

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck

Book Information

John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath

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This powerful social document exemplifies the plight of "Okies" during the 1930s.

Topics: Family Life, Misc./Other; History, Depression Era America; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, ALA Outstanding Books for College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12; U.S. States/Regions, Oklahoma

Main Characters

Al Joad the youngest son, who is interested in cars and girls

Connie Rivers Rose of Sharon's husband

Granma and Grampa an elderly couple who both die en route to California

Jim Casy a former preacher who is traveling to California with the Joads

Ma Joad the determined wife of Pa, who holds the family together

Muley Graves a neighbor of the Joads who refuses to leave his land

Noah Joad the oldest son, who is rather quiet and slow

Pa Joad a tenant farmer who has lost his land and is moving his family to California to look for work

Rose of Sharon (Rosasharn) the newly married Joad daughter, who is expecting a baby

Tom Joad the middle son, who has recently been released from prison for killing a man

Uncle John a lonely man who needs to have a drink now and then

Vocabulary

effluvium unpleasant emanation

lucent luminous or clear

supplication prayer to God; humble request for something

tarpaulin waterproof protective covering

truculent aggressively self-assertive

Synopsis

Tom Joad is hitching a ride home after being paroled from prison, where he spent four years for homicide. On the way, he runs into Jim Casy, who is a former preacher. Casy states that he has been doing a lot of thinking and realizes that people themselves are holy, and he does not have to preach to be a part of that. When they arrive at Tom's parents' place, they are stunned to find it is deserted. Muley Graves tells Tom and Jim that Tom's folks are at his Uncle John's place.

When they arrive at Uncle John's, they find the Joad family busily packing for a move. It is disclosed that the banks and large corporations have closed out all the small farmers, so folks are heading out to California to look for work. The Joads sell most of their possessions for a meager price. The Joads agree to let Casy come with them because he needs to be in California where the people are. Grampa does not want to leave his home, so they have to drug him in order to get him into the vehicle. On their first night on the road, Grampa suffers from what is thought to be a stroke and dies. The neighborly Wilsons help the family with Grampa and give the Joads a quilt in which to bury him. The Wilsons are having car problems, so the Joads fix their broken-down car and agree to continue the journey West together.

As the journey continues, Granma Joad gets sicker. Upon reaching the desert, Ma realizes Granma is dying. She dies early in the night, but Ma tells no one. The family drives on, and in the morning, she reveals that Granma is already dead. The Joads leave her to be buried as a pauper because they have no money.

Soon, the Joads arrive at a camp in Hooverville. The place is filthy and filled with other migrant workers

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like themselves. The Joads have no choice but to stay because they have no money. The men cannot find work, and things turn violent in the camp, so they decide to leave. Soon, they find refuge in a government camp where things are orderly and the residents themselves make the rules. No law officers can come inside.

The Joads find work in a peach orchard, although the pay is low. One night, Tom sneaks out of his dwelling to investigate a commotion. He finds his friend Jim Casy. Casy explains that workers from the peach orchard are striking because of wage cuts. He asks Tom to tell this to the folks inside. Soon, some men arrive on the scene and club Casy to death. Tom, infuriated, fights with Casy's murderer and kills the man. He returns to his camp dwelling, but must hide because of the damage done to his face. They leave the next day to find jobs picking cotton.

One of the Joads' younger children has a quarrel with another child and brags that her brother can kill the other's brother because he has already killed two men. This worries the Joads, so they agree that Tom must go into hiding. Tom hides out in a nearby cave, and Ma brings food to him. Tom, and eventually his mother, realize that it is not safe for him there, so he must go away. Ma gives Tom a few dollars, and he tells her not to worry because he is going to carry on Casy's work helping the poor farmers.

When the short cotton picking time is over, the rainy season comes. Rose of Sharon, the Joads' daughter, goes into labor. Meanwhile, the water is rising to a dangerous level, and Pa tries to avert a flood. The makeshift dam they build collapses, and Rose of Sharon gives birth to a dead baby.

