

## THREE ENEMIES OF THE WORKER IN *THE GRAPES OF WRATH*: THE BANK, MECHANISATION, UNEMPLOYMENT



### GAZAP ÜZÜMLERİNDE İŞÇİNİN ÜÇ DÜŞMANI: BANKA, MAKİNELEŞME, İŞSİZLİK

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**ABSTRACT:** With its various effects, the Great Depression was one of the biggest events that shaped the modern world. As John Steinbeck handles in *The Grapes of Wrath*, unemployment, hunger and homelessness spread, and workers had to leave their hometowns and migrate to big cities in order to eat a piece of bread. One of the issues handled by Steinbeck is the influence of the banks as the representative power of the capital. Due to the widespread unemployment, people are unable to find permanent jobs, and as a result, they fail to earn enough money to meet their needs. This fact force them to depend on banks for finance. Yet, as they cannot find money to pay their debts, they have to sell everything they own. Banks make people landless, unemployed, homeless, broke and even hungry. It is easy to understand the harsh realities of that period thanks to the journey of the Joad family in the novel. In this article, first information will be given about what caused the birth of the American capitalist system and how this system became successful in its development. And then how the system is reflected in *The Grapes of Wrath* will be discussed. How capitalism successfully operated through banks, machinery and the resultant widespread unemployment will also be analyzed. Finally, how this poison spread into poor people's lives through the loan system of the banks made people increasingly selfish and how this selfishness turned them into deadly monsters will be explained, by taking into account the events that Joad family encountered on their journey to find a better life.

**Keywords:** The Great Depression, Capitalism, Banks, *Grapes of Wrath*, The Joad Family

**ÖZ:** Çeşitli etkileriyle birlikte Büyük Buhran, modern dünyayı şekillendiren en büyük olaylardan biriydi. John Steinbeck'in Gazap Üzümlerinde ele aldığı gibi işsizlik, açlık ve evsizlik yayılmaktaydı ve işçiler evlerini terkedip bir parça ekmek uğruna büyük şehirlere göç etmek zorunda kalmaktaydılar. Steinbeck tarafından işlenen konulardan bir tanesi de sermayenin temsilci güçleri olarak bankaların etkisidir. Yaygın işsizlik nedeniyle, insanlar kalıcı iş bulmakta güçlük çekmekte ve sonuç olarak ihtiyaçlarını karşılamak adına yeterli para bulmakta başarısız olmaktadır. Bu gerçek onları finans sağlamları için bankalara bağımlı hale getirmeye zorlamaktadır. Lakin, borçlarını ödemek adına para sağlayamadıklarından, sahip oldukları her şeyi satmak zorundadırlar. Bankalar insanları yurtsuz, işsiz, evsiz hatta aç bir duruma getirmektedirler. Romanda Joad ailesinin yolculuğu sayesinde dönemin sıkıntılı gerçekliklerini anlamak kolaydır. Bu makalede, ilk bildirim Amerikan kapitalist sisteminin doğuşuna neden olan durum ve bu sistemin, gelişiminde nasıl başarılı olduğu hakkında verilecektir. Ve akabinde, sistemin Gazap Üzümlerinde nasıl yansıtıldığı tartışılacaktır. Kapitalizmin bankalar aracılığıyla nasıl işletildiği, mekanizmaların ve bileşenlerinin işsizliği

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*nasıl yaygınlaştırdığı da analiz edilecektir. En sonunda, bu zehrin bankaların kredi sistemi aracılığıyla insanların hayatlarına yayılarak onları git gide nasıl bencilleştirdiği ve bu bencilliğin onları ölümcül canavarlara nasıl dönüştürdüğü, Joad ailesinin daha iyi bir yaşam elde etmek adına gerçekleştirdikleri yolculuk sırasında karşılaştıkları olaylar çerçevesinde irdelenecektir.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Büyük Buhran, Kapitalizm, Bankalar, Gazap Üzümleri, Joad Ailesi

## Introduction

Capitalism emerged and started to strengthen its power following the fall of Feudal System in the 16th century. As it found new sources through the abusing of various regions and their people across the world with colonialism, it spread all around the world thanks to technology, trade, mechanization, urbanization and the Industrial Revolution in particular. These developments created both positive and negative effects. One of the damaging effects on the part of the poor working class masses was the imbalance between supply and demand in products in world, especially in the United States. Combined with the other economic factors of the period, this imbalance led to the emergence of the Great Depression, which affected people on a global scale.

