The Grapes of Wrath

John Steinbeck

About the author
John Steinbeck was born in Salinas, California in 1902. After graduating from high school Steinbeck went to Stanford University but did not complete his studies. After leaving Stanford he went to New York where he worked as a reporter, laborer, apprentice painter, caretaker and surveyor. He also had experience as a fruit picker and a ranch worker. Through these varied experiences, he had a good understanding of the lives of the workers he portrayed in his novels. He married three times, in 1930, 1943, and 1950.

His first novel, *Cap of Gold*, was published in 1929. He first received real popular acclaim for his novel *Tortilla Flat* in 1935. Much of his work concerned the plight of America’s dispossessed rural population. During World War II he worked as a war correspondent. For a period, during the Cold War, he was widely criticized in the United States for his support for the underprivileged and his attention to social issues.

His works *Of Mice and Men*, *The Grapes of Wrath* and *East of Eden* have all been made into successful movies. The movie version of *The Grapes of Wrath* (made in 1940) starred Henry Fonda as Tom Joad. In 1962 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. He died six years later in 1968.

Summary
*The Grapes of Wrath* is the story of the Joad family and their odyssey from Oklahoma to California to escape the Dust Bowl of the 1930s.

Tom Joad arrives home from jail on parole, after serving a sentence for manslaughter. He finds that his family, tenant farmers, have been pushed off their farm by the bank and are preparing to travel to California. Tom is joined by a former preacher Casy, who has lost his faith.

The whole family travel in an old truck across Colorado and Arizona to California. During the journey the family disintegrates; both grandparents die, the slow, quiet son Noah drifts away, and the son-in-law Connie abandons his pregnant wife Rosasharn. She gives birth to a stillborn child. The tragedy is mitigated by moments of kindness within the family, and to and from strangers they meet during their travels.

Once in California they find that there is little work and that employers are exploiting the large numbers of unemployed by paying starvation wages. Casy becomes involved in a strike that the Joads unwittingly break. Tom finds this out when he comes across Casy outside their camp. One of the men sent by the employers kills Casy, and Tom kills him in revenge. Eventually Tom must leave too, or else be caught and sent back to jail.

In the end only Ma, Pa, Rosasharn and the two children remain. The family takes refuge from a flood in an abandoned barn, where Rosasharn helps a man dying of hunger, by allowing him to suckle her and drink her dead baby’s milk.

Chapter 1: Tom Joad returns home after four years in prison. Near his home, Tom meets Reverend Jim Casy, a former preacher from his community. Tom learns that his family has been forced off the land. They are at his Uncle John’s place and are planning to leave Oklahoma for California. Tom and Casy meet a former neighbor and spend the night outdoors. They escape being caught by the authorities who could charge them with trespassing.

Chapter 2: Tom and Casy travel to Uncle John’s house the next day. Tom tells his father (Pa) he is on parole from prison. If he leaves the state, he could be sent back to prison. He reunites with the rest of his family: his mother (Ma), grandparents, quiet older brother Noah, younger brother Al, pregnant sister Rosasharn and her husband Connie, and his younger sister and brother, Ruthie and Winfield.

There is no work for the family in Oklahoma. Pa has a handbill that says people are needed to work in California. They are hopeful about their new life. Along with Casy, they all get in a truck and begin their journey. Grandpa doesn’t want to leave home but is taken along.
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Chapter 3: A gas attendant tells Tom and Casy about all the cars of people who stop at his station each day. They all have the same plan to move to California. Ma worries about Tom breaking parole by crossing the border but he reassures her that he will be fine if he stays out of trouble. The Joads stop for the night and meet Sairy and Ivy Wilson who are driving an old car. Sairy isn’t feeling well. Grandpa, who has also been feeling sick, dies.

The Joads and Wilsons decide to travel together. Al, who is good with machines, can help keep the Wilsons’ car running and the Joads can have more room by riding with the Wilsons in the car and truck.

