The Grapes of Wrath Companion Book

Classic stories are not the oldest books on the shelf in your closet, nor the ones that your grandmother read to your mother when she was little, a classic story is one that you can read over and over again and never tire from. A book that no matter how many times you read, you’re still intrigued and fascinated by the structure and schemes. There are many superior stories that fall under the classic category, but one novel that is a prime example of a classic is John Steinbeck's, The Grapes of Wrath. This literary wonder takes its readers back to the Great Depression and exposes them to the harsh and cruel conditions in which people lived. The story focuses on one family, the Joads, and follows them through the trials and triumphs that life had to offer. Death, suffering, and heartbreak followed them wherever they went, but it did not stop them from fighting back fiercely in hopes of survival. The Joads lost a lot through the book, but the one thing that they did not lose was hope, although they had much to fear, they looked past it and kept wishing for a better day.

“This you may say of man - when theories change and crash, when schools, philosophies, when narrow dark alleys of thought, national, religious, economic, grow and disintegrate, man reaches, stumbles forward, painfully, mistakenly sometimes. Having stepped forward, he may slip back, but only half a step, never the full step back.” ( The Grapes of Wrath, John Steinbeck)

         The Grapes of Wrath and Other Acts of Inhumanity

When readers pick up the Grapes of Wrath, they often ponder at the title, why the Grapes of Wrath? How in the world could grapes possibly possess an emotion as powerful as wrath? The author, John Steinbeck, is using the grapes of wrath to represent the people’s growing wrath toward the food waste.

In the story, all of California’s country side is covered in rotting fruit, because no one can afford to buy fruit and the farmers can’t afford to pay wages to have the fruit picked. So, the fruit gets soft and bruised and falls to the ground and the yellow jackets eat their sweet, juicy meat. The farmers are forced to dump their fruit in the landfills and fall into the deep clutches of debt. The farmers see failure when they look at the mountains of their produce pile up in the landfills, but the hungry people see hope. The hungry came in by car and truck to get the food from the dump. They eat the tart meat of oranges and plums and suck on the savory syrups of peaches and pears. Once the farmers learn what is going on they get angry, why would anyone want to buy their produce if they can just drive to the dump and get it for free? So, the farmers set out to make sure the hungry can’t get the rotted fruits by burying, burning, and guarding the wasted foods. The waste of good food has angered everyone, the farmers, the growers, the hungry, and the struggling. So the people grow full of wrath and hate towards each other, just waiting for one side or the other side of them to explode   “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 a putrefying ooze; and in the eyes of the people there is 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 for the vintage.” ( The Grapes of Wrath, John Steinbeck)

The Grapes of Wrath is just one example of an act of inhumanity  that can be found throughout John Steinbeck's masterpiece. Another example of man’s wrongdoing against each other can be found at a car salesman's lot. Here the salesmen are taking every opportunity to trick and cheat their naive customers. From putting saw dust in the engine to make it sound like it’s running smoothly, to taking the new batteries of the cars and replacing it with an old one. The car salesmen are taking advantage of the people because they know that everyone wants to go to California, and in order to get to California they need a car.  The salesmen also know that most of their customers have never even thought of buying a vehicle before, so they have no idea what they should be paying. This gives the dealers the perfect opportunity to raise the prices on cheap old cars and sell them for the price of a new car. The retailer doesn’t care what happens to the people after they sell them a car, as long as they’re a good distance between the dealership before the car breaks down.

It may seem like the only people turning on each other throughout the book are strangers who have never met before, but this is not true. Families began to split up and turn on each other just to make a quick buck or get a job. The perfect illustration of this can be found towards the beginning of the book with old Joe Davis’s boy. Tractors are being brought in by the bank to plow up the people’s land and farm it. These tractors are kicking generations of people and history off of the land. One of the drivers’ fathers, Joe Davis, lived on the land that was being plowed. All of the tenant people recognized him immediately and asked him why he was going against his own people like he was. His answer was that he was getting paid three dollars a day. This angered the tenant men so they explained to him that for his three dollars he’s putting twenty people out of a job. Joe Davis’s boy lets that roll of his shoulders and explains how times are changing and that they should all try to get jobs elsewhere, because the banks are going to kick them off the land and if they don’t have a job by the time that happens, they’re going to be in trouble.

