

The Grapes of Wrath

Commentary by Vera 8T

The opening image shows a flat, paved highway in Oklahoma. A small figure walks in distance toward the camera. The crossroad that we see in the foreground, is symbol of America's plight in the late 30s.

The truck driver notices Tom's hands made unnaturally shiny by the kind of manual labor usually done in jail and becomes suspicious because he realizes his passenger's past. Tom is irritated by the man's curiosity, and before setting off he admits with no shame that he spent four years in the penitentiary for homicide.

After getting out of the truck Tom encounters Preacher Casy right off the highway singing under a willow tree; the man, he discovers, baptised him.

Tom only got seven years jail for homicide because it was self defence murder, but in the end they let him out after four years for good conduct.

Casy admits he 'lost his call' for he has nothing to preach about anymore. He's not so sure about things as he used to be, and maybe his faith is not as strong. The tragic experiences of the Great Depression have greatly confused him, and have taken away from him, I think, his old determination and willpower to transmit positivity to those he preached to.

Tom's eyes are bewildered when going through his family's old cabin because he can't find any of his relatives. He was expecting to meet his folks, instead he finds only his old house, dark and abandoned.

When Tom, accompanied by Casy finally reaches the old Joad house, he is surprised to find it abandoned. The only signs of life in it left by the Joads' are Ma's forgotten shoe and Pa's hat that used to belong to Tom.

Preacher Casy and Tom unexpectedly find Muley, the Joad's former neighbour, hiding in the cabin. From him they learn that everybody who used to live on that land was forced to leave, and the Joad family, together with all the other families was heading to California in order to search for a decent job. Muley tells Tom that 'his folks' are staying temporarily at Uncle John's house.

Ford's technique of using flashbacks is very efficient to give more insight into Muley's report about what happened. These brief scenes set in the past, illustrate Muley's story and give us a clearer view of what the farmers and the people who worked on the land must have felt when they were informed about having to leave their homes. The flashbacks dramatically show the oppressed farmers and the rebellion of the people whose rights were ignored.

Muley is surprised when the tractor driver takes off his goggles because he finds out that he's the son of a farmer just like him that used to be his neighbour. The tractor driver has agreed to work for people who have mistreated his own people in order to be able to feed his family. At the beginning we see Muley full of anger towards the young man, because by accepting that job he betrayed everyone else who was in his same situation, but then he understands that if that job was offered to him he would have done the same thing in order to have his sons survive.

When Tom and Casy finally arrive at Uncle John's cabin, they find the whole Joad family. Ma is the first one of the family to notice Tom's arrival at Uncle John's cabin. It's an extremely tender and emotional scene, where we see how much Tom is loved by his mother. Happiness takes their words away, and neither of them really know what to say. Ma is very worried about the effect that the suffering in jail might have had on her son, and acts in a very motherly and protective way towards him.

Everyone is extremely excited, and a joyful mood is created by the singing of the children and old grandpa's enthusiasm. Most of Tom's relatives think that he 'busted out' of jail, but he then reassures them by telling them what really happened.

The scene of the men outside noisily preparing the truck, contrasts with the scene inside where Ma is deciding what to take with her and what to leave behind. Ford manages to create a very sad and nostalgic atmosphere even though no words are used to transmit Ma's emotions to the viewer. The scene is visually very effective for the way the image is composed and the shadows are arranged, make the viewer's eye focus especially on parts of Ma's face that particularly express her emotions. We understand that her mind is full of memories as she looks at postcards, cutouts and jewelry, that remind her of her past. She throws some things in the flames and keeps some with her to accompany her in her new future.

Just before the family's departure, Granpa Joad refuses to follow them to California. He is extremely attached to his homeland and stubbornly says that he'll manage to survive like Muley. In the end they manage to get him on the truck and all set out to California.

As the Joad family heads off in their truck, on the screen the image of Highway 66 is superimposed with various images of other jalopies full of people like them heading to California, and as they travel we see signs of towns they are passing through.