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The Grapes of Wrath
John Steinbeck



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Response Journal

To The Student

Although we may read a novel, play, or work of non-fiction for enjoyment, each time we read one, we are building and practicing important basic reading skills. In our ever-more complex society, in which reading has become more and more crucial for success, this, in itself, is an important reason to spend time reading for enjoyment.

Some readers, however, are able to go beyond basic reading techniques and are able to practice higher thinking skills by reflecting on what they have read and how what they read affects them. It is this act of reflection—that is, stopping to think about what you are reading—that this journal is attempting to encourage.

To aid you, we have included writing prompts for each section; however, if you find something that you wish to respond to in the book more compelling than our prompts, you should write about that. We hope you enjoy reading this book and that the act of responding to what you have read increases this enjoyment.

After you read the indicated sections, choose the questions to which you will respond. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers to these prompts, and there is no one direction in which you must go.

The Grapes of Wrath

Chapter 1

1. The author describes the cumulative effects of the drought on the land and especially the corn crop – all made worse by a prolonged windy spell that's temporarily let up. "The people, lying in their beds, heard the wind stop. They lay quietly and listened deep into the stillness." This merciless, extreme weather sets the menacing tone of the story. Has threatening weather or another adverse event ever frightened you? Write a short poem describing your feelings and what caused them.

2. "After a while the faces of the watching men lost their bemused perplexity and became hard and angry and resistant. Then the women knew they were safe and that there was no break....The women knew it was all right, and the watching children knew it was all right. Women and children knew deep in themselves that no misfortune was too great to bear if their men were whole." Is there anyone in your life who gives you a strong sense of security? If so, write a letter to that person explain how you feel about the role he or she plays in your life.

The Grapes of Wrath

Chapter 4

6. The Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung put forth the theory of a “collective unconscious.” When the preacher Casy tells Tom, “ ‘Maybe all men got one big soul ever’body’s a part of.’ Now I sat there thinkin’ it, an’ all of a sudden – I knew it. I knew it so deep down that it was true, and I still know it.” Do a little research on Jung’s hypothesis in the library or on the Internet and write a brief essay about your opinion on the beliefs expressed by Jung and those in Casy’s speech.

7. Tom Joad received a seven-year sentence for manslaughter in self-defense. Do you think his sentence was justified? Write a letter to the editor of the newspaper where you’ve read a story about the trial and the sentence. Tell him or her why you agree or disagree with the sentence Tom was given. Include whether you think he deserved parole after serving only four years of his sentence.

Chapter 8

13. Imagine that the Joads are a family that you've never met before, and your parents are sending you to visit them for the summer to give them a hand on their impoverished farm. Write a letter home to your parents, describing the Joads' home, their dress and the way they live, talk and act. Compare it to your own home experience.
14. The author writes about Ma Joad that "since old Tom and the children could not know hurt or fear unless she acknowledged hurt and fear, she had practiced denying them in herself. And since, when a joyful thing happened, they looked to see whether joy was on her, it was her habit to build up laughter out of inadequate materials." Tom's mother was raised in a culture that established emotional restraint as an ideal, unlike our contemporary culture, which values fuller emotional expression. Imagine you are a therapist that Ma Joad has approached for help in expressing her emotions. Write a dialogue or a monologue in which she talks about her feelings when she saw Tom again. It might begin:
- Ma Joad:** When Tom walked in the door, I was almost overcome with emotion, but...
15. When Casy asks Tom if his family had written to him in jail, he replies, "No. Like I said, they wasn't people to write. Pa could write, but he wouldn'. Didn't like to. It give him the shivers to write...he wouldn' write no letters just for ducks." Later, Tom's father tells him, "Tommy, we are goin' to California. But we was gonna write you a letter an' tell you." Write the letter to Tom that his father never wrote. Explain what's happened to the farm and the family and the decision that was made to go to California.

Chapter 13

25. The travelers stop for refueling at a dilapidated roadside gas station whose owner keeps wondering what is happening to the country because all the migrants passing through each day. The country is in the grip of a transformation too large for him to comprehend. What are the significant issues that the U.S. needs to confront today? Interview several older relatives or acquaintances and find out what they see as the major social issues today. Then describe their responses in a short essay with your own thoughts on the matter.
26. Rose of Sharon “was all secrets now that she was pregnant, secrets and little silences that seemed to have meanings... Connie was pleased with her too, and filled with wonder that she was pregnant. He liked to think he was in on the secrets she had.” Write an entry for Rose of Sharon’s diary where she talks about her “secrets” and her sharing them with Connie.
27. When the family encounters a couple from Kansas, the first thing Ivy notices is the differences in speech. “Ever’body says words different. ...Arkansas folks says ’em different, and Oklahomy folks says ’em different. And we seen a lady from Massachusetts, an’ she said ’em differentest of all. Couldn’ hardly make out what she was sayin’.” Write a journal entry about any experience you may have had with the dialect speech of someone from a different area of the country.
28. Write a letter from Ma to a friend back home describing Grampa’s death and burial and the reactions of family members to the event.
29. Sairy Wilson tells Ma Joad, “People needs – to help.” Later on, Ma reminds her, “You said yourself, you can’t let help go unwanted.” Write a paragraph or two about an experience you’ve had where you made an offer of help. How did it make you feel?