

Teacher's Guide to The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck

* Page numbers reference Penguin Putnam books.

NOTE TO THE TEACHER

The questions, exercises, and assignments on these pages are designed to guide students' reading of the literary work and to provide suggestions for exploring the implications of the story through discussions, research, and writing. Most of the items can be handled individually, but small group and whole class discussions will enhance comprehension. The Response Journal should provide students with a means, first, for recording their ideas, feelings, and concerns, and then for reflecting these thoughts in their writing assignments and class discussions. These sheets may be duplicated, but teachers should select and modify items according to the needs and abilities of their students.

INTRODUCTION

Life during the Great Depression of the 1930s was extremely difficult for almost everyone. But for those who had little to begin with, it created often unbearable circumstances. By 1935, drought and poor farming practices, especially in Oklahoma, Arkansas, Colorado, Kansas, and Texas, led to the wind erosion of topsoil. So severe was this problem that the affected areas of the Great Plains were labeled the Dust Bowl. At nearly the same time, the development of the all-purpose tractor enabled large landowners to dispense with the labor of farmers who were tenants on their land. By the late '30s, a majority of the approximately 1.8 million tenant farmers in the South had been evicted from their homes. Many of the displaced farmers sought work in the "promised land" of California. Eventually, there were as many as 300,000 migrants in California, several workers for every available job in the fertile farming valleys of that state.

In 1936, John Steinbeck conducted research on the people who had moved to California from Arkansas and Oklahoma; in 1937, he toured the Dust Bowl and traveled with migrants on their relentless drive to California. From those experiences he wrote *The Grapes of Wrath*, which upon publication in 1939 earned Steinbeck both high praise (including the Pulitzer Prize) and harsh criticism for its strong language and sociopolitical implications. The novel continues to be one of the most highly praised and vehemently criticized pieces of American literature.

PREPARING TO READ

1. In American history texts and other library sources, read about the Dust Bowl and other events of the Great Depression. If possible, obtain some of the famous 1930s photographs of poor farmers, migrant laborers, and people on city food lines. With other students, share what you see in the faces of those people.
2. Discuss what happens when machines replace people. What alternatives do unskilled workers have when they are replaced?
3. What is your definition of family? Is a family made up only of relatives? What keeps a family together? Of what importance is family unity in today's society?
4. Obtain a road map of the United States and, as you read the first half of the novel, trace the route taken by the Joads, noting the location of major events along the way.
5. As you read through the novel, stop occasionally to record your thoughts, reactions, and concerns in a Response Journal. Your journal may be a separate notebook or individual sheets which you clip together and keep in a folder. Include statements about the characters - what you learn about them, how they affect you - and your thoughts about the key issues and events which the book explores. Also, jot down questions you have about events and statements in the book which you do not understand. Your Response Journal will come in handy when you discuss the novel in class, write a paper, or explore a related topic that interests you. In addition, because this novel contains several sophisticated words (e.g., petulant) and unusual expressions (e.g., frawny), you may want to keep a list of some of those words and their meanings in your journal.

UNDERSTANDING THE STORY

Chapters 1-11: The Land

1. What does the setting of the opening scene suggest about the rest of the novel? What does it suggest about family structure?
2. Animals play an important symbolic role throughout this novel. What important qualities does the land turtle have as described in Chapter 3?
3. What opinions does Casy, the former preacher, have about sin and using "bad words"?
4. How do the tractors operate? What role does the bank play? What power do the small farmers have against the banks and the tractors?
5. Of what importance is Muley in this story? What's the difference between being the hunter and being the hunted?
6. Chapters 2, 4, 6, 8, and 10 tell the narrative about Tom Joad and his family the way novels usually do. What is the function of the other short chapters (1, 3, 5, etc.)? What does Chapter 7 imply about used-car salesmen?
7. What do the faces of the Joad family reveal about them? What are the most important characteristics of Ma and Pa and of the grandparents?
8. How does each member of the family feel about going to California? How does each feel about leaving home? What is young Tom's philosophy for dealing with the future? What does Ma's burning of the old stationery box illustrate?

