



# Understanding The Grapes of Wrath: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents (The Greenwood Press "Literature in Context" Series)

*Claudia Durst Johnson*

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When *The Grapes of Wrath* was published in 1939, it had an explosive effect on the public, calling attention to the problems of migrant farm workers during the Great Depression. This casebook provides a rich source of primary materials on the period and the plight of the migrant farm worker that brings to life the problems Steinbeck immortalized in the novel. Included are interviews with eyewitnesses to the Dust Bowl, firsthand accounts and investigative reports of the causes and effects of the Great Depression, letters to Eleanor Roosevelt and Labor Secretary Frances Perkins, diaries and autobiographies of migrant farm workers in the 1930s, newspaper articles and editorials of the period, congressional testimony, a Wobbly song, affidavits by union activists, and other unique materials, many of which have never before appeared in print. All these materials can be used in literature, American history, and interdisciplinary classes to enrich the study of this novel and its times.

Following a literary analysis of the novel, six chapters present primary documents on the following topics related to the novel: the financial causes and results of the Great Depression; the history of farming in the early twentieth century and the growth of agribusiness in California; working and living conditions of migrant farm workers in 1930s California; attempts to unionize farm workers and major strikes of the period; lawlessness among law enforcement officers in dealing with union members; the legacy of the 1930s?Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers, and working and living conditions of farm workers long after the publication of the novel. Each chapter is followed by study questions, topics for research papers and class discussion, and suggestions of further reading.

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