

# 4

## Lesson Four

### FOCUS: Characters

The main character in a work of literature is called the “protagonist.” The protagonist often overcomes a weakness or ignorance to achieve a new understanding by the work’s end. A protagonist who acts with great courage may be called a “hero.” A protagonist of dubious tenacity and questionable virtue is an “antihero.” Readers often debate the virtues and motivations of the protagonists in an attempt to understand whether they are heroic. The protagonist’s journey is made more dramatic by challenges presented by characters with different beliefs. A “foil” provokes the protagonist so as to highlight more clearly certain features of the main character. The most important foil, the “antagonist,” opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.

The novel begins with Tom Joad’s release from prison. He is a convicted killer who acted in self-defense and has served his debt to society. Soon he joins his family for the trip to California.

Many readers consider Tom Joad the protagonist of *The Grapes of Wrath*, a man who struggles against violent instincts while standing up for the rights of the dispossessed. Several foils propel Tom into manhood. Reverend Casy speaks a language of pantheism and growing political awareness. Ma is a restraining figure, always reminding Tom of his checkered past and responsibility to the family. Even poor Muley, a solitary outcast on the land, unwittingly warns Tom of the consequences of social exile. These foils vie to lead Tom toward his final choices.



### Discussion Activities

Who is the antagonist in *The Grapes of Wrath*? Is it the men who drive the tractors? Is it the bank officials who own the land? Or is the antagonist not a person at all, but the “monster” hounding the farmers from Oklahoma all the way to California? Are the protagonist and the antagonist in this novel in a fair fight? Can the Joads win, or are the odds stacked against them?



### Writing Exercise

Steinbeck often alludes to myth to reveal something essential about his characters. Other times, he’ll include a story within the novel. For example, he says that the Joads’ first-born son, Noah, “was not stupid but he was strange” (p. 78), then Steinbeck tells the story of Noah’s birth. Ask students to find another example of this technique, and consider the value of telling stories to develop a character.



### Homework

Have students read Chapters 14-17 (pp. 150-200). Ask them to find examples in the text where Steinbeck makes them see the landscape in a new way by comparing it to something else. For instance, challenge them to find moments where inanimate objects are compared to animate ones.