

1

Lesson One

FOCUS: Biography

Examining an author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a novel. Biographical criticism is the practice of analyzing a literary work through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to understand the novel more fully.

John Steinbeck reported on the Depression-era migrant workers of his native California for various newspapers and journals. A chronicler of the poor and dispossessed, he was a frequent visitor to migrant encampments, an experience that compelled him to write *The Grapes of Wrath*—the novel for which he won the 1940 Pulitzer Prize and is best remembered today.

Discussion Activities

Listen to The Big Read Audio Guide. Students should take notes as they listen. Ask them to present the three most important points they learned from the Audio Guide. To go more in depth, you might focus on the reflections of one particular commentator. How does the commentator's background shape his or her reading of the novel?

Have students read the following essays from the Readers Guide: "Introduction to the Novel," "John Steinbeck, 1902–1968," and "Steinbeck and His Other Works." Divide the class into groups and assign each group one of the essays. Each group will present a summary of the points in its assigned essay. Ask students to add a creative twist to make their presentations memorable.

Writing Exercise

Have students write a one-page response to a book that taught them something about a group to which they do not belong. If the book changed the way they see a certain group (a race, a religion, a social class, a subculture), then have them discuss at least three ways their perspective was changed. Have them exchange their writing with a classmate and present their books, ideas, and conclusions to the class. Get them thinking about how a novel might adjust their views.

Homework

Read Chapters 1–5. Ask students to think about how the Oklahoma landscape shapes the lives of the people who live in it. How does their own landscape shape the students' lives? When did their parents move here, and why?

2

Lesson Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Cultural and historical contexts give birth to the dilemmas and themes at the center of the novel. Studying these contexts and appreciating intricate details of the time and place help readers understand the motivations of the characters.

The Grapes of Wrath was published in 1939, near the end of a decade that began with the worst economic collapse in American history. In the 1930s, the Great Depression caused widespread unemployment and misery, especially in rural areas, and did not fully run its course until 1941, when the military and its contractors started hiring and drafting for World War II.

In spite—or because—of economic hardship, Hollywood thrived. Bette Davis, Clark Gable, Judy Garland, and the screwball comedies of screenwriters such as Dudley Nichols and Jules Furthman came on the scene. Over the airwaves, Americans listened to the jokes of Jack Benny, the adventures of the Lone Ranger, the news reports of Edward R. Murrow, and Orson Welles’s broadcast of *The War of the Worlds*. Welles also created excitement in the fine arts, producing and directing classics on Broadway and Marc Blitzstein’s opera “The Cradle Will Rock” for the government’s Work Projects Administration. The WPA also funded a renaissance in American art and architecture by commissioning buildings, bridges, and murals across the country. Artists responded by creating both serious works that reflected the growing national crisis, and sophisticated popular entertainment that gave escapism a good name.

Discussion Activities

Have students read Handout Two: The WPA. Bear in mind that Steinbeck spent much of his earliest royalties assembling a prodigious jazz collection. Play clips of Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and Benny Goodman. See if students can identify patterns in the music. If possible, team with a music specialist to explore further the music of the 1930s.

Writing Exercise

Ask the students to write a short essay on the ways artists of the twenty-first century are being influenced by the current political and social climate. In your essay, use specific examples of movies, books, or art. Are writers and filmmakers chronicling current events much as Steinbeck reported the plight of the Dust Bowl migrants? Why or why not?

Homework

Have students read Chapters 6–9 for discussion during the next lesson. Also, have them read “Major Characters in the Novel” from the Reader’s Guide. Who is telling the story, and what is the value of having alternating voices in the narration?

