

# Portraits of America

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## DEMOCRACY ON FILM

### FILM READER

**Selections for Lesson on Critical Viewing and Thinking: Two Scenes from *The Grapes of Wrath***

1. “Teaching Strategy—Watching vs. Seeing”  
(Background information for teachers)
2. “Excerpt from Chapter 2 of *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck”
3. “Red River Valley” (Lyrics)

## **Teacher Background Information:**

### **“Teaching Strategy—Watching vs. Seeing”**

To be a critical thinker in the twenty-first century, students must be critical viewers. Simply showing movies in the classroom, however, does not lead to cinema or visual literacy, or even media literacy. Scaffolding is needed, a variety of strategies and practical applications to guide students beyond the simplistic read-the-book, watch-the-movie approach to film.

One such strategy is *Watching vs. Seeing*. The premise is that close reading of a film often requires multiple screenings. First, students watch a selected scene. They identify elements of character, setting, and plot to piece together the narrative. The first screening asks students to answer the question: What is the scene about?

Because students know what happens, during the second screening they can observe more closely the use of cinematic devices. This includes framing and composition, camera angles and distances, lighting, editing choices, and the use of sound. The second screening asks students to answer the question: How is the story being told?

A fundamental principle established by the National Film Study Standards is that film is language. In learning to read this language, students must develop a film-specific vocabulary. Identifying cinematic devices is surface learning only. To become cinema literate, students must go deeper. They must interpret. *Watching vs. seeing* activities can help them do just that.

## **“Excerpt from Chapter 2 of *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck”**

A huge red transport truck stood in front of the little roadside restaurant. The vertical exhaust pipe muttered softly, and an almost invisible haze of steel-blue smoke hovered over its end. It was a new truck, shining red, and in twelve-inch letters on its sides—OKLAHOMA CITY TRANSPORT COMPANY. Its double tires were new, and a brass padlock stood straight out from the hasp on the big back doors. Inside the screened restaurant a radio played, quiet dance music turned low the way it is when no one is listening. A small outlet fan turned silently in its circular hole over the entrance, and flies buzzed excitedly about the doors and windows, butting the screens. Inside, one man, the truck driver, sat on a stool and rested his elbows on the counter and looked over his coffee at the lean and lonely waitress. He talked the smart listless language of the roadsides to her. “I seen him about three months ago. He had a operation. Cut somepin out. I forget what.” And she—“Doesn’t seem no longer ago than a week I seen him myself. Looked fine then. He’s a nice sort of a guy when he ain’t stinko.” Now and then the flies roared softly at the screen door. The coffee machine spurted steam, and the waitress, without looking, reached behind her and shut it off.

Outside, a man walking along the edge of the highway crossed over and approached the truck. He walked slowly to the front of it, put his hand on the shiny fender, and looked at the *No Riders* sticker on the windshield. For a moment, he was about to walk on down the road, but instead he sat on the running board on the side away from the restaurant. He was not over thirty. His eyes were very dark brown and there was a hint of brown pigment in his eyeballs. His cheek bones were high and wide, and strong deep lines cut down his cheeks, in curves beside his mouth. His upper lip was long, and since his teeth protruded, the lips stretched to cover them, for this man kept his lips closed. His hands were hard, with broad fingers and nails as thick and ridged as little clam shells. The space between thumb and forefinger and the hams of his hands were shiny with callus.

## **“Red River Valley” (Lyrics)**

### Chorus:

Come and sit by my side, if you love me  
Do not hasten to bid me adieu  
Just remember the Red River Valley  
And the boy who has loved you so true.

### Verses:

From this valley they say you are going  
We will miss your bright eyes and sweet smile  
For they say you are taking the sunshine  
That has brightened our pathways a while.

I've been thinking a long time, my darling  
Of the sweet words you never would say  
Now, alas, must my fond hopes all vanish?  
For they say you are going away.

Do you think of the valley you're leaving?  
Oh, how lonely and sad it will be.  
Do you think of the kind hearts you're breaking  
And the pain you are causing to me?

They will bury me where you have wandered  
Near the hills where the daffodils grow  
When you're gone from the Red River Valley  
For I can't live without you, I know.