Discussion Topics and Writing Prompts

There are many topics to discuss and write about throughout the novel. Below are some key topics to use as discussion starters, journal prompts, or short essays.

* Chapter 1
  + Steinbeck’s descriptive style (opening a novel with a description of the environment is a method he often used).
  + Causes of the Dust Bowl
  + What is the tone and the mood of this chapter?
  + Does this chapter create a feeling of hope or of despair?
* Chapter 2
  + How did the truck skinner know Tom had just gotten out of prison?
  + How did Tom know what the truck skinner was asking about?
  + What kinds of impressions do you have about the two men?
    - Like, dislike, trust, etc.?
  + How does Steinbeck compare the two men? How does he create sympathy and/or empathy towards them? Between them?
* Chapter 3
  + What does the turtle symbolize?
    - Revisit this topic after the Joad family is on the move.
  + Why does Steinbeck use a turtle for this scene?
  + Why include this scene?
  + What symbols can you identify in this chapter?
* Chapter 4
  + How do you feel about Tom?
  + How do you feel about Casy?
  + Should Tom feel ashamed of his crime? Why/why not?
  + Is prison for punishment or reform?
  + What is sin? Are there things that are good and things that are bad?
  + Do you agree with Casy’s idea of sin?
  + Tom leaves the road, each step he drifts back into his old life. How does Steinbeck show this?
* Chapter 5
  + What makes someone part of the land?
  + The tractor driver says only look after yourself and your family (37), do you agree? Disagree?
  + The tractor driver says times have changed and the farmer needs to move on (37). How do you feel about this? Do you agree? Disagree?
  + How do you feel about the tractor driver?
  + Should the farmer get to keep his land and his home?
  + Why is this scene in the book? Predict what will happen in the next chapter.
  + How does this scene connect to other economic crises?
  + What happens if the farmer does shoot at the tractor driver?
  + Discuss, create and act out a scene, or write dialogue that follows the last lines of the chapter. How do the farmer, his wife, and his children react? How do they feel?
* Chapter 6
  + Memory and the land
    - Personal examples of your connection to the land.
    - Connection to the land, being part of the land is a recurring theme in many of Steinbeck’s works. Do you believe this concept is as important today as Steinbeck felt is was? Explain.
  + What does Casy think Muley “..got a-holt of…” (49)?
  + Muley talks about Willy Feeley (55). What is the message of that paragraph? Do you agree with Muley? Explain.
    - Try to see things from Willy’s perspective.
    - What themes does this passage touch on?
* Chapter 7
  + How does this chapter compare with stereotypes of salespeople today?
  + What is this chapter foreshadowing?
  + Predict what will happen in the next chapter.
  + Compare and contrast the car salesman with the tractor driver in chapter 5 and with Willy Feeley in chapter 6.
  + “I don’t give a damn if you don’t make payments. We ain’t got your paper” (65). What does the salesman mean?
    - Connect this with the mortgage crisis in 2008
* Chapter 8
  + Predict what happens to Muley after the Joad family leaves.
  + Write a narrative about what happens to Muley after the Joad family leaves.
  + Compare the family members:
    - Ma and Granma
    - Pa and Grampa
    - Ma and Pa
  + Ma does not have a name. Why?
    - This is a recurring discussion topic. As the students get to know Ma, their opinion may change.
    - Steinbeck does this in other novels as well. Curley’s Wife in *Of Mice and Men*, Mrs. Tifflin in *The Red Pony*.
  + “If we was all mad the same way, Tomm – they wouldn’t hunt nobody down –” (77).
    - What is Ma suggesting?
    - How do you think different people reacted to this in the 1930s. Consider:
      * Migrants
      * Small farmers
      * Growers associations
      * Californians (in contrast to the “Oakies”)
      * Government officials
    - Predict: is this foreshadowing some later events?
    - This is a recurring theme. Return to this passage later in the novel when similar statements are made, especially chapter 26.
* Chapter 9
  + Do men and women think/feel differently about the past?
  + Why are prices so low when the farmers sell their possessions?
  + If you had to take only necessities, what would you leave behind and how would that affect you?
    - If students have read *Farwell to Manzanar*, there is a similar scene when Mama is choosing what to pack when they are being forced to head to the camp.
    - Compare and contrast what the women consider and what the men consider in deciding what stays and what they bring.
    - “How can we live without our lives? How will we know it’s us without our past?” (88).
      * What does Ma mean by this?
      * What defines someone’s life? What defines your life?
      * Pair this with the Identity Charts activity.
* Chapter 10
  + Compare and contrast how each character handles leaving.
