

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

Of Mice and Men

by John Steinbeck

written by Michelle Ryan

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Introduction

Originally published in 1937, John Steinbeck's novel *Of Mice and Men* reflects life during the Great Depression in the real agricultural town of Salinas, California. Steinbeck was familiar with this area as it was his birthplace and where his family owned land when he was a small child. Steinbeck patterned his characters after the men and women who were affected by the Great Depression as it contributed to the poverty of all walks of life across America. Men and women across the United States were forced to sell their assets and travel in order to find work. These men and women, as well as the countryside where the story takes place, would have been very familiar to John Steinbeck.

Of Mice and Men follows Lennie and George, two men who represent migrant farm workers who traveled to the West Coast in order to find the American Dream. Lennie and George are poor and lonely, as they have only each other for companionship. Because of the nature of life during the 1930s, George and Lennie were forced to live a lifestyle that forced travel and prohibited them from settling down to start families. Consequently, rootlessness and loneliness became a way of life. The ideal of settling down and restarting a better life becomes the catalyst of the American Dream that George and Lennie strive for throughout the novel.

John Steinbeck is considered one of America's greatest Naturalist writers. The Naturalist literary movement is characterized by literature that employs the following features:

- Naturalist writing is devoid of many poetic features that other authors might use. The prose uses few descriptions that provide images for the reader, and instead, focuses on the explanations and details. While *Of Mice and Men* contains passages of description (specifically the beginnings of chapters one and five), a majority of the text is free from metaphor. Naturalist writing explores sociological conditions in an almost objective manner, rather than focusing on the beauty of the language and story.
- Naturalist writing explores conflicts between social classes, particularly on the exploitation of workers by those in positions of power. For example, in *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck examines a microcosm of America by creating George and Lennie, who are trying to survive on a ranch, while at the same time creating a story that reflects the larger societal conflicts at hand: a lack of public policy to aid those afflicted by poverty and homelessness. Steinbeck's examination of both the microcosm and macrocosm describe American politics in the 1930s.
- Similar to the social commentary provided by Naturalist literature, *Of Mice and Men* is also a document of migrant workers in the 1930s. Naturalist writers create stories that tend to focus on one specific occupation or trade in order to document society, gathering specific data about actual life before writing. Also, because the literature focuses on one occupation or trade, the setting is usually contained to one less-than-ideal place, in the case of *Of Mice and Men*, a farm. The setting provides a detailed look at the most brutal aspects of life that accompany self-preservation and basic human need. Steinbeck used his ranching experience, as well as his experience in the Salinas Valley in order to create a novel that is more textbook than literature.

Objectives

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

1. explain the significance of the title and its relationship to one of the major themes in the novel.
2. recognize and explain the allusion in the title “Of Mice and Men.”
3. explain the use of figurative language and rhetorical techniques within the text and how they function.
4. characterize the main characters within the novel, and explain their purpose in the story.
5. define the chosen vocabulary words.
6. offer a close reading of the novel and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text.
7. demonstrate their literal, personal, interpretive, and critical understanding of the text.
8. explain the central conflicts in the play, and explain the nature of the internal and external conflicts with which various characters cope.
9. identify and discuss the following themes in the play
 - A. the impossibility of the American dream
 - B. loneliness and isolation during the Depression
 - C. friendship and camaraderie
 - D. nature
 - E. violence
10. trace and discuss images: animals, Candy’s dog, Lennie’s pup.
11. define the term “microcosm” and point out how the ranch in this novel is a microcosm of American society.
12. understand how the Depression influenced the lives of American men and women.
13. explain how each of the main characters in the novel dealt with the concept of loneliness.
14. understand how the Naturalist literary movement is reflected in the novel.

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. This is a story about people, their friendships, plans, and dreams. Describe George and Lennie's dream. How is their dream representative of the dreams of the migrant worker in the 1930s?
2. Steinbeck uses foreshadowing to build suspense and make later actions more credible. Identify and discuss three incidents of foreshadowing in this novel and explain the effect that the foreshadowing has on the reader's interpretation of events.
3. Identify and explain how characteristics of Naturalism are portrayed in the novel.
4. Examine the relationship between Lennie and George. Be sure to focus on both the negative and positive aspects of the relationship.
5. Choose one of the minor characters in the novel (Crooks, Curley's wife, Curley, etc.) and explain the purpose he or she serves in the story. How would the story change if he or she was not included in the story?
6. Steinbeck's novel explores the morality of a mercy killing. Explain how you feel the novel portrays mercy killings, using specific evidence from the text to support your answer. Then, explain whether or not you believe that Lennie's death was justified, again using specific evidence from the text to support your answer.
7. Read the poem "To a Mouse" by Robert Burns. Throughout the novel, John Steinbeck argues that "the best-laid plans of mice and men" often go wrong. Explain how he attempts to show this in the novel.
8. Using any pairing of characters in the novel, explain how Steinbeck explores a person's responsibility to another person.
9. Explain the use of animal imagery as it is used to describe the emotional states of the characters within the novel.
10. Using specific examples from the novel, explain whether or not the reader should feel sympathetic to both George and Lennie.
11. Compare and contrast the instance where Carlson takes Candy's dog away to kill it, and George shoots Lennie. What does each of the instances add to the novel's theme of people's responsibility to one another and the importance of friendship?

Of Mice and Men

Chapter I

VOCABULARY

bundle – a pack
brusquely – gruffly
contemplated – thought about
debris – leftovers, garbage
dejectedly – sadly
imperiously – like a dictator, arrogantly
junctures – joints
lumbered – moved heavily
morosely – glumly, gloomily
mottled – spotted
quivered – shook, trembled
recumbent – reclining, drooping
resignedly – in a surrendering manner
skittering – moving rapidly; skipping

1. The beginning of the novel begins with a rich description of the physical setting. Cite examples of three uses of descriptive language. Explain the effect on the mood of the novel by beginning the narrative with this description. What is Steinbeck trying to suggest about the area by the Salinas River?

2. “Jungle-up” is an idiom used in the following sentence: “...and beaten hard by tramps who come wearily down from the highway in the evening to jungle-up near water.” Explain the meaning of the idiom.

Chapter 3

VOCABULARY

bemused – preoccupied, slightly dazed, deep in thought
derision – scorn, disapproval
hoosegow – jail
raptly – intently
reprehensible – blameworthy
reverently – worshipfully
scuttled – moved very quickly
subdued – dominated, forced down
subsided – slowed, then stopped
wryly – dryly, ironically

1. Why did George at one time play jokes on Lennie? Why did he stop? What do we learn about the interdependence of George and Lennie?

2. How does Slim compare Lennie to other men?

3. Why does George reveal to Slim what happened to them in Weed? What is Slim's response?

7. At first Crooks is unfriendly to Lennie, but then he invites Lennie to sit. Why does he change?

8. Crooks is also very lonely, but how is his loneliness different from the others'?

9. Why does Lennie become upset with Crooks?

10. Why does Crooks make Lennie believe that George will not come back for him?
