

Literary Analysis Study Guide

The following list of definitions comes to you, courtesy of The Online Writing Lab at Roane State Community College (<http://www.roanestate.edu/owl/ElementsLit.html>)

Vocabulary

Theme

Definition: The idea or point of a story formulated as a generalization. In American literature, several themes are evident which reflect and define our society. The dominant ones might be innocence/experience, life/death, appearance/reality, free will/fate, madness/sanity, love/hate, society/individual, known/unknown. Themes may have a single, instead of a dual nature as well. The theme of a story may be a mid-life crisis, or imagination, or the duality of humankind (contradictions).

Character

Definition: Imaginary people created by the writer. Perhaps the most important element of literature.

Look for: Connections, links, and clues between and about characters. Ask yourself what the function and significance of each character is. Make this determination based upon the character's history, what the reader is told (and not told), and what other characters say about themselves and others.

- Protagonist - Major character at the center of the story.
- Antagonist - A character or force that opposes the protagonist.
- Minor character - Often provides support and illuminates the protagonist.
- Static character - A character who remains the same.
- Dynamic character - A character who changes in some important way.
- Characterization - The means by which writers reveal character.
- Explicit Judgment - Narrator gives facts and interpretive comment.
- Implied Judgment - Narrator gives description; reader make the judgment.

Plot

Definition: The arrangement of ideas and/or incidents that make up a story.

- Causality - One event occurs because of another event.
- Foreshadowing - A suggestion of what is going to happen.
- Suspense - A sense of worry established by the author.
- Conflict - Struggle between opposing forces.
- Exposition - Background information regarding the setting, characters, plot.
- Complication or Rising Action - Intensification of conflict.
- Crisis - Turning point; moment of great tension that fixes the action.

- Resolution/Denouement - The way the story turns out.

Structure

Definition: The design or form of the completed action. Often provides clues to character and action. Can even philosophically mirror the author's intentions, especially if it is unusual.

Look For: Repeated elements in action, gesture, dialogue, description, as well as shifts in direction, focus, time, place, etc.

Setting

Definition: The place or location of the action, the setting provides the historical and cultural context for characters. It often can symbolize the emotional state of characters.

Context: Adipiscing voluptat, ut adipiscing egestas, urna integer, purus auctor beatae amet luctus, velit justo donec necessitatibus. Et tincidunt nunc, morbi curabitur erat non augue, urna scelerisque quam ac, inventore neque etiam.

Point of View

Definition: Again, the point of view can sometimes indirectly establish the author's intentions. Point of view pertains to who tells the story and how it is told.

- Narrator - The person telling the story.
- First-person - Narrator participates in action but sometimes has limited knowledge/vision.
- Objective - Narrator is unnamed/unidentified (a detached observer). Does not assume character's perspective and is not a character in the story. The narrator reports on events and lets the reader supply the meaning.
- Omniscient - All-knowing narrator (multiple perspectives). The narrator takes us into the character and can evaluate a character for the reader (editorial omniscience). When a narrator allows the reader to make his or her own judgments from the action of the characters themselves, it is called neutral omniscience.
- Limited omniscient - All-knowing narrator about one or two characters, but not all.

Language and Style

Definition: Style is the verbal identity of a writer, oftentimes based on the author's use of diction (word choice) and syntax (the order of words in a sentence). A writer's use of language reveals his or her tone, or the attitude toward the subject matter.

Irony

Definition: A contrast or discrepancy between one thing and another.

- Verbal irony - We understand the opposite of what the speaker says.
- Irony of Circumstance or Situational Irony - When one event is expected to occur but the opposite happens. A discrepancy between what seems to be and what is.
- Dramatic Irony - Discrepancy between what characters know and what readers know.
- Ironic Vision - An overall tone of irony that pervades a work, suggesting how the writer views the characters.

Allegory

Definition: A form of narrative in which people, places, and events seem to have hidden meanings. Often a retelling of an older story.

Connotation

Definition: The implied meaning of a word.

Denotation

Definition: The dictionary definition of a word.

Diction

Definition: Word choice and usage (for example, formal vs. informal), as determined by considerations of audience and purpose.

Figurative Language

Definition: The use of words to suggest meanings beyond the literal. There are a number of figures of speech. Some of the more common ones are:

- Metaphor - Making a comparison between unlike things without the use of a verbal clue (such as "like" or "as").
- Simile - Making a comparison between unlike things, using "like" or "as".
- Hyperbole - Exaggeration
- Personification - Endowing inanimate objects with human characteristics

Imagery

Definition: A concrete representation of a sense impression, a feeling, or an idea which appeals to one or more of our senses. Look for a pattern of imagery.

- Tactile imagery - sense of touch.
- Aural imagery - sense of hearing.
- Olfactory imagery - sense of smell.
- Visual imagery - sense of sight.
- Gustatory imagery - sense of taste.

