

## Literature Unit 1 *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck

### Skills targeted:

**AO1** Respond to texts critically and imaginatively; select and evaluate relevant textual detail to illustrate and support interpretations.

**AO2** Explain how language, structure and form contribute to writers' presentation of ideas, themes and settings.

**AO3** Make comparisons and explain links between texts, evaluating writers' different ways of expressing meaning and achieving effects.

**AO4** Relate texts to their social, cultural and historical contexts; explain how texts have been influential and significant to self and other readers in different contexts and at different times.

### Why study this text?

*Of Mice and Men* is one of the most popular and widely studied texts in secondary schools. Students of all levels of ability engage with the simple narrative style and plot, as well as the moral and social implications of the novella. The title, a quotation from the poem 'To a Mouse' by Robert Burns, holds the key to the many levels of meaning within the text:

*The best-laid schemes o' mice an' men  
Gang aft agley*

This has many resonances. It may be simply interpreted as 'no matter how hard we try, things do not always go to plan'. It brackets men with mice – deflating man's sense of his own importance by coupling him with one of the smallest of creatures. On the literal level, Lennie's fascination with mice is firmly linked to the tragedy at the heart of the tale.

The lines are written in a regional dialect in a fairly brief poem, rather than being from a lofty philosophical work on an epic subject, and Steinbeck's work is likewise a large story writ small in deceptively simple and colloquial language. Burns's lines suggest the ultimate tragedy of human existence – that we are at the mercy of oft random events that impact on our lives, as well as the tyranny of time. In short, as individuals, we have little or no control over our lives.

All these themes may be explored in *Of Mice and Men*. A strong moral message that resonates throughout the book is the vulnerability of human beings who differ in any way from their fellows. We see many examples of loneliness, isolation and sadness, and how these feelings are often met by cruelty and indifference, as well as, just occasionally, by great kindness, understanding and love.

*Of Mice and Men* is also a novella very much of its time, and this unit will create opportunities for students to research and understand its social and historical background, and link their study firmly to the idea of 'exploring cultures'.

### Background and context

John Steinbeck was born in 1902 in Salinas, California. He was the third child of John Ernst Steinbeck and Olive Hamilton Steinbeck; his cultural inheritance was German on his father's side and Irish on his mother's. His father was a businessman who eventually worked as a treasurer for the county of Monterey. His mother was a schoolteacher who instilled in him a passion for reading. Steinbeck's father gave him the responsibility of looking after his own colt, and passed on his love of nature to his son.

Steinbeck always wanted to be a writer, and never wavered from his ambition; however, he also worked at manual jobs early in his life, and it was his work as a 'bindlestiff' or farm labourer that

inspired the novella *Of Mice and Men*, published in 1937. It followed his early successes such as *The Red Pony* (1933), *Tortilla Flat* (1935) and *In Dubious Battle* (1936). *Of Mice and Men* was rewritten by Steinbeck as a play, which opened on Broadway in November 1937, directed by George S. Kaufman; a film was made in 1939. After writing *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck produced his most famous work, *The Grapes of Wrath*, which reflected his research into the lives of migrant workers for a series of articles commissioned by *The San Francisco News*. Later novels included *The Moon is Down*, *East of Eden* and *The Winter of Our Discontent*.

John Steinbeck was married three times, had two sons and was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962. He died of heart failure in 1968 and is buried in Salinas, California.

*Of Mice and Men* is set against the background of the Great Depression. The contrast between the driving force of American capitalism in the 1920s and the economic hardships of the 1930s is highlighted through the way the characters articulate their own version of the American dream, and the fact that they will never be able to realise their version of this dream. Other aspects of American society – such as the role of women, civil rights and the growing influence of Hollywood – are present in the narrative. The book makes a plea for sympathy and understanding for the lonely, the excluded and the vulnerable; it is permeated by an understanding, based on Christianity, that human beings are fundamentally flawed. Central characters Lennie and George embody an ideal of friendship and love that leads ultimately to tragedy but also, arguably, to the ultimate expression of that friendship in the poignant and sacrificial act of the killing of Lennie.

## Discussion points

### Euthanasia

The death of Candy's dog foreshadows the death of Lennie and raises questions about how society treats the old, the weak and the vulnerable. This theme provides opportunities for debates on the morality of mercy killing. Is it right to destroy the dog? Surely no one has the right to take human life; therefore is George wrong to kill Lennie?

### The fall of man

The complex themes of the novella often have religious connotations. The beauty of the natural settings is described lyrically and contrasted with the flawed and repressed characters that inhabit them. Imagery of light and dark, representing good and evil, abound. Many characters feel lost and excluded from a 'paradise' they yearn for. The necessity to toil for little reward is a reality for Lennie, George and all the other ranch hands. All these themes have biblical as well as social and political significance. Do students think that Steinbeck has created a truly great novella that succeeds in highlighting important moral issues? Or is it overly sentimental, depressing or even lacking in depth?

### The American dream

Many American novels of the early twentieth century deal with the idea of the American dream. The tragedy of Lennie's death and the backdrop of the economic hardship of the Great Depression could be seen as an ironic response to the idea that all American citizens have the opportunity to better themselves. What do students think of the idea of the American dream? Is it a realistic vision for the majority of the American people, or just for a privileged few?

## Example task

### What does it mean to have a dream?

Students could research the American dream (AO4) and then create and describe their own dream. They could relate this to Lennie's dream in Section 3 (AO1).

Students could write about the following question: 'What is the significance of Lennie's dream?' They should consider the deeper meaning behind the different elements of the dream, perhaps in the form of a table – e.g. rabbits signify love and security (AO2). How realistic is Lennie's dream?

How is it the same as/different from the typical American dream? Does the dream make us empathise more with Lennie? What is the effect of other characters' involvement with it?

### Analytical/creative tasks

- Research relevant topics such as civil rights and the Great Depression. Create a PowerPoint/MovieMaker presentation for the class, relating the topic to the novella.
- Write an extra chapter that continues the story after Lennie's death.
- Write the stage directions for producing one of the sections of the novella as a play.
- Imagine you are Curley's wife. Using your knowledge of the key themes of loneliness and exclusion, write a letter or diary extract from her point of view.
- Look for examples of pantheism and the pathetic fallacy in Steinbeck's descriptions; how do these techniques support the themes of the book?
- Hold a formal debate on euthanasia.
- Research the genre of tragedy. How far does *Of Mice and Men* conform to the rules of a Greek tragedy?

### Key issues for improving grades

The specification states that answers should:

- be relevant – you don't need to write everything you know about the text, only the things that relate to the question
- be sufficiently detailed – it is better to give a lot of detail about a small part of the text than trying to cover lots of different points
- be well structured – with a clear introduction which addresses the question and a clear conclusion that returns to the question
- use effective vocabulary – including literary terms where relevant
- use well-chosen evidence/quotations to support points.

To gain a top grade, candidates should show an enthusiastic and critical personal response. The best candidates write about the author's methods and achievements, and will concentrate on comment, not content.

### Nelson Thornes resources to support this unit

Interactive resources to support a selection of the set texts, including *Of Mice and Men*, will be available via Nelson Thornes' online learning space, *kerboodle!*. The resources will support text comprehension, exam practice and revision. The texts covered are:

*Mister Pip*

*Romeo and Juliet*

*Martyn Pig*

*Of Mice and Men*

*An Inspector Calls*

*Lord of the Flies*

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