Socratic Seminar for Grapes of Wrath

Purpose: This activity serves as a final check-up to make certain students understand varying characters’ perspectives, literary strategies employed by the author, and larger or overarching ideas, issues, and themes presented throughout the novel. Through utilizing a Socratic seminar at the end of the novel, students will be able to bridge ideas, make connections among activities and discussions, and express closing thoughts and sentiments regarding the text. Students may refer to their list of discussion questions they prepared for homework during the seminar. Students will choose at least five questions/topics they are interested in from the following list and note their thoughts or additional questions they have regarding these topics.

1. Steinbeck admired the poor migrants and believed that from their enduring qualities would grow “a new system and a new life which will be better than anything we have had before.” Was he right? What kinds of changes have come about because of the suffering of those migrants of the 30’s? In our society today, what similar problems exist? What problems in recent (or past) times have been exposed by writers as Steinbeck did in The Grapes of Wrath?

2. What is the effect of the “intercalary” chapters that come between the narrative about the Joads? How would the elimination of those chapters affect the meaning and impact of the novel?

3. Identify as many direct Biblical references, allusions, or parallels as you can. Discuss their meaning and their effectiveness in the novel.

4. Socioeconomic views in the novel seem to be based on ideas of Marx and Lenin and other socialist thinkers. Yet, the novel also seems to advocate “the American Dream,” the principle of democracy, the pioneer spirit of endurance, the will to forge ahead and succeed. How do you reconcile these two views? What point does Steinbeck seem to be making to Americans of all socioeconomic groups?

5. The political implications of this novel have been strongly attacked. In what ways is the novel a criticism of capitalism? Does the novel advocate communism or socialism? Defend your opinions with evidence from the novel.

6. Steinbeck wrote to his editor about this novel: “I’ve done my damndest to rip reader’s nerves to rags; I don’t want him satisfied.” Did he succeed in doing that to you? If so, how did he accomplish it? If not, why weren’t you affected in that way?

7. Why did Steinbeck stop the story with the scene in the barn?

8. Why is the book titled The Grapes of Wrath?

Questions for Socratic seminar adapted from Barb Johnson, teacher
9. What is the meaning of the following symbols: dust, turtle, grapes, Jim Casy, Rose of Sharon.

10. What does this novel indicate about gender issues? What is the nature of male/female relationships? What seems to be Steinbeck’s view of the nature and role of women in society?

11. "The Grapes of Wrath is not a story told for its own sake, or to give pleasure to its hearers; it is a book written with a specific social purpose, and every aspect of the book is wholly devoted to that purpose" (source unknown). What is the social purpose? How does Steinbeck specifically address and accomplish this purpose?