Symbolism

Definition: When objects or actions mean more than themselves.

Syntax

Definition: Sentence structure and word order.

Grapes of Wrath Themes

This is by no means an exhaustive list of themes within Steinbeck's novel, but it should give you a good start.

Hope

The Joads experience many hardships, deprivations, and deaths, and at the end of the novel are barely surviving. Nevertheless, the mood of the novel is optimistic. This positive feeling is derived from the growth of the Joad family as they begin to realize a larger group consciousness at the end of the novel. The development of this theme can be seen particularly in Ma Joad, from her focus on keeping the family together to her recognition of the necessity of identifying with the group. "Use' ta be the fambly was fust. It ain't so now. It's anybody. Worse off we get, the more we got to do," Ma says in the final chapter.

Hope comes from the journey that educates and enlightens some of the Joads, including Ma, Tom, Pa, John, Rose of Sharon, and also Jim Casy. On the surface, the family's long journey is an attempt at the "good life," the American dream. Yet this is not the only motive. In fact, the members of the family who cannot see beyond this materialistic goal leave the family along the way: Noah, Connie, and Al. The Joads travel from their traditional life that offered security, through chaos on the road and on into California. There, they look for a new way of life, and a larger understanding of the world. And whether or not the remaining Joads live or die in California, their journey has been successful. Hope survives, as the people survive, because they want to understand and master their lives in the face of continual discouragement.

Class Conflict

The conflict in the novel between the impoverished migrants and the established, secure business people and Californians serves as a strong criticism of economic injustice. In fact, *The Grapes of Wrath* can be read as a social comment on the economic disasters of the time. The migrants' agrarian way of life has all but disappeared, threatened not only by nature's drought and dust storms, but also by big farms and financial establishments, called "the Bank." At the beginning of the novel, the owners and the banks push the tenants off of their land. Later the arrival of hundreds of thousands of poor people causes conflict in California.

The migrants represent trouble for businessmen in the form of higher taxes, labor unions, and possible government interference. The potential for future conflict is understood by all the business owners: if the migrants ever organize, they will seriously threaten the financial establishment. The Joads' travails dramatize such economic and social conflicts. In California, the conflict between the two sides grows violent as the migrants' desperation increases. The government camps are harassed or even burned down by angry state residents with financial interests.

There are also conflicts within the family that reflect the materialistic concerns of this class conflict. Rose of Sharon is preoccupied with her pregnancy and daydreams of the future. Her husband, Connie, wanted to stay in Oklahoma, and he does little to help the family on the road. Finally he disappears.

Uncle John is consumed with worry and frustration. The children, Ruthie and Winfield, are selfish and restless. The hardships of dispossessed families are made personal and individual in the account of the Joads.

Fanaticism

Fanaticism—both as a religious fundamentalism and as a social phenomenon—is condemned in the novel.

During Tom's first meeting with Jim Casy, the former preacher talks about his discovery that organized religion denies life, particularly sexuality. He in fact had found a connection between the "Holy Spirit" and sexuality when he was a preacher. Later, in the government camp, Rose of Sharon is frightened by a fanatic religious woman's warning that dancing is sinful and that it means that Rose of Sharon will lose her baby. In addition, the religious fanatic tells Ma that religion approves of an economic class system that incorporates poverty. She tells Ma: "(A preacher) says they's wicketness in that camp. He says, 'The poor is tryin' to be rich.' He says, 'They's dancin' an' huggin' when they should be wailin' an' moanin' in sin.'" This type of religious fanaticism is shown to be a denial of life and is associated with business in its economic deprivation and denial.

One of the most profound lessons from the story of the Joads and their real-life American counterparts is that one of the causes of the crises of the 1930s in California was social fanaticism and prejudice shown to the "Okies." The fear of the migrants, combined with the lack of faith in the government's ability to solve the temporary problems, often caused violence. It also led to such shameful events as starvation, malnutrition, and homelessness. In retrospect, it is obvious that World War II "solved" the migrant problem by absorbing the manpower into the war effort. How much better it would have been if California had developed emergency solutions for this period of great social transition that could have served as an historical example.

Individual v. Society

The novel demonstrates the individual's instinct to organize communities within the groups of migrants in roadside camps. "In the evening a strange thing happened: the twenty families became one family, the children were the children of all. The loss of home became one loss, and the golden time in the West was one dream." The people cooperate because it is beneficial to their welfare in order to survive. Yet Steinbeck develops the concept of the group beyond the political, social, and moral level to include the mystical and transcendental. Jim Casy reflects this when he says: "Maybe all men got one big soul everybody's a part of."

