

Lesson Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Themes are the central, recurring subjects of a novel. As characters grapple with circumstances such as racism, class, or unrequited love, profound questions will arise in the reader's mind about human life, social pressures, and societal expectations. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, the relationship between one's personal moral code and larger political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational considerations. A novel often reconsiders these age-old debates by presenting them in new contexts or from new points of view.



Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



Use the following questions to stimulate discussion or provide writing exercises. Using historical references to support ideas, explore the statements *The Grapes of Wrath* makes about the following themes:

The Individual Against the Corporation: “It happens that every man in a bank hates what the bank does, and yet the bank does it. The bank is something more than men, I tell you” (p. 33).

1. Who—or what—is most responsible for the plight of the Joads? Bankers? Tractor drivers? Landowners? Nature itself? Have students explain their answers in detail.
2. What actions does Steinbeck advocate to fix the Joads' dilemma?

The American Dream: Grampa says: “Gonna get me a whole big bunch a grapes off a bush, or whatever, an' I'm gonna squash 'em on my face an' let 'em run offen my chin” (p. 83).

1. What happens to Grampa's dream? Does anyone in the family find it?
2. What are “the grapes of wrath” in Steinbeck's novel?

Redemption: “The on'y thing you got to look at is that ever' time they's a little step fo'ward, she may slip back a little, but she never slips clear back.... An' that means they wasn't no waste even if it seemed like they was” (p. 384).

1. Are Casy's words borne out by the novel, or are they meant to be sad and ironic?
2. How do the struggles of each of the Joads change them as individuals?



Homework

Have students finish reading the novel (pp. 406–455). Ask them to begin their essays, using the essay topics at the end of this guide. Outlines are due at the next class.