The Great Depression largely affected the working class working in the fields in the farming communities. This situation *“like most other periods of severe unemployment, was produced by government mismanagement rather than by any inherent instability of the private economy”* (Friedman, 2009:43). Unemployment, hunger and homelessness spread, and workers had to leave their hometowns and migrate to big cities in order to eat a piece of bread. And this radical change in the world affected the literary world as well as all branches of art. Most writers of the period wrote about the journey of these working classes in their works. And, of course, John Steinbeck was at the forefront of these writers. In most of his works, he wrote quite impressively on how the Great Depression, which resulted from the spread of capitalism, left physical, emotional and mental wounds on ordinary people.

John Steinbeck thinks that there is a great connection between people and the environment in which they live, and his own environment and the people he meets had a great influence on the formation of his literary personality. Most works written by John Steinbeck reflect successfully the brutal effects of the capitalist system. In his works, the reflection of the Great Depression period and the destruction it caused on American society is handled in detail. With the help of these reflections, it has become possible for the readers to see how people could turn into monster-like creatures because of the harsh rivalry of the characters with each other dictated by the conditions they undergo.

One of the issues handled in Steinbeck’s novels is the effect of the banks as they are the main piece of power of the capital. Because they are tools of superpower capitalist countries. Due to the widespread unemployment in the country, people were unable to find permanent jobs,

and as a result, they failed to earn enough money to meet their needs. This fact forced them to depend on banks for finance. Yet, as they could not find money to pay their debts, which consistently increased through the stipulation of interest rates, they had to sell everything they owned. “*The bank is something more than men, I tell you. It’s the monster. Men made it, but they can’t control it.*” (Steinbeck, 2016:27). Due to their operational principles, these banks made people landless, unemployed, homeless, broke and even hungry. All these tormenting new realities, which poor people were forced to face, naturally led to citizens’ slowly losing their social positions, as well. It is possible to read about all these facts handled through the fictional Joad Family in John Steinbeck’s novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. It is very easy to understand the American world and the harsh realities of that period thanks to the journey of the Joad family in this novel, which is called the clearest mirror of American society.

In this article, firstly information will be given about what caused the birth of the American capitalist system and how the system became successful in its development. And then how the system is reflected in *The Grapes of Wrath* will be discussed. How capitalism successfully operated through banks, machinery and finally widespread unemployment will also be analyzed. Finally, how this poison spread into poor people’s lives through the loan system of the banks made people increasingly selfish and how this selfishness turned them into deadly monsters will be explained, by taking into account the events that Joad family encountered on their journey to find a better life.

### **1. Birth of the Capitalism**

Since humanity existed, it has dedicated much effort and time to meeting certain needs. These needs have mainly been shelter and food. People have set variety of ways to meet these needs during their lifetime. One of the prior habits of human beings is hunting, and then continued with agriculture after moving to settled life. People were mowing the fields, working there and meeting their needs. According to power relations, there were always inequalities in society. The rich employed the poor and met their basic needs in return. This divided society and caused the emergence of a new system: Feudalism.

