

"The Grapes of Wrath" and the Dust Bowl

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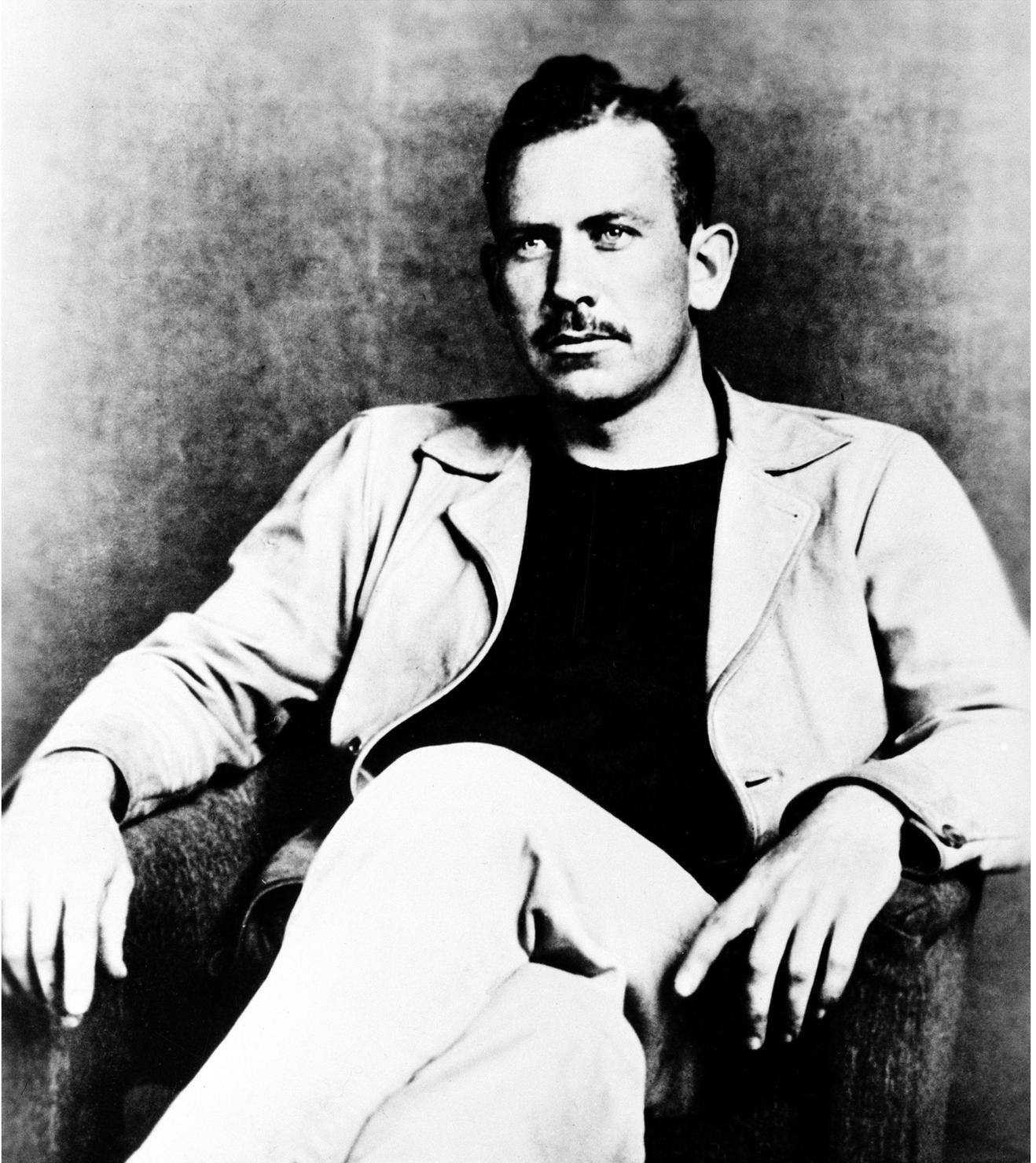
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Desolation in this part of the Dust Bowl is graphically illustrated by these rippling dunes banked against a fence, farmhouse, barn and windmill in Guymon, Oklahoma, in 1937. This property was abandoned by its owner when destructive dust clouds forced him to seek fortune elsewhere. Photo: AP.

In 1939, author John Steinbeck published "The Grapes of Wrath." In the novel, Steinbeck writes about the Joads, a family of sharecroppers from Sallisaw, Oklahoma. They were forced to migrate west during the Dust Bowl years.

Steinbeck describes an important period in American history. Its setting is the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl and the American West. Steinbeck won the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for "The Grapes of Wrath." He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962.



