

Of Mice and Men

By John Steinbeck

Especially for grades 7-12

Spring 2009 – Touring Fall 2009

(NOTE: standards are included for reading the novel *Of Mice and Men*.)

Virginia SOLs

English – 7.5, 8.5, 9.1, 9.5, 10.3, 10.6, 11.6, 12.6

History and Social Studies – USII.5, CE.8

Theatre Arts – M.8, M.9, M.12, M.13, M.14, TI.8, TI.10, TI.11, TI.13, TII.11, TII.12, TII.13, TII.14, TII.15, TII.16, TIII.12

Tennessee TCAPS

Language Arts – 7.1.12, 7.1.13, 8.1.12, 8.1.13

English I – 2.1, 2.2, 2.3 **English II** – 2.1, 2.2, 2.3

English III – 2.01, 2.02, 2.04, 2.07, 2.08, 2.10, 2.11, 2.12, 4.05, 4.07

Theatre 6th-8th Grade – 6.0, 7.0, 8.0 **Theatre 9th-12th** – 5.0, 6.0, 7.0, 8.0

North Carolina SCOS

Theatre Arts – 7.7.01, 7.7.03, 7.7.05, 8.7.01, 8.7.04, 8.7.06,

Theatre Arts I – 5.03, 6.01, 7.02, 8.01 **Theatre Arts II** – 5.01, 5.03, 6.03, 8.03

Theatre Arts III – 1.06, 5.02, 7.02, 8.0

English Language Arts – 7.5.02, 8.5.02

English I – 5.01, 5.03 **English II** – 5.01, 5.03

English III – 5.01, 5.03 **AP English** – 5.01

US History – 9.01, 9.02, 9.03 **African American Studies** – 7.01

Sociology – 3.02, 3.03, 3.04

Setting

Various locations in an agricultural valley in California – late 1930's

Characters

George – an itinerant farm worker; a man with a dream

Lennie – his friend; a big, strong man, simple-minded; George takes care of him

Candy – a one-handed rancher whose only companion is an ancient dog

The Boss – the ranch manager

Curley – son of The Boss; a small, vicious bully

Curley's Wife – Curley's bitter new wife; attempts to seduce the ranch hands

Slim – a wise, well-respected ranch hand whose word is law

Carlson – a ranch hand, coarse and insensitive

Whit – a kind-hearted ranch hand

Crooks – a proud and independent Negro who also is an outcast on the ranch

Synopsis

George and his best friend Lennie are migrant ranch hands, traveling along the Salinas River in search of their next job. Lennie is strong but simpleminded; he doesn't know his own strength, and this has gotten him into serious trouble in other towns. George does the planning for the duo. They hope to one day buy a farm of their own where they can live off the "fat of the land" and Lennie can raise rabbits.

Once George and Lennie begin working on the new farm, Lennie becomes an instant bullying target for Curley, the boss's son. Curley pushes Lennie too far though, and Lennie uses his incredible strength to crush Curley's hand. Curley's wife is intrigued by the strong and often silent Lennie, and she attempts to get closer to him in private—something that George had warned Lennie against. At first, their meeting is harmless. Lennie opens up about his dreams of tending rabbits, and Curley's wife tells him about her dreams of starring in pictures.



When their conversation gets more intimate though, Lennie loses control and accidentally kills her.

Lennie flees the farm and heads to a prearranged meeting place where he was told to wait for George if something went wrong. George discovers what Lennie has done and quickly realizes that their dreams of moving on and living peacefully can never be fulfilled. George finds Lennie at the meeting place and, with an angry mob led by Curley hot on Lennie's trail, decides that he has no choice but to put Lennie down for his own good.

Vocabulary

gutter
thrashing machine
bundle
stroke
cat house
irrigation
stake

rabbit hutch
bunkhouse
scourges
kennel
tules
Luger
tart

ringer
valise
fat of the land
take a powder
kewpie doll
euchre
rheumatism

Playwright Information

John Steinbeck (1902-1968), born in Salinas, California, came from a family of moderate means. He worked his way through college at Stanford University but never graduated.

In 1925 he went to New York, where he tried for a few years to establish himself as a free-lance writer, but he failed and returned to California.

After publishing some novels and short stories, Steinbeck first became widely known with *Tortilla Flat* (1935), a series of humorous stories about Monterey *paisanos*. Steinbeck's novels can all be classified as social novels dealing with the economic problems of rural labor, but there is also a streak of worship of the soil in his books, which does not always agree with his matter-of-fact sociological approach. After the rough and earthy humor of *Tortilla Flat*, he moved on to

more serious fiction, often aggressive in its social criticism, to *In Dubious Battle* (1936), which deals with the strikes of the migratory fruit pickers on California plantations. This was followed by *Of Mice and Men* (1937), the story of the imbecile giant Lennie, and a series of admirable short stories collected in the volume *The Long Valley* (1938). In 1939 he published what is considered his best work, *The Grapes of Wrath*, the story of Oklahoma tenant farmers who, unable to earn a living from the land, moved to California where they became migratory workers. Among his later works should be mentioned *East of Eden* (1952), *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961), and *Travels with Charley* (1962), a travelogue in which Steinbeck wrote about his impressions during a three-month tour in a truck that led him through forty American states. He died in New York City in 1968.