  + Discuss personal experiences of moving, leavings, or moving on.
  + “They were afraid, now that the time had come – afraid in the same way Grampa was afraid” (112). Explain. What are they afraid of?
  + Modern conveniences and appliances are not seen in chapter 10. How much different were the lives of the Joad family compared to our lives today?
    - Consider this: there are homeless people who still have a cell phone.
  + Why did Ma burn the box of keepsakes/memories (108)?
    - If students have read *Farwell to Manzanar*, there is a similar scene when Mama is choosing what to pack when they are being forced to head to the camp. Additionally, are Ma Joad’s actions similar to when Papa burned his Japanese flag and papers?
* Chapter 11
  + What is Steinbeck saying about Muley by using similar descriptions of the life of abandoned cats (116)?
* Chapter 12
  + “Wrecks along the road, abandoned. Well, what happened to them? What happened to the folks in the car? Did they walk? Where are they? Where does the courage come from? Where does the terrible faith come from?” (122).
    - Speculate on what happened to the people who abandoned their cars.
  + Interstate commerce an emigration.
    - What are the laws?
    - Why did Los Angeles police patrol the California borders?
    - Was this legal?
    - Do you agree with their actions?
    - Do you feel the same about the Border Patrol at our international borders?
  + Steinbeck considered this chapter the first in the second part of the novel. In *Working Days* Steinbeck wrote “…the first general and it must have the meat of the whole second volume in it” (37)?
    - Why was this chapter so important?
    - What themes, ideas, feelings, etc. is Steinbeck trying to get across?
    - Predict what will happen in the coming chapters.
* Chapter 13
  + In *Working Days*, Steinbeck says that the characters “…must be an over-essence of people…” (39).
    - What does he mean?
    - Why does he need the characters to be like this?
    - Does he succeed? How does this affect the story?
  + In *Working Days*, Steinbeck says that the Joad family’s first communication with other migrants is “very important” (39).
    - Why is this scene so important?
    - What do you see as important in their communication and interactions with the Wilson family?
  + Casy says “But they’s somepin worse’n the devil go hold a the country, an’ it ain’t gonna let go till it’s chopped loose” (129).
    - What do you think Casy is referring to?
    - Is Casy anti-capitalist? Is he anti-American?
      * How do you think different people reacted to this in the 1930s. Consider:
        + Migrants
        + Small farmers
        + Growers associations
        + Californians (in contrast to the “Oakies”)
        + Government officials
      * How do you think different people would react to this statement today?
  + What are your feelings/impressions of Rose of Sharon? Of Connie?
  + Compare and contrast the Wilsons, the fat man, and the salesman.
  + Discuss Casy’s prayer on page 144.
    - What is Steinbeck’s message in this prayer?
    - What do you think about Casy’s message?
  + Why did Grampa die?
    - Would he have died if he had stayed home?
    - Did the conditions of the trip kill him?
* Chapter 14
  + Why was there fear of and resistance to the New deal?
  + “For man, unlike any other thing organic or inorganic in the universe, grows beyond his work, walks up the stairs of his concepts, emerges ahead of his accomplishments” (150).
    - Do you agree with this idea?
    - Is this a positive or negative trait?
  + What does Steinbeck mean when he writes “results, not causes” (150, 152)? Do you agree?
  + Discuss the idea of “from I to We.” This is a big theme in the novel (and part of the Five Layers).
    - What does Steinbeck mean?
    - How do you think different people reacted to this in the 1930s. Consider:
      * Migrants
      * Small farmers
      * Growers associations
      * Californians (in contrast to the “Oakies”)
      * Government officials
    - How do you think different people would react to this statement today?
  + How was the social unrest of the Great Depression similar to that of the Great Recession of the early 2000s?
    - Think about unions, protests, Occupy Wall Street, the 99%, etc.
* Chapter 15
  + How are the different economic and social classes portrayed?
    - Blue collar
    - White collar
    - Farmers
    - Poor
  + Why are truck drivers so great?
  + Which classes approve of FDR? Why?
  + What is the fat man in the car worried about?
  + At the top of page 158 Steinbeck writes about how a nickel “…has actually done a job of work…” unlike most other money.
    - What is he alluding to?
    - What is he placing more value on?
  + “…an’ after them shitheels” (161).
    - Does this erase the compassion that Mae showed?
* Chapter 16
  + Who is more a preacher: Casy or Tom?
  + Compare Ma and Rose (164-165).
  + Ma’s revolt: “She was the power. She had taken control” (169).
    - Is this true?
