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Final Steinbeck Reflection

As my third year at the Martha Heasley Cox Center for Steinbeck Studies comes to a close, I find myself reflecting on how John Steinbeck might respond to the state of the world today — how an author so attuned to the struggles of ordinary people would react to leaders seeking to divide rather than unite, or what he would think about a society that was becoming increasingly desensitized to homelessness, inequality, and environmental degradation. Might he see echoes of the Dust Bowl in the California drought? Would he draw comparisons between the Joad family and present day political and climate refugees? Would he recognize the parallels between the exploitative sharecroppers in The Grapes of Wrath and the harsh realities faced by today's temporary "gig" workers, who, like the migrant labors and tenant farmers of the 1930s, are victims of an economic structure that offers minimal labor protections? After immersing myself in his literary catalog, his personal letters, and the scholarship surrounding his legacy, I have come to understand how John Steinbeck became the moral voice of the 20th century, and why his principles still resonate so strongly today: He compels his audience to confront the world head-on, using the power of storytelling as a force to expose injustice, uplift the marginalized, and awaken the empathy needed to enact social change.

His most powerful, enduring work was fueled by his outrage over the way that society's greed prompted a widespread disregard for kindness and human decency, with the injustices faced by marginalized communities setting the scene for many of Steinbeck's stories. Despite this, Steinbeck never reduced these real-life struggles to mere narrative fodder. Instead, he used his writing to reveal the systemic forces that were sustaining inequality and stripping individuals

of their agency. His characters were crafted with empathy and realism in mind, with novels like The Grapes of Wrath and Of Mice and Men drawing on the speech patterns and slang used by migrant laborers in order to represent their daily lives with appropriate accuracy. In addition to recreating authentic language and circumstances, Steinbeck represented realistic relationships between characters that were built on their common ground and shared struggles. His use of tight-knit ensemble characters emphasized the importance of community as a source of strength in an unjust world — a premise that is just as relevant in 2025 as it was in Steinbeck's time.

Now, as I prepare for the transition between the comforts of the Steinbeck Center and the uncertainties of postgraduate life, I have found myself viewing the world around me through a more critical lens. In the present climate of political division, widening inequality, and perpetual misinformation, it feels more relevant than ever to approach the world in the same way that John Steinbeck did, stopping to examine who's stories were being told and how they were being represented, if at all. Steinbeck's writing is a testament to how storytelling can be an avenue for resistance, proving that by amplifying the voices of the silenced, we can reaffirm our shared humanity. Though I may be exiting the Center, the moral teachings of Steinbeck's work will follow me through my next chapters and beyond. As Tom Joad says in The Grapes of Wrath, "I'll be everywhere — wherever you look. 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." His declaration functions as more than an expression of solidarity, it is a timeless call for us readers to confront injustice with courage and compassion.