Themes:

The American Dream

The American Dream is the faith or belief that the United States holds unlimited opportunity for everyone, regardless of background, race, religion, or economic status.

For many victims of the Depression, the struggles of day-to-day life were almost too much to bear. They needed something larger to turn to for inspiration. Many of these Americans turned their hopes and faith towards The American Dream.

Each character in *Of Mice and Men* is driven by a very specific objective: something they want, need or desire; something they work towards or strive for. In *Of Mice and Men*, many of these objectives are directly connected to The American Dream. George and Lennie dream of buying a ranch where they can “be their own bosses” and live off “the fat of the land” – a place where Lennie can tend the rabbits.



Loneliness

Candy's only friend is his dog. When Carlson kills the dog, Candy is left with no one and attaches himself to George and Lennie's dream in order to avoid being an outcast and alone. Even after Lennie kills Curley's wife and life will never be the same, Candy still wants to carry out the dream.

Crooks feels "...A guy goes nuts if he ain't got nobody. Don't make no difference who the guy is, long's he with you..." He would work for nothing, as long as he could communicate with others.

Curley's wife is so overwhelmed by loneliness that she seeks companionship from the other farm workers. "Think I don't like to talk to somebody ever' once in a while?" In the end, only Lennie will befriend her because all of the other men fear Curley and will have nothing to do with her.

Friendship

George and Lennie share a bond so strong that when one is destroyed, the other inevitably is as well. Steinbeck often stresses how ranchers are loners, and George and Lennie are the only ones who travel in pairs. They seem to be two halves of the same person, and they know how special together they truly are. “Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world...They got no family. They don’t belong no place... With us, it ain’t like that. We got a future. We got somebody to talk to that gives a damn about us...”

Social Aggression

Social Aggression is defined as actions and behaviors directed at damaging another’s self-esteem, social status, or both. Social Aggression can take the form of facial expressions, gossip, bullying, verbal and/or non-verbal exclusion, or the manipulation of friendships and other relationships.



The foremost reason for social aggression in *Of Mice and Men* is The Great Depression. During the Depression, employment opportunities were increasingly rare, so workers were forced to travel from town to town in search of the next job. They were unable to start families and settle down. Workers who did get married struggled to keep their families together. Saving enough money to buy a home of one’s own was virtually

impossible on a migrant worker’s salary. Racial segregation was still a widespread policy, and the economic collapse only heightened racial tensions.

The characters in *Of Mice and Men* are coping with the unique challenge of The Great Depression. They have been victims of social change, economic collapse, and environmental catastrophe. They are alienated from society. They are cut off from their roots, from larger cities and from the mainstream of society. They do, however, get to make the rules for their own little corner of the world. They decide who gets to play horseshoes. They decide who gets to join them in town on the weekends. They can choose to exclude any member of their portion of society who does not fit the standards they have set. George does not let Lennie go into town with the rest of the guys. The farmers prohibit Crooks from entering their bunkhouse. Curley’s Wife isn’t allowed to stay anywhere around the working men. Through these small acts of exclusion, the workers assert their power over others, however small and insignificant those powers may be.

Question and Activities for Guided Study and Discussion

1) In what ways has The American Dream changed since *Of Mice and Men*? What social and economic factors have caused those changes? How does The American Dream differ for different groups of Americans? How did Martin Luther King, Jr. interpret The American Dream? Is his interpretation related to the hopes and dreams of the characters in *Of Mice and Men*? Are there any characters from *Of Mice and Men* who you believe are capable of going on to achieve The American Dream? Why or why not? Do all citizens of the United States have equal opportunity to achieve The American Dream today? What social and economic factors support your argument? Do Americans today have greater access to The American Dream than Americans during the Depression?

2) Ask the following people what their American Dream is and write it down:

One of your Parents
One of your Grandparents
Your Aunt or Uncle
A Neighbor
One of Your Teachers
Your Sibling
Your Best Friend
You

Compare the answers you received. How are they different?
How are they the same? Why do you think they vary?



3) Every character in a play has an objective. An objective may be defined as something a character wants, needs or desires. On a piece of paper, list the names of the following characters in a column: George, Lennie, Candy, The Boss, Curley, Curley's Wife, Slim, Crooks and Carlson: Next to each name write down that character's objective when the play starts. How do they differ from each other? Do any of these objectives conflict with each other? How? What happens when they conflict? Next to each character's initial objective, write their objective at the end of the play. How do they differ? What accounts for the difference?