    - Or had Ma always been in control?
    - Predict: is this a turning point in the novel?
    - Do you agree with Ma?
  + Compare Casy’s method and Tom’s method. Climbing fences vs. putting one foot in front of the other (174, 176-177).
  + Was Tom cruel to the man at the wrecking yard?
    - What message is Tom trying to get across?
  + Compare California dreams: Connie & Rose vs. Ma & the Family.
    - Later, after Al begins to discuss his own ideas, separate Al from the family and return to this discussion.
* Chapter 17
  + Steinbeck describes a social structure that is being built and rebuilt as the migrants move west. Describe/summarize the process.
    - How do you think Steinbeck feels about rules, laws, and governments based on this chapter?
    - How do you think different people reacted to this in the 1930s. Consider:
      * Migrants
      * Small farmers
      * Growers associations
      * Californians (in contrast to the “Oakies”)
      * Government officials
    - How do you think different people would react to this statement today?
  + What is ostracism? Do you agree with Steinbeck that ostracism is worse than fighting (194)?
* Chapter 18
  + Compare California as the Joad family had hoped it would be versus what the men in the river describe (204-208).
  + Why does Noah leave (208-209)? Why does Tom not try to stop him?
    - If keeping the family together were so important (think of Ma’s revolt in Chapter 16), then why didn’t she make the family look for Noah?
  + Write about what happens to Noah after he leaves the family.
  + Ma’s description of life, death, and birth (209-210).
  + What do you think of Ma’s reaction to the sheriff (213-214)? Do you agree with her actions? What, if anything, could she have done differently?
  + Is Tom becoming the leader of the family?
  + “We ain’t never been dirty like this. Don’t even wash potatoes ‘fore we boil ‘em” (217).
    - What is the importance of this statement and the image it creates? How does it compare to what people said and thought of “Oakies?”
    - Return to this idea in chapter 22.
  + What is courage (221)?
  + Compare the description of the land on pages 221-222 with the description on page 227.
    - Why does Steinbeck create such an image of hope on page 227 and then immediately follow it with the news of Granma?
    - Which is stronger in the Joad family? Hope or despair?
  + “Casy said gently, ‘Sure I got sins. Ever’body got sins. A sin is somepin you ain’t sure about” (224).
    - What does Casy mean?
    - Do you agree?
    - What do you think about “Them people that’s sure about ever’thing an’ ain’t got no sin…” (224)?
      * How do you think readers at the time reacted to this idea?
  + Write about what happens to the Wilsons after the Joad family leaves.
* Chapter 19
  + Is Steinbeck calling for a revolution?
  + Is Steinbeck anti-capitalist? Is he a socialist? A communist?
  + How do you think different people reacted to this in the 1930s. Consider:
    - Migrants
    - Small farmers
    - Growers associations
    - Californians (in contrast to the “Oakies”)
    - Government officials
  + How do you think different people would react to this chapter today?
  + Why was there no revolution by nonwhites?
  + Why did socialism not develop and take hold in the United States as it did in parts of Europe?
  + Was there a revolution as Steinbeck predicted? Was there a different kind of revolution?
* Chapter 20
  + Read the descriptions of the different camp sites near the river (241-242). How does this compare to the migrant life the Joad family has endured thus far?
    - Why are the two different campsites different? What causes one to be worse than the other?
    - Extension: read chapter 2 of *The Harvest Gypsies*. Discuss the causes and effects found in the chapter.
  + How does Steinbeck build tension in this chapter?
  + In what ways are people held back? Held down?
    - Examples: division, vagrancy laws, greed, wage exploitation, abuse of power by police
  + Why did Casy have “…a look of conquest” (267)?
  + Do you agree with what Casy did? Was it a good thing? A bad thing?
  + Why does Connie leave? What are your feelings on this?
    - Predict/write: What happens to Connie after he leaves the family?
  + Why does Tom lie to Rose about Connie (277)?
    - What do you think about this? Was it a good or bad thing to do?
  + Tom complains “They’re a-workin’ away at our spirits… They’re workin’ on our decency” (278-279).
    - Who are “they?”
    - How are “they” working on the spirits and decency of people like the Joad family?
    - Extension: read chapter 4 of *The Harvest Gypsies* where Steinbeck talks about dignity. How does his definition of dignity apply to this passage?
  + Did Connie betray the family when he left? What about Noah? Casy?
  + Write a scene where Casy is in jail. What happens to him? Does any of the advice Tom gave him about prison help?
  + Extension: for a different perspective of “Reds” and violence, read Steinbeck’s short story “The Raid” in *The Long Valley*.
