

Bloom's Literature

How to Write about *Grapes of Wrath*

Reading to Write

The Grapes of Wrath was an immediate best-seller upon its publication in 1939, and in the following year it was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. The novel continues to be prized and widely read—by students and the general public—and some consider it to have attained the status of the "Great American novel." That *The Grapes of Wrath* is so praised and popular does not make it any less interesting and odd a book. It is a novel with a socially conscious content and an unusual form: Its form and its content both present intriguing challenges to readers and writers.

Readers and critics of *The Grapes of Wrath* often comment on the symphonic variety of voices and forms that collectively compose the book. The voice of the narrator is by turns realistic, lyrical, mythical, folksy, and biblical. And the form that the narrative adopts is likewise unusual: Half of the narrative follows the plot of the Joad family, the other half is a mosaic of American voices, scenes, and situations. The novel's complex variety of forms and focuses could be the subjects for an essay. For example, you might analyze the ways that the complexity of the story's narration—particularly the switching of voices—further broadens the scope of the novel. No matter what topic you choose to analyze, you must first contend with Steinbeck's use of language. This section of the chapter will demonstrate how to read closely two early passages in *The Grapes of Wrath* in preparation for writing an essay.

As you read passages, and especially those at the beginning of a story, you must locate both the literal significances and the figurative ones. In this novel, the beginning literally establishes the Oklahoma setting and the environmental and financial conflicts that are besetting the farmers. The figurative significances suggested at the beginning of the novel point to the lifelessness of the land and people and to the heartlessness of those who are capitalizing on the disasters. To ascertain the figurative meanings—the nuances and shades of intention in a narrative—you need to pay attention to the clues given by the author's diction, or word choices. Reading for both literal and figurative meanings is called "close reading" and is the method by which you will generate ideas and interpretations in preparation for writing insightfully about literature.

Read closely the first paragraph of *The Grapes of Wrath* to get not only the literal but also the figurative meanings of the story to come:

To the red country and part of the gray country of Oklahoma, the last rains came gently, and they did not cut the scarred earth. The plows crossed and recrossed the rivulet marks. The last rains lifted the corn quickly and scattered weed colonies and grass along the sides of the roads so that the gray country and the dark red country began to disappear under a green cover. In the last part of May the sky grew pale and the clouds that had hung in high puffs for so long in the spring were dissipated. The sun flared down on the growing corn day after day until a line of brown spread along the edge of each green bayonet. The clouds appeared, and went away, and in a while they did not try any more. The weeds grew darker green to protect themselves, and they did not spread any more. The surface of the earth crusted, a thin hard crust, and as the sky became pale, so the earth became pale, pink in the red country and white in the gray country.

This is a largely expository, if somewhat abstracted, narration of events, and it uses mostly declarative sentences. You have to read carefully to note the figurative language, such as "bayonet," "scarred," "protect themselves," "scattered," "day after day." You will notice that this language is suggestive of battle and siege. What it suggests here plays out in the novel, and the implication is that not only the land but the people, and farmers especially, are battling the ecological mistakes and disasters that will result in the dust bowl. We will read how the financial ruin of the Great Depression will further aggravate the farmers' livelihoods.

You may have also noticed in the paragraph the prevalence of colors mentioned: green, gray, red, white, pink, brown. The colors describe the literal appearance of the landscape, but the simplicity with which they are given is telling. The colors are described in a way that is unadorned (no regal vermilion here), and they are made specific only by their shades ("darker" and "pale"), and even these color gradations are infrequent. This description of the coloration suggests that the landscape is so depleted that adjectives

are superfluous. The lifelessness of the landscape establishes in its description of the setting what will prove to be one of the primary conflicts in the novel: that between humanity and the land.

