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The Vitality of a Story

by Mary Bodine

(English 154)

The Assignment: Compare and contrast a novel or short story collection to its screen translation.

It seemed like a preposterous idea to make John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath a movie in 1939. The novel is too gritty in language and attitude. It drips anger and revolution. It forces the reader to redefine faith, survival, sexuality, revolution and home. The novel is harsh. In fact, after publication, The Grapes of Wrath was banned, burned, and the Associated Farmers even began a smear campaign to refute it (Benson 394). Steinbeck was labeled a communist, a socialist and worse, a liar.

Despite the controversy surrounding the novel, Twentieth Century Fox executive Darryl F. Zanuck bought the rights from Steinbeck and hired Nunnally Johnson to write the screenplay (Benson 408). Steinbeck understood the movies; he told Johnson, "A novel and a screenplay are two different things. Do whatever you wish with the book. I've already made my statement. Now it's up to you to make yours" (Benson 409). Steinbeck was concerned, though, with the preservation of the novel's story. So much so that he told Zanuck "he was going to put the \$75,000 paid for the rights to the novel into escrow, and that if the movie was watered down or its perspective changed, he would use the money to sue him" (Benson 409). He kept his money and Zanuck produced one of America's greatest movies.

Steinbeck said that if Zanuck, Johnson and the film's director, John Ford, could "get 10 percent [of the novel] on film it will be worthwhile" (Benson 410). Although The Grapes of Wrath on film is much more than 10 percent of the novel – some scenes and dialogue are directly from the novel – the message and language are watered down. Its themes are not fully developed and some are ignored. Where Ford surpasses the novel is in imagery. The viewer transcends into a world the imagination could not conjure through words. There are no fancy costumes, no make-up, just the weathered, tough look of life on the road. According to film scholar Joseph McBride, John Ford said The Grapes of Wrath was a "beautifully photographed film but there was nothing beautiful to shoot." The novel is epic in prose and the film follows suit in presentation.

However, the pace of the story is quite different in each version. Steinbeck wrote The Grapes of Wrath at a rate of six pages a day. He wanted the writing process to reflect the story – a plodding journey (Shillinglaw). Ford could not afford the time and completed the film in just 43 days (McBride). Minor differences between the novel and movie are the result. A Steinbeck scholar or avid reader will generally prefer the detailed development of the story in the novel, but the movie provides easier access to a visually wrenching story about America in the late 1930s.

The first 20 minutes of the film are taken directly from the novel – including the dialogue -- with the exception of the turtle Tom Joad picks up on his way home. This omission is minor. Tom Joad was a tough character in the movie and novel, but the addition of the turtle scene had the capacity to soften Tom and make him seem more playful. The turtle also foreshadowed the

direction of the novel. When Tom discovers his family is gone he decides he isn't going to carry the turtle around with him for his younger siblings. After he lets it go, he tells Jim Casy, the former preacher, "They're always goin' someplace. They always seem to want to get there" (Steinbeck 44). The Joads would soon be trying to "get there," to work, to home, to security.

The Joad family reunites with Tom near the end of the first act. The introductions are different than the novel. First, each member of the family is introduced to the reader through stories John tells to the truck driver, Casy or Muley Graves (Shillinglaw). Pa Joad also surprises Ma with Tom's return in the novel, but, in the movie, Ma greets Tom first. Johnson may have made this change to establish the bond between mother and son. Steinbeck, on the other hand, wanted to establish Ma Joad as the family's touchstone instead: "... since old Tom and the children could not know hurt or fear unless she acknowledged hurt and fear, she had practiced denying them in herself" (74). Ma Joad was a powerful figure in the movie, but much more so in the novel. One of the main themes in the novel is how women and men deal with change, with women being more adaptable. The novel is also quite a bit more humorous when the family reunites than is the movie, with Grandpa buttoning his underwear to his shirt and fumbling to button his pants. The viewer also misses the preparation of side meat and the selling of household goods for the journey, but does not miss the crucial moment when Ma Joad thumbs through her box of collectables and lovingly tosses her memories into the fire. As pointed out by John Steinbeck scholar Susan Shillinglaw, a commentator for the movie *The Grapes of Wrath*, the song "Red River Valley" plays softly in this scene. This delicate touch by Ford could indicate the memories of what was the lush land of Oklahoma or the anticipation of the rich California valleys. The addition of music in this scene lends it more weight than was given in the novel.

After the family loads up all of their belongings and hits the road, Steinbeck gives the reader an understanding of the migration west in his subchapters. Each subchapter in the novel is a general story about experiences of all migrants, not just the Joads. They are descriptions of people and situations happening all over the Dust Bowl and in California. Steinbeck tells his readers, "66 is the path of people in flight, refuges from dust and shrinking land (118)... The people in flight from the terror behind – strange things happen to them, some bitterly cruel and some so beautiful that the faith is refired forever" (122). Ford captured the flight of "refuges" down Route 66 through images of the Joad's jalopy plodding along on the great highway cutting through the mountains and desert. He provides numerous long shots of the journey that give the audience the same perspective Steinbeck voices in the novel – people in flight. The subchapters in the novel could have presented a problem for the adaptation, but they are beautifully captured as an experience by the Joads or Muley Graves, or through visual presentation like shots of the wind blowing through a now vacant house. The subchapters added a tremendous amount of depth to the film.

