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Lesson Ten

FOCUS: What Makes a Book Great?

Great stories articulate and explore the mysteries of our daily lives in the larger context of the human struggle. The writer's voice, style, and use of language inform the plot, characters, and themes. By creating opportunities to learn, imagine, and reflect, a great novel is a work of art that affects many generations of readers, changes lives, challenges assumptions, and breaks new ground.

Discussion Activities

Ask students to make a list of the characteristics of a great book. Write these on the board. What elevates a novel to greatness? Then ask them to discuss, in groups, other books that have some of the same characteristics. Do any of these books remind them of *The Grapes of Wrath*? How so? How not?

A great writer can be the voice of a generation. What kind of voice does Steinbeck create through the Joads? What kind of voice is in the interchapters? Does the novel speak for more than one man, more than one family? What does this voice tell us about the concerns and dreams of the generation that experienced the Great Depression?

Divide students into groups and have each decide on the single most important theme of the novel. Have a spokesperson from each group explain the group's decision. Write these themes on the board. Do all the groups agree?

Writing Exercise

Write a letter to a friend, perhaps one who does not like to read, and explain why *The Grapes of Wrath* is worth reading. Make an argument for why the novel still has meaning, even if the Depression is now a distant memory.

Have students work on their essays in class. Be available to assist with outlines, drafts, and arguments. Have each student pair up with another to edit outlines and/or rough drafts. Provide students with the characteristics of a well-written essay.

Homework

For the next class, finish essays and present arguments to the class. Celebrate by participating in a Big Read community event.