

The Grapes of Wrath: Book Club Questions

When *The Grapes of Wrath* came out critics were divided about it. Fans said it exposed social injustice and called for social redress. Others denounced it as communist propaganda. The book was burned by order of the library in a town in Illinois, even as the town's library said that the waiting list for it was longer than for any other book in the history of the library. Before writing the book Steinbeck traveled the road from Oklahoma to California along with Dust Bowl migrants to research *for the Grapes of Wrath*. What do you think? Does Steinbeck go too far and turn the situation into propaganda? Or was did Steinbeck get it right, so that the book an expose instead of propaganda?

What does the turtle in chapter three symbolize? One car avoids the turtle on purpose, but another car comes along and hits it on purpose. What do these two cars represent? The turtle isn't killed. It is knocked on its back and gets up and keeps walking. In some ways this incident is symbolic of the whole story, all roughly 450 pages of it. What do I mean when I say that?

What is the significance of the title, *The Grapes of Wrath*?

Steinbeck uses a writing technique where he takes a small story, that of the Joads, and uses their small story to tell a larger story, that of the environmental disaster and the plight of the people affected by it. What do you think of this technique as far as taking one family to represent an entire situation?

There are three parts to *The Grapes of Wrath*. The first part takes place in Oklahoma as farmers are losing their farms because of the largest man-made environmental disaster in United States history. Part two takes place on the road to California where the farmers hope to find work on land that is fruitful. Part three takes place in California. Let's talk character development. How do the characters of Ma Joad and Tom Joad evolve from part one to the ending of the book?

How did the characters of Jim Casy and Tom Joad compare?

Early in the book Jim Casy, the preacher, says "there ain't no sin and there ain't no virtues." It is an interesting statement in a book that seems to be full of people who are sinners and people who are virtuous. Do you think that Jim Casy changes his mind about this? Do you think that whether an individual is a sinner or a virtuous person is a matter of perspective? Would you think that Jim Casy is trying to assuage his own guilt because he had sexual relations with girls while he was a preacher, and is therefore willing to give everyone a pass so that he doesn't have to feel guilty for his actions?

At the beginning of the book Tom Joad is self-centered and seems to care only about himself. As time goes on he becomes an important part of the Joad family unit. How does Tom Joad reflect the message Steinbeck hopes readers of this book will take to heart? How does Jim Casy affect Tom's growth? When an author chooses a character there's a reason for that individual's presence in the story. What do you think was Casy's purposes from the standpoint of why he was written into the story?

One of the core elements of Ma Joad's is her belief that family is central to all. By chapter 20 Grampa is dead, Granma is dead, Noah has left them, Mrs. Wilson has been left behind with Mr. Wilson because she will be dead soon, and Connie has left Rose of Sharon. Why do you think Steinbeck has written the breakup in the family this way with one thing after another coming so fast?

In the early chapters, Steinbeck portrays his female characters as being more passive and cautious. By the end of the book they have become more assertive. What are your thoughts on why Steinbeck included changing gender roles in this story?

There is a great deal of focus on how the Oklahomans are treated when they get to California. The cheating of the Joad family began before they left Oklahoma. The car salesman who cheats the Joads by selling them bad automobiles, and the people who pretend the items they're selling are worth nothing strike me as particularly greedy and willing to take advantage of the terrible situation the farmers find themselves in. I have read *The Grapes of Wrath* several times and for some reason this early greedy cheating/bargain-hunting doesn't seem as terrible to me as the situation the Joads face in California. Did the same thing happen for you? Why do you think that is?

Throughout the book rich people and those taking advantage of the poor are "I" and the poor people are "we". When Cornell West speaks he calls the audience members "my brothers". How does simply changing the pronouns and personal nouns change our relationship with what we are reading or hearing?

Steinbeck writes that people "in flight from the terror behind" had "strange things happen to them, some bitterly cruel and some so beautiful that the faith is refired forever." What beautiful things happen to the Joads or do the Joads do what might be considered beautiful?

Steinbeck wrote this to his editor: "I've done my damndest to rip a reader's nerves to rags, I don't want him satisfied." What was Steinbeck trying to do and change? Are these problems fixed or still with us?

The ending with Rose of Sharon feeding the dying man: What is the symbolism of it? What do you think of it as an ending to this book? Is this the sort of thing the saying, "The milk of human kindness," refers to? Do you think Steinbeck was alluding to that saying with this ending?

The death of the house and the land, now separated from the people who cared for them, foreshadows the death of Grampa who is separated from the land he loves. In some ways this is contradictory however. Steinbeck is most concerned with the plight of the working man. It is the use of the land however that is damaging to it. The areas in middle of the United States were grasslands. When settlers came and ripped out the native grass and began planting on the soil the farming practices they used damaged the soil and led to the environmental disaster. One could argue that the farmers caused the death of the land. It is only when the farmers leave the land and the native plants and animals recolonize the land that it can be healthy again. The book is about the plight of those less fortunate. Let's change gears and look at the land itself as a character in the book. Does the land as a character

evolve? Is it a static character? How does the portrayal of the land as something to be used, define the modern day narrative about environmental issues?