Of Mice and Men

Introduction

Studying the text

There are many ways in which one can write about a literary text, but among those most commonly encountered at Key Stages 4 would be to study character, theme and technique. These terms are explained below, and some pointers given as to how to study them in Of Mice and Men.

Character

We can study what characters (note the spelling!) are like in themselves, but we see them best in their relations with other people and the wider society of which they are (or fail to be) a part.

Any statement about what characters are like should be backed up by evidence: quote what they say, or explain what they do (or both). Do not, however, merely retell narrative (the story) without comment. Statements of opinion should be followed by reference to events or use of quotation; quotation should be followed by explanation (if needed) and comment. This is rather mechanical, but if you do it, you will not go far wrong.

In this guide, general comments will often be made without supporting evidence (to save time). As you study or revise you should find and list this evidence. If you cannot find any, ask a teacher who knows this text. You should certainly, in any case, be making your own revision guides, and marking your copy of the book. If you are preparing this text for an examination, you may be allowed to underline key passages or to use bookmarks.

In Of Mice and Men the characters are clearly drawn and memorable. Some could be the subject of a whole essay, while others would not. Of course a question on a theme (see below) might require you to write about characters, anyway: for example, to discuss loneliness, you write about lonely people.

George and Lennie

The principal characters are George Milton and Lennie Small (whose name is the subject of a feeble joke: “He ain't small”. Who says this?). Lennie is enormously strong. He is simple (has a learning difficulty) though he is physically well co-ordinated and capable of doing repetitive manual jobs (bucking barley or driving a cultivator) with skill.

Lennie has a man's body, but a child's outlook: he gains pleasure from “pettin' ” soft things, even dead mice, and loves puppies and rabbits. He is dependent, emotionally, on George, who organizes his life and reassures him about their future. Lennie can be easily controlled by firm but calm instructions, as Slim finds out. But panic in others makes Lennie panic: this happened when he tried to “pet” a girl's dress, in Weed, and happens again twice in the narrative: first, when he is attacked by Curley, and second, when Lennie strokes the hair of Curley's wife.

Lennie's deficiencies enable him to be accepted by other defective characters: Candy, Crooks and Curley's wife. He poses no threat, and seems to listen patiently (because he has learned the need to pay close attention, as he remembers so little of what he hears). As a child is comforted by a bedtime story, so George has come to comfort Lennie with a tale of a golden future. To the reader, especially today, this imagined future is very modest, yet to these men it is a dream almost impossible of fulfilment. As George has repeated the story, so he has used set words and phrases, and Lennie has learned these, too, so he is able to join in the telling at key moments (again, as young children do).

George is a conscientious minder for Lennie but is of course not with him at all times; and at one such time, Lennie makes the mistake which leads to his death. He strokes the hair of Curley's wife (at her invitation) but does it too roughly; she panics and tries to cry out, and Lennie shakes her violently, breaking her neck.

There is no proper asylum (safe place) for Lennie: Curley is vengeful, but even if he could be restrained, Lennie would face life in a degrading and cruel institution - a mental hospital, prison or home for the criminally insane. George's killing of Lennie, supported by Slim (who says “You hadda' ”) is the most merciful course of action.

In the novel's final chapter we have an interesting insight into Lennie's thought. Until now we have had to read his mind from his words and actions. Here, Steinbeck describes how first his Aunt Clara and second an imaginary talking rabbit, lecture Lennie on his stupidity and failure to respect George. From this we see how, in his confused fashion, Lennie does understand, and try to cope with, his mental weakness.

George is called a “smart little guy” by Slim, but corrects this view (as he also corrects the idea that Lennie is a “cuckoo”: that is, a lunatic - Lennie is quite sane; his weakness is a lack of intelligence). George's modesty is not false - he is bright enough to know that he isn't especially intelligent. If he were smart, he says, “I wouldn't be buckin' barley for my fifty and found” (=$US 50 per month, with free board and lodging). George is not stupid, but there is no real opportunity for self-advancement, as might be achieved in the west today by education. He is, in a simple way, imaginative: his picture of the small-holding (small farm) he and Lennie will one day own, is clearly-drawn and vivid, while some of the phrases have a near-poetic quality in their simplicity, as when he begins: “Guys like us...are the loneliest guys in the world”.

