

Lisa Flooding  
Mrs. Flooding  
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Waiting for Death

In Chapter One of *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck relates the story of the drought that grips the area of the country that would later be known as the Dust Bowl. It is a tale of the Earth trying to heal despite its helplessness in the face of the elements. Steinbeck's mournful yet ominous tone reminds us of how the wind and rain and sun affect the land. His evocative diction encourages sympathy for not only the farmers responsible for the land, but the land itself. In this chapter the reader is witnessing a death – the final moments of Oklahoma before it is rendered barren by the dust storms.

love this word

The imagery provided in this chapter is a tragic reminder of what is to come.

Steinbeck achieves an almost cinematic feel to the opening lines of the novel by

beginning with a periodic sentence that draws the reader in to the story: "To the red country and part of the gray country of Oklahoma the last rains came gently, and they did not cut the scarred earth" (3). It is significant that these are the "last" rains and they fall to earth without wounding it. The slow demise of the once fertile land is sped up, akin to time-lapse photography, showing the effects of short-sighted farming practices as well as the relentless weather conditions. The visual imagery here is a tragic reminder of what is to come. The land is already wounded, it is "scarred" and trying to heal. The description of this area of the country continues with details that call to mind nature photography. We learn of the brown lines marring the corn leaves, which appear first on the outside edges and then move toward the center, suggesting a slow death is taking place. At the same time, the color gradually leaves the land.

Effect of imagery:  
Cinematic feel - we see it

opening paragraph with this word

Land is focus - pity etc.

Is thesis focused enough on tone? like a movie

move to \*

visually suggests photography - we see the land.

or is death approaching?

Effect  
of  
personification

Perhaps Steinbeck's greatest achievement in this opening chapter is to promote a sense of pity for the land and crops in the reader's imagination as he personifies the sun, clouds, corn and the ground itself. The sun is "sharp" and it "strikes down" from the sky (3). The writer's choice of words shows how the land is at the mercy of the sun. The clouds "did not try any more" and "the weeds grew darker green to protect themselves" (3) as the sun beats down on the land. The land's surface is likened to a wound on human skin: "The surface of the earth crusted, a thin hard crust..." (3). While this literally explains what happens when there is no rain and abundant sunlight, it also suggests an almost human response to the elements. A fight to the death begins as "the corn fought the wind" (5). We watch as the corn is vanquished by the wind and it finally settles "wearily sideways toward the earth" (5) even as "the wind cried and whimpered over the fallen corn" (5). The wind appears to have killed the corn and yet feels sorrow for it.

Personification is effective in Chpt 1

While the first chapter of the novel chronicles how the dust storms looked as they were happening, Steinbeck's effective use of diction later emphasizes the ominous tone. Repetition of the word "dust" shows its inevitability, the repetition emphasizing the inability to escape from it. The dust begins paradoxically as "dry little streams" (5) and later moves into the sky, enveloping everything in its path. The dust becomes even more powerful, as even the stars cannot "pierce" it (5). Until finally, it is just "an emulsion of dust and air" and the transformation is complete: the air IS dust. Creatures that need air to survive are trapped in this nightmare. The dust creeps into everything – people brush it from their shoulders, it settles on the furniture and lies just outside the front door. The dust is menacing; it begins on a small scale but grows powerful with time. After the wind stops, it becomes "an even blanket cover[ing] the earth" (6).

Diction / word choice creates ominous tone

After the dust settles, the reader is introduced to the people of this region with Steinbeck's deliberately understated diction: "The men were silent and did not move often" (6).

Steinbeck uses understated diction to introduce the reader to the people who inhabit this region. → strong Determined

The ruined corn becomes the test for these families, as we learn how "the women studied the men's faces secretly, for the corn could go, as long as something else remained" (6). That "something else" is their will to fight; their sense of purpose and strength. The overall feeling of this, the last section of the chapter, is one of anticipation, but anticipation for the unknowable. The children are watching the adults to know how to react and the women are watching the men. At this moment, a transformation occurs as "the faces of the watching men lost their bemused perplexity and became hard and angry and resistant" (6). Steinbeck's use of polysyndeton in this sentence reminds us of the "something else" that remains even after the corn is gone, even after the land is destroyed, even after the family's source of income chokes beneath a layer of dust. *Despite their will to survive, the people are* The final lines of the chapter leave an ominous image - the men "thinking - figuring" because *faced with a situation they have no control over* they know impending doom is coming. How will they grow crops? How will they pay the banks? How will they survive?

*Description of people  
in Dust Bowl region  
adds to pity.*

Steinbeck's dramatic portrayal of the inception of the dust bowl era sets the stage for the narrative that is to come. The attention to detail throughout this first chapter gives the reader a first hand look at how the land suffered under such harsh conditions. While we initially sympathize with the nameless, faceless women and men in this chapter, the reader will soon come to know one family who fights for survival in the dust bowl: The Joads. The first chapter of *The Grapes of Wrath* therefore provides the setting for a tragic journey and honors the indomitable spirit of the people who came from this area.

*Land +  
people suffer*