Chapter 4: There is car trouble and they talk about splitting up while a few stay behind to fix the car. Ma insists they stay together as family is the most important thing. Meanwhile, Grandma is having problems. Pa and Tom meet a man who is returning from the west. He tells them there is little work to be found in California. There are too many workers available, so wages are low.

Chapter 5: They cross the border from Arizona to California. At a stop along a river, they meet two men who tell them that California is beautiful but life there is difficult and that people will not treat them nicely. Although there is lots of land available, it is owned and controlled by companies that will not allow them to grow their own produce. Noah decides to stay by the river and catch fish instead of continuing to the coast.

Ma is in the tent with Grandma and Rosasharn when she is confronted by a police officer who says they need to move along by the next day or be put in jail. The Wilsons decide they need to stay behind because Sairy is sick. Grandma is also sick but the family knows they have to continue. They drive through the desert and get to the fruit-growing region. Grandma dies along the way.

Chapter 6: They arrive at a camp. A man named Floyd tells them about the difficulties of finding work and a decent place to live. A contractor arrives with the offer of work. He refuses to give details of the job to Floyd. The contractor is accompanied by a sheriff who encourages them to go to the workplace or risk getting hurt if they stay around the camp much longer.

Floyd argues with the contractor and a fight breaks out. Tom trips the sheriff and Floyd escapes. Casy kicks the sheriff to knock him out and tells Tom to leave. (Casy knows that if Tom is caught he will be in big trouble for breaking parole by leaving Oklahoma.) Casy takes the blame for the fight and is taken to jail.

Meanwhile, Connie decides to leave and Uncle John goes off to get drunk. Because of the troubles with the sheriff, the family has to leave the camp right away. They find Uncle John and go.

Chapter 7: They arrive at a government camp. The conditions are better there and Tom gets work at a nearby farm. The employer cuts the workers’ wages at the request of the Farmers’ Association, which is controlled by the bank. Because there are lots of workers in the area, there are always people available to work for less money.

The employer warns Tom and the others that some people who don’t like the government camps are planning to disrupt an upcoming dance and make trouble. This will allow the police, who are not normally allowed on the camp, to enter. This warning allows Tom and the others to prevent the trouble from happening.

Chapter 8: Conditions throughout the area worsen. The companies and banks own the large farms as well as the factories. The low wages bring down the price of fruit and farmers are unable to pay workers. Fruit is ruined while people go hungry. The conditions at the government camp are quite good; however, the family finds little work so they decide to keep moving. Rosasharn, who is pregnant, is not feeling well because she has not had the milk she needs. They hear about a ranch that needs workers. They are directed there past protesting workers. They work hard and are paid in credit. The credit can be used at the ranch-owned store where prices are high.

Tom meets Casy outside the ranch. Casy tells him the former ranch workers are on strike because their wages had been cut from five cents a box to two and a half cents. Casy says the same thing will happen to Tom and the new workers. Two men who know Casy has been involved in protests kill Casy. Tom fights back and kills one of them. The family sneaks Tom out of the camp. They go to a place where they can pick cotton. Tom plans to hide from the authorities in the bushes until his face heals.

Chapter 9: The family picks cotton and sleeps in a boxcar with another family, the Wainwrights, while Tom continues to hide. However, one day Ruthie gets in a fight and makes threats that she has a brother who has killed a man. Ma gives Tom some money and tells him he needs to go away. With the completion of the cotton harvest, the family also gets ready to leave. However, Al says he’ll
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stay behind because he plans to marry Aggie Wainwright. It rains for days and the stream rises and floods the area. Rosasharn has her baby but it doesn't survive. The family escapes the flood by moving to a barn. Inside the barn, they meet a boy and his father. The boy says his father hasn't eaten in days and is dying. He needs milk. Rosasharn offers her breast to the man so he can drink her dead baby's milk.

Background and themes

The book is set during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Hard times were made even harder in Oklahoma and four other states when drought and poor farming methods led to the wind erosion of the topsoil. The Great Plains thus became known as "the Dust Bowl". Almost two million tenant farmers were pushed off their land, as they were unable to pay rent to the banks that owned their farms. A third of a million agricultural workers left the Dust Bowl for California, where they believed they could live off the rich and fertile land. However, there were many more migrant farmers than jobs, allowing landowners to treat the workers very poorly. Many of these workers lived in makeshift camps known as Hoovervilles, named after President Hoover.

