



Study Questions for The Grapes of Wrath

1. Early on in The Grapes of Wrath, the female characters are often described as “cautious” and “quiet,” tending to leave the men alone “to figure and to wonder in the dust.” (p. 34). But later in the novel (e.g., p. 210; p. 280; 454-455), female characters seem to become more active and assertive. What, if anything, do these changes tell us about the role of gender in The Grapes of Wrath?
2. In one of the most memorable passages in the novel, Steinbeck’s narrator laments the circumstances in which when a “crop grew, and was harvested, no man had crumbled a hot clod in his fingers and let the earth sift past his fingertips. No man had touched the seed, or lusted for the growth. Men ate what they had not raised, had no connection with the bread.” (p. 36). Why did Steinbeck seem to think this mattered, and was he right to think so?
3. What should we make of the narrator’s description of the turtle in chapter three of The Grapes of Wrath? Is this just an interlude, or does the description have some greater significance in the novel?
4. Highway 66 (U.S. Route 66) was an official part of the US Highway System from 1926 to 1985. Steinbeck calls it the “main migrant road,” on which the people “in flight from the terror behind” had “strange things happen to them, some bitterly cruel and some so beautiful that the faith is refired forever.” (p. 122). Does anything “beautiful” in this sense ever happen to any members of the Joad family?
5. What, if anything, is so special about Jim Casy in The Grapes of Wrath? In particular, do Casy’s actions in Chapter 20 of the novel, in which he takes responsibility for others’ wrongdoing really make-up for everything else he has been and done in the novel up to that point?
6. Midway through Chapter 26, Casy reports on the opinion of a certain “fella in jail” who argued that “ever’ time they’s a little step fo’ward, she may slip back a little, but she never slips clear back. You can prove that.” This prisoner went on to say that “that makes the whole thing right. An’ that means they wasn’t no waste even if it seemed like they was.” (p. 384). What would it mean for the Joad family to believe this theory?
7. What do you think it means that The Grapes of Wrath starts with a drought and ends with floods?
8. In Chapter 18 of The Grapes of Wrath, Ma has an interesting conversation with Rose of Sharon. She tells her that there is “a time of change, an’ when that comes, dyin’ is a piece of all dyin’, an’ bearin’ is a piece of all bearin’, an’ bearin’ an’ dyin’ is two pieces of the same thing.” (pp. 209-210). What do you think Ma Joad meant by these remarks, and is she right to think that they might bring comfort to Rose of Sharon (“Rosasharn”)?
9. Does the progress of the story in The Grapes of Wrath give us any reason to think that Tom Joad could have been justified in killing the deputy? If so, how? If not, why not?
10. Early in 1939, Steinbeck reportedly told his editor that he had done his best “to rip a reader's

nerves to rags;" and that he wanted to "write this book the way lives are being lived not the way books are written." Carefully describe one scene from the novel that you think fits this characterization. Then briefly say why, despite such scenes, the novel continues to appeal to so many people across several decades.