

# Ma Joad as Leader in The Grapes of Wrath

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In a crisis, a person's true colors emerge. The weak are separated from the strong and the leaders are separated from the followers. In John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, the Joad family, forced from their home in Oklahoma, head to California in search of work and prosperity only to find poverty and despair. As a result of a crisis, Ma [Joad](#) emerges as a controlled, forceful, and selfless authority figure for the family.

Ma Joad exhibits excellent self-control during the sufferings and frustrations of the Joad's journey. Ma knows that she is the backbone of the family, and that they will survive only if she remains [calm](#). Ma keeps

her self-control when Ruthie tells some children about Tom's secret. The family becomes nervous and enraged over the situation, but Ma restores order by handling the situation in a calm and collected manner. If Ma were to ever show fear, the family would most likely collapse. For, "Old Tom and the children could not know [hurt](#) or fear unless she acknowledged hurt or fear." Thus, if Ma acts as if everything is all right, then the family will assume everything is all right. Most members of the family openly express their doubts or fears. Ma may be just as frightened as the rest of the family, but she always maintains a front for the rest of the family. When Ma had fears, "She had practiced denying them in herself." This extraordinary self-control helps to keep the Joad unit together and alive. Ma, like all leaders, must be forceful for things to work in her favor. Numerous situations occur in which Ma must be forceful or relinquish her role as the head of the family. Her forceful leadership occurs once when the family, without Ma's consent, agrees to leave Tom and Casey behind to fix the Wilson's car. Ma feels this will break up the family and uses a jack handle to prove her point. It is at this point Ma replaces Pa as the official head of the family. Ma's forceful leadership also surfaces when she threatens a police officer with a frying pan and when she decides for the family to leave the government camp. In both situations Ma must use force to achieve her objectives; in both situations, she emerges victorious. Eventually, Pa becomes angered because of his loss of power to a woman and says in frustration, "Seems like times is changed."

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