The first chapter situates the conflict between the people and the earth, and the second chapter situates the conflict among people and introduces us to our first protagonist. This second chapter begins, however, not with humans but with the description of a "huge red transport truck" that stands outside a roadside diner; that the truck is described before the people signals the principal position that machinery plays in the new economy about which the novel will soon express so much anxiety. The truck is new, the tires are new, and it had a "brass padlock [standing] straight out from the hasp on the big back doors." Against the backdrop of the desiccated, lackluster landscape of the first chapter, the newness and relative extravagance of the truck stands out. A careful reader will note details that stick out in the same way that that truck's padlock sticks "straight out" and consider the significance of those details. One interpretation of that padlock is that the truck's contents are valuable or that they are being protected from an outside threat (a thief?). Other details about the truck, though technically inanimate, also give us information about the human drama: The corporate lettering and the "No Riders" sticker on its windshield proclaim a company policy that infuriates Tom Joad, the book's ostensible protagonist. Tom's rage is rooted in his desire for a ride (he is hitchhiking and that sticker presents an obstacle to his goal), but he also bristles at the sticker because it smacks of authoritarianism. These dynamics—between people and companies and between Tom and autocratic authorities—are established quickly and will cycle throughout the novel.

The two dramatic thrusts—human and environmental—coalesce in the novel and together amplify the concurrent distresses and interdependence of humans and the land. When faced with an unusual story form such as that in *The Grapes of Wrath*, you want to question what purpose it serves: This kind of focus on form is also a variety of close reading. As a specific topic of analysis, the two strains of the narrative are discussed in the section "Form and Genre."

A slow and careful reading of *The Grapes of Wrath* will better allow you to recognize the patterns, issues, and ideas in the novel. Reading slowly and taking notes will make for a more enriched understanding of the story, while also enabling you to gather the evidence you need to write a strong essay.

Topics and Strategies

This section of the chapter discusses various possible topics for essays on *The Grapes of Wrath* and general approaches to those topics. Be advised that the material below is only a place to start from, not an exhaustive master key. Use this material to generate your own analysis. Every topic discussed here could encompass a wide variety of good papers.

Themes:

The Grapes of Wrath grapples with many themes, ideas, and concepts that organize and underscore the importance of the events in the novel. Some of these ideas include solidarity, anger, family, violence, technology, and compassion. Writers analyzing the novel often begin by identifying a central theme they see as important and then determining what the story is saying about that theme. You can identify a theme by noticing the ideas, symbols, or even words that recur in the story—in the initial scene of *The Grapes of Wrath*, for instance, Tom Joad lectures the truck driver on the importance of worker solidarity, of being a "good guy" despite company policies. Tom's immediate goal is to convince the driver to give him a ride, regardless of company policies, but this idea of workers standing their ground against the divisive and inhumane practices of corporations is one that courses through the novel and proves to be one of the novel's central themes. Thinking about these connections among people might lead to a consideration of other moments of solidarity that are forged among people on the road, such as the fellowship between the Joad and the Wilson families. The next step is to decide what you think the story is saying about the theme of solidarity: Does it present the notion as ludicrous or laudatory? For evidence you would need to look for examples of the results of solidarity and also to places where sympathetic characters comment on solidarity (though they might use different words to describe that concept). Other themes could be approached in similar ways: You could approach the theme of anger by examining the story's depiction of angry characters and then offering an analysis about what the role of anger might be in this story. Thematic approaches also blend with the approaches described below under "Philosophy and Ideas."

Sample Topics:

1. **Family:** Explain how the notion of what constitutes a family evolves over the course of the novel. How does the concept of family operate in this novel overall?

This topic guides you toward a thesis-driven approach to the idea of family. To write an essay such as this, begin by identifying shifts you see in the idea of a family (the notion of a family as a collective might be useful here). It would be worthwhile to recognize how the notion of family seems to change as the members of the Joad family diminish in number. The second part of this topic asks you to consider what meaning the concept of family has to the characters or, more broadly, to the novel itself. One approach to this would be to consider why family is so important to Ma Joad. What meaning does family have for her? What does family mean to Jim Casy? A further consideration might be to consider whether the novel is presenting family as a potentially revolutionary force. For this, you would want to consider any connections the novel makes between the nuclear family and the extended family (of other migrants, for instance).

