*The Grapes of Wrath*

John Steinbeck

John Steinbeck was not the first writer to use a series of inner chapters, also known as intercalary or inter-chapters. Since The Grapes of Wrath’s inner chapters don’t advance the action of the Joads’ narrative, one must ask why Steinbeck uses them. We know that Steinbeck called the structure of the novel “very carefully worked out.” He insisted that the inner chapters “had a purpose.” Yet readers often find them problematic, asking questions from the specific (How can the first chapter be an inner chapter? Why do the inner chapters sometimes come in pairs?) to the general (What does this chapter have to do with the rest of the book?). [*The Grapes of Wrath*](http://www.neabigread.org/books/grapesofwrath/readers02.php) is at least two books in one. One half tells the story of the Joads while the other half tells the story of nameless people. Steinbeck called these inner chapters "generals," to “emphasize the point that the Joads represented for all the Depression-era westward migrants.” Through these “generals” Steinbeck wanted to make sure the reading public did not interpret the experiences of the Joad family as unique. [[1]](#footnote-1)

1. The Novel’s Structure:
   1. Chapters 1-11 = Time in Oklahoma
   2. Chapters 12-18 = Experiences on the Road
   3. Chapters 19-30 = Time in California
   4. Intercalary chapters – depict the experience of ALL migrants (universal/philosophical/thematic)
   5. Narrative chapters – depict the struggles of the Joad family (details/imagery/philosophy in action)
2. Philosophy in GOW:
   1. Naturalism:
      1. Use of graphic detail
      2. a “survival of the fittest” attitude
      3. man is often compared to animals
      4. use of symbols
      5. attentions to bodily functions
      6. a belief in determinism, that is the belief that one’s choice of actions is not free, but is predetermined by a sequence of causes independent of one’s will
   2. Regionalism: “local color” techniques, accuracy of detail in the description of people (Steinbeck

portrays the Okies as authentically as possible including their dialect, dress, lifestyle, etc.)

* 1. Agrarianism: close identification with and love for the land.
  2. Proletariansism: description of the injustices of the laboring classes. One social class pitted against

another.

E. Communism

i. stress cooperation

ii. collective efforts

iii. working for the group increases individual self esteem

iv. “government camps” (Weedpatch)

v. “We’re the People, we go on.” – Ma Joad

vi. the laboring man is held in high esteem

vii. references to Marx, Lenin, and Thomas Paine

F. Pragmatism: to test truth by looking at the outcomes of actions. If it works, it’s okay. The tendency to

makeup a policy as you go along, based on your current need and circumstance

G. Transcendentalism:

i. God as Nature: to look inside yourself for divine guidance in learning to understand the nature of God.

ii. Contemplation of Divine Nature: to live life close to nature, for there a person can most successfully contemplate his reason for being.

iii. Search for Meaning: devote yourself to the search for meaning in life and not to the acquisition of material possessions.

iv. Physical and Mental Work: a person should be both physically and intellectually active throughout life.

v. Know Thyself: become a person of principle and then live life by these principles. Have the courage to follow the dictates of your own conscience.

vi. Time and Personal Growth: give time priority to personal growth rather than working for money.

vii. Least Government Best: The belief that “that government is best which governs least”. Have the courage to practice some form of non-violent law-breaking if you believe the law to be in violation of your principles. Of course you have to be willing to accept the consequences that the government might invoke.

viii. Determine Truth for Yourself: Each generation should question for itself all previous teachings, all laws, and, indeed, all history, until it finds ideas, institutions, and persons worth believing in. In other words, now is the only reality; all else is illusion or conjecture.

1. Symbols:
   1. Dust
   2. Turtle
   3. Tractor
   4. The car
   5. The title
2. Biblical Allusions and Parallels
   1. The Joads – Exodus of the Israelites
   2. Jim Casey
      1. Christ-like
      2. Self-sacrifice, love for mankind
      3. spirit above material
      4. his final words
      5. meditates in the wilderness
      6. rejects the old religion for a new one
      7. both knew they would be rejected
      8. Tom becomes his disciple - Tom’s parting words to Ma
   3. Rose of Sharon and the ending
   4. Ma: “Cast your bread upon the water…”
   5. Uncle John, Rose’s baby, and “Moses”

**Levels of Reading John Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath**

Level One: one family’s (the Joad’s) struggle for survival (narrative chapters)

Level Two: the story of a group’s (the migrants) struggle for survival (intercalary chapters)

Level Three: the story of a nation (America) as it struggles to define its identity in a capitalist system.

Level Four: Moral – Philosophical Meanings – how are right and wrong / good and evil determined? (see notes)

Level Five: Ontological Questions – what duty do I owe my fellow man? What is our relationship with the earth? Why are we here? Purpose and meaning in life

***The Grapes of Wrath*, intercalary chapters[[2]](#endnote-1)**

**What does it look like?** On a sheet of paper, create a chart like the one below (You may, also, set up a word document using tables on your computer). You will need three columns and 30 rows. You will need quotations from the following intercalary chapters: **1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 12, 14, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 25, 27, and 29** that address the guiding questions on the last page of this assignment. You will, also, need quotations from the narrative chapters: **2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 13, 16, 18, 20, 22, 24, 26, 28, and 30** that discuss the Joads’ story, the biblical allusions, themes, and the philosophy (see the notes on the previous page).

