

PHILIP ALLAN
LITERATURE GUIDE

FOR GCSE

TEACHER RESOURCE PACK



Background

Background 1

The title of the novel

The title of the novel comes from the poem ‘To a Mouse’, by the Scottish poet Robert Burns (1759–96). It is addressed to a mouse that builds its winter nest in a wheat field, only to see it destroyed by a ploughman. Burns wrote his poem in Scots dialect.

Original

The best laid schemes o’ mice an’ men
 Gang aft a-gley,
 An’ lea’e us nought but grief an’ pain,
 For promis’d joy!

Standard English

The best planned schemes of mice and men
 Often go wrong,
 And leave us nothing but grief and pain,
 Instead of the joy they promised!

This is relevant to Steinbeck’s novel in four ways:

- 1 Lennie likes to stroke mice.
- 2 The setting of the novel is a farm.
- 3 Steinbeck’s characters seem to be at the mercy of fate, almost as powerless as mice.
- 4 (Most important) A major theme of the novel is ‘shattered dreams’. Lennie and George are migrant farm workers who dream of having their own home and land, but this dream is wrecked, like the mouse’s nest in the poem.

1 With a partner, discuss the following questions.

- a Why might two migrant farm workers dream of having their own home and smallholding?

- b What factors might prevent them from making their dream come true?

Then write your own paragraph giving your ideas. Write on a separate sheet of paper or in your exercise book.

- 2 Write about how you would like your life to be in ten years’ time. Try to be optimistic but realistic. Will you be married or single? Will you have children? Where will you live? What will you do for a living? How will you have changed as a person?

Background 2

The Depression and the American Dream

The new-style GCSE focuses on *Of Mice and Men* as an ‘other cultures’ text — one that reflects its cultural context. The ‘context’ of a novel means the circumstances in which it was written — the social, historical and literary factors that influenced what the author wrote. *Of Mice and Men* is a novel in which the *social* context is important. The book focuses on a poor and deprived class of men on whom the US economy depended. It is set near Salinas in California in the 1930s, during a period known as the Depression. Steinbeck was personally familiar with ranch life in California. The novel was published in 1937. To find out more about Steinbeck’s life see the *Philip Allan Literature Guide* to the novel.

You should bear in mind that many of the attitudes widely held in 1930s California differ from those in modern Britain. This is reflected in the novel. For example, there is a general acceptance of racism in the novel, and an assumption that the moral standards applied to men were different from those applied to women. This, however, does not mean that Steinbeck himself was racist or sexist.

The Depression

The Depression began with the Wall Street Crash in 1929, when the value of shares on the New York Stock Exchange plummeted. Investors struggled to sell their shares, which made share prices fall even lower. Businesses went bankrupt and people became wary of investment, so there was widespread unemployment and poverty in both the USA and other parts of the world.

Bad farming leads to the Dust Bowl

In the USA the problem was made worse by over-farming and drought. In the Midwest, especially Oklahoma, the soil became eroded and exhausted. As a result, many thousands of poor farm workers (sometimes called ‘Okies’) headed west to California, where *Of Mice and Men* is set. Unskilled workers like the novel’s main characters George and Lennie had to move from place to place to get work. They were at the mercy of the bosses and were considered lucky to find any work. Wages were low and conditions were poor.

The American Dream

When people began to emigrate from Europe to America, most had hopes and dreams for their success in this new land. The USA did not have the same rigid class system as Europe, and until about 1920 there was still land waiting to be claimed and farmed. In theory, anyone who worked hard could become rich and successful — this was the American Dream. In reality it wasn’t quite that easy.

George and Lennie are, arguably, believers in the American Dream. How far George really believes in it you will have to judge, but at the point before Lennie does one ‘bad thing’ too many, both men, together with Candy, seem to believe that they really can save enough money to buy some land and live free, happy, self-sufficient lives.

Curley’s wife has her own version of the American Dream. She tells Lennie: ‘I coulda made somethin’ of myself...Maybe I will yet.’ In the 1930s, the film industry, based even then in Hollywood (in California), was growing. Curley’s wife dreams of being ‘discovered’ and becoming a star.

