

## **Olentangy Local School District Literature Selection Review**

Teacher: OLHS English    Grade: 9    School: OLHS

Book Title: Of Mice and Men            Genre: Historical Fiction

Author: John Steinbeck    Pages: 107

Publisher: Penguin Books    Copyright: 1993

*In a brief rationale, please provide the following information relative to the book you would like added to the school's book collection for classroom use. You may attach additional pages as needed.*

**Book Summary and summary citation:** (suggested resources include book flap summaries, review summaries from publisher, book vendors, etc.)

The classic portrait of two outsiders struggling to understand their own unique places in the world--Clinging to one another in their loneliness and alienation, George and his simple-minded friend Lennie dream, as drifters will, of a place to call their own. But after they come to work at a ranch in California's Salinas Valley, their hopes, like "the best laid schemes o' mice and men" begin to go awry. (Book cover)

Truly one of the unsung triumphs of 1939, this heartfelt adaptation of John Steinbeck's morality tale of two itinerant migrant workers seems just as fresh and powerful decades after its release. Lon Chaney Jr. gives the performance of a lifetime as the sweet yet feeble-minded Lennie, who is befriended by the weary Burgess Meredith. They both would be lost without each other in a rather mixed-up world. Sensitively directed by Lewis Milestone (*All Quiet on the Western Front*), the film features the first pre-credit sequence in American film history. There's also a nice score by Aaron Copland. --Bill Desowitz

**Provide an instructional rationale for the use of this title, including specific reference to the OLSD curriculum map(s):** (Curriculum maps may be referenced by grade/course and indicator number or curriculum maps with indicators highlighted may be attached to this form)

Rationale:

After completing one of five novels exploring marginalized characters in contemporary society, students will examine marginalization that existed historically during the Great Depression through John Steinbeck's classic novel. The purpose of pairing a contemporary work with a classic work is to see the timelessness of the themes present in both works. This text portrays several realistic examples of characters who were on the fringes of society during this particular time period. Building from what students have learned through reading novels dealing with parallel situations and characters in modern day society, they will gain a deeper understanding of Steinbeck's purpose in writing this novel. They will explore themes including friendship, marginalization, and attainment of the American dream. They will look at literary devices such as symbolism, characterization, author's style, the use of the vernacular, and foreshadowing.

Connection to the state standards/OLSD curriculum map(s):

- Acquisition of Vocabulary (1)
- Reading Application Informational (5, 6)
- Reading Application Literary (7, 9, 10, 11)

- Writing Process (all)
- Writing Application (5, 7, 9)
- Writing Conventions (10)
- Research Standard (11)
- Communication Standard (13)

**Include two professional reviews of this title:** (a suggested list of resources for identifying professional reviews is shown below. Reviews may be “cut and pasted” (with citation) into the form or printed reviews may be attached to the form)

Review #1

From NCTE (2005)

*Of Mice and Men* received wide critical acclaim upon its publication in 1937. It was reviewed in a variety of newspapers, popular and intellectual journals, and literary publications. Positive reviews include those by Edward Weeks (*Atlantic*, Apr. 1937), F. T. Marsh (*The New York Times* 28 Feb. 1937), and H. S. Canby (*Saturday Review of Literature*, 27 Feb. 1937). Many critics praise Steinbeck for his juxtapositioning of harsh circumstances and tender emotions, and for his realistic, yet also poetic, rendering of the migrant labor experience. Steinbeck's stage adaptation of *Of Mice and Men*, a play in three acts published later the same year, was reviewed by a number of publications, including *Nation* (11 Dec. 1937), *New Republic* (15 Dec. 1937), and *Booklist* (1 Feb. 1938).

The novel was selected by the Book-of-the-Month Club one month before its release, which led to wide anticipation of and demand for the new book. Over a thousand copies were sold within the first few weeks following its release (Ferrell 97). Though the novel itself received no major awards, the author was the recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1962. The presentation speech, delivered by Anders Österling, refers to *Of Mice and Men* as Steinbeck's "little masterpiece."

Review #2

From NCTE (2005)\*

This short, sparsely narrated piece of fiction overlays 1930s social history with a portrait of the human condition. A novelist driven by social consciousness Steinbeck offers the reader a colorful rendering of a bleak period in U.S. history when migrant laborers struggled to survive through the Depression years. *Of Mice and Men* brings to life the plight of these uprooted and often desperate men. At the same time the work presents a story of love and tragedy realistic to any era. The most basic moral question raised by the novel—whether George did the right thing in killing Lennie—is a developmentally appropriate one for high school students who are at the stage of being able to appreciate and grapple with the complexities of such a decision. Debate over George's actions is likely to arise among students and thus it is crucial that the teacher prepare for facilitating a discussion weighted with questions and opinions tied into students' value systems and possibly religious beliefs.