* Chapter 21
  + Compare the fear of “Oakies” with the fear of illegal immigrants today.
* Chapter 22
  + What makes everyone in Weedpatch camp so kind?
  + Timothy and Wilkie Wallace help Tom get a job (293). Why do they do this? Should they have?
  + “There’s always red agitators just before a pay cut” (295).
  + “Those folks in the camp are getting used to being treated like humans. When they go back to the squatters camps they’ll be hard to handle” (296).
  + Tom’s pride when working. How does this compare to FDR’s ideas about the WPA and the New Deal?
  + Read the third paragraph on 298 which culminates with Timothy saying “…we’re all reds.”
    - Why does Steinbeck include this scene?
    - What is his message?
    - How do you think different people reacted to this in the 1930s. Consider:
      * Migrants
      * Small farmers
      * Growers associations
      * Californians (in contrast to the “Oakies”)
      * Government officials
    - How do you think different people would react to this passage today?
  + The life of the poor and farmers in the 1930s. The Joad family had never seen a modern flush toilet before!
  + “The Committees are good in this camp because they do know” (305).
    - What does this mean?
    - How does this connect to chapter 17?
  + The importance of appearance. Ma wants the family washed and looking as good as possible. Why?
    - How does this connect to what she said in chapter 18 about the family being dirty?
  + What does Steinbeck think about government?
  + What are the different sources of dignity shown in this chapter?
  + What is the difference between charity and the poor helping each other? Why is one bad and the other good?
  + The Protestant work ethic vs. charity and failure.
  + Extension: In *Working Days* (70) Steinbeck says “I want to show how valuable Ma is to society – and what a waste there is.”
    - What is Ma’s value? How does Steinbeck show this?
    - What is the “waste?”
  + Extension: Read “Breakfast” in *The Long Valley*.
    - How does this compare to the scene on page 289 when Tom joins the Wallace family for breakfast?
      * Note: the scene on page 289 is a rewrite of “Breakfast.”
    - How does this compare to the scene on page 192 in the roadside camp?
  + Extension: Read pages 51-55 in *Travels with Charley*.
    - How does this scene compare with the breakfast scene in *The Grapes of Wrath* (289)?
  + Extension: Read pages 66-69 in *Travels with Charley*.
    - Compare Steinbeck’s views on government to his commentary on government and governing in Weedpatch camp (and outside of it).
* Chapter 23
  + How important is music and entertainment?
  + Even though the country was in the Great Depression, people still went to the movies, still held dances, and still listened to popular music.
    - Go deeper into this idea with the activity Period Music
* Chapter 24
  + Arming and organizing the people (345). What are your thoughts on this?
    - Is this a dangerous, revolutionary idea?
    - How do you think different people reacted to this in the 1930s. Consider:
      * Migrants
      * Small farmers
      * Growers associations
      * Californians (in contrast to the “Oakies”)
      * Government officials
    - How do you think different people would react to this passage today?
      * How does this idea compare to the idea of “open carry” states? With militias?
  + “I been thinkin’ maybe we ought to git up a turkey shootin’ club an’ have meetin’s ever’ Sunday” (345).
    - How do you think different people reacted to this in the 1930s. Consider:
      * Migrants
      * Small farmers
      * Growers associations
      * Californians (in contrast to the “Oakies”)
      * Government officials
    - How do you think different people would react to this passage today?
      * How does this idea compare to the idea of “open carry” states? With militias?
    - Compare this to the Black Panthers, militias, and the NRA.
    - What if these same statements were made, not by poor white people, but by nonwhites?
* Chapter 25
  + “In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage” (349).
    - Why does Steinbeck call the novel *The Grapes of Wrath*.
      * Note: It was named by his first wife, Carol, after a line in “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.”
    - What is the message Steinbeck is sending with the title of the book?
    - Why is the title of the novel revealed in the narration itself?
* Chapter 26
  + “Every’thing you do is more’n you” (353).
    - What does Ma mean by this?
    - Do you agree with her?
  + “Horse is a hell of a lot more worth than a man” (358).
    - This is an important concept throughout the novel.
  + “Learnin’ it all the 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” (376).
    - Ma is finding this to be true. But is it true in the real world?
    - What is the overall message of this statement?
  + Casy and his new calling – to lead the people, to lead strikes.
  + “Jus’ goin’, an’ getting’ goddamn sick of it” (402).
    - What does Al mean here?
    - Predict what happens in the following chapters
  + “It’s need that makes all the trouble” (382). Casy tries to explain to Tom something he has figured out. What is he trying to say? What has he learned?
