

In this lesson from Module 8 of **Portraits of America: Democracy on Film**, students screen and interpret two scenes from *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940, directed by John Ford). The activity engages students in analyzing the director’s use of cinematic devices to introduce and develop the characters of Tom Joad and Ma.

MATERIALS FOR DOWNLOADING:

- Lesson Plan: Critical Thinking and Viewing: Two Scenes from *The Grapes of Wrath*
 - Teacher’s PowerPoint Presentation for classroom use
 - Portraits of America Film Reader:
 - Teacher Background Information: “Teaching Strategy: Watching vs. Seeing”
 - “Excerpt from Chapter 2 of *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck”
 - “Red River Valley” (Song lyrics)
 - Selected scenes from *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940, directed by John Ford):
 - “Crossroads” (3:14 minutes)
 - “Red River Valley” (0:51 seconds)
 - “Ma’s Memories” (01:40 minutes)
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Lesson Plan: Critical Thinking and Viewing— Two Scenes from *The Grapes of Wrath*

OVERVIEW

This lesson engages students in a watching vs. screening activity, featuring two different scenes from *The Grapes of Wrath*. Students screen each scene twice with different objectives. Activity A’s objective is to decode the narrative and explain what the scene is about. Activity B’s objective is to identify and interpret how the story is being told cinematically. In Activity B, students identify and interpret specific elements of film language, including framing and composition, types of shots, lighting, and soundtrack.

Teachers may wish to review “**Teaching Strategy: Watching vs. Seeing**” (see Resources) prior to beginning the lesson.

Activity A: Crossroads

EXPLAIN AND EXPLORE

Define the concept of a movie adaptation. An *adaptation* is the development of a story based on another work. Movie adaptations frequently use as a narrative source a printed work, such as a novel or short story, a nonfiction book, or news article. Adaptations may include all or part of this source.

It is important for students to understand that a movie adaptation is not simply a pictorial version of a novel. Rather, it is its own text that relies on but is not limited to the original source. Therefore, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* is not John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath*. Both have the same setting and characters, as well as similar plotlines. However, the ways of telling the story differ significantly. Ford uses cinematic devices to tell the story visually. Identifying and interpreting those devices are necessary to fully comprehend the movie.

Introduce the first screening activity. Explain that students will screen the opening sequence of the movie, which runs approximately three and a half minutes and introduces the main character, Tom Joad. Tell students that they will screen the sequence twice, each time with a different objective. In the initial screening, they are to simply watch and make sense of what is happening. In the second screening, they are to observe more closely the use of cinematic devices, specifically the framing and composition of the shots.

Screen "Crossroads" (a link to this film clip is in Resources). After screening, ask students to make a list of questions they have, based on the sequence. These may include the following:

- Where is this place?
- Why is this man in the middle of nowhere without a vehicle?
- How did he get there? Where did he come from?
- What year is it?
- What is a sharecropper?
- What is homicide?

All questions are valid. Encourage students to comment or respond to the questions of their classmates. For example, some students may infer that the movie takes place many years ago, basing their response on the appearance of the truck. Others may respond that the man has been in prison for murder.

Teachers may wish to briefly explain the difference between criminal homicide and justifiable homicide. Criminal homicide involves the unlawful killing of another person, and it is normally broken down into charges of murder and manslaughter. Manslaughter involves an action that results in death, but where the defendant did not intend to cause death. When a homicide is determined to have resulted from a lawful act of self-defense or

defense of others, it is deemed justifiable. Students should note that the movie does not make explicitly clear—at least initially—what type of homicide Joad committed.

ASK: Tom Joad did not need to tell the truck driver why he was sent to prison. Why do you think he did? What does this admission reveal about his character? *Answers will vary. Some may say that he is acting defensively, or that he is overly sensitive, easily offended and/or easily angered. Some might even say he is boasting or trying to intimidate the driver.*

Screen “Crossroads” a second time. Ask students to share what they noticed this time that they did not notice the first time they screened the sequence. For example, some students may comment on the stillness or silence of the opening shot of the highway. Other than the lone figure walking, there is no other movement—no sounds of traffic or wind. Some may have noticed the cries of a bird and perhaps the sound of the man’s footsteps on the pavement.

Emphasize this key point: The opening sequence does more than introduce the main character and establish a setting—a crossroads in rural Oklahoma. The road—both literally, as seen here, and figuratively— dominates throughout the movie. The opening shots, therefore, seed the theme of an overland odyssey.

