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The Grapes of Wrath

The Grapes of Wrath is a novel by John Steinbeck that exposes the desperate conditions under which the migratory farm families of America during the 1930's live under. The novel tells of one families migration west to California through the great economic depression of the 1930's. The Joad family had to abandon their home and their livelihoods. They had to uproot and set adrift because tractors were rapidly industrializing their farms. The bank took possession of their land because the owners could not pay off their loans. The novel shows how the Joad family deals with moving to California. How they survive the cruelty of the land owners that take advantage of them, their poverty and willingness to work.

The Grapes of Wrath combines Steinbeck's adoration of the land, his simple hatred of corruption resulting from materialism (money) and his abiding faith in the common people to overcome the hostile environment. The novel opens with a retaining picture of nature on rampage. The novel shows the men and women that are unbroken by nature. The theme is one of man verses a hostile environment. His body destroyed but s spirit is not broken. The method used to develop the theme of the novel is through the use of symbolism. There are several uses of symbols in the novel from the turtle at the begging to the rain at the end. As each symbol is presented through the novel they show examples of the good and the bad things that exist within the novel.

The opening chapter paints a vivid picture of the situation facing the drought-stricken farmers of Oklahoma. Dust is described as covering everything, smothering the life out of

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anything that wants to grow. The dust is symbolic of the erosion of the lives of the people. The dust is synonymous with "deadness". The land is ruined, way of life (farming) gone, people uprooted an forced to leave. Secondly, the dust stands for profiteering banks in the background that squeeze the life out of the land by forcing the people off the land. The soil, the people (farmers) have been drained of life and are exploited.

The last rain fell on the red and gray county of Oklahoma in early May. The weeds became a dark green to protect themselves from the sun's unyielding rays...The wind grew stronger, uprooting the weakened corn, and the air became so filled with dust that the stars were not visible at night. (Chp 1)

As the chapter continues, a turtle, which appears and reappears several times early in the novel, can be seen to stand for survival, a driving life force in all of mankind that cannot be beaten by nature or man. The turtle represents a hope that the trip to the west is survivable by the farmer migrants (Joad family). The turtle further represents the migrants struggles against nature/man by overcoming every obstacle he encounters: the red ant in his path, the truck driver who tries to run over him, being captured in Tom Joad's jacket. The driver of the truck works for a large company, who tries to stop the migrants from going west. when the driver attempts to hit the turtle it is another example of the big, powerful guy trying to flatten or kill the little guy. Everything the turtle encounters tries it's best to stop the turtle from making its westerly journey. Steadily the turtle advances on, ironically to the southwest, the direction of the migration of

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people. The turtle is described as being lasting, ancient, old and wise: horny head, yellowed toenails, indestructible high dome of a shell, humorous old eyes.

(Chp 1) The diver of the truck, the red ant and Tom Joad's jacket are all symbolic of nature and man that try to stop the turtle from continuing his journey westward to the promise land. The turtle helps to develop the theme by showing its struggle against life; comparing it with the Joad struggle against man.

The grapes seem to symbolize both bitterness and copiousness. Grandpa, the oldest member of the Joad family, talks of the grapes as symbols of plenty. All his descriptions of what he is going to do with the grapes in California suggest contentment, freedom, the goal for which the Joad family strive for: "I'm gonna let the juice run down ma face, bath in the dammed grapes" (Chp 4). The grapes are talked about by Grandpa to help elaborate the theme by showing that no matter how nice everything seems in California, the truth is that their beauty is only skin deep, in their souls they are rotten. The rotten core verses the beautiful appearance.

The willow tree that is located on the Joad's farm represents the Joad family. The willow described as being immovable and never bending to the wind or dust. The Joad family does not want to move, they prefer to stay on the land they have planted their roots on, much the same as the willow. The willow contributes to the theme by showing the unwillingness of the people to be removed from their land by the banks. The latter represents the force making them leave their homes. Both of these symbols help contribute to the theme by showing a struggle between each other. The tree struggles against nature in much the same way that the Joad family struggles against the Bank and large companies.

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The rain that comes at the end of the novel symbolizes several things. Rain in which is excessive, in a certain way fulfills a cycle of the dust which is also excessive. In a way, nature has restored a balance and has initiated a new growth cycle. This ties in with other examples of the rebirth idea in the ending, much in the way the Joad family will grow again. The rain contributes to the theme by showing the cycle of nature that give a conclusion to the novel by showing that life is a pattern of birth and death. The rain is another example of nature against man, the rain comes and floods the living quarters of the Joads. The Joads try to stop the flood of their home but yet are forced back when nature drops tree causing a flood of water to ruin their home forcing them to move. In opposite way rain can be helpful to give life to plants that need it to live. Depending on which extreme the rain is in, it can be harmful or helpful. This is true for man as well. Man can become both extremes, bad or good, depending on his choosing.

Throughout the novel, there are several symbols used to develop the theme of man verses a hostile environment. Each symbol used in the novel show examples of both extremes. Some represent man, that struggles against the environment, others paint a clear picture of the feelings of the migrants. As each symbol is presented chronologically through the novel, they come together at the end to paint a clear picture of the conditions, treatments and feelings the people (migrants) as they make their journey through the novel to the West.