As Dobb (1946) puts forward, the feudal system emerged as a result of the slavery order in the Western Roman Empire, by transforming the social, economic and cultural conditions. Therefore, instead of accepting it as something universal, it must be accepted as specific to the West. It is not based on the total freedom of slaves, but on a new type of domination in other forms and aspects. It constitutes a new phase of property law that is more advanced than the slavery order. The class basis is the land overlords that fully own the ownership of production vehicles and the peasant classes limited property rights. It is the economic and political system in Europe that emerges from the 9th century until the end of the middle ages. It is the order

created by military chiefs in state societies by sharing the land and turning the primitive slave into a land slave (serf). They choose one of the ways: either working for their masters or for their small lands in working areas. This helps us distinguish between slave and serf, where "*peasant producers largely keep the production process under their control; but they are not legally free*" (Dobb, 1946:37). Feudalism can be described as the non-economic exploitation of rents or services obtained from a producing class that offers livelihoods. According to Dobb (1946), cities have historically been places that led to the birth of the first nuclei of the working class as a refuge for serfs who had lost hope of finding work in the fields during the collapse of feudalism. Cities are also the oasis of freedom of serfs. In this sense, cities played a positive role in the collapse of feudalism and the birth of capitalism. Another factor influencing the collapse of feudalism is villages. In fact, according to Dobb (1946), the real struggle took place in the villages. As feudality collapsed, the fields in the villages were thoroughly fragmented and divided. The serfs, who had to leave the farmland, migrated to the cities, causing the birth of a new class of in the city.

The birth of capitalism is mainly the result of the crisis of feudalism. Economic and social crises are actually direct results of a new economic and social transformation. Crises mean the displacement of wealth. The birth of capitalism was born as the result of the collapse of feudalism in the 14th century. In Marxist terminology, three important facts seem as the reason in the emergence of capitalism; the need for new markets as a result of capital accumulation, surplus value and the formation of national markets. Karl Marx says in *Capital*, "*The process that paves the way for the capitalist system can be none other than the process that takes ownership of the means of production from the hands of the laborer.*" (1990:37). Capital literally means money, and capitalism is an expansionist policy based on liberal economic basis and the free market, which is the deregulation of the state from the economic sphere. It is a reaction to the mercenary economic model based on a state property right on the means of production. It gained momentum with the accumulation of capital generated by the discovery of the American continent. In the capitalist system, governments have no influence on capital and money. "*Capitalism is a social system based on the recognition of individual rights, including property rights, in which all property is privately owned*" (Rand, 1967:19). Accordingly, it is not an economic system that enriches society or the state, but a system that enriches the individual. Wealth and money do not spread evenly among the public, they usually revolve around the same families and groups.

## **2. The Vicious Cycle: Unemployment- Mechanization-Banks**

The existing capitalist system began to change with the industrial revolution and the development of mechanization in the world. Previously, agricultural labour was done with simple tools, a large amount of labor was needed. But thanks to mechanization, machines emerged as the biggest power of production, and these vehicles affected the lives of thousands of

people in a negative way. *“One man on a tractor can take the place of twelve or fourteen families. Pay him a wage and take all the crop”* (Steinbeck, 2016:22). This mostly fed employers and caused hunger of the workers.

The Joad family also got their share of mechanization and the deadly results of tractors in *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck. The Joad family, with a large population, lost their jobs because of these tractors and had nothing to feed themselves. Employers used to give employees a small share of the products, and they weren't enough for this crowded family. In the novel, the situation of the Joad family is presented; *“The squatting men looked down again. What do you want us to do? We can't take less share of the crop—we're half starved now. The kids are hungry all the time. We got no clothes, torn an' ragged. If all the neighbors weren't the same, we'd be ashamed to go to meeting”* (Steinbeck, 2016:22). That's exactly why they screamed. Families with such a condition had to sell their land or even borrow money from the banks. As the poor masses were forced to get indebted to banks, they became like slaves economically. In the novel, the banks are depicted as monsters; *“it's the bank. A bank isn't like a man. Or an owner with fifty thousand acres, he isn't like a man either. That's the monster”* (Steinbeck, 2016:23). On the fictional level, this bank becomes a nightmare for the Joad family. This bank is not human, so it can not have feelings. It does not know what it means to get enough or it has not an ability on stopping any critical situation. It is notionally always hungry and it always demands more and more. Interest rates are what feed the bank, and those interest rates will never diminish, but on the contrary, they keep increasing. Within an academic perspective, the life of the Joad family is in the hands of this monster, and the monster begins to kill the members of this family with its hands. The Joad family face a dilemma and has to make a decision; they will either accept to be destroyed at the hands of the monster or they will run away to create new opportunities for survival.

