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Capturing the Communal American Experience in “The Grapes of Wrath”

With the 14th annual John Howard Birss, Jr., Memorial Lecture Series and associated events underway, explore John Steinbeck’s celebrated novel in these vivid passages from “The Grapes of Wrath”



Portrait of an 18-year-old mother with two children who are penniless and stranded in Imperial Valley, Calif., after leaving Oklahoma. Photograph taken by Dorothea Lange in March, 1937, for the Farm Security Administration. Image Credit: Dorothea Lange/Farm Security Administration

February 11, 2014 | Jill Rodrigues '05

BRISTOL, R.I. – Alternating between creative prose and journalistic-style passages, [John Steinbeck](#) composed some of the most vivid and realistic portrayals of the American farmer contending with environmental change at the hands of man in his masterpiece novel, “The Grapes of Wrath.”

Tackling the pressing issues of the day – many of which still resonate with contemporary Americans – including the widening gap between rich and poor via the [Great Depression and unlegislated wages and labor laws](#), and the [environmental catastrophe of the Dust Bowl](#) and how that impacted the lives of everyone in the country, Steinbeck tells his story through the plight of the Joads, a displaced farming family from Oklahoma. A social realist at heart and in his writings, Steinbeck toils

to authentically depict the events and people mired within who have had their farmland taken by climate change and big business, forcing a move West to seek a new life or, at least, endure. But Steinbeck also weaves in a silver lining – the collective spirit of the working man and his family who grow to learn that they must lean on each other to survive.

“Steinbeck is arguing for us to be a more communal country – that kind of communal spirit is at heart of the novel,” says James Tackach, professor of English and organizer of the 75th anniversary celebration of “The Grapes of Wrath” as part of the annual **Professor John Howard Birss, Jr. Memorial Lecture Series**.

“It’s been part of the American experience since John Winthrop gave his sermon to a group of Puritans sailing from England to Boston in 1630. The famous line from that sermon is that America should be a ‘city upon a hill’ – a model of Christian charity. We need to take care of each other and share one another’s burdens. That’s at the heart of the American experience – when we’re at our best that’s what we do.”

Prepare for the full sweep of events surrounding the Birss Series – which studies in depth a significant work of American literature each year – with these selected passages from the novel below. Then head to the [book discussion group](#) on Thursday, February 13, at 4 p.m. in the Mary Tefft White Cultural Center, stopping on the way in the University Library foyer to view a [special library exhibition of Steinbeck’s works and memorabilia](#); and finally, hear the [keynote address by Robert DeMott](#) – Ohio University distinguished professor emeritus of American literature and author of “Working Days: The Journals of *The Grapes of Wrath*,” among other books on Steinbeck’s works – on Wednesday, Feb. 26 at 4:00 p.m. in FCAS 162.

- **Depicting the Dust Bowl:** “Every moving thing lifted the dust into the air: a walking man lifted a thin layer as high as his waist, and a wagon lifted the dust as high as the fence tops, and an automobile boiled a cloud behind it. The dust was long in settling back again.” (Narrative passage.)
- **Evil Among Us:** “Here’s me that used to give all my fight against the devil ‘cause I figgered the devil was the enemy. But they’s somepin worse’n the devil got hold a the country, an’ it ain’t gonna let go till it’s chopped loose.” (Said by former preacher Jim Casy.)
- **Rise of the Machines:** “And when that crop grew, and was harvested, no man had crumpled a hot clod in his fingers and let the earth sift past his fingertips. No man had touched the seed, or lusted for the growth. Men ate what they had not raised, had no connection with the bread. The land bore under iron, and under iron gradually died; for it was not loved or hated, it had no prayers or curses.” (Narrative passage.)
- **The Spirit Suffers:** “It’s dirt hard for folks to tear up an’ go. Folks like us that had our place. We ain’t shif’less. Till we get tractored off, we was people with a farm.” (Said by Pa Joad.)

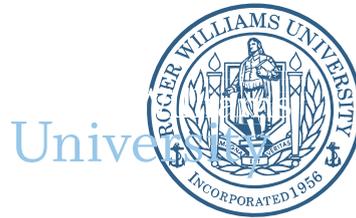
- **Desperation and Migration:** “Car loads, caravans, homeless and hungry; twenty thousand and fifty thousand and a hundred thousand and two hundred thousand. They streamed over the mountains, hungry and restless—restless as ants, scurrying to find work to do—to lift, to push, to pull, to pick, to cut—anything, any burden to bear, for food.” (Narrative passage.)
- **Fear Breeds Hate:** “Okie use’ ta mean you was from Oklahoma. Now it means you’re a dirty son-of-a-bitch. Okie means you’re scum. Don’t mean nothing itself, it’s the way they say it.” (Said by a laborer in a government-sponsored migrant camp.)
- **Adversity Forges Bonds:** “... the twenty families become one family, the children were the children of all. The loss of home became one loss, and the golden time in the West was one dream. And it might be that a sick child threw despair into the hearts of twenty families, of a hundred people; that a birth there in the tent kept a hundred people quiet and awestruck through the night and filled a hundred people with the birth-joy in the morning.” (Narrative passage.)
- **Reprising History:** “Okies—the owners hated them because the owners knew they were soft and the Okies strong, that they were fed and the Okies hungry; and perhaps the owners had heard from their grandfathers how easy it is to steal land from a soft man if you are fierce and hungry and armed.” (Narrative passage.)
- **The Indomitable Human Spirit:** “I figgered about the Holy Sperit and the Jesus road. I figgered, ‘Why do we got to hang it on God or Jesus? Maybe,’ I figgered, ‘maybe it’s all men an’ all women we love; maybe that’s the Holy Sperit—the human sperit—the whole shebang. Maybe all men got one big soul ever’body’s a part of.’” (Said by former preacher Jim Casy.)
- **Harvest Reaps Change:** “The people come with nets to fish for potatoes in the river, and the guards hold them back; they come in rattling cars to get the dumped oranges, but the kerosene is sprayed. And they stand still and watch the potatoes float by, listen to the screaming pigs being killed in a ditch and covered with quicklime, watch the mountains of oranges slop down to putrefying ooze; and in the eyes of the people there is the failure; and in the eyes of the hungry there is a growing wrath. In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage.” (Narrative passage.)

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