

# The Grapes of Wrath

by  
John Steinbeck

## StoryLines California Discussion Guide No. 6

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### Discussion questions

In the American West especially, the ideal of “rugged individualism” is at the root of many laws, or lack of laws, and has also shaped attitudes toward welfare and treatment of the homeless and needy. Is the ideal of rugged individualism still workable? Can we survive as individuals today the way we might have survived one or two hundred years ago?

What are the benefits of community to the individual? What are the sacrifices an individual must make to participate in the community? What are some benefits and sacrifices in your own life?

### Additional readings

Francisco Jiminez. *The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child*, 1997.

Tomás Rivera. *Y No Se Lo Trago La Tierra/And the Earth Did Not Devour Him*, 1987.

Jerry Stanley. *Children of the Dust Bowl: The True Story of the School at Weedpatch Camp*, 1992.

John Steinbeck. *Harvest Gypsies: On the Road to the Grapes of Wrath*, 1936.

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John Steinbeck's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, is a moving tale of the Joad family's struggle to adapt and survive in a changing world. Like thousands of other families in the Dust Bowl years of the 1930s, the Joads are forced to leave their home and the land they have been farming for generations. These "Okies" load their trucks and jalopies with the few possessions they can bring along and set out for California, where they plan to work in the vineyards, orchards, and cotton fields. Sadly, their high expectations soon collide with harsh realities.

"How can we live without our lives? How will we know it's us without our past?" Steinbeck asks these important questions as the Joads are packing to leave and discarding much of their already meager material wealth. Such disorientation is symptomatic of all dispossessed people, and many of us can perhaps identify times in our own lives when we have felt the same way in the face of profound change. The Joad family hits the road with little more than family memories and dreams. By the close of the novel, the dreams have died, the memories are distant, and the Joad family has disintegrated—or so it appears.

When *The Grapes of Wrath* was first published in 1939, it was banned in some schools and discredited by many critics, who called it inflammatory, biased and exaggerated. The book asks the reader to reexamine the free enterprise system. The Joads, like many Midwestern farmers and ranchers today, could not compete with the larger—and more politically powerful—corporate farm. "Who can we blame for our hardships and mistreatment?" ask Tom Joad and others. The corporate farm had no face and no personality. It was run by the finance company and the bank—monsters, in the Joads' eyes—of overwhelming size, devoid of human compassion and understanding.

The term "Okies," a word the Joads had not heard until they came to California, stereotyped and denigrated a whole group of people as inferior and undeserving of normal human courtesies. Dehumanizing attitudes such as these make life-and-death conflicts between competing groups possible, if not inevitable.

Perhaps the most interesting characters in the novel are the preacher, Casey, and Ma Joad. Both embody qualities that cause humans to care for one another in times of crisis and to protect the weak rather than prey upon them. They represent the sacrifice of individual needs in favor of the common good. "I got to thinkin' how we was holy when we was one thing, an' mankind was holy when it was one thing. An' it on'y got unholy when one mis'able little fella got the bit in his teeth an' run off his own way," concludes Casey, after giving up the gospel and turning instead to spreading the doctrine of unionization to working people and the oppressed.

Ma struggles valiantly against the family's disintegration. Her notion of family is more inclusive than blood relation; she is, in a sense, a true humanist, a champion of the family of man. Thus she welcomes strangers and guests into the family and shares whatever she can. One of the most touching scenes in the book is the moment in camp when Ma has managed with great ingenuity to cook a meager meal to feed her own hungry clan, but must ignore the desperate looks of children who have smelled the food and come to beg. Readers might compare Ma's agony to their own reactions to the homeless who beg on our city streets.

Consider also Ma's strategy of not telling the others that Grandma has died until after they have crossed the desert at night and reached safer territory. Although Ma is suffering deeply at the loss of her own mother, she puts aside her need to grieve for the good of the rest of the family. Another meaningful moment is when Ma instructs Rose of Sharon, whose baby is stillborn, to give her breast to a man who has starved himself to feed his son. Casey says of Ma, just after she has revealed Grandma's death, ". . . there's a woman so great with love—she scares me." Ma also provides the family with a unifying identity. Her answer to so many intricate and painful dilemmas is always, "Remember, we's Joads."

Through the example of Casey and Ma, Steinbeck asks us to think about the very definition of civilization. We have banded together in family units, in larger groups, in nations, for the purpose of identity and survival. America is a nation of the uprooted and the dispossessed; over the course of a life, one person might experience again and again the turmoil of dislocation or hear the call to help others in times of extreme need. What actions are right or wrong, just or unjust, during such times? These are the central conflicts in the story of the Joads. They are also central in the settlement of California and the West, which have seen one wave of immigrants after another arrive with the fierce hunger born of desperation and the instinct for survival.

### About the author

John Steinbeck (1902-1968) was born in Salinas, California, and educated at Stanford University. Among his other novels are *Tortilla Flat*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *East of Eden*. He also wrote nonfiction works, including the autobiographical *Travels with Charley*. Steinbeck was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962 for "writings, combining... sympathetic humour and keen social perception."