The bank leaves the Joad family only one option in terms of survival, it is to sell. The family have to sell everything they own to the bank in return for the high interest rates stipulated for the loan they get from it. They had limited sources and they had nothing left in a short time. The bank has forced the Joad family to sell all they have. What aggravated their already terrible conditions is the loss of fertility of their land in time just because they grow cotton; *“the land's getting poorer. You know what cotton does to the land; robs it, sucks all the blood out of it”* (Steinbeck, 2016:22). The bank does not allow them to wait for the right time to grow crops and pay back their debts, instead, it has forced the family to sell their lands and then banned them from sheltering in it. The representatives show the Joad family an alternative, which is leaving their own lands and town; *“You're on land that isn't yours. Once over the line maybe you can pick cotton in the fall. Maybe you can go on relief. Why don't you go on west to California?”* (Steinbeck, 2016:23). It makes the family to emigrate to a land they never knew about it.

The monster, representing the capitalist system with all its ruthlessness, finally gets what it wants. The Joad family sells everything to the bank, forcing them to go from one end of the country to the other; from Oklahoma to California. Like the Joads, many families are forced to leave their hometowns and go there with big expectations. They think they can find work, money and a house there. In the example of the Joads, as they come to the of their journey, they realize that California is not the place they have imagined. Their dreams and expectations of a happy and comparatively wealthier life is shattered. As Hinton says, *"Like thousands of families in the rural southwest, the Joads leave their lands their people have formed for generations and the head for California, supposedly a place of hope and prosperity. Unfortunately, they find only poverty and despair."* (1998:101). The reason why landowners forcibly send thousands of families from their land is clear. The real owners of that land are now not the simple farmers or the labourers, but only the farmers who own the tractors because there is no need for humans in the land anymore. Rich landowners have tractors to do their jobs. As *"industrialized America regards modern man as just an ornamental function in total that makes up the system"* (Aşkaroğlu, 2021:12), humans' physical power does not have a significant importance. As soon as the Joad family leave their hometown, the monster is depicted at work; *"The tractors came over the roads and into the fields, great crawlers moving like insects, having the incredible strength of insects. They crawled over the ground, laying the track and rolling on it and picking it up."* (Steinbeck, 2016:24). Tractors, a terrible production of mechanization, have ruthlessly entered the fields and destroyed everything. Now there is only one owner of the whole land, which does not want anything or anyone that is useless on his land. Joad's middle son Tom is released from prison and he is full of hope about the land of his father; *"my old man got a place, forty acres" "Jesus!"* (Steinbeck, 2016:7). Yet, upon the sight he encounters when he returns to his hometown in hope, he is totally bewildered; *"Hell musta popped here. There's no one livin' there."* (Steinbeck, 2016:27). Like Tom's reaction, the pastor's shock who came there with Tom is visible; *"If I was still a preacher I'd say the arm of the Lord had struck"* (Steinbeck, 2016:27). They are both confused because they were in another world, and now this world seems completely alien to them.