The Grapes of Wrath tells the story of one family who live through these events. It is a harsh condemnation of an American Dream gone wrong, of the greed of big business, and the ineffectiveness of government.

Despite the bleakness and tragedy, Steinbeck shows us the essential goodness of the people involved and their willingness to help strangers, and, when given the opportunity, to work together for the common good. There are many examples of this in the story: Muley unquestioningly shares the rabbits he has caught with Tom and Casy; the men work together to build a wall to keep back the flood waters; and strangers invite Tom to share their breakfast. The final moments of the story when Rosasharn suckles the dying stranger symbolize this most clearly. The message of the book is one of hope.

Discussion activities

Before reading

1 Discuss: Have students work in small groups and respond to the following:
   a The book is set during the Great Depression in the United States in the 1930s. What do you think are some of the causes and consequences of an economic depression?
   b Part of the family's problem in the story is environmental. What do you know about the problems of the "Dust Bowl" in the United States? Are there any similar problems elsewhere in the world today? What should we do about them?
   c Another problem the family faces is the arrival of new technology which means fewer agricultural jobs. How might similar problems happen in the future? Who would be affected, and how should we solve the problem?

2 Guess: Have students look at the picture on the cover of the book. How does it make you feel? What do you think is happening? Then have them look at the title of the story. Does that give you any more ideas about what might happen in the story?

Introduction

After reading

3 Write: Draw a family tree noting the members of the Joad family.

   Grandma & Grandpa
   Ma & Pa
   Noah ...
   Uncle Joe

4 Check: Have students think about their discussion in activity 1. What key facts have you learned about the Dust Bowl of the 1930s? Have them share their information.

Chapters 1–3

Before reading

5 Guess: Tom Joad, the main character in the story, returns home to his family after serving four years in prison. His family doesn't know he is coming. Have students guess the following: How would Tom feel about coming home? How would his family feel about seeing him? What kind of changes could he expect to find in his family and on the farm?

After reading

6 Discuss: Have students think about their answers to activities 2 and 5. Were you correct? Tom finds out his family is moving to California. If you were Tom, how would you feel about going on the journey? What would be your reasons for going and for staying?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons for Tom to go</th>
<th>Reasons for Tom to stay</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

7 Group work: Give each student the name of a different character who appears in the first three chapters. Ask students to write a description of their character (without mentioning the name) and also a thought this person might have about the journey.
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Example: This is a young man. He is good at fixing cars and he likes girls. Thought: "I hope I can keep our car running so we can get to California. I'm going to make lots of money there and meet some beautiful girls!"

Have them exchange descriptions with others in their group and try to guess the name of each character. Possible characters to describe include: Tom, Casy, Uncle John, Pa, Ma, Grandma, Grandpa, Noah, Al, Rosasharn, Connie, Winfield and Ruthie (young boy and girl) and Ivy and Sairy Wilson. Check their answers together.

8 Write: Have students choose one of the characters that interests them. Imagine you are writing in your diary after the first night on the road. How do you feel? What are your hopes? Have students write a diary entry and then share their writing in groups.

Dear Diary, This is my first night away from home … Rosasharn

Chapters 4–5
Before reading

9 Group work: Have students think about taking a long road trip with family members. What challenges might you have along the way? Make a list of possible problems. Then make a second list outlining specific problems the Joads might have. Share your ideas with the class.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenges: Traveling on a long journey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My family</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After reading

10 Discuss: Think about Ma's reaction to the people in the truck moving ahead while those in the car stay behind. Re-read page 26. What is most important to her? If you were with her on this journey, would you agree with her? Why/why not?

11 Pair work: On page 35, the family meets a man who talks to them about life in the west. In pairs, have students imagine they are Tom and they are listening to the man talk about his problems. What are the main problems he talks about? What does he say? What do you (as Tom) hope?