When the rains ease up a bit, the Joads continue on to find a drier place to stay. They happen upon a barn where there is a boy and his starving father. Ma subtly suggests to Rose of Sharon that she feed the dying man with her breast milk, which she gladly does.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

One of the most realistic, yet seemingly simple, aspects of this novel is the regional dialect. It is very believable and helps bring the characters to life. What are some examples of this dialect?

"Ain't got the call no more. Got a lot of sinful idears--but they seem kinda sensible" (26).

"Somepin's wrong ... I can't put my finger on her. I got an itch that somepin's wronger'n hell" (54).

"Pu-raise Gawd fur vittory" (100).

Literary Analysis

The relatively non-dialogue, informative chapters interspersed throughout the book are called intercalary chapters. How does Steinbeck make use of these chapters?

The chapter about the turtle functions symbolically to show the trials and tribulations that lie ahead for the Joads. It also symbolizes the human spirit and the ability to keep going in the face of opposition. Other intercalary chapters give informative and historical information about migrant farmers and the powerful who cheat the small farmers. In the chapter on Route 66, Steinbeck uses chaotic writing to mimic the speeding cars that rush by. Still other chapters serve to directly foreshadow coming events.

Inferential Comprehension

What was Steinbeck's attitude toward the large landowners?

He thought they were grossly unfair and wanted them to be lenient with the workers. He also seemed to mock them. The large farmers would pay salaries to guards to protect their farms from the migrant workers. This money could have been used to pay workers instead of protecting themselves from them.

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Constructing Meaning

How might Jim Casy be considered a modern Christ figure?

After Tom trips the deputy, Casy sacrifices himself by pretending to be Tom. He then goes on to devote himself to the betterment of mankind. He lives among the poor and sees the holiness in the seemingly lowest of people. He works to make their lives better. Also, his violent and unnecessary death at the end is somewhat similar to Christ's--he was killed simply because he was trying to bring the truth to people. Also similar to Christ, he says, "You don't know what you're a-doin'."

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors To prepare for writing *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck actually went to Oklahoma, joined some migrant workers, and then went with them out to California. He stayed with the workers in Hoovervilles, and he looked for work with them. He also made trips to other camps to observe the conditions and treatment of the workers there. He then wrote some articles for the *San Francisco News* in which he described the conditions these migrant farmers faced. Have students find the actual articles Steinbeck wrote. Read them and discuss them in class. How do they compare with his depictions in the novel?

Understanding the Author's Craft Steinbeck paints descriptive portraits of his characters. Each character is introduced with incredible, lifelike detail. Have students create their own descriptive portraits. Each student should write a descriptive page or two about one student in the classroom. No name is to be mentioned in the writing. Instead, encourage the students to write about the clothes, posture, facial expression, mannerisms, and any other thing they guess might be a part of that person's life, for instance, athletics, love of cars, etc. Then, have each student read his portrait aloud and see if the class can guess the identity of the person being described.

Describing Actions or Events The main characters in this novel are forced to become a part of the growing number of migrant farm workers during that time period. Most of these workers were Americans headed for California. Today, there are still migrant workers, however, many of them are illegal aliens from countries such as Mexico. There have been countless reports about the plight of the poor migrant workers. Have students research the plight of the migrant farm worker in America today. Who are they? Where do they come from? What are their daily lives like? Do any work in the area in which you live?

Recognizing Details When *The Grapes of Wrath* was first published, it was often attacked by critics. Those of a religious nature declared the novel obscene. There were people who even thought the novel had communist tendencies. The novel had an Emersonian influence to it. Emerson believed that every individual comes from something called an Oversoul, and once a person dies, he returns to that Oversoul. This is very similar to Casy's belief because he believed that each man was part of a greater soul, of a world soul. He believed that we were all connected and that we were all holy. These beliefs are also similar to aspects of Transcendentalism. Have students research Emerson's beliefs about the Oversoul as well as Transcendentalism and write an essay exploring Steinbeck's use of their ideologies.