The banks do not want anyone on their land anymore. Tractors are enough for them, and one person is enough to drive the tractor. As a result, while one family is fed, and at least five other families are left to starve. Just like the banks, which represent the ruthlessness of the capitalistic system, the landowners, the rich and the investors have no feelings. In return, the lack of feelings in these people who rule the society causes ordinary people to lose their conscience. As a result of the fierce competition for jobs, the lucky family driving the tractor do not care about other families, just like the banks. What is important now is just to feed themselves. They are not impressed by the fact that their neighbors are hungry. The money they earn

in return for their labour seems worth the world to them. John Steinbeck makes it very clear in the novel in a conversation between a tractor driver and a man who has been kicked out of his home and lost his job; *"Well, what you doing this kind of work for—against your own people?" "Three dollars a day. I got damn sick of creeping for my dinner—and not getting it. I got a wife and kids. We got to eat. Three dollars a day, and it comes every day." "That's right," the tenant said. "But for your three dollars a day fifteen or twenty families can't eat at all. Nearly a hundred people have to go out and wander on the roads for your three dollars a day. Is that right?"* (Steinbeck, 2016:25). This dialogue is a sign of how people have changed in the face of competition for employment and their feelings become more and more blunt in a society dominated by banks. One worker makes \$3 a day, while other one hundred people lose their jobs and their homes. The scary thing is that it turns into a bloody competition within society. People just think about their own children and their own families, and if they manage to get a \$3 job, they do not care about anything else. In the dialogue above, the lucky driver explains the rationale behind his choices; *"Can't think of that. Got to think of my own kids. Three dollars a day, and it comes every day. Times are changing, mister, don't you know?"* (Steinbeck, 2016:25). This answer shows clearly how the driver's heart is deprived of humanistic ethics.

In the world mechanized by the industrial era, farm people's lifestyles have changed and they have become immigrants due to the incredible development of the ruthless capitalist system and the Great Depression, which resulted in a great transformations in this development process. People who do not have a home, are depicted by Steinbeck always on the road, like a little boy, who cannot even tell what is right or wrong. Homelessness, unemployment and hunger begin to transform them. And that transformation does not lead to any good developments. In fight for their bread, most of these people end up either in prison or in the grave. The economic conditions of these people is so terrible that they cannot even meet their most basic needs, and some of them have no other way but stealing food; *"mostly they was there 'cause they stole stuff; an' mostly it was stuff they needed an' couldn' get no other way"* (Steinbeck, 2016:262). That's how Casy, who has sacrificed himself to save Tom, explains why people turn to crime. Casy, who was a pastor, does not blame people for stealing and he thinks they have to because they need it. The hunger in this brutal system forces people to steal other people's property. Whereas the goods are piling up in the hands of a few people, most of the people are hungry and forced to have what they need for survival. As they do not have any other choice, the competitive and unjust capitalist system forces them to become thieves.

Capitalism, thought by the majority of people of the time to be the only alternative for a country's economy, had created so many hungry people that they were competing with each other for a slice of bread. And in this race, people's emotions were always neglected because all they could think about was getting a little full. When they manage to get enough, it means the

starvation of the unlucky others. In order to find employment, the workers are forced to accept extremely hard jobs with very long working hours for very little wages. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck exemplifies this situation in a conversation between a member of the government camp and the Pa Joad; "*Pa demanded, "Well, what the hell am I gonna do? We're outa money. One of my boys got a short job, but that won't feed us. I'm a-gonna go an' take twenty cents. I got to."* Black Hat raised his head, and his bristled chin showed in the light, and his stringy neck where the whiskers lay flat like fur. "Yeah!" he said bitterly. "You'll do that. An' I'm a two-bit man. You'll take my job for twenty cents. An' then I'll git hungry an' I'll take my job back for fifteen. Yeah! You go right on an' do her" (Steinbeck, 2016:231). Pa Joad makes another family starve so that he can feed his own family by accepting a very small amount of money. The vicious cycle goes on like this as the next time, someone else will have to starve the Joad family in order to feed themselves again. This system makes people act just like a ruthless monster, symbolized by the bank and the tractor. Here, there is only one deadly rule; if you want to sleep sound, your neighbor has to go hungry.