3

Lesson Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

The narrator tells the story with a specific perspective informed by his or her beliefs and experiences. Narrators can be major or minor characters, or exist outside the story altogether. The narrator weaves her or his point of view, including ignorance and bias, into telling the tale. A first-person narrator participates in the events of the novel, using “I.” A distanced narrator, often not a character, is removed from the action of the story and uses the third person (he, she, and they). The distanced narrator may be omniscient, able to read the minds of all the characters, or limited, describing only certain characters’ thoughts and feelings. Ultimately, the type of narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

The Grapes of Wrath is narrated in a “limited-omniscient” third-person voice. This narrator recounts the points of view and experiences of many characters, sometimes far removed from the Joad family. The narrator is “limited” because, in spite of this omniscience, the interior lives of the characters—their silent thoughts and perceptions—are not always revealed to the reader.

Discussion Activities

Steinbeck’s narration alternates between the specific story of the Joad family and the larger story of all the Dust Bowl migrants. He accomplishes the latter through interchapters that he called “generals.” Why would Steinbeck do this? Is the alternation consistent, or are there deviations? How does his focus on the migrants (for example, in Chapter 9) contribute to the point of view of the book?

Writing Exercise

Ask students to choose one character who has appeared so far: Tom, Casy, Ma, Pa, Uncle John, Grampa, or Granma. Have students rewrite the novel’s beginning from this character’s perspective. Have them think about how a story can be told from multiple perspectives. What might Steinbeck be trying to tell us by writing about a whole family and a whole community?

Homework

Have students read Chapters 10–13. Ask students to trace the motivations and development of the same character they chose for the writing exercise. Is the family itself a character in the novel? Have them keep track of each character’s way of talking. What particularities do they notice in the phrases, word choices, and education of their chosen character?

4

Lesson Four

FOCUS: Characters

The central character in a work of literature is called the protagonist. The protagonist usually initiates the main action of the story and often overcomes a flaw, such as weakness or ignorance, to achieve a new understanding by the work's end. A protagonist who acts with great honor or courage may be called a hero. An antihero is a protagonist lacking these qualities. Instead of being dignified, brave, idealistic, or purposeful, the antihero may be cowardly, self-interested, or weak. The protagonist's journey is enriched by encounters with characters who hold differing beliefs. One such character type, a foil, has traits that contrast with the protagonist's and highlight important features of the main character's personality. The most important foil, the antagonist, opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.

The novel begins with Tom Joad's release from prison. He is a convicted killer who acted in self-defense and has served his debt to society. Soon he joins his family for the trip to California. Many readers consider Tom Joad the protagonist of *The Grapes of Wrath*, a man who struggles against violent instincts while standing up for the rights of the dispossessed. Several foils propel Tom into manhood. Reverend Casy speaks a language of pantheism and growing political awareness. Ma is a restraining figure, always reminding Tom of his checkered past and responsibility to the family. Even poor Muley, a solitary outcast on the land, unwittingly warns Tom of the consequences of social exile. These foils vie to lead Tom toward his final choices.

Discussion Activities

Who is the antagonist in *The Grapes of Wrath*? Is it the men who drive the tractors? Is it the bank officials who own the land? Or is the antagonist not a person at all, but the “monster” hounding the farmers from Oklahoma all the way to California? Are the protagonist and the antagonist in this novel in a fair fight? Can the Joads win, or are the odds stacked against them?

Writing Exercise

Steinbeck often alludes to myth to reveal something essential about his characters. Other times, he'll include a story within the novel. For example, Steinbeck tells the story of the Joads' first-born son, Noah. Ask students to find another example of this technique, and to consider the value of telling stories to develop a character.

Homework

Have students read Chapters 14–17. Ask them to find examples in the text where Steinbeck makes them see the landscape in a new way by comparing it to something else. For instance, challenge them to find moments where inanimate objects are compared to animate ones.

5

Lesson Five

FOCUS: Figurative Language

Writers use figurative language such as imagery, similes, and metaphors to help the reader visualize and experience events and emotions in a story. Imagery—a word or phrase that refers to sensory experience (sight, sound, smell, touch, or taste)—helps create a physical experience for the reader and adds immediacy to literary language.

