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Teaching John Steinbeck's

Of Mice and Men

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General Introduction to the Work

Introduction to *Of Mice and Men*

JOHN STEINBECK WAS BORN in 1902 in Salinas, California. He was raised in an agricultural area, an area that later became the setting for his novel *Of Mice and Men*. At the age of 17, he went to Stanford University to study literature and writing. Though he spent five years at the university, he never earned a diploma. Steinbeck spent his time between classes working at various jobs on ranches and in sugar mills.

Steinbeck spent much of his career writing about issues at the forefront of American society. His writing explored the physical environment of living in California. Many of his early novels were rejected, but after *Tortilla Flat* was published, he found literary success. Many critics believe that with his second marriage and subsequent move to New York, that Steinbeck's writing lost its edge—he ceased to be a Californian, and his writing lost its naturalistic quality.

Of Mice and Men was originally published in 1937. Steinbeck's previous novel, *In Dubious Battle*, established him as a writer who was interested in contemporary issues. Therefore, readers were not surprised that *Of Mice and Men* reflected life during the Great Depression. However, readers might have been surprised that the characters in this latest novel had not become as socially aware as they were in *In Dubious Battle*. Steinbeck patterned his characters after the men and women who were most affected by the Great Depression, characters whose forced lifestyle created a rootlessness and loneliness that was typical of the poorest class in America.

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. The prose contains few descriptions that provide images for the reader, and instead, focuses on the explanations and details. While *Of Mice and Men* does contain passages of description (specifically the beginnings of chapters one, five, and six), a large part of the text is free of metaphor. Naturalist writing explores sociological conditions in a largely objective manner, rather than focusing on the beauty of the language and story.
- Naturalist writing explores conflicts between social classes, particularly 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 as characters who are trying to survive on a ranch. At the same time, he creates a story that reflects the larger societal conflicts at hand, especially 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.

Formalist Theory Applied to *Of Mice and Men*



Notes on the Formalist Approach

THE FORMALIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE was developed at the beginning of the 20th century and remained popular until the 1970s when other literary theories began to gain popularity. Today, Formalism is generally regarded as a stuffy, rigid, and inaccessible means to read literature, used in Ivy League classrooms and as the subject of scorn in rebellious coming-of-age films. It is an approach that is concerned primarily with form, as its name suggests, and thus places the greatest emphasis on *how* something is said, rather than *what* is said. Formalists believe that a literary work is a separate entity—not at all linked to the author's life or the culture in which the work is created. No paraphrase is used in a Formalist examination, and no reader reaction is discussed.

Originally, Formalism was a new and unique idea. The Formalists were called “New Critics,” and their approach to literature became a standard academic approach. Like classical artists such as da Vinci and Michaelangelo, the Formalists concentrated more on the form of the art rather than the content. They studied the recurrences, the repetitions, the relationships, and the motifs in a work to understand what the work was about. The Formalists viewed the tiny details of a work as nothing more than parts of the whole. In the Formalist approach, even a lack of form means something. Absurdity is in itself a form—one used to convey a specific meaning (even if the meaning is a lack of meaning). The Formalists also looked at smaller parts of a work to understand the meaning. Details such as diction, punctuation, and syntax all give clues.



Activity One

Examining the use of symbols in the novel

1. Divide the class into six groups.
2. Assign each group one of the following motifs or images and have them examine the novel, noting each instance in which the motif appears. Then have them answer the questions that follow.
 - Animal imagery as it is used to describe characters
 - women
 - loneliness
 - animals (puppies, mice)
 - George and Lennie's farm
 - hands
 - A. How many times does your motif appear in the novel?
 - B. *When* does it appear?
 - C. Is it associated with a particular event? A particular character?
 - D. What does the motif contribute to the *structure* of the novel?
 - E. What does the motif contribute to the *artistic effect* of the novel?
 - F. What does the motif contribute to the *meaning* of the novel?
3. Reconvene the class and allow each group to report.