One quality of the work that intensifies the central moral question is Steinbeck's in-depth portrayal of George and Lennie's relationship. Juxtaposed against the tough and masculine setting of 1930s migrant farm life the friendship between these two men emerges as a positive theme in the novel. Characters comment on the uncommon nature of two men traveling together and the companionship between George and Lennie despite the hardships it brings clearly provides each character with a purpose greater than his own survival. Showing the intricacies of men's connection to one another in a world that discourages intimacy Steinbeck offers a message meaningful to adolescents both male and female three quarters of a century later. Exposing students to stories of adult male friendship is especially important in an era where popular culture often promotes homophobia and plays up

masculine stereotypes thus pushing underground the notion of men benefiting from positive caring relationships with one another.

While possibly not unique to fiction of the period the intimate portrayal of mental retardation in *Of Mice and Men* is a rarity. Unlike Harper Lee's minimalist sketch of Boo Radley in *To Kill a Mockingbird* also set in the 1930s Steinbeck's treatment of Lennie is vivid and fully integrated into the story's narrative. The reader remains with Lennie throughout the novel even at times when George is not present to watch over him. Lennie's condition elicits no commentary within the story. Instead the reader infers from Lennie's actions as well as others' reactions to him—sometimes dismissive and derogatory sometimes appreciative and empathic—that he has a mental disability. A class discussion focused on Lennie's character might expand into a broader examination of mental retardation as portrayed in fiction. Does Steinbeck writing in 1937 capture Lennie in a simplistic or complex manner? Staying within the story while also drawing on current ethical and social dilemmas students could consider the implications of Lennie's mental capacity in terms of the moral issues raised by the story. Was Lennie more mouse than man and how does his condition influence one's attitude toward George's decision?

Shifting from the personal to the political teachers might also use the work to address issues relating to migrant labor in both the 20th and 21st centuries. Using complementary texts such as Steinbeck's journalistic essay *The Harvest Gypsies* (see *Alternate Works* section below) students could investigate the changes in migrant labor demographics—from foreign-born to U.S.-born laborers—resulting from the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl. This look at American social history would lead logically into a consideration of present-day immigration and labor issues. Teachers might consider including readings and other resources relating to past and present-day migration. (One example is S. Beth Atkin's collection of photographs and essays, *Voices from the Field: Children of Migrant Farmers Tell Their Stories* (1993).) Whether or not teachers choose to integrate literature and social history when teaching *Of Mice and Men* the realistic portrayal of a rural "living off the land" existence provides an important experiential component to students be they from urban suburban or rural settings.

\*Finding reviews of classic works older than fifty years is difficult. If you would like more information regarding this text, please contact the OLHS library.

### **What alternate text(s) could also fulfill the instructional requirements?**

Title: Summer of My German Soldier      Author: Betty Green

Title: To Kill a Mockingbird              Author: Harper Lee

Title:    Author:

Title:    Author:

Title:    Author:

Title:    Author:

### **Document any potentially controversial content:**

This novel contains graphic language. There are several instances where the word "nigger" is used in reference to the character Crooks. Steinbeck's use of the word "nigger" shows how other characters within the novel used language to alienate Crooks. Crooks is marginalized not only within society, but also within the ranch. Using the word "nigger" allows the reader to see an accurate representation of discrimination during the time period--the Great Depression. It also allows the reader to see how powerful language can be when it is used as a weapon to purposefully hurt others. The reader sees how Crooks is affected by the use of the word "nigger."

Steinbeck includes language that could be construed as offensive to some to accurately portray migrant workers of the time period. Steinbeck traveled around the country with migrant workers so that he could capture their stories accurately and authentically. He uses language within his novel that was used by the group of people for whom and about whom he wrote. Examples of such language include using "hell, bastard, God damn, and son-of-a bitch.

**Keeping in mind the age, academic level, and maturity of the intended reader, what is the suggested classroom use: (check all that apply)**

Gifted/Accelerated  Regular  At Risk

**GRADE LEVEL(S):** 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

**Reading level of this title (if applicable):**

**Date Submitted to Department Chair:** 4/13/07

**Suggested Professional Literary Review Sources:**

School Library Journal

Horn Book

Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books

VOYA (Voice of Youth Advocates)

Library Journal

Book Links

Publisher's Weekly

Booklist

Kirkus Review

Wilson Library Catalog

English Journal (and other resources of the National Council of Teachers of English)

The Reading Teacher (International Reading Association)

Literature for Today's Young Adults