Some figurative language asks us to stretch our imaginations, finding the likeness in seemingly unrelated things. Simile is a comparison of two things that initially seem quite different but are shown to have significant resemblance. Similes employ connective words, usually “like,” “as,” “than,” or a verb such as “resembles.” A metaphor is a statement that one thing is something else that, in a literal sense, it is not. By asserting that a thing is something else, a metaphor creates a close association that underscores an important similarity between these two things.

Discussion Activities

Divide the class into groups. Assign each group a selection of chapters (1–17) from the novel, asking group members to identify figurative language used in those chapters. Students should identify specific examples of imagery, similes, and metaphors. In those chapters, how does the figurative language help tell the story? Have each group present its findings to the class, highlighting what it considers the best example. What is implied when a writer treats an inanimate object as if it were alive? Are there counter-examples where Steinbeck treats a creature as if it were a thing?

Writing Exercise

Sometimes Steinbeck uses a mix of sensory images to introduce a metaphor: “The ancient Hudson, with bent and scarred radiator screen, with grease in dusty globules at the worn edges of every moving part, with hub caps gone and caps of red dust in their places—this was the new hearth, the living center of the family.” Have students find some imagery in the text and make it into a metaphor, as Steinbeck makes the car into “the new hearth” in the passage above. When is an image merely an image, and when does an author place metaphorical weight on it?

Steinbeck uses metaphor when he writes the following: “66 is the mother road, the road of flight.” Have students write two paragraphs about a road trip they have taken, using several examples of figurative language to color their account of the journey. Encourage students to include metaphors as well as similes.

Homework

Have students read Chapters 18–19. Ask them to think about what California represents to the Joads. Challenge them to bring to class three quotes from the text that will help examine the Joads’ views of California.

6

Lesson Six

FOCUS: Symbols

Symbols are persons, places, or things in a narrative that have significance beyond a literal understanding. The craft of storytelling depends on symbols to present ideas and point toward new meanings. Most frequently, a specific object will be used to refer to (or symbolize) a more abstract concept. The repeated appearance of an object suggests a non-literal, or figurative, meaning attached to the object. Symbols are often found in the book's title, at the beginning and end of the story, within a profound action, or in the name or personality of a character. The life of a novel is perpetuated by generations of readers interpreting and reinterpreting the main symbols. By identifying and understanding symbols, readers can reveal new interpretations of the novel.

Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



To summarize, a symbol is an object or action that suggests additional meanings. Use this class period to analyze three major symbols in the novel: the road, the West, and the grapes of wrath.

The Road: Route 66

As America's major east-west road, Highway 66 was also known as Route 66, The Mother Road, and The Main Street of America. A trip from Oklahoma to California was not taken lightly in this pre-interstate era. Focus on the description of the road in Chapter 12: "66 is the path of a people in flight, refugees from dust and shrinking land." How does this tone change by the time we reach Chapter 21? What has changed in the Joad family?

The West

For Americans, the West in general and California in particular have symbolized a new life, or the Promised Land. Building on the homework from Lesson Five, why did so many families in the 1930s—including the fictional Joad family—pin their hope for a better life on California? Pay particular attention to Chapter 18, when the Joad family reaches Tehachapi and sees the vineyards and orchards for the first time.

The Grapes of Wrath

Steinbeck's title quotes from Julia Ward Howe's "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," a famous Civil War anthem associated with the anti-slavery movement. Howe's allusion to "the grapes of wrath" comes from the biblical books of Deuteronomy and Revelation. From what you have read so far, do you think Steinbeck chose a good title? Does it have patriotic, religious, and political connotations? (Students will read the famous passage, "In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy," when they reach Chapter 25.)



Homework

Read Chapters 20–21. Students should return to their original Joad character from the homework in previous lessons. How has their character changed? If their character has died, ask them to consider the ways that the death has affected other members of the Joad family.



7

Lesson Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Novels trace the development of characters who encounter a series of challenges. Most characters contain a complex balance of virtues and vices. Internal and external forces require characters to question themselves, overcome fears, or reconsider dreams. The protagonist may undergo profound change. A close study of character development maps, in each character, the evolution of motivation, personality, and belief. The tension between a character's strengths and weaknesses keeps the reader guessing about what might happen next and the protagonist's eventual success or failure.