Racism and sexism

It is a feature of the novel that attitudes that we would now call racist and sexist are generally accepted. The USA has a special history of racism because slavery was once a major feature of its economy. Crooks is a black stable buck, a skilled worker responsible for looking after the mules and horses. He is not allowed in the bunk house because he is black. The one time that he is allowed in, at Christmas, he is set upon by another man. The boss routinely ‘gives him hell’, taking out his irritation on him, largely because he is black and therefore he has to put up with it.

Curley’s wife is also treated unfairly, although many students find it more difficult to see this. She is generally seen as a ‘tramp’ and a ‘tart’ because she takes an interest in the men on the ranch. On the other hand, no one on the ranch criticises her husband Curley for spending Saturday night in a brothel, even though the couple have been married for only two weeks. When she threatens to get Crooks lynched, she is being racist, but she is also responding to the lack of respect she gets on the ranch, and asserting herself over the one person who is beneath her in the pecking order.

Another way in which Curley’s wife reveals the social context of the novel is that she is disappointed because she thought she had a chance to become a film star. This is another aspect of the American Dream, which makes her think she, too, could be discovered and go from rags to riches, like some Hollywood stars (see above).

To find out more about racism and sexism in the context of *Of Mice and Men*, see the *Philip Allan Literature Guide* to the novel.

1 Answer these short questions on the context of *Of Mice and Men*.

a When and where is the novel set?

b What was the Depression?

c Why was California’s population increasing at the time when the novel is set?

d Why was it theoretically easier to escape poverty in the USA than in Britain?

e How did Hollywood help to create the American Dream?

f Why does the USA have a special history of racism?

- 2 On a separate sheet of paper or in your exercise book, write a paragraph on the possible benefits of having 'dreams' in the sense of cherished ambitions.

Add a second paragraph on the risks of having dreams. If you wish, you could apply this to your own life. For example, you might dream of becoming a top footballer, a pop star, a vet or just rich.

Finally, write a third short paragraph weighing up the benefits and risks and summing up your views. You could begin, 'On balance, I think...'

- 3 On a separate sheet of paper or in your exercise book, write a news article for the *Salinas Gazette*, for any day in 1935, with the headline 'Mixed feelings on migrant workers'.

You could begin, 'It was announced yesterday that a record number of migrant workers entered California last year. Reactions to them have been mixed...'

Here are some 'quotes' you could use or adapt.

'These guys are taking the food out of our mouths. They'll work for a dollar a day. I was born right here in Salinas...'

'Ranch owners have been hit same as anyone. I pay those Okies a wage and give 'em a bunk to sleep on. They can take it or leave it. I ain't running a charity!'

'Those guys talk about buying some land, but what little money they got they spend in here on a Saturday night. But I ain't complainin'!'

'I had a little farm back in Oklahoma but it ain't worth a dime now. Here I get 50 bucks a month, with food and lodging — but if I can save 25...'

Extension activity

Use the internet to research:

- a conditions for migrant workers in California in the 1930s
- b conditions for illegal migrant workers in modern Britain

Write about the similarities and differences in the situation of both groups.

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Plot notes
and activities

Plot notes and activities

Section 1 The pool in the river

(from start of section to ‘...the green pool’, p. 19)

- A peaceful scene by a river is described.

Note: Remember that Steinbeck does not call the separate sections of the novel ‘sections’, and does not number them or give them titles. On these worksheets, for convenience, they are referred to as sections and numbered.

Read the first three paragraphs of the novel. Notice that Steinbeck begins, not by immediately introducing his characters, but by carefully ‘painting’ a scene. The place he describes is idyllic — it is like a little paradise. We read of the Salinas River, which has ‘slipped twinkling over the yellow sands in the sunlight’ and of the animals that come there. We also read of boys and tramps who come to the pool in the river to swim or drink. There is a sense of peace and natural harmony.

The geographical details in this opening are real, not imaginary. The Salinas River runs through the Salinas Valley, flanked by the Gabilan Mountains. Soledad is a real town. Steinbeck spent the first 18 years of his life here and it is likely that his description is based on a real place. (For more on Steinbeck’s life, see the accompanying *Philip Allan Literature Guide*.)

1 Answer these quick questions.

a What two sorts of tree are mentioned?

b What six different animals are mentioned?

c What two sorts of people come here?

2 Notice that the first two paragraphs are in the present tense. What is the effect of this? How would the effect be different if they were in the past tense?

3 Find at least three words or phrases that make this place sound pleasant.

- 4 What effect do you think Steinbeck is trying to achieve by including all the animals in his description?

