

## *The Grapes of Wrath*

After several false starts, John Steinbeck wrote *The Grapes of Wrath* in five months of intense creative activity. The effort left him emotionally exhausted and unsure of the value of his great work. A shy man who was uncomfortable in the limelight, he warned his publisher about printing too many copies of a book he thought would have very little appeal to the general public. To his surprise and dismay, *The Grapes of Wrath* was an immediate best-seller, widely praised and almost as widely damned throughout the country. *The Grapes of Wrath* remains to this day one of the most frequently banned and most widely read novels of all time. Since its publication in 1939, the book has never been out of print and has rarely sold fewer than 50,000 copies a year.

*The Grapes of Wrath* divides neatly into three parts: the drought in Oklahoma (Chapters 1–11), the Joads' journey to California (12–18), and the Joads' experiences as migrant laborers in California (19–30). Of the 30 chapters in the book, 14 directly portray the saga of the Joad family. Using a mixture of poetic and journalistic language, the remaining 16 chapters, called interchapters, connect the Joads' experiences to a more universal story.

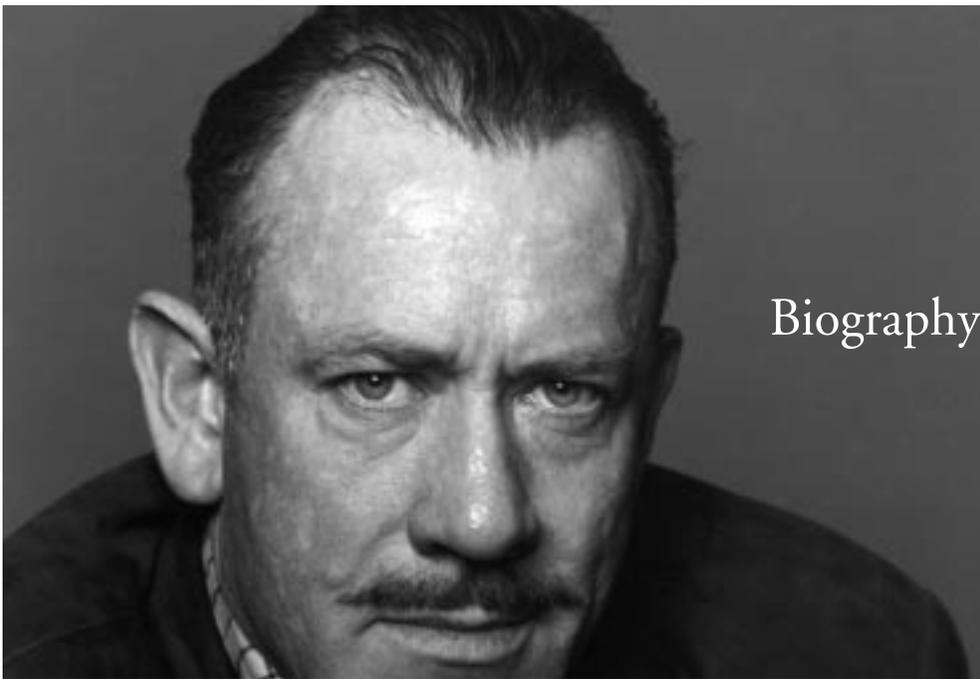
*The Grapes of Wrath* begins in drought and ends in flood. This has led some readers to view the book as a retelling of the biblical Exodus story. Other readers interpret it as a historical portrait of the suffering of Depression-era migrant workers. Still others see it as a political indictment of large landowners and corporations. Steinbeck himself wrote friends that the book could be read on five levels (but never specified what those five levels were). At its most essential, *The Grapes of Wrath* is about family, community, human dignity, generosity and courage in the face of intolerable suffering.

Or, as John Steinbeck said in his 1962 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, “The writer is delegated to declare and celebrate man’s proven capacity for goodness of heart and spirit—for gallantry in defeat—for courage, compassion, and love. In the endless war against weakness and despair, these are the bright rally-flags of hope and emulation.”

