

Teaching Nonteleology: *The Grapes of Wrath* and *The Sea of Cortez*

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Objectives:

This lesson guides students in an exploration of non-teleological thinking, as presented by Ed Ricketts and John Steinbeck in *The Sea of Cortez*. This exploration of non-teleological thinking and *The Sea of Cortez* and their connection to *The Grapes of Wrath* is intended to be done alongside a reading of *Grapes of Wrath*. However, this lesson could be modified to connect with any of Steinbeck's works that focus on non-teleological thinking, including *Of Mice and Men*, *Cannery Row*, or *In Dubious Battle*.

This lesson can also be done at any point in the novel, although earlier in the novel would be preferable, as it would help students wrestle with ideas of holism and non-teleological thinking throughout the whole of the novel as they read.

Grade Level

11th and 12th Grade

Materials

Boxes of matches or bundles of 20-30 matches (enough for students to work in pairs)

The Sea of Cortez or *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*

The Grapes of Wrath

Procedure

Day One

1. Objective: Interactive definition of non-teleological thinking.
2. Distribute matches from the same box of matches. In pairs students measure a bundle of matches for length, recording their findings.
3. Discussion of the measurements
 - a. In the discussion following the measuring of the matches, some points to examine include:
 - i. What are some possible reasons for matches of varying lengths? Are there any reasons we're not thinking of?
 - ii. Even knowing these "reasons," can we have perfectly equal matches? Why or why not?
 - iii. After you do the measurements, does it change what *is* in these matches (in other words, can we change the length of the matches), regardless of technological advances for future matches? What happens when we try to change the length of the matches?
4. In two small groups, students read excerpts from Chapter 14 of *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* on match measurements (113-4 in Penguin Classics edition) and the Norway willow Grouse (119-21).
 - a. Students summarize what Ricketts and Steinbeck said and present back to the rest of the class.

- b. After they present Ricketts and Steinbeck, they can define for themselves what they believe non-teleological thinking is. It may be helpful to do this on notecards that students turn in as their “exit passes” in order to leave the room.

Day Two

1. Objective: Refine definition of non-teleological thinking and make connections to the two pieces of literature.
2. Discussion of the history of the journey to the Sea of Cortez and the history of Steinbeck and Ed Ricketts.
 - a. Teacher could use a power point presentation, a lecture, or have students do their own research.
3. Read excerpts from Ch 14 of *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* where Steinbeck and Ricketts define teleological (112) and non-teleological thinking (121-5).
 - a. Stress the importance of what *is* rather than what *ought to be* or *how*
 - b. Compare their definitions from the day before with the definitions in *The Log*. Return notecards so that students can modify their definitions.
4. Make connections to the structure of *The Sea of Cortez* and the structure of *The Grapes of Wrath*.
 - a. The importance of multiple voices, not a singular voice.
 - b. Discuss what voices are left out of *The Grapes of Wrath* and the voices missing from *Sea of Cortez*.

Day Three

1. Objective: Examine why non-teleological thinking is important in science, history, politics, literature, etc.
2. Why is non-teleological thinking important for *The Grapes of Wrath*?
 - a. Connections to Jim Casy (modeled after Ricketts), a character who is always on the journey (127-8) given that he “got the call to lead the people, an no place to lead ‘em” (21) and tries to accept people and the journey as is (23). He declares, “All that lives is holy” (144). These connections could be made through an in-class discussion or a written assignment.
3. Come back to the matches. Lead an open discussion on how the matches then connect to *The Grapes of Wrath*.
 - a. Steinbeck suggests that while we might want to find all the “reasons” the migration happens, we have to accept what *is* and the role of all of the characters (both the main characters and their contacts as well as the voices in the interchapters) in the migration itself.

Possible Extensions

- Yogic practice is about the *is* rather than the *why*, is about the *present* rather than the *future* or *past*. Possible extensions might be to lead a class on yoga asana or meditation.
- Further extensions might include tidepooling (see “Reading Texts as Tide Pools” by Juliet Chiarella and “Tide Pools are Everywhere” by Jaime Allesandrine in the lesson plans) to examine the holistic nature of science and to make connections back to the holistic nature of *The Grapes of Wrath*.

- Another science extension could be squid dissection (See “Squid, Willow Grouse, and Log From the Sea of Cortez” by Chris Freeman).

Sources

Steinbeck, John. *The Grapes of Wrath*. Ed. Robert DeMott. 1939. New York: Penguin Classics, 1992.

Steinbeck, John. *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*. 1941. New York: Penguin Classics, 1995.