The conversion of Tom, Ma, Rose of Sharon, and Casy to a "we" state of mind occurs over the course of the novel. As they gradually undergo suffering, they learn to transcend their own pain and individual needs. At the end, all four are able to recognize the nature and needs of others. The process of transcendence that occurs in these characters illustrates Steinbeck's belief in the capacity of humanity to move from what he calls an "I" to a "We" consciousness.

The Joads are also on an inward journey. For them, suffering and homelessness become the means for spiritual growth and a new consciousness. Ma sums up this new consciousness and what it means to her when she says: "Use' ta be the fambly was fust. It ain't so now. It's anybody." Yet although each of the four characters undergoes a spiritual transformation, each also finds an individual way to help others in

the world and to take action. At the end, Tom has decided to become a leader in the militant organizing of the migrants.

Ma accepts her commitments to people other than her family. Rose of Sharon loses her baby but comes to understand the “we” of the starving man to whom she blissfully gives life as if he were her child. Casy, who has been jailed, reappears as a strike leader and union organizer, having discovered that he must work to translate his understanding of the holiness of life into social action. Casy dies when vigilantes attack the strikers and kill him first.

Steinbeck makes clear that this potential for transcendental consciousness is what makes human beings different from other creatures in nature. In Chapter 14, Steinbeck describes humanity’s willingness to “die for a concept” as the “one quality [that] is the foundation of Manself, and this one quality is man, distinctive in the universe.”

Commitment

Steinbeck develops extensively the theme of social commitment. Both Casy and Tom were inspired to make Christ-like sacrifices. When Jim Casy surrenders to the deputies in place of Tom and Floyd, Jim is acting on his commitment to love all people. He later becomes a labor organizer and dies in his efforts. His statement to Tom, “An’ sometimes I love ’em fit to bust. . .,” exemplifies his commitment. In Tom, the development of commitment is even more striking. At the beginning of the novel, Tom is determined to avoid involvement with people. After his experiences on the journey and through his friendship with Casy, Tom becomes committed to social justice. His commitment extends to a mystical identification with the people. When Ma worries that Tom may also be killed like Casy, Tom tells her: “Then I’ll be ever’where wherever you look.

Wherever there’s a fight so hungry people can eat, I’ll be there. Wherever they’s a cop beatin’ up a guy, I’ll be there. If Casy knowed, why, I’ll be in the way guys yell when they’re mad an’ I’ll be in the way kids laugh when they’re hungry an’ they know supper’s ready. An’ when our folks eat the stuff they raise an’ live in the houses they build why I’ll be there.”

Grapes of Wrath Style

Point of View

The novel is narrated in the third-person voice (“he”/“she”/“it”). What is particularly significant about this technique is that the point of view varies in tone and method, depending on the author’s purpose. The novel’s distinctive feature is its sixteen inserted, or intercalary, chapters (usually the odd-numbered chapters) that provide documentary information for the reader. These chapters give social and historical background of the mid-1930s Depression era, especially as it affects migrants like the Joads.

These inserted chapters range from descriptions of the Dust Bowl and agricultural conditions in Oklahoma, to California’s history, to descriptions of roads leading west from Oklahoma. In the more restricted chapters that focus on the Joads, the point of view shifts to become close and dramatic. In addition, many of the inserted chapters contain basic symbols of the novel: land, family, and the conflict between the migrants and the people who represent the bank and agribusiness. The turtle in Chapter 3 symbolizes Nature’s struggle and the will to survive. It characterizes the will to survive of the Joads and “the people.”

Setting

John Steinbeck wrote some of his best fiction about the area where he grew up. The territory that Steinbeck wrote about is an area covering thousands of square miles in central California. He particularly used the Long Valley as a setting in his fiction, which extends south of Salinas, Steinbeck’s hometown. The Long Valley, covering more than one hundred miles, lies between the Gabilan Mountains to the east and the Santa Lucia Mountains on the Pacific Coast. The major site of *The Grapes of Wrath* is the San Joaquin Valley, which lies east of the Long Valley and the Gabilan Mountains. The Long Valley is also the general setting for *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and *East of Eden* (1952), two of Steinbeck’s other well-known works. This rich agricultural area is an ironic setting for a novel that examines the economic and social problems affecting people during the Depression. It was no promised land for the Joads and others like them.

One of Steinbeck’s major achievements is his remarkable descriptions of the environment and nature’s effects on social history. He was also ahead of his time in writing about the circumstances of the migrant workers and small farmers fighting corporate farms and the financial establishment decades before such subjects gained national press coverage in the 1970s.

Symbolism

The major symbol in the novel is the family, which stands for the larger “family” of humanity. The Joads are at the center of the dramatic aspects of the novel, and they illustrate human strengths and weaknesses.