2. **Anger:** How is anger (wrath) presented as an idea in this novel? Does the story suggest that some outbursts of anger are justified and appropriate? When is anger inappropriate or misguided?

Such an essay would need to locate those scenes that feature characters expressing anger and the narrator commenting on that anger. The topic suggests that anger is represented in the book as alternately appropriate and inappropriate. The anger of the migrants at inhumane treatment, for instance, seems to be a reaction rooted in dignity and a sense of self-worth. The anger directed at the migrants by corporations and their administrators (the police, the vigilantes, etc.) is represented as inappropriate because of its misdirection. You will want to limit your focus so you can thoroughly analyze your examples. It would be worth exploring how the biblical allusion in the book's title is itself suggestive of righteous anger. Based on your assessment of the portrayal of this emotion, you can develop a thesis about the various significances of anger in this novel.

3. **Violence:** How does the story represent and evaluate the use of violence? Is violence characterized as aberrant or natural behavior?

To write an essay on this topic, it would be useful to focus on a tight collection of examples or even on a single character. Tom Joad, the novel's ostensible protagonist, would be a good choice for this topic because he is represented sympathetically while also demonstrating persistently violent tendencies. Look to the narrator and the reactions of other characters to determine how Tom's (or another character's) violent acts are judged. Ultimately, you will want to reach a conclusion about how the novel judges violence.

4. **Compassion:** How does this novel characterize the conditions that promote compassion? What does the novel's final scene of compassion suggest about the book's overall message?

This topic asks you to consider what the novel suggests are the necessary conditions for compassion. One approach to this topic would be to examine the instances of kindness or generosity that occur in the novel and then assess how they came to be. The scene in chapter 15 with the waitress and the truck drivers and Ma Joad's interaction with the company store clerk in chapter 26 are two of many examples of compassion. You would want to theorize about the conditions, the participants, and the situation that make kindness possible. The final scene of the novel—with Rose of Sharon and the starving man—is an unforgettable example of taboos suspended for the sake of compassion. Rose of Sharon has not—up until the end—been a compassionate, selfless person. What is the novel testifying to about people and compassion? An alternative approach to this topic would be to consider how the novel characterizes the conditions that promote cruelty.

Character

Good essays can focus on questions of character development (such as how Steinbeck distinguishes Granma and Granpa from each other by the content of their outbursts), means of characterization (such as the way the reader learns about Jim Casy from his monologues and the discussions about him by other characters), or interpretations of changes in a character as the novel proceeds (such as the profound shifts from selfishness to selflessness that we see in both Tom Joad and Rose of Sharon). To write an essay on character, you would need to approach the story by way of questions about how readers come to know various characters. How, for instance, does Steinbeck distinguish a character's manner? In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Granpa's lasciviousness is underscored by his literal inability to button his trousers. Ma Joad's generous heart is demonstrated by her feeding of hungry strangers, even if in doing so she herself goes hungry. To analyze questions of character development, look closely for distinguishing traits of language, action, or interactions with other characters. The ways characters behave with one another helps the reader not only understand the means by which characters are created but also assess what characters signify and represent for the story overall.

Sample Topics:

1. **Tom Joad's character development:** How does Tom Joad change over the course of the novel? Why might these changes occur?

To write an essay on this topic, you would need to decide what kinds of changes Tom Joad undergoes. Consider, for example, how his connection to the world around him shifts from limited to more expansive. To that end, it would be important to analyze the differences in the two deaths for which he is responsible: How are the reasons behind these fatal acts different from each other? Analytical evidence for the changes he undergoes can be gathered from the conversations he has with other characters (especially with Ma Joad and Jim Casy). After you assess the substance of Tom Joad's changes, consider whether the changes he experiences represent growth. A strong essay will also assess how his growth connects to the story's overall significance.

2. **Character development in general:** How does the story present characters to the reader? What techniques does the novel use?

