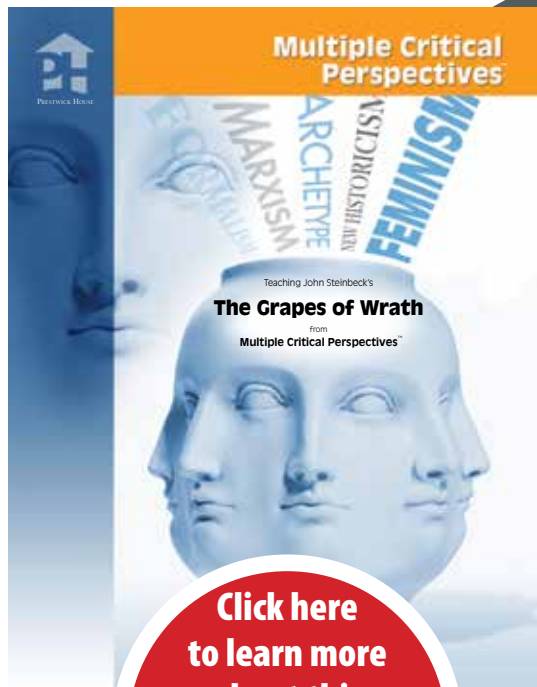




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Teaching John Steinbeck's

The Grapes of Wrath

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General Introduction to the Work

Introduction to *The Grapes of Wrath*

THE GRAPES OF WRATH is a **novel** relating the experiences of disenfranchised migrant farmers escaping America's Dust Bowl region in search of a new life in California during the 1930s. The novel incorporates elements of the **historical novel**.

All novels rely on certain conventional elements, including **plot**. (In an attempt to escape the ecological disaster of the American Dust Bowl, the Joad family of Oklahoma sets out for California in hopes of finding work and a new life. Once on the road, the Joads realize that there are thousands of migrant farmers who, like themselves, have been driven off their land and are now traveling toward the "Promised Land" of California. The Joad family endures considerable hardship while on the road. Once they reach California, they learn that there is not enough work for all the migrant farmers. Moving from camp to camp, the Joads realize that the working conditions in California are harsh, and they struggle to keep their family alive.)

Character is another crucial element of the novel. (The Joad family stands at the center of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Tom Joad is one of the major characters, and his psychological and spiritual development is central to the text. Tom can be considered a **dynamic character** because he changes over the course of the novel as a result of his experiences narrated in the plot. Ma Joad is another essential, **dynamic** character. Within the Joad family, she quickly emerges as the leader. The other Joad family members, Pa Joad, Grampa and Granma, Al, Noah, Rose of Sharon, Connie, and the children Ruthie and Winfield, all enable Steinbeck to vividly illustrate the difficult life Dust Bowl refugees had to endure. Other characters in the novel include the preacher Jim Casy, who functions as a **symbolic** character, the Wilson family, law enforcement officials, and as camp personnel. The **structure** of the novel indicates that the Joads are exemplary of thousands of, anonymous families who underwent similar experiences during the 1930s.)

Another significant element of the novel is **setting**, the time and place in which the characters move and the plot events take place. (*The Grapes of Wrath* is set in America during the 1930s. During that time period, Americans suffered from the effects of the Great Depression, a time of severe economic crisis. Additionally, most Americans—particularly farming families in Great Plains states such as Oklahoma—struggled to escape the effects of the Dust Bowl, a period of devastating dust storms caused by improper agricultural techniques and a severe drought that affected the farming regions of the American Mid-west. The plot of the novel begins in Oklahoma, where the Joads are forced to leave their land. The family then travels along Route 66 to California.)

Mythological/Archetypal Applied to *The Grapes of Wrath*



Notes on the Mythological/Archetypal Approach

MYTHOLOGICAL, ARCHETYPAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM are all very closely interrelated. This is because Freud formulated many theories around the idea of the social archetype; and his pupil, Carl Jung, expanded and refined Freud's theories into a more cross-cultural philosophy.

Critics who read texts with the mythological/archetypal approach are looking for symbols. Jung said that an archetype is "a figure...that repeats itself in the course of history wherever creative fantasy is fully manifested." He believed that human beings were born innately knowing certain archetypes. The evidence of this, Jung claimed, lay in the fact that some myths are repeated throughout history in cultures and eras that could not possibly have had any contact with one another. Many stories in Greek and Roman mythology had counterparts in Chinese and Celtic mythology long before the Greek and Roman Empires spread to Asia and northern Europe. Most of the myths and symbols represent ideas that human beings could not otherwise explain (the origins of life, what happens after death, etc.) Every culture has a creation story, a life-after-death belief, and an explanation for human failings, and these stories—when studied comparatively—are far more similar than different.

When reading a work looking for archetypes or myths, critics look for very general recurring themes, characters, and situations. In modern times, the same types of archetypes are used in film, which is why it has been so easy for filmmakers to take a work like Jane Austen's *Emma* and adapt it into the typical Hollywood film *Clueless*. By drawing on those feelings, thoughts, concerns, and issues that have been a part of the human condition in every generation, modern authors allow readers to know the characters in a work with little or no explanation. Imagine how cluttered stories would be if the author had to give every detail about every single minor character that entered the work!