Several elements of the novel are left out of the film that may or may not have changed the story. One element of the film that should have been left out was the character Noah, Tom's older brother. Noah makes two appearances in the film: once to greet Tom and then to bathe in the Colorado River with the family. He disappears in the film and novel. In the novel, Noah tells Tom that he can't leave the river and simply walks down the bank of the Colorado. In the film, Ford completely disregards the character and never accounts for Noah's disappearance. It is odd and unsettling, but perhaps a homage to Steinbeck's own disregard for the character. According to Shillinglaw, Steinbeck forgot about Noah as he was writing and had to suddenly write him out of the novel. Perhaps Ford or Johnson also forgot about Noah. For Steinbeck and Ford, Noah was an unnecessary character and added nothing to either story.

The movie begins to make a major departure from the novel when the major action is reversed. In the novel, the Joad family goes first to the Weedpatch government camp and then must leave to find work. It is at that time the family ends up on the peach farm, Hooper Ranch, and Tom kills an officer and must go into hiding. He is brutally beaten in the novel – his nose broken, and his eye is swollen shut. The family immediately leaves the camp, and finds good work on a cotton field. While they live in half a boxcar and work as cotton pickers, Tom hides out in the brush. In the film version, the family goes first to the peach farm, now called Keene Ranch, and Tom sustains only mild injuries after killing the officer. The family still immediately leaves the ranch, but, instead, goes to the government camp. Tom lives with his family in the government camp until the police suspect he is there.

The reversal of action helped make the movie more palatable to a general audience, because one of the major themes in the novel is revolution or the strength of two men over one. Because The Grapes of Wrath was a movie of its time, it reflected real issues in the country. Zanuck and Ford, perhaps, did not want to force the message of revolution as Steinbeck had in the novel. In an interview for the San Jose Mercury, Steinbeck said, “Their [labor migrants] coming here now is going to change things almost as much as did the coming of the first American settlers ... These people have that same vitality ... and they know just what they want” (Benson 387).

Steinbeck makes several arguments in the novel for revolution, for the poor to get together and fight oppression and exploitation, most notably in Chapter 14:

Keep these two squatting men apart; make them hate, fear, suspect each other. Here is the anlage of the thing you fear. This is the zygote. For here ‘I lost my land’ is changed; a cell is split and from its splitting grows the thing you hate – ‘We lost our land.’ The danger is here, for two men are not as lonely and perplexed as one. (151)

In the film, revolution or the power of two is more of an undertone. It is not ignored completely, but is treated with less anger. It is directly spoken about by Casy before he is killed and by Tom as he leaves the government camp in what is arguably the most famous dialogue in the book and movie, “... Wherever they’s a fight so hungry people can eat, I’ll be there. Wherever they’s a cop beatin’ up a guy, I’ll be there ...” (419).

A theme of the novel that is as fully developed in the film as in the book is faith and the capacity of people to help each other. Jim Casy was a crucial character in both versions, and not a line of dialogue from Casy (except for at the Joad family introduction) was left out of the film. Jim Casy, J.C., was the Jesus Christ of the movie (Shillinglaw). He, too, went out to find himself, to find God. He, too, sacrificed himself, but for Tom. His faith, though, was in the human spirit and that is the gift he gave to Tom. Tom learns from Casy in the film and novel that “he didn’ have no soul that was his’n. Says he foun’ he jus’ got a little piece of a great big soul. Says a wilderness ain’t no good, ‘cause his little piece of a soul wasn’t no good ‘less it was with the rest, an’ was whole ... a fella ain’t no good alone” (418).

Although most of the novel’s rich dialogue was used in the film, the different endings give the viewer vastly different perspectives. Steinbeck ends his novel with the family drowning, literally and figuratively. Rose of Sharon’s child is stillborn and the family seeks shelter from torrential downpour in a barn. There they meet a father and son. The father is starving and Rose

of Sharon, full of milk, breastfeeds him to life and a vague knowing smile crosses her lips. The novel's conclusion was perhaps too perverse to put on screen, even in today's industry. It leaves the reader unsettled. Steinbeck himself said, "I'm not trying to write a satisfying story. I've done my damndest to rip a reader's nerves to rags. I don't want him satisfied" (Shillinglaw).

In contrast, the conclusion to the film was more optimistic. By reversing the story so that the family lives in the government camp last, the viewer is left with the feeling that things are better for the family. The closing scene is one in which the family is back on the road looking for work. They are not starving or cold or wet as in Steinbeck's novel, but are still looking for their "Red River Valley."

The story of The Grapes of Wrath, visual or written, begs its audience to feel for the plight of the "refugees," to act when injustice is being committed, to adjust and expect change. The movie rips the heart out, the novel wrenches the soul. They are one and the same, despite their differences. In a letter written in December 1939, after an initial screening of The Grapes of Wrath, Steinbeck wrote:

Zanuck has more than kept his word. He has a hard, straight picture in which the actors are submerged so completely that it looks and feels like a documentary film and certainly has a hard, truthful ring. No punches were pulled – in fact, with descriptive matter removed; it is a harsher think than the book, by far. It seems unbelievable but it is true. (Benson 411)

What greater blessing could a movie receive?

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