

6

Lesson Six

FOCUS: Symbols

Symbols are interpretive keys to the text. The craft of storytelling depends on symbols that present ideas and point toward new meanings. Most frequently, a specific object will be used to represent (or symbolize) a more abstract concept. The repeated appearance of an object suggests a non-literal or figurative meaning attached to the object above and beyond face value. Symbols are often found in a novel's title, at the beginning and end of the novel, in an important action, or in the name or personality of a character. The life of a novel is perpetuated by generations of readers interpreting and re-interpreting the main symbols of the novel. By decoding symbols, any reader can reveal a new interpretation.

Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



To summarize, a symbol is an object or action that suggests additional meanings. Use this class period to analyze three major symbols in the novel: the road, the West, and the grapes of wrath.

The Road: Route 66

As America's major east-west road, Highway 66 was also known as "Route 66," "The Mother Road," and "The Main Street of America." A trip from Oklahoma to California was not taken lightly in this pre-interstate era. Focus on the description of the road in Chapter 12: "66 is the path of a people in flight, refugees from dust and shrinking land." How does this tone change by the time we reach Chapter 21? What has changed in the Joad family?

The West

For Americans, the West in general and California in particular have symbolized a new life, or promised land. Building on the homework from Lesson Five, why did so many families in the 1930s—including the fictional Joad family—pin their hope for a better life on California? Pay particular attention to Chapter 18, when the Joad family reaches Tehachapi and sees the vineyards and orchards for the first time.

The Grapes of Wrath

Steinbeck's title quotes from Julia Ward Howe's "Battle-Hymn of the Republic," a famous Civil War anthem associated with the anti-slavery movement. Howe's allusion to "the grapes of wrath" comes from the biblical books of Deuteronomy and Revelation. From what you have read so far, do you think Steinbeck chose a good title? Does it have patriotic, religious, and political connotations? (Students will read the famous passage "In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy" when they reach Chapter 25.)



Homework

Read Chapters 20-21 (pp. 240-284). Students should return to their original Joad character from the homework in previous lessons. How has their character changed? If their character has died, ask them to consider the ways that the death has affected other members of the Joad family.