New Historicism Applied to *Of Mice and Men*



Notes on New Historicism

A COMMON TENDENCY IN THE STUDY of literature written in, and/or set in, a past or foreign culture is to assume a direct comparison between the culture as presented in the text and as that culture really was/is. New Historicism asserts that such a comparison is impossible for two basic reasons.

First, the “truth” of a foreign or past culture can never be known as established and unchangeable. At best, any understanding of the “truth” is a matter of interpretation on the parts of both the writer and the reader. This is most blatantly evident in the fact that the “losers” of history hardly ever get an audience. The culture that is dominated by another culture is often lost to history because it is the powerful who have the resources to record that history. Even in recent past events, who really knows both sides of the story? Who really knows the whole of the Nazi story? Or the Iraqi story? New Historicists argue that these unknown histories are just as significant as the histories of the dominant culture and should be included in any world view. Since they often contradict “traditional” (i.e., the winner’s) history, there is no way to really know the ironclad truth.

Second, while the text under consideration does indeed reflect the culture in which it was written (and to some degree in which it was set), it also *participates* in the culture in which it was written. In other words, its very existence changes the culture it “reflects.” To New Historicists, literature and culture are born of one another. For example, although Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* certainly reflected the culture of the South during the mid-20th century, it also became a tool to raise awareness of and change certain elements of that culture.



Activity One

Examining the text for clues to the political situation in the United States during the Depression

1. Have students (independently, in pairs, or in small groups) examine the text and list the key scenes in which the action or dialogue offer anything that could be construed as a political “message.” Then have them answer the following questions:
2. What impact, if any, would the fact that Steinbeck wrote this novel during the Depression have on the subject matter of the novel?
3. What impact, if any, would the fact that Steinbeck wrote this during the Depression have on its reception to the two audiences it portrays: the migrant workers and the ranch owners?
4. What evidence is there, if any, of Steinbeck’s social status and how that affected the characterization of certain characters in the novel?
5. List the effects of the Depression on the lives of Americans implied throughout the novel.
6. To what extent are the roles/conditions of the “less powerful” represented in the novel?
 - women
 - African-Americans
 - the elderly
 - the poor
7. What can be inferred from the treatment of these groups (or their absence) in the novel?

Marxist Theory Applied to *Of Mice and Men*



Notes on the Marxist Approach

THE MARXIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE is based on the philosophy of Karl Marx, a German philosopher and economist. His major argument was that the means of production in society controlled the society—whoever owned the factories “owned” the culture. This idea was called “dialectical materialism,” and Marx felt that the history of the world was leading toward a communist society. From his point of view, ownership of the means of production (i.e., the basis of society) would be placed in the hands of the masses who actually operated them, not in the hands of a few capitalists and industrialists. It was a perverted version of this philosophy that was at the heart of the Soviet Union. Marxism was also the rallying cry of the poor and oppressed all over the world. To read a work from a Marxist perspective, one must understand that Marxism asserts that literature is a reflection of culture, and that culture can be affected by literature (Marxists believed that literature could instigate revolution). Marxism is linked to Freudian theories by its concentration on the subconscious—Freud dealt with the individual subconscious, while Marx dealt with the political subconscious. Marx believed that oppression exists in the political subconscious of a society—social pecking orders are inherent to any group of people.



Activity One

Analyzing characters as representative of the oppressed

1. Divide the class into small groups.
2. Assign to each group (or allow each to choose) a character from the novel and draft a character description. (NOTE: You may want to assign all of the minor characters to a single group: i.e. the Boss and Slim, or Carlson and Whit.)
3. Have students create a chart that depicts the character's physical description, action/purpose in the novel, social group, hopes and aspirations.
4. While in groups, students should respond to the following questions:
 - Is the character in a position of power? If so, how? If not, why?
 - Does the character's physical description substantiate the person's role in the novel? How?
 - If the ranch is a microcosm of American society, what social group do each of the character's represent? What comment is Steinbeck trying to make about each group and their role in society?
5. Reconvene the class and allow each group to share its findings with the entire class.