Chapters 12-18: The Migration

1. What is the first unpleasant event that occurs on the Joads' journey? What does that event portend about what lies ahead?
2. What happens to solidify the family as they drive along? Of what significance is Grampa Joad's death? How does Granma take it? What is Ma's philosophy of "holdin' on"? What is the value of Casy's prayer?
3. What does it show about the Joads when they befriend the Wilsons? What is the significance of the change from "I" to "We" (p. 165)?
4. What is the function of Chapter 15? What does it imply about businessmen, waitresses, and truck drivers?
5. When the car breaks down, what is significant about Ma's reaction? How does the mechanical difficulty affect the relationship between Tom and Al?
6. How does the one-eyed man in the junkyard feel about the owner of the yard? What advice does Tom give him?
7. In the camping area, what information does the ragged man give to Pa about California? What effect does that information have on the Joads?
8. What effect does the nightly camping have on the people heading for California? How does it give them strength and power?
9. What is the Joads' first view of California? What impressions of California do the two men from the Panhandle provide? Why does Noah leave? What is Ma's response?
10. Why are the migrants called "Okies"? What do the two boys in the service station in Needles say about Okies?
11. Of what symbolic value is the desert? Does California look the way the characters thought it would? What do we learn about Granma? What do Ma's reactions again show about her?

Chapters 19-30: The Promised Land

1. How has farming changed according to Chapter 19? Why do the local people fear the migrants? What is a Hooverville? How do you suppose a Hooverville got its name? What are the "three great facts of history" (p. 263), and what do they imply about the outcome of the events in this novel?

2. Why is it so difficult to obtain work in California? Why do wages fall? What keeps the men from uniting? What advice does Floyd Knowles give? How is Rose of Sharon affected by all of this?
3. How do the police treat the migrants? Why? What does Casy's attack on the deputy reveal about him? Why is Uncle John so upset? What causes Connie to leave?
4. What does Ma Joad mean when she says "Why, we're the people - we go on"?
5. In what ways does the hostility of the local people change the migrants? How are the government camps different from the Hoovervilles? What is effective about the way they are run?
6. How does Mr. Thomas (Chapter 22) treat the workers? How does Tom feel about working? In what ways does Mr. Thomas represent the dilemma of the small farmer?
7. How do the Joads, especially the children, show their ignorance of "modern" conveniences?
8. What do the events in Chapter 22 say about charity, religion, and hard work? What and who are "reds"?
9. How is it that people are starving when fruit is overabundant? Why do the owners destroy the surplus?
10. Why do the Joads leave the government camp at Weedpatch? How is life at the Hooper ranch different? How is it typical of the lives of migrants? What does Ma's encounter in the store show about the plight of migrant workers?
11. What does Tom discover about Casy? How is Casy different from what he once was? How does Tom react to the attack on Casy?
12. What do the boxcars provide besides shelter? In hiding, what decision does Tom make? How does Ma feel about that? What conclusion does Ma reach about the family? What keeps them all from giving up?
13. How does the rain affect the lives of the migrants? Of what importance is building the dike, even if it breaks? How does Ma know they will survive?
14. What impact does the stillbirth of Rose of Sharon's baby have? What does Uncle John do with the dead baby, and what does this act signal about him and the other migrants?
15. Why is Rose of Sharon's feeding the starving man an appropriate ending for this novel? Why is she smiling "mysteriously"?

Digging Deeper

1. In the beginning, each character has personal reasons for wanting to go to California. In what ways does each individual's goal change? Which people grow to see a larger purpose in life? What factors contribute to their changes?
2. The heroes of *The Grapes of Wrath* are on the bottom of the social ladder; their language is often vile, their behavior is sometimes as coarse as their language, and they freely discuss bodily functions (which in the 1930s were seldom mentioned in literature). What was Steinbeck's purpose in portraying such unrefined and coarse people? What would be the effect on readers if the Joads spoke "proper" English and did not curse?
3. According to statements made in this novel, of what importance is anger in overcoming fear? What must be done with anger in order to make it productive? Do you agree or disagree with that philosophy as expressed in this novel?
4. What is the effect of the chapters which come between the narrative about the Joads? How would the elimination of those chapters affect the meaning and the impact of the novel?
5. Identify as many Biblical references or parallels as you can find in the novel and discuss their effectiveness as well as their meaning.
6. The political implications of this novel have been strongly attacked. In what ways is the novel a criticism of capitalism? Does the novel advocate communism? Defend your opinions with evidence from the novel.
7. In what ways is your definition of the term family similar to the meaning Ma Joad gives to the term? In what ways is Ma Joad's meaning different? What do the implications of her meaning contribute to the author's message in the novel?
8. If you had been an owner of a large California farm in 1939, how would you have felt about people like the Joads? As the owner of that farm, how might this novel have changed your feelings?
9. Steinbeck wrote to his editor about this novel: "I've done my damndest to rip a reader's nerves to rags, I don't want him satisfied." Did he succeed in doing that to you? If, so how did he accomplish it? If not, why weren't you affected in that way?