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| --- | --- | --- |
| Chapter/Topic | Quotation | Analysis (purpose) |
| Chapter One:  Emotions of the reader | "Men stood by their fences and looked at the ruined corn, drying fast now, only a little green showing through the film of dust. Then men were silent and they did not move often. And the women came out of the houses to stand beside their men -- to feel whether this time the men would break. The women studied the men's faces secretly, for the corn could go, as long as something else remained. The children stood nearby, drawing figures in the dust with bare toes, and the children sent exploring senses out to see whether men and women would break." 6 | In this passage, Steinbeck depicts how the women watch the men and how the children watch both the men and the women. The woman's outlook on the situation depends on how the men react to the dying corn. If the men break, then hope has been lost. Through the silent communication between the men and the women and the children, Steinbeck creates a silent desperation in order to gain sympathy from the readers.  Despite the dwindling hope of the dying crops, these farmers don't break, but because of the way they watch each other, it seems as if the breaking point is near. Immediately, the reader feels concern and worry for these families.  It's as if the hope is so fragile, talking about the desperate situation could make the hope disappear.  Men, women, and children watch and wait and keep the illusion of hope alive. |
| Chapter Two:  Tom Joad Hitches a Ride | "The questions of the driver had the tone of a subtle examination. He seemed to spread nets, to set traps with his questions. 'Lookin' for a job?' he asked. 'No, my old man got a place, forty acres. He's a cropper, but we been there a long time.' The driver looked significantly at the field along the road where the corn was fallen sideways and the dust was piled on it. Little flints showed through the dusty soil. The drier said, as thought to himself, 'A forty-acre cropper and he ain't been dusted out and he ain't been tractored out?'" (12) | In this chapter, two things occur that connect to chapter one: the discussion of failing crops and the ways people study each other.  Because Tom has been away, he is not aware of how the farms have been plowed under and how families have fled.  When the truck driver glances out of the window of the moving truck and notices the “sideways corn” and the “dust piled on it,” the reader can connect the story of all migrants to Tom’s story. It is very possible that Tom’s home and family may be “*tractored* out.” Steinbeck does this to once again evoke sympathy from the readers for Tom’s possible plight. Tom really doesn’t know lies in his future, but the reader has some idea. Also, the truck driver prides himself in noticing "stuff" about people.  By watching people closely, the driver can intuit their situation.  This is similar to how the women watch their men and how the children watch their parents in chapter one. Observing others is a survival skill. The only difference between the two chapters is that the truck driver talks and asks questions while the farmers just watch.  Talking seems to make the hardship more real, more tangible. The driver brings the problems out into the open and discusses them while the farmers just watch and wait. |

**The Drought and Dust Bowl in Oklahoma – pp. 3 – 159 due date: 3/21 (A) and 3/22 (B)**

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| Chapter/Topic | Quotation | Analysis (purpose) |
| 1. Drought and dust storm |  |  |
| 2. |  |  |
| 3. Turtle crosses the road |  |  |
| 4. |  |  |
| 5. Owners evict people |  |  |
| 6. |  |  |
| 7. Used car salesman |  |  |
| 8. |  |  |
| 9. Selling property |  |  |
| 10. |  |  |
| 11. Vacant houses, vacant everything |  |  |

**Oklahoma Residents Travel to California – pp. 160 – 314 due date: 4/6 (A) and 4/7 (B)**

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| --- | --- | --- |
| 12. Highway 66 |  |  |
| 13. |  |  |
| 14. Change; eviction; struggles of migrants |  |  |
| 15. Restaurants along Highway 66 |  |  |
| 16. |  |  |
| 17. Migrants camping along Highway 66, relationship with other campers |  |  |
| 18. |  |  |

**Becoming Migrant Farmers in California – pp. 315 – 619 due date: 4/19 (A) and 4/20 (B)**

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| 19. Relationship between landowners and workers |  |  |
| 20. |  |  |
| 21. Migrant labor (payments, landownership). |  |  |
| 22. |  |  |
| 23. Amusement and pleasure for migrants |  |  |
| 24. |  |  |
| 25. Growing season and economic situation |  |  |
| 26. |  |  |
| 27. Picking cotton |  |  |
| 28. |  |  |
| 29. Rain storms and related struggles |  |  |
| 30. |  |  |

**What exactly do I analyze?**

First, you **must analyze Steinbeck’s purpose** in every chapter and address the following **individual chapter criteria (or guiding questions)**:

**Chapter 1**: Look at the opening descriptions of the dust bowl conditions in Oklahoma. How does Steinbeck use language to evoke an emotional response from the reader?

**Chapter 3**: This chapter is all about symbolism: What does the turtle represent? The highway? How about the cars and trucks? What is their goal and direction? Why is the turtle going the other way?

**Chapter 5**: The comparison of tractors (machines/technology) to an invasion of monsters. Or, what arguments do the tenants use against the repossession of their lands by the owners?

**Chapter 7**: This chapter is written in what critic Peter Lisca calls “harsh, staccato prose.” Why does Steinbeck use such hectic prose for this chapter about used car dealers?

**Chapter 9**: What argument is Steinbeck making about the “junk” that is being sold?

**Chapter 11**: What argument is Steinbeck making about machines and people?

**Chapter 12**: What does Highway 66 represent?

**Chapter 14**: What does Steinbeck have to say about capitalism and capitalists?

**Chapter 15**: What is Steinbeck’s opinion of the rich?

**Chapter 17**: What social phenomena take place among the migrant families on the way to California?

**Chapter 19**: How do company stores function? Or: How do Californians feel about the Okies?

**Chapter 21**: How does Steinbeck define the danger of machines?

**Chapter 23**: What is the significance of the storyteller?

**Chapter 25:** How is the idea of rot and decay a metaphor?

**Chapter 27**: What is the argument of the workers? Or: What is the argument of the wealthy?

**Chapter 29**: What is the significance of the torrential rains and floods?

1. http://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plan/john-steinbecks-grapes-wrath-inner-chapters#sect-background [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://teacherweb.com/CA/ThousandOaksHighSchool/Burgar/apt22.aspx?print=true [↑](#endnote-ref-1)