Lennie is a burden to George, who frequently shows irritation and, sometimes, outright anger to him. But it is clear that George is not going to leave him. What began vaguely as a duty, after the death of Lennie's Aunt Clara, has become a way of life: there is companionship and trust in this relationship, which makes it almost unique among the ranch-hands. George confesses to Slim how he once abused this trust by making Lennie perform degrading tricks; but after Lennie nearly drowned, having (although not able to swim) jumped, on George's orders, into the Sacramento River, George has stopped taking advantage of Lennie's simplicity. At the end of the novella George confronts a great moral dilemma, and acts decisively, killing Lennie as a last act of friendship.

Other characters

Slim

All the other characters are important for their dealings with these two, but some are worthy of comment in their own right. Unlike all the other characters, however, is Slim. This man is not just a hired labourer, but a craftsman (he drives a team of mules or horses). He is “the prince of the ranch” and he is regarded as an authority. For most of the novel he is a detached figure who observes Lennie's and George's relationship. At one point he is called to make a judgement, when he decides that Candy's dog should be shot. By listening to George in the ranch house, Slim allows him to reveal a great deal about his relations with Lennie, and to describe incidents from their past.

The Boss and Whit

The Boss appears briefly, voicing suspicion at George's speaking for Lennie, while Whit is important for one incident. He shows the other ranch-hands a letter in a magazine, written by a worker he had known on the ranch previously. He relishes the memory of this man (Bill Tenner) and shows his own loneliness, and longing for friendship; yet even as he shows the magazine to George, he will not let go of the page.

Candy

Far more important is a trio of misfits or outsiders: Candy is an old man, reduced to cleaning the bunkhouse after losing his hand in an accident at work. He has been compensated by his employer and has saved the money, which he offers to give to George, in return for a share in his and Lennie's dream. George is happy to agree to this, but is not interested in buying the smallholding with Candy alone, after Lennie has killed Curley's wife.

Candy is excluded from the social life of the ranch-hands, by his age, his disability and demeaning job, and by his own choice ("I ain't got the poop any more", he says when the others go into town on Saturday night). His lack of status appears when he is powerless to save his old dog from being shot. He bitterly (and unfairly) reproaches Curley's wife for the loss of his dream.

Crooks

Crooks is also disabled and a Negro, unusual at this time in California. (He points out that he is not a "southern negro", referring to the "deep south", states like Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia, where coloured people live in large numbers). He is excluded by his colour from the bunkhouse (he is allowed in at Christmas, but has to fight one of the men, it seems). Crooks protects his feelings by keeping to himself. When Candy tells him of the dream ranch, he offers to work for nothing. But Curley's wife reminds him that he has no hope of sharing the dream, and he pretends the offer was made as a joke. (But it seems clear that he means it when he says it.)

Curley's wife

Curley's wife is the most pathetic of the outsiders: unlike the others, even Lennie, she seems not to understand her limitations - or she refuses to admit them. She still dreams of what might have been, seeing herself as a potential film-star. But she has no acting talent, men (one from a travelling show, one who claimed to be in the movies) make bogus offers as a chat-up line, and now that films require actresses to talk, her coarse speech would be a handicap. Her naiveté shows in her belief that her mother has stolen a letter (from her "contact" in Hollywood) which was obviously never written; her immaturity appears in her instant reaction of marrying the loathsome Curley.

Desperate for companionship she does not find at home, she flirts with the ranch-hands. They are uneasy about this, as they think her to be seriously promiscuous, and are fearful of Curley's reaction. Her inappropriate dress on the ranch and her coquettish manner brand her as a “tart”. She is, perhaps, the most pathetic of all the characters.

