

Lesson Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

The narrator tells the story with a specific perspective informed by his or her beliefs and experiences. Narrators can be major or minor characters, or exist outside the story altogether. The narrator weaves her or his point of view, including ignorance and bias, into telling the tale. A first-person narrator participates in the events of the novel, using “I.” A distanced narrator, often not a character, is removed from the action of the story and uses the third person (he, she, and they). The distanced narrator may be omniscient, able to read the minds of all the characters, or limited, describing only certain characters’ thoughts and feelings. Ultimately, the type of narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

The Grapes of Wrath is narrated in a “limited-omniscient” third-person voice. This narrator recounts the points of view and experiences of many characters, sometimes far removed from the Joad family. The narrator is “limited” because, in spite of this omniscience, the interior lives of the characters—their silent thoughts and perceptions—are not always revealed to the reader.



Discussion Activities

Steinbeck’s narration alternates between the specific story of the Joad family and the larger story of all the Dust Bowl migrants. He accomplishes the latter through interchapters that he called “generals.” Why would Steinbeck do this? Is the alternation consistent, or are there deviations? How does his focus on the migrants (for example, in Chapter 9) contribute to the point of view of the book?



Writing Exercise

Ask students to choose one character who has appeared so far: Tom, Casy, Ma, Pa, Uncle John, Grampa, Granma. Have students rewrite the novel’s beginning from this character’s perspective. Have them think about how a story can be told from multiple perspectives. What might Steinbeck be trying to tell us by writing about a whole family and a whole community?



Homework

Have students read Chapters 10–13 (pp. 90–149). Ask students to trace the motivations and development of the same character they chose for the writing exercise. Is the family itself a character in the novel? Have them keep track of each character’s way of talking. What particularities do they notice in the phrases, word choices, and education of their chosen character?