

Advanced Placement in
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

The Grapes of Wrath

by John Steinbeck

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Item No. 302258

The Grapes of Wrath

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. trace the development of the character of Ma Joad.
2. analyze the character of Jim Casy as a messianic, Christ-like figure.
3. explore the theme of endurance as it applies to the characters of Ma Joad, Tom Joad, and Rose of Sharon.
4. discuss the novel as a critical commentary on the plight of the farmers impacted by the Great Depression and the American Dust Bowl.
5. discuss the novel as a critical commentary on the need to implement elements of Socialism into American government and the benefits of actively supporting the formation of labor unions to improve the lives of America's workers.
6. examine the language of *The Grapes of Wrath* and analyze the impact the different narrative styles have on the reader.
7. trace the depiction of changing family structures in the novel and analyze how the novel complicates traditional notions of gender.
8. analyze the relationship between the novel's narrative chapters and its alternating inter-chapters.
9. explain different perspectives on religion presented by the novel.
10. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
11. respond to multiple choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
12. offer a close reading of *The Grapes of Wrath* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the novel.

Background Information

THE AMERICAN DUST BOWL

During the 1930s, American farmers in the Great Plains suffered a devastating series of dust storms caused by extensive drought and exploitation of the land. For decades, inappropriate farming techniques—particularly the deliberate removal of grass in order to plant cotton and other crops—had increased erosion of the soil in the farming areas of the Great Plains, particularly in Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, and Arkansas. When the area experienced a severe lack of rain, the dry soil turned into dust and began blowing through the region and across the American continent, causing the development of dust storms and large dust clouds. As a result of these dust storms—also known as “Black Blizzards”—farmers were unable to cultivate their land, feed their families, and pay their rents to the landowners whose land they occupied.

The dust clouds that swept across the continent often darkened the sky completely, destroyed crops, and caused an increase in the incidence of respiratory illness within the farming community. The dust clouds reached as far as Chicago, Boston, New York, and Washington D.C., dropping inches of dust and debris on city streets. The most severe dust storm occurred on April 14, 1935, a day that came to be known as “Black Sunday,” when a number of thick storms hit the Great Plains region and left the area in complete darkness for days. Afterwards, many people suffered from irreversible lung damage and malnutrition.

When tenant farmers were unable to harvest their crops, their families were driven from the land by the landowners, who expected pay for the land-use they provided and consequently foreclosed on the farmers who resided on their soil. Half a million people were forced to leave their homes in search of other places to live. With its mild climate and abundant citrus crop, California seemed like a Promised Land to these displaced farmers. When word reached the Great Plains that landowners in California were looking for hundreds of fruit pickers, an unprecedented westward migration of dispossessed families looking for work began. Most of the migrants moving westward came to be known as “Okies,” even though not all of them originated in Oklahoma.

OKIES

Before the American Dust Bowl that struck the Great Plains region of the United States in the 1930s, the term “Okies” served to identify residents of the state of Oklahoma. When thousands of rural workers tried to escape the ecological disaster of the Dust Bowl, the term “Okies” became a generic term for any dispossessed migrant from the Midwest or other Great Plains states. Thousands of farming families headed west toward California to find work and a new place to live after being driven from their land, and most of the migrants came from Oklahoma. In fact, about 15% of Oklahoma’s population left the state and moved to California during the 1930s.

West Coast residents quickly adopted the term as a collective designation for all migrants fleeing the Dust Bowl, disregarding whether or not they actually originated in Oklahoma. When a growing number of West Coast residents began to object to the huge number of poor and needy

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. How and why does the character of Ma Joad develop over the course of the novel?
2. What is the correlation between Jim Casy and the Socialist elements of the novel?
3. To what extent does the power hierarchy within the Joad family change throughout the novel?
4. What effect do the inter-chapters have on the reader? How do they help reinforce Steinbeck's critical perspective on the plight of the migrant farmers?
5. How does Tom Joad develop as a character? How does he become a disciple of Jim Casy?
6. How does Jim Casy function as a Christ figure throughout the course of the novel? What is his specific role within the Joad family? What is the significance of his teachings for the novel as a whole?
7. Which narrative, stylistic, and structural elements enable Steinbeck to endow his novel with a powerful sense of realism and authenticity?
8. What lessons do Jim Casy and Tom Joad learn while in prison? How do the lessons they learn impact their outlook on life?
9. What are the different perspectives on religion portrayed by Steinbeck?
10. How does the concept of "home" change throughout the novel?
11. What is the significance of community and fellowship for the migrant community? What events challenge the sense of community among the migrant workers and why?
12. Is it plausible to argue that Rose of Sharon is, ultimately, the most significant character in the novel? How might you support this argument? How might you refute it?

The Grapes of Wrath

Chapter 1

1. What tragedy is foreshadowed by the suggestion that “the leaves of the young corn became less stiff and erect; they bent in a curve at first, and then, as the central ribs of strength grew weak, each leaf tilted downward”?

2. Why does the sky darken?

3. What does Steinbeck suggest about the power of wrath when he writes that as long as the men were “hard and angry and resistant, ...no misfortune was too great to bear”?

4. Why does Steinbeck not introduce any of his major characters in this chapter?

Chapter 10

- 1. How does Ma’s vision of California resemble the biblical Eden and the Promised Land? What promises are conveyed by means of the biblical imagery?

- 2. What did Tom learn in prison that he is able to convey to Ma when she enquires about the length of the journey ahead of them?

- 3. How does Ma respond to Tom’s fear that there are too many people looking for work in California?

- 4. How has pregnancy affected Rose of Sharon?

- 5. How can we evaluate Uncle John’s attitude toward women—and toward Rose of Sharon in particular—when we learn that he “would have liked Rose of Sharon to sit [in the honor seat]. This was impossible, because she was young and a woman.”?

Chapter 20

1. How does the concept of survival by community effort begin to evolve in this chapter? What inspires this idea for Tom?

2. Why, according to Knowles, have the landowners over-advertised for labor?

3. What happens to workers who try to organize a labor union?

4. How do law enforcement officials deal with disorderly, demanding, or inquisitive migrant workers?

5. Which statements by Connie foreshadow his later disappearance?

Chapter 30

- 1. How do the sense of community and cooperation between the migrant workers in the cotton camp disintegrate in this closing chapter?

- 2. What is the significance of the fate of Rose of Sharon's baby for the cycle of life theme?

- 3. How does Steinbeck use religious imagery connected with the burial of Rose of Sharon's dead baby in order to further the novel's political agenda?

- 4. How does the final scene of this novel, which is both poignant and controversial, illustrate Casy's notion of the human soul?

- 5. How does the final scene draw a correlation between the theme of the cycle of life and the theme of change?
