

## Teaching “The Harvest Gypsies” by John Steinbeck

### **Overview of text:**

In 1936, John Steinbeck published a series of articles on the plight of migrant farmworkers in California. Three years later, he would publish *The Grapes of Wrath*, tackling many of the themes and observations from his time spent researching the articles, now collectively known as “The Harvest Gypsies.” These seven articles by John Steinbeck can be found re-published in the book *The Harvest Gypsies: On the Road to The Grapes of Wrath* published by Heyday Books with a 1988 introduction by Charles Wollenberg and accompanying photographs by Dorothea Lange. They are also available online and several pieces are available in Penguin’s collection of his non-fiction *America and Americans* (2003).

### **Curricular connections:**

While “The Harvest Gypsies” most easily fits in with a study of *The Grapes of Wrath*, many of these articles could be used as a non-fiction counterpoint for any literary or historical study of the time period (such as Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*) or in a study of memoirs that revolve around some the themes presented. As stand-alone pieces, “The Harvest Gypsies” not only demonstrate the clear writing style for which Steinbeck is known but also reveal both empathy and a call-to-action by the American public. As Wollenberg writes in his introduction,

Steinbeck’s depiction of extreme poverty is not without relevance today. In his time, homelessness and despair existed within the larger context of the Depression, and the general public was, for a while at least, genuinely touched by the suffering of migrants. In our time, prosperous Americans seem all too willing to accept the presence of homeless people [...]. The sense of shock and indignation with which Steinbeck wrote these articles seems tragically absent in contemporary America. (xvii)

**Background Knowledge:** The following lessons are designed to be implemented in the high school classroom in 9th or 10th with students of varying ability levels in a heterogeneously grouped setting. To access the content of the articles, scaffolding and instruction surrounding the Dust Bowl and time period is needed. I have chosen 15 vocabulary words from the articles to serve as a pre-reading activity.

When working with ELL students or students for whom reading is a challenge, one activity to review new vocabulary is to print each word on an index card. Distribute to students. Have students get up and read their definition to their partner in a share/share/swap format. Students should then move around the room and continue the process of share/share/swap. You can add other items to index cards, such as photographs, symbols, historical dates or the name of relevant writers, etc.

**15 Vocabulary Words for Understanding:** Selection of 15 regularly used or important words from the text with contextual sentences from the text.

**1. peon: a laborer who is obliged to do menial work** (11 uses in text)

*The earlier foreign migrants have invariably been drawn from a **peon** class.*

**2. migrant:** traveler who moves from one region or country to another (54 uses in text)

*At this season of the year, when California's great crops are coming into harvest, the heavy grapes, the prunes, the apples and lettuce and the rapidly maturing cotton, our highways swarm with the **migrant***

**3. malnutrition:** a state of poor nourishment (5 uses)

*He has the swollen belly caused by **malnutrition**.*

**4. vigilante:** a person who take the law into his own hands (4 uses)

*raid now and then for a wanted man, and if there is labor trouble the **vigilantes** may bum the poor houses.*

**5. labor:** any piece of work that is undertaken or attempted (75 uses)

*In the past they have been of several races, encouraged to come and often imported as cheap **labor**; Chinese in the early period, then Filipinos, Japanese and Mexicans.*

**6. migratory:** animals that move seasonally

*Ineligible for relief, they must become **migratory** field workers.*

**7. deputize:** appoint as a substitute

*He finds the ranch heavily policed by **deputized** employees.*

**8. repatriate:** send someone back to his homeland against his will

*Because the old kind of laborers, Mexicans and Filipinos, are being deported and **repatriated** very rapidly, while on the other hand the river of dust bowl refugees increases all the time, it is this new kind of migrant that we shall largely consider.*

**9. felonious:** involving or being or having the nature of a crime

*The large growers' groups have found the law inadequate to their uses; and they have become so powerful that such charges as **felonious** assault, mayhem and inciting to riot, kidnapping and flogging cannot be brought against them in the controlled courts.*

**10. ineligible:** not qualified for or allowed or worthy of being chosen

*Ineligible for relief, they must become migratory field workers.*

**11. speculative:** not based on fact or investigation

*It is difficult to believe what one large **speculative** farmer has said, that the success of California agriculture requires that we create and maintain a peon class.*

**12. anachronistic:** chronologically misplaced; belonging to a period other than that being portrayed

*And they are strangely **anachronistic** in one way: Having been brought up in the prairies where industrialization never penetrated, they have jumped with no transition from the old agrarian, self-containing farm where nearly everything used was raised or manufactured, to a system of agriculture so industrialized that the man who plants a crop does not often see, let alone harvest, the fruit of his planting, where the migrant has no contact with the growth cycle.*

**13. subsistence:** the state of existing in reality; having substance

*Located near to the areas which demand seasonal labor, these communities will permit these **subsistence** farmers to work in the harvests, while at the same time they stop the wanderings over the whole state.*

**14. ostracize:** expel from a community or group

*These were foreigners, and as such they were **ostracized** and segregated and herded about.*

**15. terrorism:** the use of violence against civilians for ideological goals

*“The better way,” as accepted by the large growers of the Imperial Valley, includes a system of **terrorism** that would be unusual in the Fascist nations of the world.*

### **Introductory Questions** (before reading):

Depending on students' skill level, use vocabulary words to discuss basic background information of the text and connect with present day.

Example questions:

- Why might foreign workers be ostracized during the Dust Bowl? Are foreign workers ostracized today?
- Why might a worker be ineligible for benefits?
- What do you think caused malnutrition in the 1930s? Is it the same as today?
- What do you think 'menial work' entailed in the 1930s? Is it the same today?
- What jobs does our society value and hold in high esteem? What jobs does our society judge? How do you know?
- What are some struggles a migrant farmworker would face that someone who got to live and work in one place would not?

### **While Reading:**

Each of the seven articles are approximately the same length. Depending on time, you could separate the class into small groups, have each group read an article and report back to the larger class, or read the entire collection. It might be a good idea to read the first article together and model annotation, note-taking or questioning.

### **After reading:**

- have each student choose an important sentence, concept or idea from their chapter and write on post-it note

In small groups:

- explain the significance of their chosen quotation or concept to group
  - determine in what ways their post-it notes are linked; devise system for sorting common themes
  - as a group, summarize the article in 3-5 bullet points
  - write a discussion question about their article for the class
- Report out findings to larger group; discuss.
  - Put post-it notes on board and develop larger system of classification; identify common themes

**Follow-up ideas for writing or discussion:**

- Journal entry from the perspective of a migrant farm worker
- Research project on agriculture/labor jobs in your area. Compare/contrast. (For Maine, we can look at blueberry rakers and potato farmers, as well as the large influx of refugees and asylum seekers in a previously very white state)
- Have students choose a quotation from Steinbeck to pair with a Dorothea Lange photograph
- In Chapter 1 Steinbeck writes, “The migrants are needed and they are hated. Arriving in a district they find the dislike always meted out by the resident foreigner, the outlander. This hatred of the stranger occurs in the whole range of human history, from the most primitive village form to our own highly organized industrial farming” (20).
  - Have students write a response to this idea of being an outsider and being hated/feared.  
Draw on current events, political responses and students’ own experiences
- Read/discuss psychological studies on the concept of teaching empathy. Have students consider whether or not our society is more or less empathetic than it was in the 1930s and why.