John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*

Both this author and this novel are considered by many to be among America’s most important. This, therefore, goes beyond saying that he writes well and/or that this is a good story with interesting characters. It means that the book presents a particular take on certain information, situations, perceptions, conflicts, ideas and historical events that helps readers to better understand the relationship(s) between people and the forces that have shaped America. It is also an artistic masterpiece because of the way Steinbeck used language, structured his story, and crafted his characters and conflicts.

What we’re providing for you is 1) Some information, 2) Suggested exercises that will help you find, understand, track, and remember what you’re reading, and 3) Places to look for extra resources and information you can use to better understand the book, see pictures of some of the history it depicts, and understand that many of the conflicts are very much still around and guiding our country’s thinking.

While this work isn’t mandatory, this is a large, philosophically complex book, and we will be using it as a foundation for the first few weeks of class. Doing these assignments will substantially prepare you for our initial assignments, essays, and discussions.

**INFORMATION:**
John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* is about America during the Great Depression, specifically regarding how farmers and other poor families were affected and the way our political and economic systems were designed to help them. *All of these can obviously be looked up on the internet if you want further clarification or more background.* If you read something that pertains to capitalism, socialism, The Great Depression or The Dust Bowl, make note of the page, what’s going on, and your reaction to it.

**Capitalism:**
A competitive economic system centered around the private ownership of businesses and the goods and services they produce. Success is considered to be a result of individual merit and measured in terms of profits and wages. In its purest form, a government would not play a role in how businesses operate.

**Socialism:**
An economic system based on the merits of shared ownership, responsibilities and benefits of business. Socialist organizations are cooperatively motivated by the well-being of the entire community, including sharing the profits, goods and services produced by the system.

**The Great Depression:** A global economic downturn that began in 1929 with the stock market crash and lasted 10-15 years, resulting in businesses and individuals losing most, if not all, of their value.

**The Dust Bowl:** A period of time in the early and middle 1930s, during which severely dry conditions, combined with improperly managed farm lands, produced soil conditions where the ground became brittle and blew up into enormous dust storms.

**CHARACTERS AND SETTINGS:**
There are a lot of characters in the book and it takes place in a number of different settings. Try to keep
track (on a bookmark, maybe?) of who everyone is and what it’s like to be in the different settings Steinbeck gives us.

**STYLE:**
*The Grapes of Wrath* is famous for the way it’s organized. Specifically, look out for two types of chapters. 1) Many of the chapters are “narrative,” meaning that they tell the characters’ stories. When you get to these, make a note of what happened, who was involved, and what conflicts are either developing or playing out.

2) Other chapters are “expository” in that they express an idea, establish a theme, motif, or symbol or provide a sense of historical and political context. When you get to these, try to consider why Steinbeck is including it in the book. Do your best with this. Don’t skip these chapters because they truly will help you to better understand the story.

**THEMES AND CONFLICTS:**
Finally, consider the list of conflicts below. It isn’t complete, but these make for a great start. Some of them are presented as topics while others have natural opposites that come up in the novel. Create a chart or some other organizational system for yourself that you can use to: 1) Take notice of when something happens in the book that relates to any of the conflicts or topics. 2) Collect ideas about how different conflicts and topics are affecting different characters. We can only begin to understand theme after we get a handle on how an author presents topics and resolves conflicts.

- Industry v. Agriculture
- Power and authority’s connection to money
- Community v. Individual
- Control v. Victimization
- Human dignity
- Victimization
- Resourcefulness