As the novel unfolds, we see Tom come to the defense of a principle larger than just himself. He learns to protect others against crooks, cons, vigilantes, and violent cops. He uses the toughness he developed in prison to shepherd the Joads to the "safety" of California, stepping in to take on the roles of family members who die, or leave, or lose authority. In this way, Tom grows into the role of family provider.

Discussion Activities

Which members of the Joad family undergo a change in the course of the novel? Divide the class into groups and assign a member of the family to each. Have each group find examples where the character has changed by the time he or she reaches California. What causes this change? Does any character fail to evolve? If so, why? Are the Joads responsible for what happens to them? Have a spokesperson report the group's findings to the class.

Writing Exercise

Have students focus on and write about Tom, Ma, Casy, and Rosasharn. Students should consider these four characters in pairs, since Tom follows Casy's example while Rosasharn emulates Ma. How are Tom and Casy, or Ma and Rosasharn, similar? How are they different?

Homework

Have students read Chapters 22–24. Ask them to begin thinking about how Steinbeck has organized the events that make up the plot, and whether the story so far points to a likely resolution. Students should come to class with what they think are the two most important turning points so far in the novel.

8

Lesson Eight

FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

The author crafts a plot structure to create expectations, increase suspense, and develop characters. The pacing of events can make a novel either predictable or riveting. Foreshadowing and flashbacks allow the author to defy the constraints of time. Sometimes an author can confound a simple plot by telling stories within stories. In a conventional work of fiction, the peak of the story's conflict—the climax—is followed by the resolution, or denouement, in which the effects of that climactic action are presented.

There are many moments in the novel that can be seen as turning points: the bank's eviction of the tenant farmers, the deaths of Grampa and Granma, Noah's and Connie's desertions, the revival of hope when the Joads arrive at the government camp, and the scuffle with the deputies.

Discussion Activities

Use the homework assignment from the last lesson to have students present the most important turning points in the novel. Ask them to refer to key passages from the novel, explaining why these moments are significant. What consequences does this turning point have for our main characters—Tom, Ma, or Casy?

Have students read “The Novel at the Movies” from the Reader's Guide. Then have them imagine they are making a movie of the novel. Tell them they have to cut certain scenes from the novel because of limited running time. Divide the class into groups and have each suggest two scenes that could be dropped. How does cutting the scene change the structure? Does it improve the story? Have students explain the reasons for their choices.

Writing Exercise

Ask students to anticipate the novel's ending. Have them write several paragraphs describing what could become of the Joad family if they stay in the government camp. Ask them to consider whether the Joads at this point seem likelier to be doomed or saved.

Homework

Have students read Chapters 25–26. Will the novel end on a tragic or comic note? Can they predict any particular tragedy or triumph for a main character?

9

Lesson Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Themes are the central, recurring subjects of a novel. As characters grapple with circumstances such as racism, class, or unrequited love, profound questions will arise in the reader's mind about human life, social pressures, and societal expectations. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, the relationship between one's personal moral code and larger political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational considerations. A novel often reconsiders these age-old debates by presenting them in new contexts or from new points of view.

Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



Use the following questions to stimulate discussion or provide writing exercises. Using historical references to support ideas, explore the statements *The Grapes of Wrath* makes about the following themes:

The Individual Against the Corporation: “It happens that every man in a bank hates what the bank does, and yet the bank does it. The bank is something more than men, I tell you.”

1. Who—or what—is most responsible for the plight of the Joads? Bankers? Tractor drivers? Landowners? Nature itself? Have students explain their answers in detail.
2. What actions does Steinbeck advocate to fix the Joads' dilemma?

The American Dream: Grampa says: “Gonna get me a whole big bunch a grapes off a bush, or whatever, an' I'm gonna squash 'em on my face an' let 'em run offen my chin.”

1. What happens to Grampa's dream? Does anyone in the family find it?
2. What are “the grapes of wrath” in Steinbeck's novel?