Dangers in nature and in society disrupt the family, but they survive economic and natural disasters, just as humanity does. At the end, the Joads themselves recognize they are part of a larger family. The land itself is a symbol that is equated in the novel with a sense of personal identity. What the Joads

actually suffer when they lose their Oklahoma farm is a sense of identity, which they struggle to rediscover during their journey and in California. Pa Joad, especially, loses his spirit after the family is “tractored off” their land. He must cede authority in the family to Ma after their loss.

There is also a sequence of Judeo-Christian symbols throughout the novel. The Joads, like the Israelites, are a homeless and persecuted people looking for the promised land. Jim Casy can be viewed as a symbol of Jesus Christ, who began His mission after a period of solitude in the wilderness. Casy is introduced in the novel after a similar period of retreat. And later, when Casy and Tom meet in the strikers’ tent, Casy says he has “been a-gin’ into the wilderness like Jesus to try to find out sumpin.” Also, Jim Casy has the same initials as Jesus Christ. Like Christ, Casy finally offers himself as the sacrifice to save his people. Casy’s last words to the man who murders him are significant: “Listen, you fellas don’ know what you’re doing.” And just before he dies, Casy repeats: “You don’ know what you’re a-doin’.” When Jesus Christ was crucified, He said, “Father forgive them; they know not what they do.” Tom becomes Casy’s disciple after his death. Tom is ready to continue his teacher’s work, and it has been noted that two of Jesus’s disciples were named Thomas.

Biblical symbols from both Old and New Testament stories occur throughout the novel. Twelve Joads start on their journey from Oklahoma, corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel or the twelve disciples of Christ (with Jim Casy, the Christ figure) on their way to spiritual enlightenment by a messiah. Like Lot’s wife, Grampa is reluctant to leave his homeland, and his refusal to let go of the past brings his death. Later, the narrative emphasizes this symbolism when Tom selects a Scripture verse for Grampa’s burial that quotes Lot.

The shifts between the Old and New testaments coalesce with Jim Casy, whose ideas about humanity and a new social gospel parallel Christ’s new religion two thousand years ago. Biblical myths also inform the final scene through a collection of symbols that demonstrate the existence of a new order in the Joads’ world. As the Joads seek refuge from the flood in a dry barn, the narrative offers symbols of the Old Testament deluge (Noah’s ark), the New Testament stable where Christ was born (the barn), and the mysterious rite of Communion as Rose of Sharon breast feeds the starving man. With this ending, it is clear that this is a new beginning for the Joads. All the symbols express hope and regeneration despite the continuing desperate circumstances.

Allusion

Allusions, or literary references, to grapes and vineyards are made throughout the novel, carrying Biblical and economic connotations. The title of the novel, from Julia Ward Howe’s poem “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” is itself an allusion dating back to the Bible’s Old Testament. In Isaiah 63:4-6, a man tramples grapes in his wrath: “For the day of vengeance was in my heart, and the year for my redeeming work had come. I looked, but there was no helper; I stared, but there was no one to sustain me; so my own arm brought me victory, and my wrath sustained me. I trampled down peoples in my anger, I crushed them in my wrath, and I poured out their lifeblood on the earth.” Steinbeck’s first wife, Carol, suggested the title after hearing the lyrics of the patriotic hymn: “Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord / He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored.” Steinbeck loved the title and wrote to his agent: “I think it is Carol’s best title so far. I like it because it is a march and this book is a kind of march because it is in our own revolutionary tradition and because in reference to this book it has a large meaning. And I like it because people know the ‘Battle Hymn’ who don’t know the ‘Star Spangled Banner.’”

Indeed, Steinbeck knew that his unfinished novel was revolutionary and that it would be condemned by many people as Communist propaganda. So the title was especially suitable because it carried an American patriotic stamp that Steinbeck hoped would deflect charges of leftist influence. He decided that he wanted the complete hymn, its words and music, printed on the endpapers at the front and back of the book. He wrote his publisher:

“The fascist crowd will try to sabotage this book because it is revolutionary. They will try to give it the communist angle. However, the ‘Battle Hymn’ is American and intensely so. Further, every American child learns it and then forgets the words. So if both the words and music are there the book is keyed into the American scene from the beginning.”

Allegory

An allegory is a story in which characters and events have a symbolic meaning that points to general human truths. The turtle in Chapter 3 is the novel’s best-known use of allegory. The patient turtle proceeds along a difficult journey over the dust fields of Oklahoma, often meeting obstacles, but always able to survive. Like the Joads, the turtle is moving southwest, away from the drought. When a trucker swerves to hit the turtle, the creature survives, just as the Joads survive the displacement from their land. Later, Tom finds a turtle and Casy comments: “Nobody can’t keep a turtle though. They work at it and work at it, and at last one day they get out and away they go off somewheres.” The turtle is hit by a truck, carried off by Tom, attacked by a cat and a red ant, yet, like the Joads and “the people,” he is indomitable with a fierce will to survive. He drags himself through the dust and unknowingly plants a seed for the future.