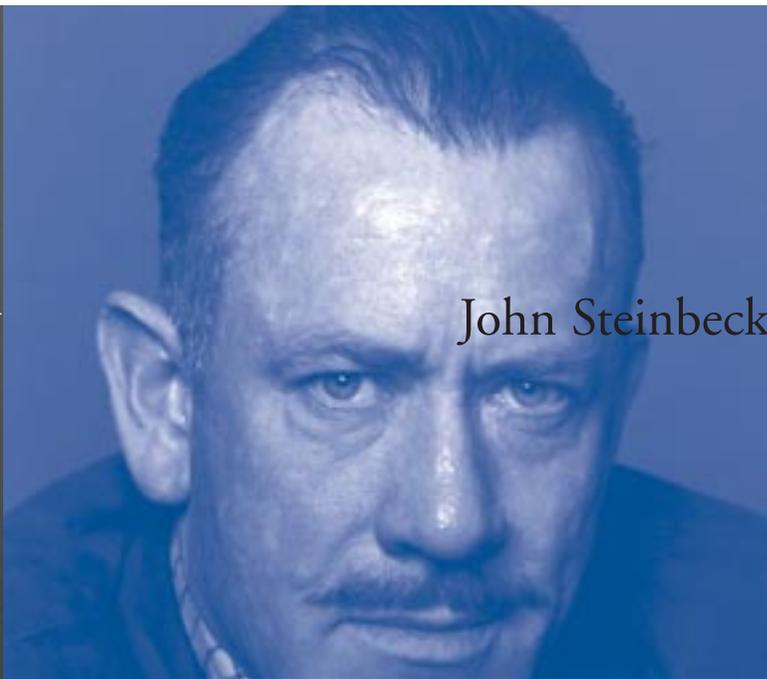


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*Woman of the High Plains, Texas Pan Handle, 1938.*  
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## Biography



## John Steinbeck



**John Steinbeck was born on February 27, 1902, in Salinas, Calif., to John Ernst II and Olive Hamilton Steinbeck. He lived much of his life in the surrounding region, the setting for a number of his most memorable books. As a young man he worked as a farm laborer, ranch hand and factory worker. These experiences lent authenticity to his depiction of the lives of the working people who are the central characters of his most important novels.**

Steinbeck attended Stanford University off and on between 1919 and 1925, but left before receiving a degree. Determined to establish himself as a writer, he traveled by freighter from Los Angeles to New York City, where he worked briefly as a journalist. In 1926 he returned to California and found employment as a caretaker for a Lake Tahoe estate.

His first novel, *Cup of Gold*, was published in 1929, and was followed by *The Pastures of Heaven* and *To a God Unknown*. *Tortilla Flat* (1935), his story of Monterey “paisanos,” brought Steinbeck his first commercial success. He received even greater acclaim for *Of Mice and Men* (1937), which became a best-seller and was adapted for the stage and film.

*Photo: John Steinbeck, 1953 by Philippe Halsman.  
Copyright Halsman Estate.*

In 1936 Steinbeck was asked by editors at the *San Francisco News* to write a series of articles on the condition of migrant farmers. Steinbeck bought an old bakery truck (he called it the “pie wagon”), converted it into a sort of mobile office, and traveled throughout California’s Central Valley, documenting the poverty and labor unrest he saw first-hand. At the government camp at Weedpatch, Steinbeck met Tom Collins, the camp director to whom the novel is dedicated and who served as a model for his character Jim Rawley.

What Steinbeck saw during this and additional visits moved and outraged him. He resolved to write a “big book” chronicling the suffering and oppression of the migrants. The result of his efforts was *The Grapes of Wrath*, for which he received the Pulitzer Prize in 1940. Later that year the book was adapted into a film directed by John Ford; that film is also considered a classic.

Steinbeck went on to write other notable works of fiction, including *Cannery Row* (1945), *The Pearl* (1947), *East of Eden* (1952) and the *Winter of Our Discontent* (1961). In addition to his novels, Steinbeck produced newspaper and travel articles, short stories, plays and film scripts. A major literary figure since the 1930s, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1962. He died in New York in 1968 at age 66.

# Time Line

1902

Born in Salinas, Calif., on February 27, the third child of John Ernst II and Olive Hamilton Steinbeck.

1919

Graduated from high school and attended Stanford intermittently for the next six years, but left before receiving a degree.

1925

Traveled by freighter from Los Angeles to New York City, where he worked briefly as a journalist.

1926

Returned to California and worked as a caretaker for a Lake Tahoe estate.

1930

*Cup of Gold*, his first novel, published, but sold poorly. Married Carol Henning (divorced in 1942).