  + Casy compares his journey to that of Jesus (381). Is this inspirational, or blasphemous?
    - How do you think different people reacted to this in the 1930s. Consider:
      * Migrants
      * Small farmers
      * Growers associations
      * Californians (in contrast to the “Oakies”)
      * Government officials
    - How do you think different people would react to this passage today?
  + “Gives ya a funny feelin’ to be hunted like. I’m getting’ mean” (403).
    - Ma says this. Who in the novel would you have expected to make this statement?
    - Is it more important or does it make a stronger impact being said by Ma?
  + What are Casy’s religious, spiritual, and social influences?
    - Christianity, Buddhism, socialism.
  + Extension: Read “The Raid” in *The Long Valley*. Compare this to the attack on Casy’s group and the way the gate guards talk (377-378, 381-387).
  + Extension: Read about company camps in *The Harvest Gypsies* (chapter 3).
* Chapter 27
  + California dream of working, buying a piece of land, and farming versus the reality of saving for winter and facing months of no work.
  + How have the hopes and expectations changed up to this point in the novel?
  + Predict: What do you think will happen to the Joad family in the next chapters?
* Chapter 28
  + How and why did Ma become the leader of the family? Or was she always the leader?
  + Tom’s speech on page 419 is one of the most famous passages in the novel. Is this speech the peak pinnacle of the story?
    - What other powerful speeches and moments in the book compare?
  + Ma talks to Pa about how women and men handle change differently (423). Do you agree? What are your thoughts on this?
  + This chapter began with hope. How does it end?
  + How does Steinbeck change the pacing and create tension in this chapter?
  + Why does Rose of Sharon react the way she does to hearing about Al and Aggie?
    - Discuss this further after completing the novel.
* Chapter 29
  + Once again Steinbeck returns to a scene where the women are watching the men to see if they break (434-435). Compare this to the original scene on pages 3 and 4.
    - Compare the conclusions of each scene. In both scenes the women remain unbroken, but the reasons are different.
    - As the reader, are you left with hope or despair at this point?
  + Extension: In *Working Days* Steinbeck writes of this chapter “The last general must be a summing of the whole thing. Group survival” (88).
    - Does chapter 29 accomplish this goal?
    - Is it an effective summary?
  + Predict: How will the novel end?
* Chapter 30
  + Is Pa to blame for the family being stuck?
  + Did Rose of Sharon know that she was going to lose the baby?
  + Uncle John sends to set the baby’s body into an apple box and floated it down stream (448).
    - This is a graphic scene. What is Steinbeck trying to accomplish with it?
    - Do you agree with what Uncle John did? Is he sending a message? Is he doing something cowardly? Mean?
  + Write/Predict: What happened to Tom? He is never mentioned after Ma left him in his hiding place.
  + The last words of the novel describe Rose of Sharon as she nursed the starving man. “She looked up and across the barn, and her lips came together and smiled mysteriously” (455).
    - What are your thoughts on this ending? On this scene?
    - What does it mean that she “smiled mysteriously?”
  + Steinbeck insisted that the ending to the novel not be changed, he refused to alter it. He insisted that the dying man be a stranger and that he be an anonymous character.
    - Why? Why is the man a stranger? Why end the novel in this way?
  + Compose a newspaper article, letter, journal entry, poem, or song about the flooding.
  + Write your own general chapter to end the novel. Does it end in hope or despair.
  + Extension: Dive deeper into the ending by reading Steinbeck’s letter to his publisher Pascal Covici (*Life in Letters*, 178-179).
    - “I’ve done my damndest to rip the reader’s nerves to rags, I don’t want him satisfied.”
    - “…I tried to write this book the way lives are being lived not the way books are written.”
    - Do you think Steinbeck achieved these aims?
* Cumulative
  + Does the novel end with hope, or despair?
  + *The Grapes of Wrath* was banned in Kern County, California (where the Joad family spend their time once reaching California).
    - Why was the novel banned?
    - What particular themes, scenes, or ideas may have prompted the banning?  
      Who wanted the book banned?
  + How does Steinbeck treat Oakies in the novel?
    - Some people complain that they are treated poorly, as if they are stupid.
    - Some people claim that they are the true heroes of the book.
  + Is *The Grapes of Wrath* still relevant today?
    - Why or why not?
    - Have working conditions changed?
  + *The Grapes of Wrath* warns that change is coming – revolution perhaps.
    - Did change come? Was it revolutionary (even if it was not a revolution)?
  + Why read *The Grapes of Wrath* today?