A paper on this topic would observe how Steinbeck gives insight into character. A possible technique would be to look carefully at a pair of characters or a set of techniques and attempt to show what effects they have. A paper could discuss the way that two characters deal differently with the act of leaving home, for instance. What might these reactions tell us about the character? About the meaning of home? Other subjects could also be fruitful for this topic. Analyzing the techniques of dialogue and physical description, for instance, is another way of writing about character development.

3. **Jim Casy as a character:** Though Jim Casy insists he is no longer a man of the cloth, the characters and the narrator consistently refer to him as "the preacher." What does "the preacher" contribute to the family he becomes a part of? What does Jim Casy contribute to the novel?

This is an evaluative topic that asks you to consider the effect Jim Casy has on the family specifically and, more broadly, on the story itself. Note that from the outset, Jim Casy recognizes the larger, cosmic issues that Tom and the others are initially blind to or simply ignore. Consider how his presence figuratively enlarges the Joad family and the other people with whom he comes into contact. Consider also what Jim Casy's philosophy contributes to the novel's overall message. A word of caution about this character: Much has been speculated about the Christlike aspects of Jim Casy, and Steinbeck was certainly making suggestive connections between this character and Jesus (see, for instance, Jim Casy's last words, which paraphrase what Jesus Christ said before his own martyrdom). This is interesting and potentially rich analytically, but you should avoid simplistic assertions (such as Jim Casy *is* Jesus Christ) in essays. Such allegorical readings are too restrictive and limiting for good analysis.

4. **Eccentrics/grotesques:** Sprinkled among the Joads are a number of eccentric characters, figures who are outcast because of a condition, situation, or belief. Choose one or two characters and analyze what these eccentrics reveal about the central characters in the novel.

This is an evaluative topic requiring you to analyze what information the story offers about these important, somewhat strange, and sometimes mysterious characters. You might consider analyzing the religious woman of Weedpatch, the one-eyed man at the gas station, the company store clerk at Hooper [R]anch, or Muley Graves. In the case of Muley Graves, we learn from his life what happens to a man whose allegiance to his land is greater than that to his family. The consequences of becoming a "ghost" in Oklahoma are dire, and his experience effectively illustrates the impossibility of Tom's staying in Oklahoma to fight for his family's land. Muley also illustrates the vulnerability of a single man opposing an amorphous agricultural corporation. Muley's experience foreshadows Tom's eventual fugitive life: Both men are taking moral stands that require a severing of family ties. Whichever eccentrics you choose to analyze, be sure to discuss in your essay what they reveal about the action or the other characters.

History and Context

Another especially worthwhile approach to *The Grapes of Wrath* is through history and context. The novel sought to capture a current social crisis, and in doing this so aptly, the book became a historical event in its own right. The general population knew that human failures and natural disasters culminated in the exodus of economic refugees from the Great Plains to California. People were aware that this dust bowl migration featured starvation, dislocation, social unrest, and tremendous general misery.

Steinbeck's novel put human (if fictive) faces on the dust bowl tragedy, and the book struck a nerve for readers across the country. *The Grapes of Wrath* was considered controversial, in part, for its candid portrayal of the Joads and for the negative light in which the book presented the social calamity it discussed: Some civic leaders in Oklahoma, for example, were so outraged