1935

*Tortilla Flat*, his first commercial success, published.

1936

Wrote a series of articles for the *San Francisco News* about the plight of migrant farm workers.

1937

*Of Mice and Men* published; became a bestseller, while the stage version of the story won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award.

1939

*The Grapes of Wrath* was published and became an immediate best-seller.

1940

*The Grapes of Wrath* won the Pulitzer Prize. Steinbeck embarked on an expedition to the Gulf of California with his friend and marine biologist Edward Ricketts.

1941

Film versions of *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Of Mice and Men* released. *Sea of Cortez*, written with Edward Ricketts, published.

1943

Served as a war correspondent in England and North Africa for the *New York Herald Tribune*. Married Gwendolyn Conger (divorced in 1948).

1944

Birth of his first child, Thom.

1945

*Cannery Row* published.

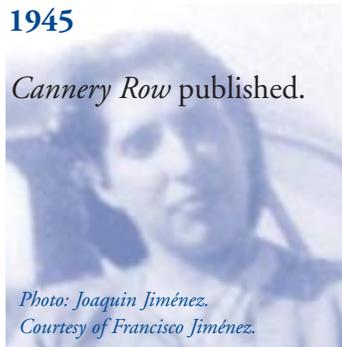


Photo: Joaquin Jiménez.  
Courtesy of Francisco Jiménez.

1946

Birth of John, his second child.

1947

*The Pearl* published.

1950

Married Elaine Scott.

1952

The book Steinbeck considered his most important, *East of Eden*, published.

1959

Traveled to England and Wales, researching background for a modern English version of Malory's *Morte d' Arthur* (1485).

1961

Published his last novel, *The Winter of Our Discontent*.

1962

*Travels With Charley*, a memoir of a cross-country trip with his poodle, was published.

1962

Awarded the Nobel Prize for literature.

1964

Presented with the U.S. Medal of Freedom by President Lyndon B. Johnson.

1968

Died on December 20 in New York City at age 66.

# Discussion Questions

## I. THE PLEASURES OF READING

“I don’t think *The Grapes of Wrath* is obscure in what it tries to say. ... It’s just a book, interesting I hope, instructive in the same way that writing instructed me. Its structure is very carefully worked out and it is no more intended to be inspected than is the skeletal structure of a pretty girl. Just read it. Don’t count it!” *John Steinbeck, February 5, 1955*

### Questions to consider

1. *The Grapes of Wrath* has been translated into more than 50 languages and remains one of the most widely read novels of all time. Why do you think the book has such a wide appeal?
2. In mentioning the California Stories: Reading *The Grapes of Wrath* project, ABC-TV commentator George Will quipped, “It is about the Joad family’s Depression-era trek from suffering in Oklahoma to more suffering in California. It is 600 depressing pages long. It will be good for what ails sunny California, which has an altogether too sunny view of life.” Did you find the book a depressing read? Do you think reading it might be “good for what ails” California? Why or why not?
3. Some 60 years ago *The Grapes of Wrath* was denounced as much for the language and earthy behavior of its characters as for its politics. What is your opinion of Steinbeck’s use of language in the book? Do his characters seem true to life?
4. Who are your favorite and least favorite characters? Why?
5. What parts of the book did you enjoy most? Least? Why?

## II. THE MIGRANTS’ TALE

According to Steinbeck biographer Jackson J. Benson, 300,000 to 400,000 Dust Bowl refugees came to California in the decade of the 1930s. This was, Benson writes, “an overwhelming number, considering that the total number of farm workers throughout the state prior to the influx was something over 200,000.” *The Grapes of Wrath* was widely praised for raising national and international awareness of the plight of Dust Bowl migrants. But its portrait of conditions on large Central Valley farms also angered many powerful Californians, who called the book a distortion of the truth.