Redemption: “The on'y thing you got to look at is that ever' time they's a little step fo'ward, she may slip back a little, but she never slips clear back. . . . An' that means they wasn't no waste even if it seemed like they was.”

1. Are Casy's words borne out by the novel, or are they meant to be sad and ironic?
2. How do the struggles of each of the Joads change them as individuals?



Homework

Have students finish reading the novel. Ask them to begin their essays, using the Essay Topics. Outlines are due at the next class.

10

Lesson Ten

FOCUS: What Makes a Book Great?

Great stories articulate and explore the mysteries of our daily lives in the larger context of the human struggle. The writer's voice, style, and use of language inform the plot, characters, and themes. By creating opportunities to learn, imagine, and reflect, a great novel is a work of art that affects many generations of readers, changes lives, challenges assumptions, and breaks new ground.

Discussion Activities

Ask students to make a list of the characteristics of a great book. Write these on the board. What elevates a novel to greatness? Then ask them to discuss, in groups, other books that have some of the same characteristics. Do any of these books remind them of *The Grapes of Wrath*? How so? How not?

A great writer can be the voice of a generation. What kind of voice does Steinbeck create through the Joads? What kind of voice is in the interchapters? Does the novel speak for more than one man, more than one family? What does this voice tell us about the concerns and dreams of the generation that experienced the Great Depression?

Divide students into groups and have each decide on the single most important theme of the novel. Have a spokesperson from each group explain the group's decision. Write these themes on the board. Do all the groups agree?

Writing Exercise

Write a letter to a friend, perhaps one who does not like to read, and explain why *The Grapes of Wrath* is worth reading. Make an argument for why the novel still has meaning, even if the Depression is now a distant memory.

Have students work on their essays in class. Be available to assist with outlines, drafts, and arguments. Have each student pair up with another to edit outlines and/or rough drafts. Provide students with the characteristics of a well-written essay.

Homework

For the next class, finish essays and present arguments to the class.

The Dust Bowl

The Dust Bowl catastrophe began with a plow and a dream. The escalating price of wheat during World War I encouraged the cultivation of large areas of the Great Plains previously used only for grazing. Through the 1920s, farmers confident in the bounty of the American heartland plowed under an area of 100 million acres, including parts of Kansas, Colorado, Oklahoma, Texas, and New Mexico.

Farmers plowed the marginal land and reaped good harvests for years. But when cattle and sheep were returned to the land in the late 1920s, they overgrazed soil that had already been loosened by cultivation. The native grasses that retained water were plowed under or eaten and rubbed away by livestock. A serious mistake in land management, the planting and overgrazing of the Plains needed only a small push to become a full-fledged disaster.

That push came in 1931 when the rains stopped. Within three years, the central Plains region became a vast desert. High winds blew loose Plains soil as far as the East Coast, darkening closer cities under “black blizzards.” On a dry, windy day the sun could hardly be seen, and the dirt collected in drifts. In 1935 the area was dubbed a “dust bowl” by the Associated Press, a grim name that never went away. It became the worst drought in American history.

By mid-decade, the federal government was working to restore the land. Through progressive practices like contour plowing, crop rotation, shelter belts, and strip plowing, agriculturalists strengthened the Great Plains against human abuse and unfriendly weather. By the early 1940s, the area was already recovering.

The legacy of the Dust Bowl was harsh. About a quarter of the area’s population, perhaps as many as two million people, left the land. Some 200,000 ended up in California, where they accepted the ill-paid stoop labor of migrant workers. It was the most concentrated migration in United States history. When Woody Guthrie sang, “I’m a-goin’ where them dust storms never blow, blow, blow, / An’ I ain’t a-gonna be treated this way” (“Blowin Down This Road”), he sang for a heartland population that had become refugees in their own country.

During the Dust Bowl years, what early explorers had dubbed the Great American Desert—the North American interior—lived up to its name. The Dust Bowl was not simply the result of prolonged drought but the consequence of humans and nature unwittingly working in concert toward a disastrous end.



