

Individual Learning Packet

**Teaching Unit**

**The Grapes of Wrath**

by John Steinbeck

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**ISBN 978-1-60389-785-3**

Item No. 200859

# The Grapes of Wrath

## A Note on the Novel's Structure

Most odd-numbered chapters, with a few exceptions, provide a context for the Joad family story that is told in the even-numbered ones. As a result, you know the “whys” and “wherefores” of what is happening; thus, while the odd-numbered chapters may seem extraneous at first and not important to the plot, try to note how they illustrate and/or illuminate what is to come or what has just happened. The odd-numbered chapters are referred to as “interchapters” or, technically, “intercalary” chapters and the even-numbered as “narrative chapters.” *The Grapes of Wrath* won the Pulitzer Prize for literature in 1940, and Steinbeck won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1962.

Note: The word “nigger” is used at various times in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Students should be made aware that the word as used by Steinbeck is not so offensive as it is today. Additionally, within the plot, Steinbeck allows the characters the freedom to tell a few off-color jokes and to speak plainly and naturally (with some profanity) in their own dialects.

All references come from the Penguin Classics edition of *The Grapes of Wrath*, copyright 1992.

# The Grapes of Wrath

## Objectives

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

1. discuss and trace the development of the following themes in this novel:
  - All men are a part of the family of man.
  - A bond exists between the land and the people who work it.
  - People, as long as they retain their spirit, cannot be defeated.
2. write a two-page paper on the topic: “Heroes and Villains in *The Grapes of Wrath*.”
3. write a one-page paper on the topic: “*The Machine Age and Social Change*.”
4. discuss whether Steinbeck’s novel is a socialist attack on capitalism.
5. explain the significance of the novel’s title and the allusion to which it refers.
6. discuss the reasons why some critics see Jim Casy as a Christ figure.
7. trace the fragmentation of the Joad family.
8. state Steinbeck’s treatment of the following topics:
  - unionism
  - the role of the local, the state, and the federal governments in regard to migrants
9. discuss how Steinbeck structures this novel and what he loses or gains by structuring it in that fashion.
10. compare and contrast Steinbeck’s style of writing in this novel with the style of one other novel with which you are familiar.

# The Grapes of Wrath

## Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Who is the hero in this novel, Ma or Tom Joad?
2. Write a brief character sketch for each, and describe how each character changes during the course of the novel:
  - Tom Joad
  - Ma
  - Pa
  - Rose of Sharon
3. Discuss the role of machinery in this novel; state how and what social changes came about as a result of machines.
4. The heroes in this novel are the people who continue to persist despite the obstacles. Identify and discuss who the villains are.
5. Identify those comments and incidents in this novel that appear to be an attack on capitalism and/or a call for socialism.
6. Relate the novel's title, *The Grapes of Wrath*, to the allusion to which it refers, and state why it is significant for this novel.
7. Point out at least three items from the novel that lead critics to suggest that Jim Casy is a Christ figure.
8. Since Ma Joad's goal was to keep the family together, does the fact she was unable to do so mean that Ma is a failure in this regard?
9. What role did Steinbeck see for unions and unionism in the U.S.A.? What role does he see the federal government playing in regard to aiding the poor?
10. Comment on the structure of this novel; be sure to mention the function of the "interchapters."
11. Comment on Steinbeck's style, particularly his use of dialect in this novel, and compare and contrast it with the style of other novels you have read.
12. Although the historical circumstance that gave rise to the novel have changed since the novel was published in 1939, what makes this novel a popular and powerful book for many readers today?

# The Grapes of Wrath

## Chapter One

### Vocabulary

**bemused** – dazed; stunned  
**dissipated** – scattered and vanished  
**emulsion** – suspension  
**perplexity** – confusedness

1. As the novel opens, what is devastating the land?

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2. When the men's faces become hard and angry and resistant, why are the women relieved?

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3. What theme of the novel is exemplified in this quote from the last paragraph of the chapter: "Women...knew deep in themselves that no misfortune was too great to bear if their men were whole"?

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4. Find elements of personification and simile in this chapter. Explain them.

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5. What philosophical ideas about killing and prison does Tom wonder about?

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6. How does Willy Feely's opinion about helping others differ from Muley's?

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7. What is ironic about Tom's reaction to the arrival of the men who are trying to keep people off the land?

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8. At the end of this chapter, Casy cannot sleep; he says he has too much to think about. From comments he has made earlier, what do you suppose he is thinking about?

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## Chapter Fourteen

### Vocabulary

**plummet** – drop; fall

**zygote** – individual just beginning to develop

1. What do the large landowners fear, and what do they not understand?

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2. Although the masses of people striving for a better life fall back one step for every two steps forward, why will they prevail in the end?

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## Chapter Twenty-One

### Vocabulary

**ferment** – to seethe

**paradoxes** – something seemingly self-contradictory, but true

**pellagra** – disease marked by skin and gastrointestinal disorders

**pustules** – pus-filled blisters

**rachitic** – rickety; said of one who has rickets

1. This chapter is about the fear of the haves and the growing anger of the have-nots. It concludes, “And the anger began to ferment.” What is the relationship between fermenting anger, the novel’s title, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and the song to which the title alludes.

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