

## “Sticks ’n Stones”: Looking at Ourselves and Others

“Well, Okie use’ to mean you was from Oklahoma. Now it means you’re a dirty son-of-a-bitch. Okie means you’re scum. Don’t mean nothing itself, it’s the way they say it.” (ch. 18)

“A red is any son-of-a-bitch that wants thirty cents an hour when we’re payin’ twenty-five.” (ch. 22)

“Them Okies? They’re all hard-lookin.”

“Well, you and me got sense. Them goddamn Okies got no sense and no feeling. They ain’t human. A human being wouldn’t live like they do. A human being couldn’t stand it to be so dirty and miserable. They ain’t a hell of a lot better than gorillas.” (ch. 18)

“Sure they talk the same language, but they ain’t the same. Look how they live. Think any of us folks’d live like that? Hell no!” (ch. 19)

“These goddamned Okies are dirty and ignorant. They’re degenerate, sexual maniacs. Those goddamned Okies are thieves. They’ll steal anything. They’ve got no sense of property rights.”

And the latter was true, for how can a man without property know the ache of ownership? And the defending people said, “They bring disease, they’re filthy. We can’t have them in the schools. They’re strangers. How’d you like to have your sister go out with one of ‘em?” (ch. 21)

1. Most of us grew up chanting the nursery rhyme that ends, “Words will never hurt you,” but our experience has proved that words can hurt every bit as much as sticks and stones. Can you remember a time when someone called you a name and it truly hurt?
2. Does it hurt more when the name-calling is done by persons we know (or love) rather than strangers?
3. In the first quotation above, a returning migrant explains to Tom that Okie was not always a term of derision but now its meaning has changed. What changed the meaning of the word?

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

4. At various points in the novel, people deemed "troublemakers" are called "reds," "bolsheviks," or communists. In the second quotation, an owner named Hines attempts to define "reds" for the curious young man. Explain what his definition means.
5. Do Americans today have a common definition for "communist"? Do we ever use the word in the same way Steinbeck's characters used "Okies"?
6. Can you think of other labels that are in everyday use?
7. What do the labels have in common?
8. In the last two quotations, we overhear people discussing the poor, hungry migrants before them. Might these people have been the Joads? Is this how you have seen them in your mind's eye as you read the novel?
9. In your experience, do people often believe that poor people, who do not look (or smell) as good as they themselves do, are somehow subhuman, unfeeling, stupid creatures.
10. Has reading *The Grapes of Wrath* changed any of your perceptions about the poor and homeless of our time? Explain.