10. Some critics maintain that this novel promotes hatred between classes of people. In what ways does it do that? In what ways does the novel's effect go beyond that?

11. What has become of Noah? What does Connie do with the rest of his life? What will Tom become, and will he be successful at it? What will Al do next? How will these events change Rose of Sharon?

12. You might have utilized notes from your Response Journal to answer some of the questions above. Now select one specific, unanswered question that you raised in your journal and see if your classmates can shed some light on that issue.

WRITING RESPONSES

1. Explain the importance of the contrast between the dryness of the first part of the novel and the floods of the final part. Note also the frequent references to the sun as a "large red drop" that made a cloud look like a bloody rag and the earth look bloody. How do those images contribute to the meaning of the novel?

2. Describe the role women play throughout this novel. Pay particular attention to the dialog between Ma and Pa Joad on page 467, and be sure to comment on the significance of Rose of Sharon's final act in the novel.

3. Explain how Tom's imprisonment affected the way he behaved during the journey and throughout his search for work in California.

4. Steinbeck describes the migrants as "homeless, hardened, intent, and dangerous" (p. 257). Write a newspaper editorial about those migrants as if you were the editor of a small town newspaper in California.

5. Steinbeck admired the poor migrants and believed that from their enduring qualities "will grow a new system and a new life which will be better than anything we have had before." Was he right? What kinds of changes have come about because of the suffering of those migrants of the '30s? In our society today, what similar problems exist? What problems in recent times have been exposed by writers the way Steinbeck did in *The Grapes of Wrath*?

6. Each of the characters in the novel had a dream of what he or she wanted in the future. Describe your own dreams and expectations for the future and explain how you intend to go about attaining them.

7. Write a short story to describe what happens to the Wilsons after the Joads leave them behind.

8. Write a factual newspaper account of the citizens' raid on the camp at Hooverville.

9. Some Americans believe this novel is dirty, blasphemous, advocates a communistic society, and therefore should not be taught in high schools. Explain to parents in your town why you feel the novel should be read and studied in your high school, or explain to a group of teachers why you feel the novel should not be required.

EXPLORING FURTHER

1. To learn of the angry reactions of Californians to *The Grapes of Wrath*, read Frank J. Taylor's "California's Grapes of Wrath," published in 1939. Similarly interesting is Martin Shockley's "The Reception of The Grapes of

Wrath in Oklahoma," which appeared in 1944. Both are reprinted in *The Viking Critical Library Edition of The*

Grapes of Wrath: Text and Criticism, edited by Peter Lisca.

2. Read a simpler view of migrant workers in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, or about a strike of migrant workers in his *In Dubious Battle*.

3. Research the requirements for and the other recipients of the Pulitzer Prize (for fiction) and the Nobel Prize, both of which were awarded John Steinbeck. Read his Nobel Prize speech.

4. Who are the migrant workers today in California? Are they better organized than the "Okies" were? What are the

typical wages paid today for picking peaches, lettuce, and other farm produce? Research the housing and living

conditions for migrant workers in your state.

5. Who picks cotton today? Find out about the capabilities of today's modern tractors and harvesters.

6. What is the percentage of small farms in the U.S. today? How do today's small farmers compete against the gigantic land-owners, and what are their relationships with today's bankers? What has changed for farmers since

the 1930s and what problems still exist?

7. View the 1940 film based on this novel (available on video tape). How closely do Nunnally Johnson's screenplay

and John Ford's direction follow the events and the spirit of the book?

8. Write an advertisement for jobs for migrant workers of the '30s. To what would you want to appeal?

9. Locate and play recordings of some of the music mentioned throughout this book, such as "Ol' Dan Tucker" and

"Chicken Reel." In what ways is the music like the people in *The Grapes of Wrath*?

10. Locate drawings or photographs of some of the different types of automobiles mentioned in the novel, such as

Cord, LaSalle, and Zephyr. Find out why those cars are no longer manufactured.