by the novel's depiction of their state that book burnings were held. These historical events prove fascinating subjects to study in conjunction with your analysis of the novel. Historical research will enable you to see the novel in its historical context while also recognizing its status as a catalytic force for social change. Because the novel is so epic in its scope, the challenge of approaching this novel through its historical context is in isolating an idea or subject of manageable size. The notion of migration in the novel, for instance, is an important one for the Joads as well as a historical fact for the over 300,000 people who fled the dust bowl for California, but without some more limiting focal direction, "migration" is too big an idea for an essay. One way to limit the idea is to take one aspect of migration: Looking at how the idea of migration is rendered in the book as a distinctively American experience, for instance, would enable you to usefully limit an investigation of both the idea and the fact of migration. You might also study this novel in its sociological context. In the novel, the notion of what constitutes a hero and an outlaw is discussed through the story of bank robber Pretty Boy Floyd; seeking to understand the risky appeal of his story contributes to an understanding of how the characters think and, moreover, what the novel is saying about the social results of poverty and individual desperation. Still another historical context is that of vigilantism, the informal and often violent forms of popularly determined justice that the Joads witness and experience. The novel also refers to the incipient labor union organizing that was taking place at this time. For this last topic or any other historical topic, you would need to do some research to be able to consider knowledgeably what the novel is asserting about the world it describes.

Sample Topics:

1. **The migrant experience as the American experience:** How does the novel show how fundamentally American the migrants are in terms of their values and their goals? Analyze how Steinbeck emphasizes the American traits of his characters. In what ways does this technique encourage identification with the characters?

This essay topic directs you to consider the novel's use of American identity reference points. After identifying some of these traits (e.g., pioneering, hard work, self-reliance, agrarianism), you could focus on one or two areas and track how those ideas are weaved into the plot and characterizations. The latter part of the topic suggests that Steinbeck intentionally tapped into these ideas in an effort to generate sympathy for and identification with the Joads. You would need to decide on the verity of that statement and demonstrate how you do or do not see it in action. Another approach to this topic could be to investigate how the unsympathetic characters in *The Grapes of Wrath* are dissociated from their American values.

2. **Migration and vigilantism:** How does *The Grapes of Wrath* speak out against an atmosphere of scapegoating and fear mongering? How does the novel analyze the conditions that contribute to vigilantism and other forms of popular anger?

This is a broad topic, and you would need to focus on a few key scenes and study closely how the novel seeks to understand the factors that culminate in vigilantism (such as when the Hooverville is set ablaze). This topic requires you to research the social climate of the time in order to understand examples of vigilantism outside this novel. One relevant example would be the "bum blockade" that the city of Los Angeles organized on the state's highways to prevent dust bowl refugees from joining the already flooded labor market. There are other examples of American vigilantism in the early 20th century that can be studied in history books and in other sources. An ambitious essay might draw connections to the more recent anti-immigration movements in California.

3. **Pretty Boy Floyd and the outlaw:** Ma Joad repeats the criminalization saga of the bank robber and folk hero Pretty Boy Floyd because she sees in his story a cautionary tale that Tom should hear. In what way does the story of Pretty Boy Floyd also operate as a cautionary tale for Steinbeck's audience?

Before writing this essay, you should research the story of how Pretty Boy Floyd became a bank robber, how his notoriety grew, and how he received popular support from the poor (who themselves felt robbed by the banks he was robbing). A good response to this topic would read closely the conversations in the novel about Floyd and especially how these relate to Tom, a man who has already served time in prison and does not want to return there (though his temper and parole violations put him at risk of this). What is the reader to conclude about Tom's farewell speech, in which he tells his mother that he will be "out there"? Does Tom Joad, whose experiences of injustice are coupled with his pride, symbolize a figure whom readers should fear?

4. **Labor unions and the novel:** The novel makes many references to labor unions and organizing as a response to the working conditions experienced by the Joads and others. How does Steinbeck use this contemporary movement in the novel? What purposes are served by this kind of historical reference?

A paper on *The Grapes of Wrath* and labor unions would require you to research the labor movement in America, paying

particular attention to both the 1930s and agricultural workers (as opposed to industrial workers, who were considered easier to unionize). After doing this research, you would want to consider how Steinbeck uses the idea and practice of labor unions. In what specific ways does the book present labor unions as a commonsense solution for the challenges faced by the migrant workers? Consider what other significances are served by the idea of unions: How, for instance, are unions related to the idea of family? Your essay on this topic should discuss the blacklists mentioned in the book as a method used to inhibit labor organizing (see, for example, chapter 26).