Curley

Curley, her husband, is a rather two-dimensional villain. Conscious of his own failings, he tries to earn respect by picking fights, but is vain, boastful and aggressive. He suspects everyone of laughing at him. His wife's behaviour ensures that they do laugh, even Candy.

Carlson

Carlson typifies the men George describes as “the loneliest guys in the world”. He is outwardly friendly, but essentially selfish. He finds the smell of an old dog offensive so the dog must be shot. He has little regard for the feelings of the dog's owner. At the end of the novella, as Slim goes to buy George a drink, and comfort him, it is Carlson who says to Curley, “What the hell...is eatin' them two guys?”

There is, clearly, only one real relationship depicted in the novel. All the characters, save George and Lennie, are more or less in search of a relationship. We see how far their failure to find friendship or company, even, is due to general attitudes, to their circumstances, and to themselves.

Themes

The themes of this novella are very clear: one (the fragility of people's dreams) is indicated in the title. The other themes are friendship, and its opposite, loneliness.

The fagility of dreams

The novella's title comes from a poem, To a Mouse (on turning her up in her nest with the plough) by the Scots poet Robert Burns (1759-1796):

“The best-laid plans of mice and men
Gang aft agley (=often go wrong).
And leave us naught but grief and pain
For promised joy.”

Burns shows how the plans of men are no more secure than those of the mouse, and this is the point of Steinbeck's title. The source of the characters' dreams is their discontent with their present. Steinbeck shows how poor their lifestyle is: they have few possessions, fewer comforts, no chance of marriage or family life and no place of their own.

George's and Lennie's dream is at first a whim, but becomes clearer. The unexpected opportunity offered by Candy's money means it is no longer a fantasy, but the threat to the fulfilment of this dream, ever-present in Lennie's behaviour finally destroys it, just as it has become possible. Candy and Crooks both try to share in this dream. Candy is desperate and, so, ready to trust his fortune to a near stranger.

Crooks is most cynical about the dream of owning land: “Nobody never gets to heaven and nobody never gets no land”, even though every ranch-hand, he says, has “land in his head”. Yet even he, recalling happy times in his childhood, hopes, briefly, for a share in George's and Lennie's dream.

Curley's wife indulges a different fantasy, far less likely of fulfilment. As many young women do, she aspires to stardom in films. She knows she is pretty, and, believing too readily the man who says she is “a natural”, thinks her talent is merely waiting for an opportunity and that her mother has stolen the letter which represents her chance for fame. Steinbeck describes precisely “the small grand gesture” (an oxymoron or contradiction in terms) with which she demonstrates to Lennie her supposed talent.

The end of the novella seems to confirm Crooks's pessimistic view. None of the characters does achieve his or her dream. But this seems more due to a lack of opportunity and the way society is organized, than to anything else.

Loneliness and friendship

To the people on the ranch, even the broad-minded Slim, George's and Lennie's partnership is very unusual. It is clear that most of them are lonely. Some, like Whit, feel the loneliness and remember wished-for friends with affection. Others learn to be self-sufficient emotionally, or just plain selfish. Crooks insists on his right to be alone even though he dislikes it, while Carlson seems incapable of actually sympathizing with anyone else's viewpoint. Curley can only communicate through aggression. He marries to impress the men with his sexual prowess and to boast to his wife about how he will give “the ol' one-two” to his opponents. Slim enjoys respect and a friendly manner, if not actual friendship, from the others on the ranch. He is welcoming and sympathetic to George and Lennie, and forces Carlson to consider Candy's feelings: he allows the dog to be shot, but Carlson must bury it; Candy should not have to do this. Candy is desperate for companionship, and readily discusses the proposed ranch with Lennie (“I been figurin' how we can make on them rabbits”) without any sense that Lennie is too simple to follow his conversation.

