



Of Mice and Men

By John Steinbeck

Concept Analysis

Introduction/Basic Rationale

Easy and interesting to read, John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* not only provides students with an intimate view of descriptive and poetic prose, but it also provides a portrait of two loyal friends just trying to make their way in the world and achieve their dreams. It would enhance learning for any student between ninth and twelfth grade.

Central Enduring Issues -- And What Things Do You Want To Remember?

Several central issues are explored in this book. First, it gives a personal an up-close view of what it was like to be a migrant worker in California in the 1930's. Many elements in the text relate to the signs of the times. A huge focus of the book is also on friendship vs. loneliness. Lennie and George have a life-long friendship in which they look out for each other. Many of the other people they interact with do not believe that that kind of friendship is possible, but they are still envious of their relationship. Perhaps the biggest question that the book raises is: what is the true meaning of friendship? The book also focuses on dreams, specifically the "American dream" to own land, provide for oneself, and to prosper. Lennie and George have their own plans to fulfill the "American dream" and they are willing to work and sacrifice to make it possible. Because of the various (though interrelated issues), one must wonder what Steinbeck's primary purpose was in writing the novel.

Issues Related to the Study of Literature

This book would be helpful in teaching a number of literary issues including the following: characterization (comparing the desires of each of the main characters),

foreshadowing (comparing Candy's experience with his dog to that of George's in the last chapter), setting (being aware of the rich, descriptive passages Steinbeck uses to set up the scenes), and recurrent images (is there any significance in Lennie's fascination with soft things and his tendency to kill them accidentally, what about the animals in both the opening and the closing scenes, or why is the retelling of their dream so important to Lennie and does it hold the same importance to George?). Also, reading this book would introduce (or reinforce) some reading strategies. Students will need to know how to make inferences, understand dialogue with a dialect, recognize foreshadowing, learn to ask questions of the text while they read, apply new vocabulary words to understanding, interpret heavy or dense texts, and understand characters.

Organizational Patterns

The format of this book is almost a short *novella* because of its short length. It is set up in six chapters. The first chapter introduces the reader to the primary characters of the novel, Lennie and George, who are traveling to a new place to work. It goes into quite a bit of detail about their dream. It also alludes to some shady behavior in a previous town, hence their current migration. The second chapter introduces the reader to the other main characters as well as the setting at the ranch. Also, it goes into more detail about Lennie and George. Chapter three is big on foreshadowing. Candy acquiesces to his roommate's complaints about his old dog, and allows his roommate to shoot it. Then, Candy gets involved in Lennie and George's plan, which acts as a substitute friendship for losing his dog. Also, this chapter introduces a possible conflict between Curley and Lennie. Chapter four brings up racial, gender, age, and disability issues. It toys with the question: can anyone have a dream? In chapter five, the rising action climaxes when Lennie accidentally murders Curley's wife. He runs to hide. George and Candy are devastated when they realize their dreams will not materialize. In the last chapter, a search party is out looking for Lennie so

that they can execute him for killing Curley's wife. George misleads them so that he can talk to Lennie alone. He kills him mercifully saving him from a brutal death by Lennie's enemies. The novel ends when one who does not understand the meaning of friendship questions George's remorse.

Vocabulary/Background Knowledge Issues

Because of the emphasis on dialogue in the text, some background knowledge about slang of the 1930's would be important so that the students would be better able to understand the text. The students should be aware of living conditions for migrant workers in California during the Depression. They should also be familiar with the history around the dustbowl. Also, a teacher would need to be aware of idiomatic phrases and geographical allusions which appear frequently in the novel.

Implications for Gender and Students of Diversity

This book would most likely be more appealing to boys, but because of the emphasis in the book on friendship, it would be appealing to girls as well. There are some definite gender and cultural elements to address. For example, it uses the "n-word" on occasion. The black character, Crooks, is ostracized from the main community and seldom listened to with respect. The only female character does not even have her name revealed. We know her only in association with her husband. The book raises awareness about issues of the elderly. Also, and perhaps most importantly, because so much of the book centers on a character who has a mental disability, a frank discussion about mental retardation would be appropriate before reading the novel.

It might raise a few concerns among parents (or even some students) as it talks freely (though implicitly, as opposed to explicitly) about prostitution, gambling, and alcohol consumption. But, these seem to appear in the novel more as a sign of the times (of the

loneliness and desperation) rather than for a didactic reason. Steinbeck does not appear to take a moral stance on these issues. He is just stating the lifestyle as he saw it.

Supplemental Texts – Informational/functional/literary

Appropriate supplemental texts might include: John Steinbeck's Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech, an overview of the area in California (mapped out), *The Grapes of Wrath* film, *Out of the Dust* (a book of poetry by Karen Hesse), the ending of *Old Yeller*, the scene from the movie *Castaway* when Tom Hanks' character loses "Wilson" (to talk about the innate need for a person to have another person to be with/look out for), an informational text on mental retardation, stories by Peter Rand (if they really do exist), photographs by Dorothea Lange, paintings by Maynard Dixon, paintings based on this novel, and whatever other options seem appropriate.

Related Research/Project Ideas

The following projects would be helpful: a multi-genre research project about one aspect of life between 1920-1940, an analysis of the novel based on a student's understanding of Steinbeck's purpose, found poetry using a text from the novel, and, again, whatever other options seem appropriate.

Concluding Thoughts

Of Mice and Men would provide students with a window to life in a different time period under different circumstances. It would provide a good launching ground for literary analyses, reader response assignments, evaluating an author's purpose in writing a work, and understanding thematic elements such as friendship vs. loneliness, the "American dream," and life in California between 1920 and 1940. In short, the book would be a powerful catalyst for some intense class discussions and hopefully, some epiphanies.