Philosophy and Ideas

Another approach to forming an argument about *The Grapes of Wrath* is to identify and then analyze the philosophical ideas that circulate in the novel. This approach is related to the thematic approach discussed above in that it tracks an idea in the story, but this kind of an essay would demonstrate how you see the story as commenting on the idea in its more general form. For instance, many critics have debated the origin of the novel's philosophy of collectivity, which various critics see as rooted in biblical, Transcendental, Hindu, or Jungian philosophies. The notion of collectivity is a useful focus for thinking about *The Grapes of Wrath*; doing so reveals the inner dynamics of the novel's most prized social organization. Observing how the characters benefit from operating as a group and tracking the dominant arc of development for characters (from strict individuality to membership in the collective) enables you to understand how the general idea of a collective operates in the novel. You could locate evidence for the importance of this idea by looking at the presentation of sympathetic characters gaining awareness about the efficacy and fundamental humanity of working together toward common goals. Other broad ideas in the novel include ownership, dehumanization, and social utopianism.

Sample Topics:

1. **The over soul:** How is Ralph Waldo Emerson's notion of an "over soul" related to Jim Casy's philosophy of the divinity of all men? How is Jim Casy's philosophy important to the novel's overall message?

This topic guides you toward thinking about collectivity in a specifically Emersonian manner (as mentioned above, there are other ways to look at collectivity). The writer of this topic would need to acquire familiarity with Emerson's essay "The Over Soul" (which maintains that all humans are part of a single, divine soul) or with the Bhagavad Gita and its description of the *Paramatman* (supreme soul), a concept by which Emerson was deeply influenced. Once you have a working knowledge of the over soul or *Paramatman*, you could analyze how the notion operates in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Does the novel endorse this way of seeing the world? You will want to assess Jim Casy's preaching on this idea, as well as any actions you identify as being in keeping with the collective soul (i.e., does Jim Casy practice what he preaches?). Are there other characters who likewise seem to embrace the divinity of all humankind?

2. **Ownership:** Ownership is a complex concept in this book, and for the Joads specifically it does not always bring out their best sides. Consider the positive and negative aspects of ownership as presented in the novel and reach a conclusion about what *The Grapes of Wrath* is ultimately saying about ownership. Is it natural and, more to the point, is it right?

This is an evaluative topic about ownership as a concept and a practice, and it guides you to think about how ownership affects human relations in this book. *The Grapes of Wrath* presents owning property as engendering love of the land (chapter 5), but also as the source of a divisive I/we mentality (chapter 15). For this topic, you would want to identify both the positive and negative presentations of ownership and also reach a theory about what, ultimately, the novel is saying about ownership. Is there an amount of ownership that is ideal? Related concepts worth discussing might include greed and theft.

3. **Dehumanization:** Dehumanization, or the act of asserting the inferiority of a person or group of people, can be intentional or inadvertent. Where in this novel do you see intentional dehumanization, and for what goal do you see this dehumanization taking place? Consider also how dehumanized individuals work to maintain their humanity.

This is a topic that directs you to observe how a person or group of people are made to feel less than human. In a war, dehumanization has been observed to be a process by which the killing of an enemy seems less morally abhorrent (the thinking goes that since this enemy is not a man, killing him will not pack the sting of immorality). You would want to track the means by which dehumanization happens to the migrants and venture a theory on the sociological or psychological reasons that it takes place. Chapter 21 is worth reading closely because it gives voice to the people who think themselves superior to the migrants: "These goddamned Okies are dirty and ignorant." The readers know that the Joads are very

human. Why might they be considered less than human? What purpose or outlook does dehumanization serve those who think in this belittling way? There are many scenes where you can observe dehumanization taking place, such as when Ma Joad is first called an "Okie" (chapter 18) or when the deputies invade the Hooverville (chapter 19).

4. **Social utopias and dystopias:** Under what conditions are people at their best and most heroic in this novel? Under what conditions are people at their worst and most base? Is the book showcasing a specific social system as a panacea? What, in short, does the book want society to do?

