The Grapes of Wrath
by John Steinbeck

SUMMARY

The Grapes of Wrath is the story of the Joad family and their odyssey from Oklahoma to California to escape the Dust Bowl. Tom Joad arrives home from jail on parole, after serving a sentence for manslaughter. He finds that his family, who are tenant farmers, have been pushed off their farm by the bank. They 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 the employers are exploiting the large numbers of unemployed by paying starvation wages. Casy becomes involved in a strike which 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.

ABOUT JOHN STEINBECK

John Steinbeck was born in Salinas in 1902. After graduating from high school John went to Stanford University. However, he 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 married three times, in 1930, 1943, and 1950.

His first novel, Cup 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 the Second World War he worked as a war correspondent. For a period, during the Cold War, he was widely criticized in the USA 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. In 1962 he was awarded the Nobel prize. He died six years later in 1968.

BACKGROUND AND THEMES

The book is set during the Great Depression of the 1930’s. 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 who 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, 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, strangers invite Tom to share their breakfast for example. 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.
Communicative activities

The following teacher-led activities cover the same sections of text as the exercises at the back of the reader, and supplement those exercises. For supplementary exercises covering shorter sections of the book see the photocopiable Student’s Activities pages of this Factsheet. These are primarily for use with class Readers but, with the exception of discussion and pair/groupwork questions, can also be used by students working alone in a self-access center.

ACTIVITIES BEFORE READING THE BOOK
1 Ask students to work in small groups to discuss these questions.
   (a) The book is set during the Great Depression in the USA. 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 USA? 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 problems?
2 Ask students to finish these questions correctly. Some have missing words and some are jumbled, and then ask them to interview other members of the group. Finally ask them to report their answers to the whole group.
   (a) What ______ you think are some of the advantages ______ working ______ a farm?
   (b) I / have / country / agricultural / your / workers / in / what / do
   (c) What do you think ______ intensive farming and the ______ of chemicals ______ make crops grow faster and bigger?
   (d) ______ / ever / buy / organic / fruit / and / you ______ vegetables / do
   i. so / why / if
   (e) Who ______ most ______ the agricultural ______ in your country, small farmers, the banks or big ______ owners?
   f. ______ leave / your / town / would / ever / home / find / to / work / you
   i. would / where / go / you / so / if

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING A SECTION
Chapters 1–3
1 Give students the names of different characters who appear in the first three chapters and ask them to write descriptions of them. Ask them to exchange their descriptions, without the names, and try to guess the name of the character in each case.
2 Ask students to discuss these questions in small groups.
   (a) Do you think that Tom Joad’s sentence of four years was fair? Why / why not?
   (b) Why do you think Grandpa died?
   (c) Why do you think that Casy is no longer a preacher?
   (d) Do you think they will find happiness in California? Why / why not?
   (e) Who do you think is the strongest member of the family? Why?
   (f) If you were Tom, would you break your parole and go with the family, or would you stay in Oklahoma? Why?

Chapters 4–6
1 Give students the names of some of the different characters from the three chapters and ask them to write about their character’s thoughts about the journey. Ask them to read their texts to the group. Ask the group to decide who is speaking.

2 Ask the students to discuss these questions in small groups.
   (a) Why do you think Ma has changed?
   (b) Why did the ragged man laugh at the Joad’s?
   (c) What do you think is the hardest thing about the Joads’ journey?
   (d) What’s the longest car road journey you have made?
   (e) What was it like?
   (f) “Oakies” is a rude way of describing somebody from the Dust Bowl state of Oklahoma. Are there any groups in your country who are treated badly like the “Oakies”. If so, why?

Chapters 7–9
1 Ask students to 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’s problems.
   (f) The writer’s main message is that

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING THE BOOK
Ask students to research, prepare and give a presentation about one of these 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
   (d) Economic migration

Glossary

It will be useful if your students know these new words. They are practised in the Before You Read sections at the back of the book. (Definitions are based on the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English.)

appendix (n) a small tube in your body which is closed at one end and joined to your bowel at the other end
barn (n) a large farm building where animals are kept and sometimes crops are stored
cart (n) a small, inexpensive restaurant beside the road
country (n) infml old fashioned man
diner (n) parents or family
director (n) a piece of paper containing information or advertising something
draft (n) a powerful light at the front of a vehicle
driver (n) the line in the distance where the earth seems to meet the sky or sea
driver’s side (n) being someone out of jail early on condition that they must behave well
executive (n) a person who pays rent for the use of a room, building, or land
husband (n) a motor vehicle with large wheels and thick tires, used for pulling farm machinery or other heavy objects
intoxicated (adj) a person who is very poor
jail (n) a person who teaches about a certain religion
preacher (n) a person who is very poor
parole (n) a person who pays rent for the use of a room, building, or land
rags (adj) did and torn: a ragged shirt
reverend (n) a title used to address or talk about a person holding a religious position
school (n) a person who pays rent for the use of a room, building, or land
system (n) the piece of glass across the front of a vehicle which the driver looks through
The Grapes of Wrath

Chapter 1–3

1. Fill in the missing words in this summary of the first chapter with an appropriate word.

Tom had been _______ for a long time and the new shoes he was wearing hurt his feet. As he was passing a _______, he saw a _______. He decided to try to get a _______. _______ first the driver didn't want to take him, but _______ the end he agreed. Near his family home Tom met Casy, who had been a _______ before, and together they went to the Joad farm. The farm was deserted. Then they met Muley who told them that Tom's family had gone to stay at an uncle's house, after which they _______ go to California. The three men ate some _______ that Muley had caught, and spent the night in a _______.

2. Answer these questions.

(a) Why did so many farmers have to leave their land?
(b) How did Uncle John's wife die?
(c) Why does the family think there are good jobs in California?
(d) Why is Ma worried about Tom going to California?
(e) How do they make Grandpa go with them?
(f) Why does Pa have his first doubts about California?
(g) Why do the two families decide to travel together?

Chapter 4–6

1. Put these events from the story in order.

(a) The men bathed in the river.
(b) Grandma died.
(c) Tom and Al did business with a one-eyed man.
(d) Something went wrong with the Wilson's car.
(e) They were stopped by guards at the border.
(f) They crossed the desert.
(g) Ma got very angry and threatened to hit people with a hammer.
(h) Ma got very angry and threatened to hit people with a hammer.

2. Are these sentences true or false?

(a) They repaired the car early in the morning.
(b) The ragged man had already been to California.
(c) The father and son they met at the river were on their way to California too.
(d) Noah thinks he can live by fishing.
(e) The policeman was polite when he spoke to Ma in the tent.
(f) Grandma was dead before they crossed the desert.
(g) Connie regrets leaving Oklahoma.
(h) Tom kicked a policeman.

Chapter 7–9

1. Answer these questions about the story.

(a) How are the rules made in the Weedpatch camp?
(b) Why did the farmer lower the men's pay?
(c) Why was a fight organized?
(d) Why are the prices high in the Hooper Ranch store?
(e) What did Tom find out when he met Casy at the Hooper Ranch?
(f) Why did Tom kick the policeman?
(g) Why did the family leave the boxcar?

2. Answer these two questions.

(a) Which acts of kindness occur in these chapters?
(b) Which things go wrong for the characters in these chapters?
1 Write a letter to the US president complaining about the treatment of the agricultural workers and saying what you think the government should do about it.

2 What do you think happened to the following characters after the end of the story?
   (a) Muley
   (b) Connie
   (c) Tom
   (d) Rosasharn
   (e) Ruthie and Winfield