Both the bank and the tractor dehumanize people, and this dehumanisation process involves not only people who are unemployed, but also wealthy employers. Like the rivalry between the workers, which result in the survival of the lucky and the destruction of the unlucky, the wealthy do not care about the pitiful plight of the workers. All they care about is getting someone to do their job for the lowest wages. As there is a high number of unemployed people due to mechanisation, employers always know there is someone who can do their job for less money. If a worker refuses to accept this situation and objects, the employers can say "*there's two hundred men coming from the South that'll be glad to get it.*" (Steinbeck, 2016:271). Employers normally do not physically abuse workers, but their treatment of hungry and unpaid workers is pure psychological violence. They only think about their own interests, regardless of the miserable lives of others; "*The most important element behind violence is greed which belongs to humans only*" (Aşkaroğlu, 2018:169). This psychological violence of employers is entirely based on their greed to make more profit. If employers or banks can be satisfied with getting enough instead of more, then enough can be available for the workers and the poor. However, for the rich, these hungry people do not matter; the only thing that matters is that the work is finished as soon as possible and that they make a lot of profit with little loss. They do not pay attention to whether the worker is hungry or full. All they can think about is money, which is the symbol of the capitalist system, which has managed to turn money into the god of people.

### **Conclusion**

The feudal system, which had been going on very successfully for the feudal lords and empires for many years, ended with the development of trade and the world needed a new and more feasible economic system. There were too many landowners in the feudal system, and so, many



landowners were not satisfied with feudalism as it failed to meet their financial activities and expectations. At that time, land meant money, money meant a power and status in the society. However, the number of landlords was too high, and there were too many influential people. In terms of productivity, everything in the system was very difficult to process with the high number of landowners. So monopolization emerged and all the land was collected in the hands of a few people, who bought the lands of the poorer ones in return for their debts.

In addition, when the industry developed and tractors appeared, the growing use of machinery in the farms forced millions of workers working in the fields to emigrate in a very short time, leaving thousands of them homeless and unemployed. As the land was now in the hands of a monster which is called the bank and the richer landowners, and the new production methods based on the replacement of human power with the tractor would not permit to the humans to stay in the production line, which is the land. A tractor and one person who's going to drive that tractor efficiently in all the phases of agricultural production seemed adequate. It became possible to employ one person than to employ hundreds of people with almost the same level of production but much lower wages. The monster was very good at changing people when they were chasing people from their homes. More and more people became homeless and unemployed.

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck describes the journey of the Joad family in the light of what capitalism had done to Americans at the time of Great Depression. The Joad family is a victim of capitalism and cannot survive in this system. The reflections of the terrible conditions are fictionalised in the novel through the portrayal of the characters as a unified family at the outset. First they cannot find employment in their hometown. They are forced to get loan from the bank. They fail to pay their debt back, upon which they lose their lands to the bank in return for their debts. The bank does not allow them to stay there, and they are forced to emigrate to another city so that they can work in farms and meet the needs of the family. Yet, their expectations turn out to be disastrous, and some members of the family die during the journey. Some cannot find employment and turn to stealing to feed themselves. Some of them become part of the revolutionary groups in the camps but turn into traitors in the face of money.

In conclusion, it can be said that Steinbeck just shows the impossibility of success in the conditions depicted realistically in *The Grapes of Wrath*. The system seems as the biggest factor responsible for the failure and misery of people. Additionally, mechanization is another factor which creates high level of unemployment, reducing human power to an insignificant function. Upon the decrease of income on the part of the farm labourers, the bank begins to operate as a mechanism of robbing people of their properties by stipulating high interest rates. At this point, the rivalry among the workers to find employment aggravate their misery, and as a result of it, they become ruthless beings who can commit anything just to manage to survive. The

capitalist system has made every one of them a small monster, rather than truly human beings, with such feeling as love, understanding, and pity for the miseries of others. As fictionalized in detail through the case of the Joad family in the novel, the capitalist system, which is a monster itself, has left society in need and managed to make them a copy of itself.

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