### Questions to consider

1. What did the economic Depression of the 1930s and the natural disaster called the Dust Bowl mean for the Joads and other migrants to California? Have you or your family had similar experiences of economic depression or natural disaster? If so, what effects have these events had on your family and community?
2. What hopes, dreams and values helped the Joads during their journey to and through California?
3. Before the Joads cross the desert, they stop at a service station in Needles. Tom Joad tells the service-station boy, “It don’t take no nerve to do somepin when there ain’t nothin’ else you can do.” When the Joads leave, the boy comments to his helper, “Jesus, I’d hate to start out in a jalopy like that.” And the helper replies, “Well, you and me got sense. Them goddam Okies got no sense and no feeling. They ain’t human. A human being wouldn’t live like they do. A human being couldn’t stand it to be so dirty and miserable. They ain’t a hell of a lot better than gorillas.” The Joads believe they are doing what they have to do; the helper thinks they are acting out of ignorance and animal instinct. What is your reaction to Tom’s and the helper’s points of view? How would you respond to the helper’s statement? How widespread do you think these attitudes are today?
4. How important is it to you that *The Grapes of Wrath* focused only on Dust Bowl migrants? Do you think the Joads’ experiences are similar to the experiences of other groups of migrant laborers who came to California during the 1930s? How similar are the experiences of the Joads to the experiences of people who come to work in California today? Who do you think are the Joads of today?
5. The Joads’ California dream differs significantly from the reality they face when they arrive in California. How closely do present-day California dreams match reality?

### III. LANDSCAPE AND THE LAND

In *The Grapes of Wrath* and other early novels, Steinbeck writes vividly about nature and the land. Martha Heasley Cox, founder of the Center for Steinbeck Studies at San Jose State University, states that Steinbeck's "emphasis on environment and human values ... anticipated the concern with ecology and the 'greening of America'" that blossomed into the environmental movement some 30 years after the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath*.

#### Questions to consider

1. In Chapter 3, Steinbeck describes a turtle crossing the road. What do you think this description means?
2. *The Grapes of Wrath* begins in drought and ends in flood. How do natural disasters change the economic climate for the Joads? Which do you think is more important in determining the fate of the Joads, natural forces or human actions?
3. Grandpa Joad dies just after he leaves his home near Sallisaw, Okla., because he's no longer connected to his land. Throughout the rest of the story, Steinbeck points out the differences between people who live on the land and people who do not live on the land. What do these differences mean to you? How important do you think such differences are today?
4. In Chapters 19, 21 and 25, Steinbeck describes the history of landownership in California and the effects of that history on farmers and farm workers. What do you think about Steinbeck's description? Do you agree with him? What impact do landownership patterns have on your neighborhood and community?



Japanese-American farmer in the Fresno area, ca 1920. Courtesy of Fresno County Free Library.

### IV. POLITICS AND SOCIETY

In 1946 critic Edwin Berry Burgum wrote of *The Grapes of Wrath*, "The novel is more than a reflection of the democratic spirit in America. ... It sets the pattern of enlightenment which has instigated the movements of independence in Africa, in Java, in China, in Burma, indeed in all places where people of good intent are oppressed by poverty."

#### Questions to consider

1. The title *The Grapes of Wrath* comes from the great Civil War anthem, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," which was written during another period of great social and political upheaval in U.S. history. For the first edition of his novel, Steinbeck insisted that all the lyrics of the song be included in the book. Why do you imagine this was so important?
2. When the Joads arrive at the government camp at Weedpatch, Tom Joad exclaims, "Well, for Christ sake why ain't they more places like this?" How would you answer Tom's question?
3. The Joads leave Weedpatch and head north to find work. They end up in a labor camp run by one of the growers. What are the differences between the grower's camp and the government camp? What do these differences suggest to you about basic issues of democracy and self-government? What other issues do the descriptions of the two camps raise for you?
4. Early in the novel, Ma Joad tells Jim Casy that he shouldn't help salt the fresh pork because it's women's work. Casy says, "It's all work ... They's too much of it to split up to men's or women's work." What does *The Grapes of Wrath* have to say about the roles of men and women?
5. Near the end of the novel, Ma and Tom have a final meeting by the stream. Tom says he has been thinking about what Jim Casy said and repeats it to Ma: "Again, if two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm alone? And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him, and a three-fold cord is not quickly broken." What do you think Tom has learned from Casy? What do you think this has to do with what Edwin Burgum (above) calls "the pattern of enlightenment"?



Filipino contractor taking a crew of field workers to a ranch from Stockton.  
Photo by J. J. Billones. Courtesy of Bank of Stockton.