This topic asks you to observe under what conditions in the novel we see the best and worst behavior. One approach to this topic would be to read closely the sections on the Hooverville shantytown and the Weedpatch government camp and observe what these disparate settings generate in terms of behavior. You should reach a conclusion on whether the novel is presenting a social mandate. Another question to consider: Is there any way in which the dystopic Hooverville is a judgment not on its occupants but on the society around it?

Form and Genre

Form and genre provide illuminating ways of analyzing many literary works. Form is defined as the shape and structure of a literary work; genre is defined as the kind, or classification, of a literary work. Though technically independent of the content of literature (love, for instance, is an idea that can be communicated in various forms), form and genre are used deliberately by authors to help further the ideas in, strengthen the dramatic impact of, and generally refine their stories. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the genre is fiction and, more specifically, it is a novel. The novelistic form of *The Grapes of Wrath* is unusual in that it is composed of a conventional narrative intertwined with chapters that are not directly related to the plot. These less plot-directed chapters are called intercalary or interchapters and are themselves worthy of close study both for how they expand the novel's scope and for how they insert a different, often more lyrical voice into the highly realistic saga of the Joad family. Steinbeck felt that these interchapters would hit readers "below the belt," and his goal to engage the reader emotionally is worthy of analysis. You could, for instance, study how the interchapters complement the realistic novel and what emotional additions they offer. You could also study the interchapters as a text distinct from the Joad story. Seen together, what do the interchapters offer as a collection of texts on their own? What varieties of voices are included, and to what end? The question of form in this novel is an excellent approach to writing an essay. More traditional essay topics are also useful for *The Grapes of Wrath*. Consider, for example, the techniques by which the story is shaped or structured through discussions of narrative point of view, dialogue, or style.

Sample Topics:

1. **The form of the interchapters:** Analyze the form of the interchapters; pay special attention to the style in which they are written and the voices they include. Reach a conclusion about the effect of the interchapters on the overall narrative.

This topic asks you to consider the interchapters independently of the novel's plot. You would want to consider how the interchapters are constructed. What varieties of voices do we hear in them? In what style are they written? This last question asks you to note the different styles in which these chapters are voiced (e.g., lyrical, mythical, folkloric, supernatural). You would want to come to a conclusion about not only the effects the interchapters offer but also their overall function for the story. One idea to consider: How does the panoply of voices make this novel more expansive than a novel with a single protagonist or family?

2. **Protagonists and antagonists:** Who or what are the protagonists and antagonists of this novel?

This topic asks you to think about the dramatic form of this novel in terms of its protagonists and antagonists. Conventional fiction often features a single hero or protagonist around whom the story revolves and an antagonist, or character who presents conflict for the hero. One could argue that Tom Joad is the protagonist because he is the member of the Joad family whom the novel begins with and features most prominently. However, his character effectively leaves the story before the novel ends, and it is the family who concludes the action. Does this therefore mean that the family as a group is the true protagonist of *The Grapes of Wrath*? Or is the migrant community the protagonist? The question of an antagonist is likewise worth consideration, and to answer this question you should decide who or what the novel presents as the source of antagonistic force. Is it a group of people? Banks? Capitalism? Your essay's thesis will come from your ideas about the protagonists and antagonists of this novel.

3. **Biblical analogues in *The Grapes of Wrath*:** Analyze how a scene in the novel that contains clearly biblical resonances

contributes meaning to the overall narrative. What does the story's specifically biblical provenance contribute to the scene as Steinbeck writes it?

