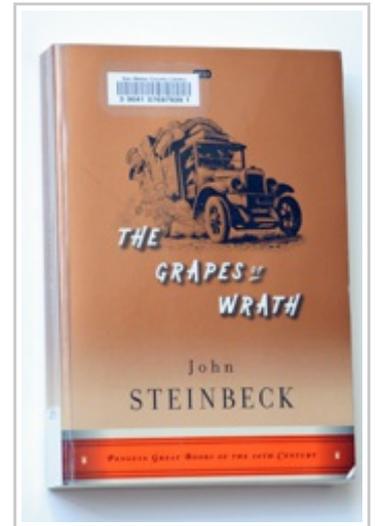


Reading the Grapes of Wrath

The Grapes of Wrath is one of the most read classic works of literature in high school, and also one of the most thought-provoking. John Steinbeck's novel chronicles the experiences of the Joad Family, along with thousands of other American families. In the 1930's, farmers all across the Midwest lost their homes and land due to a severe drought in an already depleted region, creating "The Dust Bowl." They were told to head west to California to become migrant workers where the jobs were plentiful, and where there was no thick curtain of dust hanging in the air.

How did the "Okies" fare? Here's a teen-friendly refresher course in the plot of this classic work of literature, as well as SAT vocabulary your teen can use to describe what happens for his or herself.



When the novel opens, Tom Joad is hitchhiking home from a stint in the Oklahoma Prison. The road is hot and lonely, and he picks up a turtle to take as a gift for his younger siblings. He stops for rest and Jim Casy, a former preacher who had baptized Tom himself, offers to share the shade. Jim tells Tom that he has given up preaching because it seems to him that he believes less in sin and damnation and more in the holiness of human action. Jim accompanies Tom to his family's home, but the two realize immediately that something is wrong. The entire area feels empty and quiet, and Tom realizes that not only is his family gone, but *everyone* is gone.

Useful vocabulary to describe the farmland:

- **Desolate** - Abandoned and lifeless
- **Barren** – Lifeless, infertile
- **Dilapidated** - Neglected and run down
- **Devoid** - Lacking
- **Vacuous** - Empty

Suddenly, an old man, Muley Graves, who had been camping out on the farmlands, comes out of the fields and tells Tom that his family has gone to live on Uncle John's farm, and they are all leaving for California soon. Tom goes to the home of his uncle and shares a loving reunion with his large family: Ma and Pa Joad, Granma and Grampa Joad, Uncle John, brothers Noah and Winfield, and sisters Rose of Sharon and Ruthie. Almost immediately, the clan begins packing up for the trip.

Less than a day into the journey, the Joads encounter their first pitfall. While stopped for gas, their dog is hit by another car on the highway. This does not bode well for the Joads, but they continue on, until they come across Ivy and Sairy Wilson broken down by the side of the road. They stop and decide to camp for the night, and, while resting in the Wilsons' tent, Grampa has a stroke and dies. After burying Grampa, the Joads decide to continue on with the Wilsons, misery loves company, right?

Together the Joads and the Wilsons make progress, and eventually encounter the California desert. The lush green valleys they had heard so much about are nowhere to be seen. They meet a father and son traveling in the opposite direction, and the father tells them there are no jobs to be had, and no friendly faces for the migrant workers in California, and that they are headed back home to starve among friends.

Useful vocabulary to describe treatment of the migrant workers:

- **Exploit** - To take advantage of
- **Beguile** - To trick

- **Leery** - Suspicious
- **Skeptical** - Doubtful
- **Insidious** - Harmful but enticing

The Joads decide to continue on, but as they are leaving Tom's brother Noah hangs back. Noah tells Tom he will not continue on with them; instead he is going to stay on the river. Ma Joad is devastated, and to make matters worse, Granma is sick and feverish. As they cross the desert, Granma dies but Ma Joad keeps silent so they can get into the valley without further discouragement.

Further along the road, the migrant workers have created a camp, called a Hooverville, and Tom becomes involved in a dispute between a land owner and a spokesman for the workers who is demanding a fair wage. The land owner, tired of arguing over basic workers' rights, calls the police to haul the man off and a fight starts. Tom helps the man escape by knocking one of the officers unconscious – not wise for a man still on parole. Jim Casy takes the rap for Tom and is dragged away. Tom decides this is not the place for them, and they must move on quickly (even though it means leaving the missing Connie behind).

The Joads finally hit a patch of good luck and find Weedpatch, a migrant-run camp where they are treated like human beings (a nice change of pace). The camp is clean and organized, but there is still no work. After lots of searching, only Tom comes back with a job, but camp festivities help them stay positive. He soon hears that the owners are using a planned dance as a way to have the police shut down the camp if a fight occurs. He stops the fight before it can draw the police and begins to realize that helping the workers create a life for themselves benefits more than just his family. His thoughts turn to the people he has seen and the experiences they have endured.

Useful vocabulary to describe a union for the workers:

- **Solidarity** - Unity
- **Converge** - Come together
- **Convene** - Meet together
- **Contentious** - Quarrelsome
- **Discordant** - Quarrelsome

Although the conditions are better in Weedpatch than other camps, there is no work – and no work means no food. The Joads are forced to pack up and try another crop - peaches are paying five cents a box. Although they pick all day, pooling their money together still only nets them a dollar.

Near the camp Tom meets up with Jim Casy, who since being released has been trying to help the workers fight for fair wages and livable conditions. As Jim fills Tom in on his experiences, two policemen appear and attack Jim right in front Tom. Jim is killed, and Tom lashes out at the officers and killing one before fleeing. He knows that shouldn't bring his trouble back to his family, but Ma makes him stay.

The entire family packs up, moving to another farm down the road while Tom finds a place near them to hide out. The plan is for Tom to rejoin them when he doesn't look so suspicious- broken nose and black eyes look like trouble- but Tom's little sister, Ruthie, makes that impossible when she taunts a bully by saying that her brother is a murderer. Tom takes off on his own, and the family looks again for work.

They eventually find work and shelter picking cotton. They share an old boxcar with another family, the Wainwrights, who have a daughter, Agnes, right around Al's age. The family actually begins making some money and has a few happy moments. Al and Agnes announce that they have fallen in love and are engaged. Finally, something to celebrate!

That brief moment of happiness proves short lived when Rose of Sharon goes into labor in the boxcar and her baby is stillborn. The rains have been severe and their boxcar floods, so again they have to

move on, although Al stays behind with Agnes. The family finds what seems like an abandoned barn - but when they get closer, they see a little boy and his father have also made a camp there. The father is nearly dead because he has stopped eating in order to provide more for his son.

Ma Joad immediately realizes what must be done. Herding the others outside, she leaves Rose of Sharon, she was still producing milk even though her baby had died, to literally nurse the dying man with the milk of human kindness.

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