## V. THE NOVEL'S MORAL UNIVERSE

Throughout his life, Steinbeck was concerned with justice, empathy and understanding. He destroyed an early novel about the conditions he later portrayed so movingly in *The Grapes of Wrath* because, as he wrote, “My whole work drive has been aimed at making people understand each other and then I deliberately write this book, the aim of which is to cause hatred through partial understanding.” In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, he said, “The ancient commission of the writer has not changed. He is charged with exposing our many grievous faults and failures, with dredging up to the light our dark and dangerous dreams for the purpose of improvement.”

## Questions to consider

1. When we first meet Tom Joad, he has just been released from prison, where he served time for murder. Why do you think the novel's central character is an ex-con? Is Tom Joad justified in killing Jim Casy's killer near the end of the novel? Why or why not? Do you think Tom Joad grows or fails to grow by the end of the story?
2. What do you think about Jim Casy's statement: “Maybe all men got one big soul everybody's a part of”?
3. Muley Graves says, “if a fella's got somepin to eat an' another fella's hungry—why, the first fella ain't got no choice.” But the caterpillar driver Willy Free tells Muley, “Fust an' on'y thing I got to think about is my own folks. “What happens to other folks is their look-out.” How do the Joads balance their responsibilities for family members with their feeling of responsibility for others in need? How do you balance family responsibilities with responsibilities to your neighbors and community?
4. Near the end of the novel, Ma Joad tells the clerk at the company store, “I'm learnin' one thing good. Learnin' it all a time, ever'day. If you're in trouble or hurt or need—go to poor people. They're the only ones that'll help—the only ones.” What leads Ma Joad to believe this? Do you agree with her?
5. Steinbeck's editor strongly urged him to change the final scene of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Steinbeck refused. He believed the ending was an integral part of the novel's design and that the action itself “must be an accident, it must be a stranger, and it must be quick.” What do you think about Rose of Sharon giving her breast to the starving stranger? What is the meaning of this act? Is this a satisfying ending for *The Grapes of Wrath*?

## Sources used in preparing this guide

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- Burgum, Edwin Berry. "The Sensibility of John Steinbeck." In *Steinbeck and His Critics*, edited by E.W. Tedlock Jr and C.V. Wicker. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1957.
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- Lisca, Peter. *The Wide World of John Steinbeck*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1958.
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- Shillinglaw, Susan. Unpublished notes for a discussion guide for *The Grapes of Wrath*.
- Steinbeck, John. *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters*. Edited by Elaine Steinbeck and Robert Wallsten. New York: The Viking Press, 1975.

## Other *Grapes of Wrath* discussion guides

- The Great Books Foundation  
[www.greatbooks.org/library/guides/steinbeck.shtml](http://www.greatbooks.org/library/guides/steinbeck.shtml)
- PinkMonkey Book Notes  
[www.pinkmonkey.com/booknotes/barrons/grpswth.asp](http://www.pinkmonkey.com/booknotes/barrons/grpswth.asp)
- Classic Notes  
[www.classicnote.com/ClassicNotes/Titles/grapeswrath/](http://www.classicnote.com/ClassicNotes/Titles/grapeswrath/)

## For further reading

- Fiction  
[www.californiastories.org/programs/grapes\\_companion\\_fiction.htm](http://www.californiastories.org/programs/grapes_companion_fiction.htm)

- Nonfiction  
[www.californiastories.org/programs/grapes\\_companion\\_nonfiction.htm](http://www.californiastories.org/programs/grapes_companion_nonfiction.htm)
- Children's books  
[www.californiastories.org/programs/grapes\\_companion\\_children.htm](http://www.californiastories.org/programs/grapes_companion_children.htm)

## Resource for middle school and high school teachers

- Teaching material  
[www.socialstudies.com/c/@LoPcRGNKMTYeA/Pages/grapes.html](http://www.socialstudies.com/c/@LoPcRGNKMTYeA/Pages/grapes.html)

## The Grapes of Web: A Digital Companion to Reading *The Grapes of Wrath*:

- A constellation of freely accessible web resources  
[lii.org/TGOW](http://lii.org/TGOW)

## Other resources

- Films  
[www.californiastories.org/programs/grapes\\_companion\\_film.htm](http://www.californiastories.org/programs/grapes_companion_film.htm)
- Music  
[www.californiastories.org/programs/grapes\\_companion\\_music.htm](http://www.californiastories.org/programs/grapes_companion_music.htm)
- Audiobook  
[www.californiastories.org/programs/grapes\\_companion\\_audiobook.htm](http://www.californiastories.org/programs/grapes_companion_audiobook.htm)