Often times throughout the book, people were left to fend for themselves. The friends and neighbors that they had been able to lean back on before were gone, they left them to fall. And when they did fall, they hit the ground where hundreds of other men's bodies were left to the same fate. But, then the former friends and alliances would look back for them, hoping that the ones that they had regarded would catch them in this sick trust fall, but no one was there and they too would fall. The men would begin to get on their feet again for awhile, helping those who need it so they do not hit the ground as they did. But,  again they would seek help, leaning back for a sturdy hand to catch them and push them back up, and each time they would fall once again. This is a foolish thing, leaning when you know that you will fall. The bruised and aching men realize this and they stop falling, and when they stopped falling they stopped catching. Forever shutting off the bonds of trust.  The migrants believed that when they arrived in California that the people there would be happy to employ them and help them gain their confidence. But, they could not have been more wrong. The people in California wanted nothing to do with the migrants. So, the travelers had to rely on other migrants to help them back up. While the California citizens were brutal and inhumane, the farmers, travelers, and other evacuee’s could find hope among themselves.

The Hope for Humanity

Even though it may seem like the entire book is based on man’s inhumanity against each other, John Steinbeck occasionally allows characters to show a small amount of sympathy and compassion towards other characters in the book. Whether it’s a small act of generosity to show that the character understands the position that other characters in the book are in, to helping each other out when one of the characters is in a struggle.

The Great Depression affected people in different ways, in some cases it tore people apart and everyone turned on each other, this was the most common side effect of the Depression. But, in some cases it linked people together and put everyone in the same boat. Throughout The Grapes of Wrath, John Steinbeck incorporated both of these plights into the plot line. Most of the time the people would be at war with each other, eager to get a shot at someone when they were not looking, but occasionally a small act of altruism and mercy  would arise. This kindley exchange would happen between strangers, friends, and family. When someone was treated with the least bit of humanity it was a breath of fresh air since everywhere the migrants went they were treated with the same regard as an animal.

One example of this hope for humanity happens to one of the main characters, Ma Joad, while at the store. She was buying food for her family and all she had to spend was one dollar. She bought meat, bread, potatoes, and coffee for one dollar exact. She had no more money but the men in the family wanted sugar for their coffee. The sugar was ten cents but she had no more money. The store clerk told Ma that he could not give her the sugar and then have her pay him back when she could. Ma asked why and the clerk explained that the company would fire him, so he gave her one of his own dimes and let her take the sugar. Ma later paid him back and thanked him immensely for him generosity.

People like the store clerk were understanding and forgiving towards others who were struggling. Another couple of sincere characters who were giving towards others were Mae and Al. Mae and Al worked at a dinner along Route 66 and were always looking out for truck drivers to give good tips so they could make good money. One day a father with his two children came in asking if they could buy a loaf of bread. Mae and Al sold them a fifteen cent loaf of bread for ten cents and gave his children two candies for a penny when they were actually a nickel apiece.  When they did this there were truck drivers at the joint who saw how giving Mae and Al were, so they tipped them three dollars, bought a song on the jukebox, ate a huge slice of blueberry pie, and played the lottery. This made Al and Mae almost seven dollars, much more than they were required to pay.

People in the book were often rewarded or recognized for their kindness, but the people who were cruel and unforgiving were not punished for their crimes. The migrants appreciated the people who were willing to give them a break and make them feel like people again, like someone worthy of respect. This gave them hope, determination, and perseverance.

         The Description of the Depression

The themes that John Steinbeck uses may be phenomenal, but his equally applausable craft technique is often overlooked. John Steinbeck uses vivid descriptions and visionary vocabulary to get his point across. By using descriptions and vocabulary in the way he does, it helps the reader get absorbed into the book and understand the scenes and scenarios better. The descriptions that Steinbeck uses makes the reader feel like he or she is living alongside the Joad family, trying to find some footing during a dispiriting, and hopeless time.

One example of an impressive description that Steinbeck uses can be found in chapter eighteen when he describes California as it would look to those who had never seen it’s bounty before. He tells of rolling hills and quaint little homes that look like dolls houses in the distance. “They drove through Tehachapi in the morning glow, and the sun came up behind them. Al jammed on the brake and stopped in the middle of the road, and, “Jesus Christ! Look” he said. The vineyards, the orchards, the great flat valley, green and beautiful, the trees set in rows, and the farm house. And Pa said, “God Almighty!” The distant cities. the little towns in the orchard land, and the morning sun golden on the valley.” Even though Steinbeck doesn’t use long or combined sentences, you can not tell because of the technique he uses. The whole story feels natural because you get so absorbed in the book that you don’t notice the periods, paragraphs, or even chapters.

Overall, the Grapes of Wrath is an outstanding book that is highly recommended by students, teachers, parents, and friends. This book has both realized the division between integrity and cruelty for men and explored the perseverance of mankind. John Steinbeck was a prestigious and distinguished writer, whose talents show through his work. The Grapes of Wrath is a story that will continue to live on for decades to come. After reading this book, readers will forever remember the influence it had on them.