lets the children have some candy. Her kindness is noticed by a truck driver, who then gives her money to cover the cost. The audience realizes that those not dealing with such dire troubles are happy to help those in need.

Later, the Joads stop at a camp for the evening and join other families around the campfire. They all share the stories of having to leave home for a far-off place in order to care for their families. This is also where they first hear of the scarcity of jobs and food in California. The families are determined, though, and refuse to turn back.

## Speeches

Several speeches are made throughout the film, and they help tell the story of the Joads and other families. Viewers learn more about the people from these stories and realize that they are hardworking, only wanting the best for their families.

One of the first speeches the audience hears is delivered by Ma Joad as the family gets ready to leave. She reminds them that as long as they stay together, they will always be



a strong, loving family. Later in the journey, she also talks about how they simply can't seem to keep everyone together.

At the end of the film, Tom gives his own speech. As he talks to Ma, he tells her that he will be anywhere that people are hungry, thirsty or in need. He believes that they can change the world if they all stick together and keep working toward the same goal.

# Symbols

## The Tractors

As Tom hears the story of the family's land, viewers see the tractors mowing down fields and houses. They come in droves and are driven by people from the area who are trying to keep their own families alive.

The tractors are symbolic of the changing lives of those in the Midwest and of the seemingly unstoppable power of those with wealth, the landowners and banks. Although families care for their neighbors, many people have to change their focus to themselves in order to survive. They quickly realize that to keep their families alive, they might have to work for the bad guys, as the men on the tractors recognize.

On the other hand, many people like the Joads are forced to move from the homes that they have known for so long and find a new life. Although Muley Graves tries to stay, he is not likely to survive there for long. The tractors push down the houses and push families out of their old lives.

## The River

The Joad family travels thousands of miles to arrive in California. They know nothing about the state besides what they have seen on the handbills offering jobs for everyone. When the family finally arrives in California and looks over the river, they are skeptical but hopeful nonetheless.

The river is symbolic of crossing into a new world. It evokes the Israelites entering into the Promised Land. The Bible tells the story of how the Israelites looked into the Promised Land before going over. The Joads are hoping that California will be their Promised Land, but even as they look over into this new place, Tom and the others are a little skeptical.

## Casy's Death

Casy serves as a Savior figure in the film. He is constantly discussing life and how people should live. When he sees the way people are being treated, he simply cannot handle that. He feels that he must make a difference somehow, and he goes out to change the world.

Casy's death is symbolic of self-sacrifice and martyrdom, referencing the death of Christ. Through discussions with Casy, Tom has become motivated to make changes as well. Although Tom is being hunted for killing Casy's murderer, he also has another reason to hit the road; he wants to follow in Casy's footsteps and help make changes.

Casy inspires many people to demand changes in the way workers are treated. Casy feels that there is no reason for this type of injustice, and he wants workers to stand up for themselves and demand changes.



## Essay Questions

Why has Tom been in jail? What does this say about his character?

What has happened to Tom's home when he returns? How widespread is this issue?

Where do Tom and his family go and why? Who goes with them?

Why do Tom and the Joads decide to take the trip?

What kinds of information do Tom and his family hear along the way?

When the Joad family arrives, what do they find?

Who dies along the way on the Joads' trip? How are these deaths important to the story?

What happens to Connie? How does this relate to the theme of family?

How does Casy die?

What is Tom's goal when he leaves the family?