

William Blackwood – John Steinbeck’s Portrayal of the Weedpatch Camp as a Teaching Tool

Once the Joads depart Oklahoma westward in their all-or-nothing bid to establish a new existence in California, there is only one place where they find even a modicum of existential security: the Weedpatch Camp. Also known contemporaneously as the Arvin Federal Government Camp and, later, as the Sunset Labor Camp, the camp was erected in 1936 by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) to promote the common good and to provide employment for construction workers. In Steinbeck’s depiction, the camp features as the only – albeit prominent – manifestation of federal government intervention in the economic crisis. The Depression thrusts the Okies into depths of poverty and deprivation that, to many people, seemed unimaginable in the United States and that, to others, appeared to herald the abject failure of the free-market system on the most basic human level (here it is important to note that the Okies were not an easily identifiable ethnic minority, but rather lower-class white American Protestants). Tom Collins, the director of the Weedpatch Camp, provided Steinbeck with reports that, together with the author’s own direct research, yielded rich material for the novel.

When discussing the camp’s role in the story and, more broadly, the camp’s place in the Depression-era United States, the teacher should impart a two-fold understanding to students: 1.) because of resistance from the local population in California, the WPA built a limited number of camps in the state that was the destination of over 250,000 Dust Bowl migrants; and 2.) because of the federal government’s inability to interfere with the property rights of private land-owning farmers in the San Joaquin Valley, the camps themselves did not provide significant labor opportunities to their inhabitants. This means that the camps embodied both the promise and the shortcomings of the government help given to the Dust Bowl refugees. Steinbeck makes it clear that Weedpatch was, quite literally, the only island in the storm available to people like the Joads, and his depiction of the refugees’ ability to self-organize in a way that enables them to thwart a political provocation convinces the reader that an institution such as Weedpatch did indeed offer a viable way to maintain dignity and to sustain an otherwise precarious existence.

For this assignment, students will read chapters 22-26 of *Grapes of Wrath* in class, with the teacher providing textual guidance and ensuring that the students grasp the main aspects of the camp’s functioning and its overall significance as a harbor in the storm for people like the Joads. The following two videos will supplement the text:

“Steinbeck Country: Dorris Weddell” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7lePgX4r25c>); and “Huell Howser’s California Gold – Weedpatch” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gzX0v_WJCB8). Question sets will accompany both video clips. For homework, students will consult the National Archives website “Archival Vintages for the Grapes of Wrath” (<https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2008/winter/grapes.html>) and provide 5 major “takeaway points” that help them locate Weedpatch’s role in the story, specifically, as well as in the Depression, more broadly. The Weedpatch topic will conclude with the students writing a paragraph without using any supplementary materials in response to the question -- “What does the Weedpatch camp tell me about the United States during the Depression?

For teachers wishing to take students further into the topic of California’s federal camps for migrant laborers, a Columbia University undergraduate thesis by K. R. O’Reilly offers a good starting point (<https://asit-prod-web1.cc.columbia.edu/historydept/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2017/07/Kelly-OReilly-.pdf>). Entitled “*Oklatopia: The Cultural Mission of California’s Migratory Labor Camps, 1935-1941*”, this work has a map and a descriptive list of the sixteen camps in its appendix. Fourteen of Tom Collins’ original reports are now available online in digitized format through the National Archives (<https://catalog.archives.gov/search?q=Tom%20Collins%20arvin&f.locationIds=24>). Students can read the reports and gain a direct feel for the rich detail that informed Steinbeck’s fictionalized account of the Okies’ plight. O’Reilly’s above-mentioned study offers useful background that does not shy away from critical assessments of the role played by Collins and of the motivations behind the composition of what, for the time, were remarkably sensitive portrayals of an all-too easily forgotten segment of the American population. Teachers may use the Collins’ reports in tandem with the novel’s text thanks to the NEH website, “Steinbeck’s Use of Nonfiction Sources in *The Grapes of Wrath*” (<https://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plan/steinbecks-use-nonfiction-sources-grapes-wrath#sect-background>). This resource contains materials that enable students to make direct correlations between Collins’ reporting and Steinbeck’s prose in the novel.