4) How do the time and place of this play affect the story? What was the significance of setting *Of Mice and Men* in Soledad, California? Locate Soledad on a map of California. How far is it from John Steinbeck's hometown of Salinas? What is the population of Soledad today? How does it compare to the population back in the 1930's, when this story was set? What sort of industry took place in this area of California at that time? How does it compare to Soledad's industry today? Has Soledad changed much? Could this play have been set there today? Why or why not? Discuss how important time and place are in telling a story.

5) Who is your favorite character in this play? Why? Who is the protagonist? The antagonist? Why? What would you do if you were responsible for caring for someone like Lennie? Is there any character in this play who could have saved Lennie? Who? How? Break into groups and write a scene in which this character saves Lennie from himself. Who would be involved? Act your scene in front of the class.

6) What might have happened to Lennie if he had been arrested at the end of the play? Would he have been put on trial? For what crime? What role does his mental disability play in the death of Curley's wife? Should this be accounted for in his punishment? What should his punishment be? Keep in mind this play was set in the late 1930's. Were the laws regarding murder different at this time? How so? What should happen to George at the end of the play? Should he be put on trial, be held accountable for Lennie's death? Who is more guilty of murder – Lennie or George? Why?

Breaking the class into various members of the Court, put both George and Lennie on trial. Twelve students will act as jury members, two students will be Prosecutors (one for George, one for Lennie) and two students will be Defense (again, one for George, one for Lennie). The other students will take on the other roles in the play and be called as witnesses in the trial.

7) Keeps a journal as one of the following characters: Candy, Curley, Whit, and Crooks. Begin your journal entries the night before George and Lennie arrive on the farm. End your journal entry the night after George kills Lennie. Be sure to include all your thoughts for the day and your hopes and dreams for the future. Compare your character's journal entries with those of the other characters. How does the action of the story differ according to point-of-view?

8) What separates Crooks from the rest of the men? Why do you think John Steinbeck portrayed Crooks as an African American? How did it affect the story? What rights did African Americans possess in the 1930's? How did the Great depression affect the African American community? Does racial discrimination still exist today? Why?

9) Both the opening and closing scenes in *Of Mice and Men* are set on the banks of the Salinas River. How is water used symbolically in this play? Can you think of any other famous scenes in literature/art that take place on or near a river? Does the same symbolism apply? How did Barter's set design accommodate a river scene? What sort of technology was involved? Can you think of any other ways to recreate a river on stage?

10) Using pictures, create a collage that you feel is representative of this story. Include characters, place and concepts from the play. When you are finished, give your collage a title that you feel best represents its overall theme.

11) Why does Steinbeck never give Curley's Wife a name? Discuss. What do you think of Steinbeck's portrayal of women in this play? How do these women compare to the women in Steinbeck's other works – for example Ma Jode in *The Grapes of Wrath*?

12) Research the life of John Steinbeck. How much of his life can be found in *Of Mice and Men*?

13) George and Lennie are migrant workers. Do we still have migrant workers in this country today? If so, how do their lives compare to the lives of George and Lennie?

14) Why does Candy allow his dog to be killed? What function does the dog's death play in the story?



15) A play script is structured as follows:

Inciting incident: the launching pad of the play; the action or short sequence of actions that constitutes the point of attack.

Rising action: the sequence of actions and events that leads to the climax.

Climax: the action that resolves the conflict; the central dramatic question is answered; comes late in the play.

Falling action: the acceptance of the situation derived from the climax; the resolution.

What is the Inciting Incident in *Of Mice and Men*?

List three events in *Of Mice and Men* that can be considered Rising Action.

What is the Climax in *Of Mice and Men*?

What is the Falling Action in *Of Mice and Men*?

16) Write a review of Barter's production of *Of Mice and Men*. Be sure to include all the elements in your critique: the set, costumes, the sound design, the lighting design, the directing and the performances. How did each of these elements influence the final product? Did they work well together? What would you have changed, done differently? Be specific.

17) Social Aggression is defined as actions and behaviors directed at damaging another's self-esteem, social status, or both. What acts of social aggression have you seen in your school and community? What role did the school or community environment play in those acts of aggression? What role did economic factors play? What role did social pressure play? Were there other factors that somehow impacted the situation?

18) List three major causes of social aggression in your life. Are any of these causes similar to the causes of social aggression in *Of Mice and Men*?

19) Has anyone ever taken out his/her anger with something else on you? Write a letter to this person. Explain how his or her actions made you feel. Suggest some other ways this person might deal with his or her anger. What are some alternatives to social aggression? Are there ways to address and respond to the causes of social aggression without attempting to damage someone else's self-esteem or social status?

Suggested Further Reading

Other novels by John Steinbeck include: *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Tortilla Flat*, *East of Eden*, *In Dubious Battle*, *The Long Valley*, *Cannery Row* and *The Pearl*

To find out more about John Steinbeck, his life and his works go to this link:

<http://www.steinbeck.org/MainFrame.html>