Display PPT slide 2: Camera Angles and Distances. A distinctive feature of Ford’s visual style is the careful framing of the subject in relation to his or her environment using long and medium shots. He uses close-up shots sparingly, and when he places the camera very close to the subject, he is making the audience aware of specific details of importance.

Discuss with students each shot on the slide, focusing on where the camera is placed and what narrative details are suggested through this placement. Recommended discussion questions are below. While interpretations will vary, some key points of emphasis are provided.

- Shot A is a long shot. The camera is positioned at a distance from the subject. What is being communicated in these long shots? *Shot A emphasizes the open space and overall flatness of the land. Some students may describe it as barren. A key element within the composition is the lone figure, but the positioning of the camera at such a distance makes him quite small, barely distinguishable. By showing him at this distance, the shot suggests vulnerability. The land dominates.*
- Shot B is also a long shot. However, the camera is placed somewhat lower to the ground. What is being communicated by the camera placement in this shot? *Tom is the man in the foreground with his arm raised to the side of the truck. He is in shadow. Some students may state that this indicates Tom is a loner, an outsider watching others. The truck driver and the waitress are in the background and not clearly distinguishable. They do not notice Tom.*

- Shot C is a close-up (CU). The camera is now placed quite near the subject—the truck’s sticker—showing it in clear detail so that the audience can easily read it. How does this CU help to establish the mood and overall tone of the opening scenes? *The sign is the equivalent of a “no trespassing” notice. This further isolates Tom. He is not welcome, not wanted. It is important to note that Tom knows the sign is placed there by the owners of the trucking company, not the driver.*
- In shot D, the camera is placed a medium distance from the subjects. What can you infer about the relationship between these two men as a result of this composition? *The windshield creates a frame within the frame of the film. This framing and the medium distance together create a tight or cramped space. Note how the driver is eyeing his passenger surreptitiously. Nor does Tom look at the driver. Neither is comfortable with the other.*
- Shot E is a high angle shot. The camera is placed above Tom, looking down. This suggests we are seeing him from the driver’s perspective. Again, the truck window and door create frames. How do you interpret the meaning of the shot? *Tom is outside of the cramped space of the truck. The composition includes the land with a road in the background. This road, however, unlike the highway, is unpaved, just two tire tracks that curve into the distance.*
- Shot F is another long shot. What is significant about the barbed wire and the fact that Tom’s back is to the audience now? *The barbed wire across the road suggests private land or ownership. It can also be associated with “no trespassing” or with exclusion. Tom may be a little bit nearer to his home, but he is still in shadow and alone.*

Read “Excerpt from Chapter 2 of *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck” (see Resources). John Ford’s movie does not begin with Steinbeck’s Chapter 1. The novel’s first chapter is an eloquently detailed description of the once fertile farmland in Oklahoma, now thirsty and reduced to dust. Instead, the screenwriter, Nunnally Johnson—working closely with director John Ford—begins with Tom Joad approaching the crossroads and the roadside restaurant.

Encourage a discussion of the differences between Steinbeck’s text and Ford’s visual imagery.

ASK: Why do you think the director chose to omit Chapter 1’s description of the landscape? Why do you think the scene inside the restaurant from Chapter 2 was also omitted? *Answers will vary. Responses may include but are not limited to the following:*

- A film’s narrative structure limits how long a film can run. In adaptations, scenes are sometimes omitted or compressed to advance the storyline.

- The director may consider some expository passages in the novel not visually interesting or dramatic. Details about the flies buzzing against the screen or the coffee machine steaming may enhance Steinbeck's setting but do not serve the purpose of the movie.
- Too much dialogue can slow down the pace of the film.

Emphasize this key point: John Ford's purpose differed from Steinbeck's. The film's opening sequence reflects Ford's perspective, drawing the audience's focus to Tom Joad. It is interesting to note that while the extended dialogue between the truck driver and the waitress is minimized, the director chose to include the dialogue between Tom and the truck driver.

Conclude the first screening by sharing this statement from John Ford about his approach to telling the story:

"I was only interested in the Joad family. Before all else, it is the story of a family, the way it reacts, how it is shaken by a serious problem which overwhelms it. It is not a social film on this problem, it's a study of a family."