Extension activity

Find out more about the Salinas Valley in California. If possible, find out what it was like in the 1930s. You could start with these websites:

- www.cityofsoledad.com for what it is like now
- www.mchsmuseum.com/salinasbrief.html for its history

Write at least one paragraph describing the valley.

Plot notes and activities

Section 1 George and Lennie make their entry

(from p. 19, 'They had walked...', to end of section)

- George and Lennie are described; they are going to new jobs.
- George makes Lennie give up a dead mouse.
- George tells Lennie how to behave at the new ranch.
- George complains about Lennie, then feels he has been 'mean'.
- They eat supper.
- George tells Lennie again about their dream of owning land.
- George tells Lennie to come back to the brush if he gets into trouble.

Steinbeck uses this section to tell us about the two main characters and their relationship and to explain their situation. He introduces them in a 'cinematic' way. We hear their footsteps first, then see them emerging into the space by the pool. We receive our first clues about their relationship here. Lennie walks behind George and almost knocks him over when George stops. George's first words are a warning to Lennie not to drink too much water.

We discover that George is small, intelligent and careful and looks after Lennie, who is big and well-meaning but slow-witted and childlike. We hear that the two men are coming for jobs on a ranch, but have been dropped off too far from the ranch by a lazy bus driver. This reminds us that men like them are likely to be badly treated.

1 Answer these quick questions.

a How are the two men dressed?

b What are they carrying?

c What is the first thing George tells Lennie?

d Why have they had a long walk?

e What does George take away from Lennie?

f What do they eat for supper?

Plot notes and activities

Section 2 The bunk house

(from start of section to ‘...so you won’t forget it’, p. 53)

- The bunk house is described.
- Candy shows George and Lennie where they will sleep.
- George and Lennie meet the boss, then Curley.
- George warns Lennie to stay away from Curley.

Like the first section, this one begins with a description of a place — a setting. This time, it is the bunk house. Steinbeck’s description of it is down-to-earth and factual, reflecting the nature of the place. It is simple and functional.

This section introduces most of the other characters. Steinbeck has already made sure that we will identify primarily with George and Lennie by introducing them and their troubles to us in Section 1. We now tend to see the other characters from their point of view.

Candy, the old swamper (who cleans the ranch buildings), shows George and Lennie the bunk house. Candy is anxious to reassure George about how clean the place is. We have a preview of the boss when Candy mentions twice how angry the boss was when George and Lennie failed to turn up the previous evening — and how he took out his anger on Crooks the stable buck. In this way, Steinbeck gives us a preview of Crooks too.

Curley enters, looking for his wife because he is a jealous and suspicious husband. We see at once that Curley is an aggressive and unpleasant little man. George takes an instant dislike to him and warns Lennie to keep away from him.

1 Answer these quick questions.

a Where do the men keep their personal belongings?

b What are we told about the bunk house floor?

c Why does Candy have to reassure George?

d What does Candy say Crooks has in his room?

e What does the boss suspect George of doing?

f Why does Curley get angry with Lennie?

- 2 Candy now plays a minor role on the ranch, but he is an important character in the novel. He ‘previews’ other characters, telling George and Lennie (and us) about them before they appear in person. Suggest why Steinbeck uses this previewing technique.

- 3 *Of Mice and Men* is full of moments of dramatic interest — when Steinbeck makes us want to know how a situation will turn out. Explain the dramatic interest in the scene in which George and Lennie meet the boss.

- 4 Summarise Candy’s ‘preview’ of Curley’s wife and describe your personal response to it. Consider:

- how accurate you think it is
- what factors might influence Candy’s views (think about Candy himself and about 1930s California)

Write your summary on a separate sheet of paper or in your exercise book.

- 5 Imagine that, shortly after meeting George and Lennie, Curley tells his father (the boss) what he thinks of them. On a separate sheet of paper or in your exercise book, write the dialogue between Curley and his father.

Consider:

- Curley is an aggressive little man. He has taken a dislike to Lennie.
- Curley’s father is suspicious of George but he needs the two men on the ranch.
- George and Lennie have not yet proven their worth.

You could begin: ‘Hey, Pa. You sure you done the right thing hiring them two new guys?’

Role play

In pairs, act out the dialogue suggested in Activity 5 above. Improvise on the script.