## Information about California Stories: Reading *The Grapes of Wrath*

- California Council for the Humanities  
[www.californiastories.org](http://www.californiastories.org)
- California Center for the Book  
[www.calbook.org](http://www.calbook.org)

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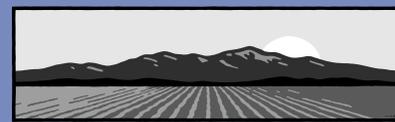
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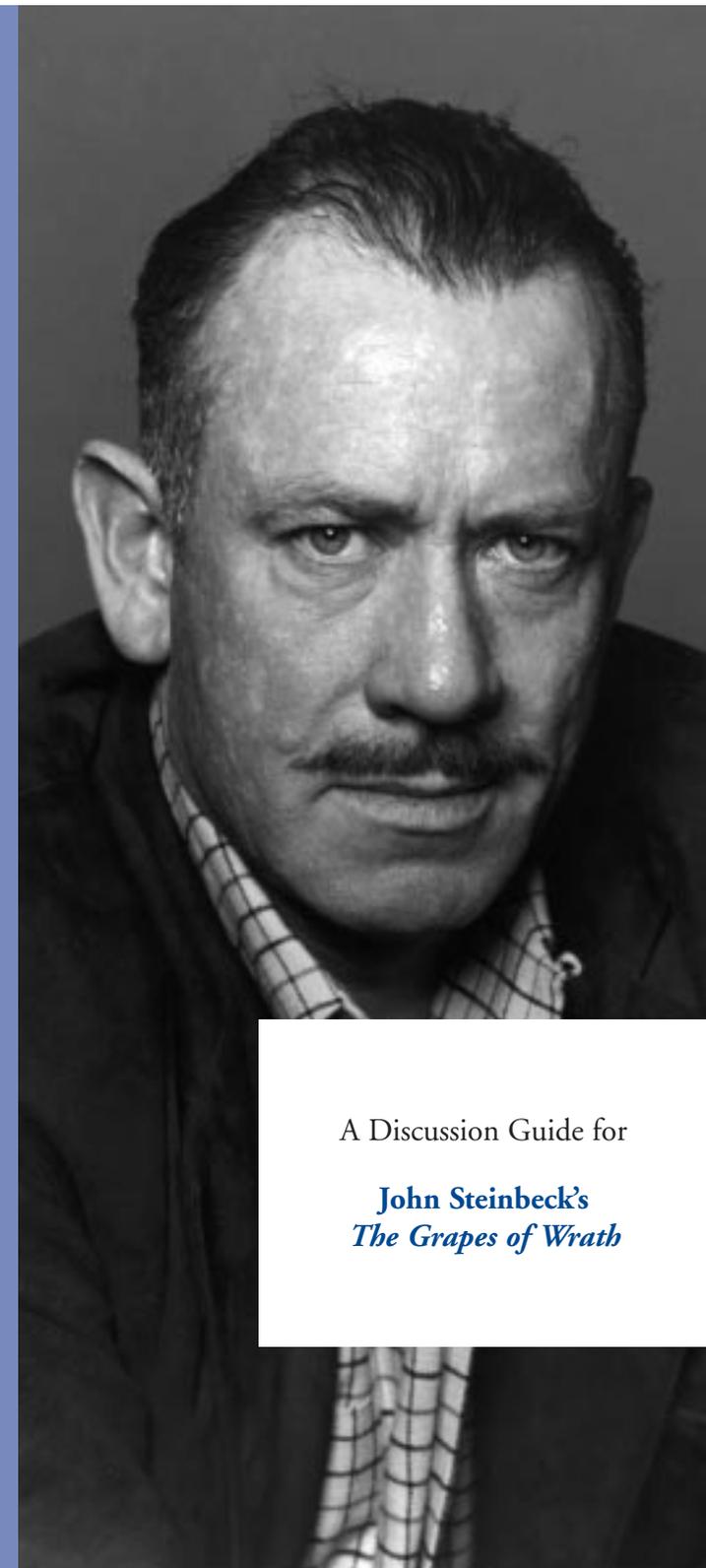
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A Discussion Guide for

**John Steinbeck's  
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