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Lesson One

FOCUS: Biography

The author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a novel. John Steinbeck reported on the Depression-era migrant workers of his native California for various newspapers and journals. A chronicler of the poor and dispossessed, he was a frequent visitor to migrant encampments, an experience that compelled him to write *The Grapes of Wrath*—the novel for which he won the 1940 Pulitzer Prize and is best remembered today. One practice of examining a literary work, biographical criticism, looks through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to understand more fully the novel.

Discussion Activities

Listen to the Big Read CD. Students should take notes as they listen. Ask them to present the three most important points they learned from the CD. To go more in depth, you might focus on the reflections of one particular commentator. How does his or her background shape his or her reading of the novel?

Have students read the following essays from the Readers Guide: "Introduction to the Novel," "John Steinbeck (1902-1968)," and "Steinbeck and His Other Works" (pp. 3-7; 10-11). Divide the class into groups. Each group will present a summary of the points in its assigned essay. Ask students to add a creative twist to make their presentations memorable.

Writing Exercise

Have students write a one-page response to a book that taught them something about a group to which they do not belong. If the book changed the way they see a certain group—a race, a religion, a social class, a subculture—have them discuss at least three ways they were changed. Have them exchange their writing with a classmate and present their books, ideas, and conclusions to the class. Get them thinking about how a novel might adjust their views.

Homework

Read Chapters 1-5 (pp. 1-39). Ask students to think about how the Oklahoma landscape shapes the lives of the people who live in it. How does their own landscape shape the students' lives? When did their parents move to where the students are growing up now, and why?