

## Honors American Literature

### *The Grapes of Wrath* Summer Reading Discussion

#### NOTES

*Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck – ISBN-10: 0-14-303943-1

If you have any questions, please contact Mrs. Johnson via e-mail: [joyjohnson@concordiaprepschool.org](mailto:joyjohnson@concordiaprepschool.org).

#### 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 thirties, 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 30,000 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 socio-political implications. The novel continues to be one of the most highly praised and vehemently criticized pieces of American literature. (Source: Dr. Donald R. Gallo, Professor of English, Central Connecticut State University)

#### Preparing to Read

- If interested, read about the Dust Bowl and other events of the Great Depression.
- Think about what happens when machines replace people. What alternatives do unskilled workers have when they are replaced?
- What is your definition of family? Is a family made up of only relatives? What keeps a family together? Of what importance is family unity in today’s society?
- As you work through *The Grapes of Wrath*, consider stopping occasionally to record your thoughts and reactions in a Response Journal. (NOTE: This is entirely optional. This journal can then be used during the school year for class notes.) Include statements about the characters—what you learn about them, how they affected you—and your thoughts about the key issues and events which the book explores. Or, jot down questions you have about events and statements in the book which you do not understand. The Response Journal/notes will be helpful as we discuss the novel in class in preparation for an essay. In addition, because this novel contains several sophisticated words, unusual expressions, and dialect, you may want to keep a list of some of those words and their meanings in your journal.

#### Discussion Questions

Select **FIVE** questions and respond in paragraph form. (The rest will be discussed in class in conjunction with additional discussion points.) Make sure to incorporate direct quotes from the text in your answers, citing the lines you quote. Submit your TYPED summer reading responses to Turnitin.com on the first day of class.

## Quoting the Text

When quoting passages from a novel, stand-alone quotes are not allowed. Respond, use textual support to back up your statement by first introducing the quote, and then comment on the quote after the citation.

NOTE: Shorter phrases/passages work better—no need for block quotes—and remember to cite the page numbers.

Examples:

After several of the women decide to burn their possessions before they move, one mother asks, “How can we live without our lives? How will we know it’s us without our past?” (Steinbeck 22).

or

Unlike the predatory actions of the tractor, Steinbeck demonstrates the optimistic power of a machine as the Joads prepare to leave their home: “The family met at the most important place, near the truck. The house was dead, and the fields were dead; but this truck was the active thing, the living principle. The ancient Hudson...this was the new hearth, the living center of the family” (147).

**\*\*\*A word of warning!\*\*\***

**Please DO NOT include the question in your response. This creates a false positive when you upload in Turnitin.com (which means the instructor must investigate if you have in fact plagiarized). Failure to comply will cost you points on your summer reading.**

1. In the beginning, each character has personal reasons for wanting to go to California. How does each member of the Joad family feel about moving to California? How does each feel about leaving home? 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. How do the tractors operate? What role does the bank play? What power do the small farmers have against the banks and the tractors?
3. 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 impact of the novel?
4. Identify as many Biblical references or parallels as you can find in the novel and discuss their effectiveness as well as their meaning within the context.
5. How has farming changed throughout the novel? Why do the local people fear the migrants? What is a Hooverville? How do you suppose a Hooverville got its name? In addition, 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?
6. Some critics maintain that this novel promotes hatred between classes of people. In which ways does it do that? In what ways does the novel’s effect go beyond that?
7. 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 these images contribute to the meaning of the novel?
8. Describe the role women play throughout this novel. Be sure to comment on the significance of Rose of Sharon’s final act in the novel.