Grapes of Wrath

Concept/Vocabulary Analysis

Literary Text: The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck

Organizational Patterns: The Grapes of Wrath is organized into thirty chapters, each describing life in the Dust Bowl of the 1930’s. Most chapters follow the story of Tom Joad and his family as they suffer from the effects of the drought and depression. Some chapters however deviate from the story and show the scenery. For example chapter 3 describes a turtle’s journey across the highway. Chapter 7 talks about dishonest salesman. The details and story line come together to create a compelling and visual depiction of life during the Dust Bowl.

Themes

Masculinity: The story deals with men feeling like they amount to something. When they are driven off their land, when they have no means to care for their family, when they don’t even have anyone to blame or take their anger out on how can they still feel like men? The first chapter says, “No misfortune was too great to bear if the men were whole.” The rest of the book deals with this concept of the men in difficult situations being whole.

Identity/Land: The book deals with how a person’s identity can be tied to the land. The land is symbolic for a resting place or home. Steinbeck probes the issue of identity when the land is taken away. They were born on the land, lived on the land, died on the land, respected the land and then it was just taken away from them. He discusses how humans and families react to being driven off of the land.

Modernization/Technology: Steinbeck also nostalgically reflects on the changes that were occurring in the 20’s and 30’s as the world moved more towards the use of
machines and less towards the life of tenant farmers. He vividly describes the distance that is created when men no longer work directly in the soil but are on top of machines, never knowing the land and never loving the land.

Setting

The setting is crucial to the story. In the Midwest from 1930-1936 America experienced an ecological disaster known as the Dust Bowl. Because of drought and non-rotation of crops the land was dry and huge clouds of dust formed. The Dust Bowl occurred at the same time as the Great Depression and forced hundreds of thousands of American Citizens from Oklahoma, Texas and the surrounding states to leave their homes and look for a way and a place to survive. The Grapes of Wrath is effective as a novel because it portrays the struggles and hopelessness of the time. Students need to know the historical background before they begin reading. An excellent preparatory text would be Out of the Dust by Karen Hesse, the 1998 Newberry Award Winning novel.

Point of View

The story is told in third person by an omniscient narrator. Because of this point of view the narrator is able to tell more about the setting and history of the time period because it isn’t confined to one person’s point of view.

Literary Terms

**Imagery:** One of Steinbeck’s strongest traits as an author is his use of imagery. His describes the animals such as the turtle in chapter three and lets its perseverance symbolize the people during the dust bowl. He describes in details the land, the fields, and the houses each one standing as an image for an idea or theme.

**Dialogue:** Steinbeck uses dialogue to show the culture of the area he is writing about. He portrays the personality, class, and lives of the people he is writing about.

**Tone:** The tone of the novel fits well with the time period. It is somber and depressing, just like the story being told.

**Conflict:** The conflict in the story becomes complicated as people are pushed off their lands but have no one to blame and no way to revenge. They are fighting against an institution and it leaves them helpless.

**Affective Issues:** Students can relate to experiences they have had that were difficult, when they had to move, when they were forced to create a new identity in a new school, when they lost their courage or confidence because of something that happened.

**Vocabulary Issues:** There are words that Steinbeck uses from the 1920’s that aren’t used in our everyday vocabulary. Some of them are expressions, others are names for
certain items (old cars etc.) that could be used as an opportunity for learning new vocabulary.

**Background Knowledge:** The students can learn from this book that anyone can be kicked out of their homes or forced to leave, and become refugees or looked down upon by the other people. A scaffold to prepare them would focus on different times in history when people have been forced out of their homes, or had their land and identity taken away from them.

**Implications for Students of Diversity:** Here a teacher could address the subject of prejudice. Why were people prejudiced against the “Okies?” How can we avoid situations like that today? What other groups have been unjustly dealt with.

**Gender Issues:** Masculinity vs. Femininity. Why do the men get so depressed when they lose their land? Why do they feel like they cannot be a man if they don’t own land? Why are the women alright until the men break? Are the women too submissive?

**The Central or Enduring Question:**

How do outward disasters or catastrophes affect our inward sense of identity and human relationships?

**Research Issues/Project Ideas**
Students could write their own short story about someone in the Dust Bowl.
Students could research why the Dust Bowl happened, what effects we still feel today from the Dust Bowl.
Students could make a map showing where the 500,000 evacuees went.
Students could look for other true stories about people who lived in the time of the Dust Bowl.

**Information/Functional Texts**

Out of the Dust, Karen Hesse
Information on the Internet about the Dust Bowl
True stories about families in the Dust Bowl