Activity One

Examining Tom Joad and Jim Casy as Archetypal Characters

1. Divide the class into pairs or small groups. Assign two groups to review each of the following Chapters: 2, 4, 8, 10, 20, 27, and 29.
2. For each chapter, ask one group to review and take detailed notes on the character of Tom Joad. Ask the other group to review and take detailed notes on the character of Jim Casy. Each group should pay particular attention to references to qualities of the archetypal HERO and/or archetypal OUTCAST. Each group should present relevant information about their character as it relates to the archetypal HERO or OUTCAST to the class.
3. Use the following questions to generate a classroom discussion in which you ask students to relate their notes about Jim Casy and Tom Joad with regard to the qualities and characteristics of the archetypal hero and/or outcast:
 - What elements in the novel make Tom Joad an outcast?
 - What elements of the novel make Jim Casy an outcast?
 - What is the significance of both characters' shared prison experience? What do both characters learn in the course of their imprisonment?
 - What is the relationship between hero and sacrifice for Jim Casy and Tom Joad?
 - To what extent does Jim Casy emerge as a leader? What heroic qualities does he exemplify?
 - To what extent does Tom Joad emerge as a leader? What heroic qualities does he exemplify?
 - What does Jim Casy's dissatisfaction with institutionalized religion reveal about his definition of a hero or his role as a hero?
 - How do the journey and ultimate fate of Jim Casy reflect the typical fate of the archetypal hero and/or outcast?
 - How do the journey and ultimate fate of Tom Joad reflect the typical fate of the archetypal hero and/or outcast?
 - To what extent are both characters dependent on one another for their personal development?

Feminist Approach Applied to *The Grapes of Wrath*



Notes on the Feminist Approach

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY, and feminism in literature is an even newer area of study and thought. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

The social movement of feminism found its approach to literature in the 1960s. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those of male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be unintelligent (at least in part because they were generally less formally educated than men), and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts to reevaluate their portrayal of women and writing new works to fit the “modern woman.”

Three main areas of study/points of criticism:

- differences between men and women
- women in power or power relationships between men and women
- the female experience



Activity One

Examining the Power Hierarchy in the Relationship Between Ma and Pa Joad

1. Divide the class into four groups or a number of groups divisible by four. Assign each group (or allow each to choose) one of the following passages. Have students review the entire chapter, but pay particular attention to the sections indicated here:
 - Chapter 8 – paying particular attention to descriptions of Ma following Tom’s return from prison
 - Chapter 10 – paying particular attention to Ma’s participation in the discussion about Jim Casy and his desire to join the family on their journey to California
 - Chapter 16 – paying particular attention to Ma’s actions, decisions, and demeanor following the breakdown of the Wilsons’ car
 - Chapter 28 – paying particular attention to Ma’s conversations following her decision to send Tom into hiding
2. Each group should examine the assigned passages carefully and take detailed notes.
3. Use the following questions to generate a classroom discussion:
 - What female stereotypes, if any, does Ma Joad exhibit in the early chapters of the novel?
 - Who are the dominant characters in the Joad family? In what ways are they dominant?
 - What role does Ma Joad play in each assigned chapter? Leader? Supporter? Subservient? Equal?
 - How does Pa Joad treat Ma Joad in each of the assigned chapters? Does his treatment of Ma change throughout the novel?
 - Does Ma Joad’s attitude toward the relationship between men and women change during the course of the assigned chapters? If so, how?
 - How can Ma Joad’s attitude toward Pa be characterized?
 - To what extent does the Joad marriage represent a patriarchal, or traditional marriage? How does it divert from a patriarchal, or traditional marriage?

New Historicism Applied to *The Grapes of Wrath*

Notes on New Historicism

A COMMON TENDENCY IN THE STUDY of literature written in, and/or set in, a past or foreign culture is to assume a direct comparison between the culture as presented in the text and as that culture really was/is. New Historicism asserts that such a comparison is impossible for two basic reasons.

First, the “truth” of a foreign or past culture can never be known as established and unchangeable. At best, any understanding of the “truth” is a matter of interpretation on the parts of both the writer and the reader. This is most blatantly evident in the fact that the “losers” of history hardly ever get heard. The culture that is dominated by another is often lost to history because it is the powerful who have the resources to record that history. Even in recent past events, who really knows both sides of the story? Who really knows the whole of the Nazi story? Or the Iraqi story? New Historicists argue that these unknown histories are just as significant as the histories of the dominant culture and should be included in any world view. Since they often contradict “traditional” (i.e., the winner’s) history, there is no way to really know the ironclad truth.

Second, while the text under consideration does indeed reflect the culture in which it was written (and to some degree in which it is set), it also *participates* in the culture in which it is written. In other words, its very existence changes the culture it “reflects.” To New Historicists, literature and culture are born of one another. For example, although Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* certainly reflected the culture of the south during the mid-20th century, it also became a tool to raise awareness of and change certain elements of that culture.



Activity One

Examining the Text for Clues to the Economic and Social Situation in the United States During the 1930s

1. Copy and distribute: *The Grapes of Wrath*: New Historicism—Activity One.
2. Then have students (individually, in pairs, or in small groups) answer the following questions:
 - What view of the Great Depression is portrayed in *The Grapes of Wrath*? Whose perspective of events is illustrated throughout the novel? Do we see events from different perspectives? Why or why not?
 - What view of the Dust Bowl is portrayed in *The Grapes of Wrath*? Whose perspective of events is illustrated throughout the novel? Do we see events from different perspectives? Why or why not?
 - What events or consequences of the Great Depression or the Dust Bowl does the novel primarily focus on and why?
 - Does the novel effectively present the plight of *all* American farmers affected by the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl? Why or why not?
 - How do the events of the 1930s affect Steinbeck's creation of the character of Jim Casy?
 - In order to reach his intended audience or achieve his intended goal, what changes might Steinbeck have had to make with regard to events relating to the Great Depression or the Dust Bowl?
 - How does Steinbeck portray the landowners in Oklahoma and California?