The WPA

The Work Projects Administration (WPA), originally called the Works Progress Administration, was the largest government agency established to fight unemployment during the Great Depression. From its inception in 1935 as part of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, the agency was responsible for refurbishing America's road infrastructure, erecting buildings and bridges, improving airports, developing the arts, and giving millions of its employees an honest wage and a job in the broken American economy.

By 1935, America had some twenty million people on government relief. The WPA paid heads of families on relief for a thirty-hour work week. The agency employed both blue- and white-collar workers, who did everything from building zoos and writing books to laying sewers, landscaping parks, and paving airport runways.

The WPA is well remembered for its contribution to American arts and letters. One program was the Federal Writers' Project, an ambitious venture that produced, among other things, a series of comprehensive state and regional guidebooks. The American Guide Series offered cultural essays, automobile tours, historical reflections, photographs, and more. The Writers' Project also produced extensive folklore research, including interviews with many former slaves recorded in the Slave Narrative Collection.

The WPA's reach in the arts extended far beyond the written word. Through the Federal Art Project (FAP), unemployed American artists were hired to decorate and create murals for public buildings such as schools, libraries, and post offices. They created some 200,000 works of art during the FAP's tenure. Among the artists who worked for the WPA were Thomas Hart Benton, Ben Shahn, Willem de Kooning, and Jacob Lawrence.

WPA photographers also captured the visual saga of America in the Great Depression. They depicted urban and rural life of the 1930s and extensively documented programs including the Federal Theatre Project, another artistic arm of the WPA. Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans took the best-known photos of the Depression, those showing poverty in rural America, under the direction of the Farm Security Administration, a sister relief agency created under the New Deal.

The WPA employed over eight million people during its existence, including writers Saul Bellow, John Cheever, Studs Terkel, Richard Wright, and Zora Neale Hurston. By the time the agency disbanded in 1943, it had bequeathed a legacy, both economic and artistic, that would benefit generations of Americans with its documentary precision, its enormous scale, and its human touch.



Migrant Farm Workers

Land in America is plentiful, but not always cheap. Those who cannot afford to buy it often work it for a wage. Tenant farmers cultivate a plot of land and pay a portion of the harvest to the owner, as do the Joads before the beginning of *The Grapes of Wrath*. But migrant farmers and laborers occupy a rung further down the ladder, traveling seasonally and getting paid by the bushel to do painful and dehumanizing “stoop labor.”

Since subsistence farming began to wane during the late nineteenth century, cheap migrant labor in America has been in constant demand. The people taking migrant jobs have belonged to many different groups: whites like the Joads, African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos. The Depression-era photographs of Dorothea Lange, Horace Bristol, Walker Evans, and others made the grim faces of migrant farmers a permanent part of the collective American memory.

During the Depression, American citizens desperate for work did most of the migrant labor. Due to the labor shortage caused by World War II, however, the Bracero Program brought five million Mexican agricultural workers to the United States, beginning in 1942. The program ended two decades later, when a rash of accusations and lawsuits charging human rights abuses were filed against the American and Mexican governments.

In the 1960s, the United Farm Workers brought to light the conditions of migrant laborers. Led by Arizona-born César Chávez, the union organized protests, marches, and boycotts to educate the American public about who was picking their produce and the conditions in which they lived. In the 1970s, an estimated seventeen million Americans participated in a successful boycott of nonunion grapes.

In more recent years, right-to-work legislation and a surplus of labor have prevented most migrant farmers from unionizing. Though estimates vary, it is safe to say that more than two million migrant farm workers labor in America’s fields—most of them Spanish-speaking and at least 100,000 of them children. About a third of the total are U.S. citizens who live a hand-to-mouth existence. Their average education stops at the sixth grade, their lifespan ranks substantially below the American norm, and the majority of them have incomes well below the poverty line.

Many farm workers today labor under conditions familiar to the writers and photographers who chronicled their precursors during the Depression. Migrant farmers remain a large yet nearly invisible presence in the American mosaic.