What was the Dust Bowl?

It is impossible to understand the Joads without understanding the Dust Bowl. The Dust Bowl was a series of dust storms brought on by drought and erosion in the Great Plains region in the 1930s. It was both a human and an environmental disaster.

Chad Kauffman is a professor of earth sciences at California University of Pennsylvania. He explains that drought was not the only factor at play, however.

"There was a human influence on the Dust Bowl, as well," he said. Farmers used bad agricultural methods and did not understand the nature of the Great Plains.

The region saw less rainfall than usual in the 1930s. It was really the modifications humans made to the landscape that led to erosion, though. Farmers plowed up native grasses, which exposed the topsoil. The deep roots of the grasses held the soil in place. Without the plants, the soil was exposed to the weather and blew away.

"We didn't understand how important natural grasses were to the ecology and physical landscape of the Great Plains," Kauffman said.

At the same time, the Great Depression was taking place. It was a worldwide economic collapse that left many families devastated, especially farmers. For many, the only choice they had was to leave and go to California.

Steinbeck's social lens on environmental history



Many of these families ended up in the Salinas Valley, where John Steinbeck lived most of his life. Some of the themes in his books are Dust Bowl migration, the creation of a Californian identity, and the human connection with the environment. These were all deeply personal topics for Steinbeck.

"This book is about a huge topic," said Susan Shillinglaw, a Steinbeck scholar and the author of "On Reading The Grapes of Wrath."

"It's about a migration of over 500,000 people coming into California and the environmental disaster that caused it. How do you write about weather patterns, drought, migration, and identity at once, as it is happening?"

Shillinglaw said Steinbeck met the challenge by telling the story of a family and wove in information that explained the larger cultural and historical context.

"He structured the book so that it moves from one family to many families, to the human experience," Shillinglaw said.

"The Grapes of Wrath" became very controversial. Congress held hearings that changed laws governing migrant camps.

In truth, though, families like the Joads faced awful living and working conditions throughout their migration.

Community reaction to migrants and the book

Lifelong Salinas resident Dorothy Wallace grew up next door to the Steinbeck family. Like Steinbeck and everyone else in her community, she saw migrant families like the Joads arrive in droves, many living in cardboard boxes in camps. She remembers how her community reacted to the migrants, and then to Steinbeck's book.

"If you were making money, you didn't like [Steinbeck]. If you were coming up through the classes, you were a fan of him. But even those that disliked him respected his writing. He just wrote things as they really were. I remember everything exactly as the way he wrote it," she said.

Wallace said that everyone disliked Okies, which was an insulting name for the migrants. "But his books helped people see that they were just here looking for work and trying to pull themselves up, and in the end they did."

She said that many of the migrants became very successful farmers in California, and then people's attitudes began to change.

California drought

"The Grapes of Wrath" still has a great influence today. California recently experienced a severe drought. Experts saw many similarities with the events in the book. It is not a bad idea to take notes from the past when moving toward the future.

As Ma Joad says in the book, “Up ahead they's a thousan' lives we might live, but when it comes it'll on'y be one.”

Quiz

- 1 Read the section "Community reaction to migrants and the book."

Select the paragraph from the section that suggests that people had strong opposing reactions to "The Grapes of Wrath" because it was so realistic.

- 2 Read the inference below.

Steinbeck's work helped to create positive social change for migrants.

Which sentence from the article provides the BEST support to the statement above?

- (A) It's about a migration of over 500,000 people coming into California and the environmental disaster that caused it.
- (B) Congress held hearings that changed laws governing migrant camps.
- (C) She said that many of the migrants became very successful farmers in California, and then people's attitudes began to change.
- (D) "The Grapes of Wrath" still has a great influence today.

- 3 Read the paragraph from the section "What was the Dust Bowl?"

At the same time, the Great Depression was taking place. It was a worldwide economic collapse that left many families devastated, especially farmers. For many, the only choice they had was to leave and go to California.

Why did the author include this paragraph in the article?

- (A) to emphasize the idea that many believed California was a good place for migrant workers
- (B) to illustrate the effects of the Great Depression on people beyond the Dust Bowl
- (C) to elaborate on the events that caused the situation Steinbeck was writing about
- (D) to indicate that the Great Depression was more important to Steinbeck than the Dust Bowl

- 4 What is MOST likely the reason the author included information about Shillinglaw's work in the article?
- (A) to introduce the topics of migration and environment that inspired Steinbeck
 - (B) to illustrate that she writes about similar themes and topics to Steinbeck
 - (C) to emphasize the admiration that other writers feel for Steinbeck and his work
 - (D) to elaborate on the way Steinbeck was able to include many themes in his work