

Name _____ Date _____

John Steinbeck

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. b'

The Dust Bowl was a period in the 1930s when droughts ravaged the south-central United States. It was named for the intense dust storms that resulted from long periods without rain. Soil erosion from farming created the conditions in which huge dust storms some as tall as a mile, and as wide as several hundred miles to form. This led to a drastic decrease in crop output, greatly reducing farmers' profits and quality of life. At the same time, the Great Depression upended the American economy, further worsening conditions in the region. Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* explores this setting, evoking the desolation and suffering of the Joad family as they flee Oklahoma for California.

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2. b'

The term *naturalism* describes a literary and artistic movement that held a strong belief in the influence of nature on human behavior. It began in France in the late 19th century, popularized in an essay by Émile Zola. A second wave, American Naturalism, began in the early 20th century. In naturalist literature, characters behave in accordance with what the authors viewed as natural impulses, often coming into conflict with the order of human society. For example, a pampered house dog transforms into a wild beast in Jack London's *The Call of the Wild*. Scholars do not always agree about whether John Steinbeck belonged fully to literary naturalism, but *The Grapes of Wrath* does contain elements of naturalism. In the novel, powerful naturalistic forces, such as the Dust Bowl and mighty floods, influence the conflict and characterization.

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3. b'

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In writing *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck blamed corporate greed for the harsh conditions farmers faced in the Dust Bowl and in their migration to find other work. He celebrated the way workers banded together in spite of their mistreatment. Through the hardships they experience, the Joads find their way by trusting one another and their fellow workers, presenting the importance of community and collective action as a major theme. They have frequent clashes with police and other members of authority, who embody the corporate rule that Steinbeck criticizes. These authorities persecute the novel's characters for organizing strikes and asking for guaranteed wages, representing how corporate greed undermines workers' rights.

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