

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

Cannery Row

by John Steinbeck

Copyright © 2002 by Prestwick House Inc., P.O. Box 658, Clayton, DE 19938. 1-800-932-4593.
www.prestwickhouse.com Permission to copy this unit for classroom use is extended to purchaser for his or her
personal use. This material, in whole or part, may not be copied for resale.

ISBN 978-1-60389-726-6

Item No. 201250

Cannery Row

Notes

John Steinbeck's *Cannery Row* can be classified as a work of regional writing or local color—writing that shows the distinct and unique nature of a certain locale. Set in the coastal town of Monterey, California, just south of San Francisco, the novel contrasts with other works of utopian fiction by showing a typically less than perfect way of life. Instead of idealism, Steinbeck focuses on realism.

Ironically, the novel eventually portrays this little seaside town as an ideal environment. The characters do not need money, mansions, or material objects to achieve happiness in life. Friendships and family relationships are forged beyond the traditional model of father, mother, and child, and good will and fellowship override the ever-present realities of an imperfect world.

While reading the novel, keep in mind that it is not the actual events that determine the quality of life on Cannery Row, but rather the characters' reactions to the events. Similar to their environment, the characters are also tattered and grungy, yet colorful and unique. However, beneath the less-than-pristine exteriors are virtuous hearts. Be aware of the violence. There are suicides, dead bodies, and threatening language contributing to the realism of the story. Teachers must be aware of language and implied adult situations when reviewing this novel in the classroom.

Despite the dirty and violent exterior, *Cannery Row* is an uplifting novel that focuses on how people can create an ideal environment. The chapters are short but packed with symbolism and irony. Various sub-plots and vignettes are layered together to offer the reader a glimpse of a time and place in which the whole is ultimately more than the sum of its parts.

All references come from the Penguin Books edition of *Cannery Row*, published 1992.

Cannery Row

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. answer objective questions on the literal meaning of the story in terms of plot
2. identify who or what the following characters or places symbolize:
 - Lee Chong
 - Mack and the boys
 - Doc
 - Dora Flood
 - Frankie
 - Cannery Row
3. understand the development of the following concepts in the novel:
 - Can a utopia exist in a lower socioeconomic environment?
 - What is the correlation between the appearances of the characters and their personalities?
 - What are some of the characteristics of “local color” or regional writing?
4. recognize multiple meanings in *Cannery Row* and be able to find similarities between them.
5. define and give examples from the text of the following literary terms:
 - allusion
 - anecdote
 - digression
 - idealism
 - irony
 - local color
 - metaphor
 - mood
 - paradox
 - personification
 - realism
 - simile
 - symbol
 - theme
 - tone
 - utopia
 - vignette

Cannery Row

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. In this novel, how could collecting be a metaphor for writing? What is symbolic about collecting? Include examples of various vignettes.
2. What is significant about the animal references in the novel? When do these occur and why are they used? What might the animals symbolize?
3. Explain the role of violence in the novel. What is Steinbeck's reasoning for including so many suicides and other deaths in the story? How would the story be different if the violence were less prevalent?
4. Explain how this novel could be categorized as regional writing, or "local color" writing. Find specific references that support your answer.
5. Choose a character you think is the most successful in this novel and explain why you chose that character. Think of how success can be defined for these people in Cannery Row (monetarily, sense of pride, etc.) and argue your point using specific examples from the book.
6. Doc responds peculiarly when he finds the dead girl in the water. Explain how his reaction is integral to his character, and discuss what the dead girl may symbolize.
7. Compare aspects of Frankie's character with those of Mack and the boys. How are they similar? Find examples that illustrate their good intentions which accidentally hurt others.
8. Compare the behavior of Mrs. Malloy and her boiler curtains with Mrs. Mary Talbot, the party organizer for the neighborhood cats. What are the qualities that both women share? Discuss how these women characterize the contrast of realism versus idealism.
9. How does Doc's reaction after the first disastrous party differ from the second, successful one? Describe in your own words how Doc feels after each party.
10. Explain how Cannery Row itself is a character in the novel. Comment on how individually, each character may appear weak, but the solidarity of all combined creates a strong, indivisible whole.
11. What qualities do the characters of Cannery Row exhibit that supports the argument that this book is a utopian novel? What are some qualities or events that contrast that point and suggest that this book is actually a realistic novel? Could this work be best viewed as a realistic utopian novel?
12. Why does Steinbeck include the story of the gopher at almost the end of the novel? What does the gopher symbolize? Speculate on why Steinbeck uses the gopher vignette, rather than any other familiar character, to make one of the strongest statements of this book.

Chapter 1

Vocabulary

abacus – a mechanical device for making calculations

avaricious – showing a strong desire for money

benefactor – someone who aids a cause, institution, or individual especially with a gift of money

cordage – ropes or cords collectively

dubiously – doubtfully

inviolable – secure from violation

vagrant – a person who wanders from place to place and has no permanent place to live

1. How are Lee Chong and his grocery store described?

2. How does Lee Chong acquire the fish-meal house? What does Chong decide to do with the house?

Chapter 7

Vocabulary

encroach – to exceed the proper limits

gilded – wealthy and privileged; decorated with gold

ravening – living by hunting prey

1. This chapter's plot development consists of Mack and the boys of the Palace Flophouse deciding to throw Doc a surprise party. Their now-organized home, complete with furnishings and a large stove, is a source of pride for all. Over the shared jug of liquor, the plans are discussed for the party. What is Mack's plan?

Chapter 8

1. This chapter introduces another vignette about some new characters on Cannery Row, the Malloys. Briefly describe the Malloys. Explain how Mrs. Malloy's behavior is ironic and what her character represents.

4. What are the signs that evil is lurking in Cannery Row? What is the climax of the plot and what is its significance?

5. Mack is again indebted to Doc, this time for saving Darling. What does he do at the end of the chapter?