The man says … I (as Tom) hope …

12 Role play: In pairs, have students imagine a final conversation between Grandma and Ma.

Student 1: You are Ma. You know Grandma is very sick but you know the family must continue traveling. What would you tell Grandma about the trip and your plans?

Student 2: You are Grandma. You know you are dying. What would you say to your daughter about your hopes for her future? What advice would you give her?

Chapters 6–7
Before reading

13 Guess: The family arrives at a camp in California. As a class, have students guess what might happen next. What will the family find? How will they feel? Will they find work? A place to live? New friends? What will happen?

While reading

14 Role play: After reading Chapter 6, have students take the roles of two of the characters. Have them discuss their feelings about what they have experienced and what they hope will happen.

Examples: Rosasharn and Connie talking about their future together; Pa and Ma talking about Grandma's funeral; Casy and Tom talking about the fight with the sheriff; Casy and the sheriff talking about the fight; Tom talking to Uncle Joe about coming with the family; Ma and Rosasharn talking about Connie running away.

After reading

15 Read carefully: In Chapter 7, the family moves to a government camp. In groups, read carefully and discuss how the camp works. Fill out the chart together.

Characteristics of other workers

Type of work nearby

Committee (How does it work?)

Government camp

Role of police

Facilities at camp

Chapters 8–9
Before reading

16 Guess: Have students guess what will happen in the next two chapters. Think of individual family members as well as the whole family. Where will the family go? What will they do? Will they be happy? Have them share their ideas.

While reading

17 Read carefully: At the beginning of Chapter 8 (page 65), the family discusses future plans. In pairs, list the pros and cons of staying at the Weedpatch government camp.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pros</th>
<th>Cons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

In pairs, have students continue by describing life on the Hooper Ranch. Have them read for the details on pages 66–68.
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Hooper Ranch

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of work at ranch</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(First impression entering the ranch)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vehicles (describe)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People (describe)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wages at ranch</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of boxes filled by Joads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wages for that work</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cost of goods at store</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ma’s purchases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total cost</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Owner of store</th>
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After reading

18 Check: In groups, have students look at their guesses from questions 2, 13 and 16. Did any of the students guess correctly? Discuss what might happen next.

19 Role play: Think about Tom and his experiences at Hooper Ranch. Imagine that he is caught for killing the man near Hooper Ranch. Have students act the roles of the police officer questioning Tom.

Student A: You are the police officer. What do you need to know about Tom and his involvement in the killing of the man?

Student B: You are Tom. What happened? Why did you hit the other man?

20 Write: Think about the experiences of one of the characters in this chapter. Have students imagine what they might say to this person if they were to meet them. What could you say to make them feel more confident about their future?

Extra activities

21 Discuss: Have students complete these sentences and then discuss their answers in small groups.

a Tom should / shouldn’t have …

b If I were Connie, I …

c If I were Rosasharn, I …

d The worst thing that happened to the Joads was when …

e … was / were responsible for most of the Joad family’s problems.

f The writer’s main message is that …

22 Research: Have students research, prepare and give presentations about one of the following topics. They could do this in pairs.

a The Dust Bowl and the Great Depression

b John Steinbeck’s life and works

c The problems of modern farming

23 Write: Have students choose one of the characters in the novel. Write a letter to a friend from home (in Oklahoma). Tell them about your experiences in the west and what you hope you will do next.

24 Role play: In pairs, have students imagine the situation of the family one year later.

Student A: You are Tom. You have been away from the family. Explain what you have been doing. Ask about your family.

Student B: You are one of the family members. (Choose the character that is most interesting to you.) Tell Tom what you and the others have been doing. Ask what Tom has been doing.

25 Artwork: Have students imagine that they are one of the characters in this story and that they have taken photographs on the family’s journey. Think of an event in the story that is meaningful to you. Draw a picture of this event and explain what is happening. Have students share their “photographs” in groups and put them together to form a Joad Family Album.

Vocabulary activities

For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.