There are a number of scenes in the novel that are clear analogues to stories from the Bible. This topic asks you to analyze how the story's inclusion contributes meaning to Steinbeck's narrative. You would need to locate and study the biblical story, understand the meaning of the story within the context of the biblical narrative, and then analyze how that story fits into the context of *The Grapes of Wrath*. One example of a biblical analogue is when Uncle John sets Rose of Sharon's stillborn baby adrift on the floodwaters. This act, in some of its details, is similar to the story of the baby Moses being set adrift on the waters of the Nile. The flood itself is another biblically significant story; in the Bible it is, after all, a flood that purifies the world by destroying it. This topic asks you to comment on this formal technique of referencing biblical stories (by studying how the inclusion of the Bible story works within the form of this novel) and to venture analysis of the meaning of the story within the novel's context. In the course of your analysis, also comment on how the stories differ.

Comparison and Contrast

Comparing components of a story in order to explain and analyze the similarities or differences between them is a useful approach to writing an essay. Remember to avoid the pitfall of merely creating a list of such similarities or differences in a work; instead, you must take the necessary step of commenting on these observations. To begin a comparison/contrast essay, you might compare characters with each other: How does Pa Joad compare to Ma Joad? How does Tom Joad compare to Jim Casy? How does Jim Casy, as a spiritual character, compare to the zealot at Weedpatch? You could also compare characters (or other elements of the story, such as patterns of imagery or action) across different stories. For example, how do the depictions of labor compare in *In Dubious Battle* and *The Grapes of Wrath*? The challenge of this kind of essay is to decide what the similarities or differences you identify might mean. These are the questions that make essays interesting and the ones that will have different answers for each writer. To get to these questions, think about what kinds of effects Steinbeck achieves by producing either similarities or differences between elements of his stories. What, for example, does the difference between Tom Joad's and the one-eyed man's respective attitudes on perseverance do for our understanding of each character and his views of the world? It is not sufficient to identify a pattern and, to point to the existence of similarities or differences; you must also consider what purpose those similarities or differences might serve in the story overall.

Sample Topics:

1. **Compare the narrative voices within the novel:** Account for the various writing styles or narrative voices in the novel. Compare a few of them and discuss their formal differences while also theorizing on the connections between style and subject.

This is a comparative topic on form that asks you to study the different narrative styles in the novel and offer analyses about not only the form but also the relationship between its style and its content. One kind of narrative style sounds mythic, almost as if it were from a history passed down orally, as seen in chapter 5: "Men ate what they had not raised, had no connection with the bread." This chapter describes the financial practices that bankrupted the small farmers. These bankruptcies were effectively the downfall of the small farmers, and you might argue that the mythic voice used here emphasizes both the gravity of the event and the way the story will live on in the memories of the ruined farmers. Thus, the mythical style of the chapter's narration emphasizes the mythical weight of the event. Other narrative styles in the novel include a biblical voice, a down-home folksy voice, the fast-talking vernacular of salesmen, the "language of the roadsides" (chapter 2) in the banter among truck drivers and diner waitresses, and the voices of realism and naturalism. The panoply of voices is one of the appealing qualities of the novel, and the connections between style and subject are well worth exploring in an essay.

2. **Contrast the respective spiritual beliefs of Jim Casy and the zealous woman of Weedpatch:** These two characters have extremely different senses of the relationship between God and humans. How would you characterize their respective senses of holiness? Comment on what these differences might say about the novel's general position on God or religion.

This topic asks the writer to look carefully at the opinions of Jim Casy and the religious woman of Weedpatch and to evaluate the significance of their respective senses of God. Based on the way these characters are presented in the story, is one of their philosophies endorsed over the other's? What are the social and spiritual effects of the less vaunted spirituality? Based on your analysis, reach a theory on the novel's overall presentation of the ideal variety of religion or spirituality. Does

one help while the other hinders?

3. **Contrasting Ma's and Pa's roles at the beginning and end of the novel:** Ma's and Pa's roles in the family undergo profound changes as the novel progresses. Identify what those changes are and, using the narrator's suggestions as evidence, offer a theory about why you think these shifts happen.

The focus here would be to track the changes that the roles of Ma and Pa undergo at the beginning and at the end of the novel. It would be important to consider how their authority within the family changes and to discuss what the novel presents as the reasons behind those transformations.

Further Information

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