

## Lesson Two

### FOCUS: Culture and History

Cultural and historical contexts give birth to the dilemmas and themes at the center of the novel. Studying these contexts and appreciating intricate details of the time and place help readers understand the motivations of the characters.

*The Grapes of Wrath* was published in 1939, near the end of a decade that began with the worst economic collapse in American history. In the 1930s, the Great Depression caused widespread unemployment and misery, especially in rural areas, and did not fully run its course until 1941, when the military and its contractors started hiring and drafting for World War II.

In spite—or because—of economic hardship, Hollywood thrived. Bette Davis, Clark Gable, Judy Garland, and the screwball comedies of screenwriters such as Dudley Nichols and Jules Furthman came on the scene. Over the airwaves, Americans listened to the jokes of Jack Benny, the adventures of the Lone Ranger, the news reports of Edward R. Murrow, and Orson Welles’s broadcast of *The War of the Worlds*. Welles also created excitement in the fine arts, producing and directing classics on Broadway and Marc Blitzstein’s opera “The Cradle Will Rock” for the government’s Work Projects Administration. The WPA also funded a renaissance in American art and architecture by commissioning buildings, bridges, and murals across the country. Artists responded by creating both serious works that reflected the growing national crisis, and sophisticated popular entertainment that gave escapism a good name.



### Discussion Activities

Have students read Handout Two, “The WPA.” Then go to the NEA’s Jazz in the Schools Web site at [www.neajazzintheschools.org](http://www.neajazzintheschools.org). Bear in mind that Steinbeck spent much of his earliest royalties assembling a prodigious jazz collection. At the Web site, ask students to go to Lesson Two and play clips of Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and Benny Goodman. See if they can identify patterns in the music. If possible, team with a music specialist to explore further the music of the 1930s.



### Writing Exercise

Ask the students to write a short essay on the ways artists of the twenty-first century are being influenced by the current political and social climate. In your essay, use specific examples of movies, books, or art. Are writers and filmmakers chronicling current events much as Steinbeck reported the plight of the Dust Bowl migrants? Why or why not?



### Homework

Have students read Chapters 6–9 (pp. 40–89) for discussion during the next lesson. Also, have them read pp. 4–5 in the Reader’s Guide. Who is telling the story, and what is the value of having alternating voices in the narration?