Activity B: Ma's Memories

Introduce the second screening. If students are not familiar with the novel, explain that Tom Joad returned to the family farm to find the home deserted. He eventually locates his family and learns that they have been evicted from their property. They had sold most of their possessions to purchase a truck and generate cash. Now they load what few belongings are left, intending to leave Oklahoma and travel west to California where the family hopes to find work.

This scene occurs on the night the family intends to leave. Ma Joad sits alone in the dark in front of a stove. She is going through a box holding various items. Students will screen the scene twice, just as they did the opening sequence to the movie in Activity A above.

Screen "Ma's Memories" (a link to this film clip is in Resources).

After the first screening, encourage students to comment on Ma's behavior.

ASK: What does this scene reveal about Ma? What emotion(s) might she be feeling?
Accept all reasonable interpretations.

Before re-screening the scene, review two cinematic devices that Ford uses in this scene: chiaroscuro lighting and music.

Display PPT slide 3: "What Is Chiaroscuro Lighting?" Briefly, *chiaroscuro* is a lighting technique used in film. The cinematographer contrasts areas of bright and dark light to create a dramatic effect. The contrast in light can be interpreted in a variety of ways

depending on the narrative. It may contribute to the suspense of a scene or create an atmosphere of mystery or impending danger.

ASK:

- What part of the frame is more brightly lit? *The brightest point is the flame from the stove. This light source illuminates Ma's face.*
- What is the overall effect of this contrast between areas of light and dark within the frame? *Interpretations will vary. Most students may agree that the composition is bleak/barren, suggesting loneliness or sadness. Others may say that the composition suggests the family's impoverishment. Although shadowed, the viewer can see that the room is mostly empty and quite plain.*

Display PPT slide 4: "Lighting for Dramatic Effect." Encourage students to comment on this frame from the scene. What is highlighted is significant. What does the director want the audience to notice about Ma? *Interpretations will vary. The brightest feature may be the brim of Ma's hat, but the focus is on her expression as she holds up the earrings. Ma's eyes suggest memories of a better time, perhaps when she was younger and being courted. The image of Ma staring at herself in the mirror might resonate with audiences who likewise have stared into a mirror, remembering a pleasant or bittersweet moment from the past.*

Display PPT slide 5: "The Use of Close-Up (CU) Shots."

ASK: What is the purpose of these CU shots? *Each shot is a memory, referencing a life of both happiness and sorrow before the terrible dust storms desiccated the land and resulted in the family's eviction. Students may note that whereas Ma burned the postcard (upper left shot), she pockets the dog souvenir as well as the earrings. Overall, the family may be impoverished, but the CU shots suggest memories are something that can't be taken away and are of real value.*

Define leitmotif. A *motif* is a narrative element—either an image, an idea, or even a spoken word—repeated throughout a work of art. When that element is a song or melody, it is called a leitmotif. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the American folk song "Red River Valley" is a significant leitmotif which Ford uses as a reference to the Joad family's troubling situation—their eviction and journey from Oklahoma to a new home in California. The audience first hears the song during the movie's opening credits.

Read and discuss the lyrics to "Red River Valley" (see Resources). Explain that this song was quite popular throughout the 20th century in America. Although its origins are somewhat unclear, it is generally associated with the American West and cowboys, in particular. The Red River may refer to a region of the American West, but it has also been associated with other geographical locations, including some in Canada.

Play the audio clip "Red River Valley" (a link is in Resources). The music is from the opening credits to the movie. Various renditions of the melody are heard. The first strains are played by an orchestra, followed by strains played on a banjo. Draw students' attention also to the changes in tempo among the different renditions, sometimes slow and

sometimes faster, more upbeat. Tempo can influence how the song resonates with the audience, suggesting melancholy and loss when slow, or simply a slice of Americana when played faster.

Screen “Ma’s Memories” a second time.

ASK: How, if at all, has your understanding of this scene changed? What do you believe is the purpose of this scene? In other words, what is John Ford communicating to the audience about Ma and the Joad family through the visuals and sounds in this scene?

Conclude the activity. Share this information with students about the scene they just screened. In Steinbeck’s novel, Ma does indeed go through a box of mementos. But she does not specifically hold up earrings and gaze at herself in a mirror. That particular shot is original to the movie. Remind students that film has its own language that differs from print text. Ford uses this particular shot to develop Ma’s character. ASK: What do you think this shot suggests about her?