Crooks astutely notes that Lennie cannot remember what he is saying, but points out that most people in conversation do this, that being with another is what counts; and so he talks freely to Lennie, who has the same effect on Curley's wife. She cannot speak to her husband but pours out her troubles to Lennie. It is ironic that the retarded man should be taken into the confidence of these supposedly normal characters. It is unfortunate that the rare relationship of friends should be ended by one of them; in killing Lennie, George knows (and tells Candy) he is condemning himself to the life of working for a month, then blowing his pay in the pool-room and “lousy cat-house”. And the detailed references to the two brothels in Soledad remind us both of the lack of opportunity for the ranch-hands to have a lasting sexual relationship, and the absence of opportunities for women to work in respectable jobs.

The author's technique

Structure

Steinbeck's narrative method is unremarkable but effective in a simple way; for this reason it is not an obvious subject for study. The structure of the novella is clear and quite simple: each chapter is an extended episode, in the same place. Some things happen while others, which have happened, are re-told (George tells Slim about Weed; Whit tells the hands about Bill Tenner's letter; Curley's wife tells Lennie about her past).

Time and place

Steinbeck controls time and place very skilfully. Though he recalls events from earlier, what he narrates directly takes place over a single weekend. The narrative is framed by the opening and closing chapters, which are set in a beautiful clearing by a stream, close to the ranch. All the other chapters are set on the ranch, inside: in the bunkhouse, in Crooks's room or in the barn. The text is very short, and yet a great proportion is taken up with dialogue, in the form of direct speech. It is clear from all of this (a series of “scenes”; no single viewpoint, nor access to thought; unity of time and place; past events recalled in conversation; indoor locations, and heavy reliance on dialogue) that the novella has been written with an eye to dramatization. It is not surprising to discover that Steinbeck himself did write a dramatization for the stage, and that this has subsequently been made into (two) very successful feature films.

Viewpoint

The novella is written in the third person, but there is no single viewpoint. We read of scenes in which George or Lennie or both are present, but we may briefly follow other characters (Candy or Crooks, say). We are never told what anyone is thinking, but must work this out from what people say, with one curious exception. In the final chapter, Steinbeck describes the imaginary talking rabbit (as one would expect from Lennie, it does not see anything odd in telling him he is not fit “to lick the boots of no rabbit”!) and the remembered Aunt Clara, who appear to Lennie, their voices supplied by his talking aloud.

Language and symbolism

The language of the narrative is fairly simple; most vocabulary is of an everyday kind, except for names of items of farm equipment to which Steinbeck refers. In the dialogue, Steinbeck uses slang and non-standard terms (“would of”, “brang” and so on) to convey an authentic sense of the speaking voice.

Apart from the symbolism in the title, we should note the symbolic function of the killing of Candy's old dog. At various points in the novel shooting is mentioned as a way out of trouble (as when George says he would shoot himself if he were related to Lennie). The killing of the dog parallels the shooting of Lennie: both are depicted as merciful, in both cases the shot is in the same place (base of the skull) and Slim approves both killings.

Responding to the text

Here are some suggestions for activities which will help you develop an understanding of the text. Some of these may be suitable for assessed coursework in English (reading, writing and speaking and listening) for Key Stage 3 or Key Stage4/GCSE, or for GCSE work in English literature.

- Retell the events of one or more episodes in the story, as if you were one of the characters who has witnessed it.
- Using the evidence in the novella, describe the lifestyle and possessions of the ranch-hands. Compare what they lack to what you have.
- Discuss ways in which John Steinbeck argues that “the best-laid plans of Mice and Men” often go wrong.
- Watch one or both of the feature film versions of Of Mice and Men (1939, directed by Lewis Milestone, and 1992, directed by Gary Sinise, who plays the part of George). Look at the way the directors present the narrative, and compare this to the presentation in the novella. You could do this work as a task for assessment in media studies.
- Take an episode from the novella and adapt it as a narrative of a different kind - such as a script or storyboard for a dramatic treatment, on stage, screen or radio.
- Hot-seating: each student should take a character to study. Other students ask questions to him or her, which the student should answer in character. Teachers can devise a way of scoring points, if students catch the speaker out, or rewarding those who show most understanding of the character.
- This novella dates from 1937 - does it still have anything to say to us? Who are the “loneliest guys in the world” today? Are we more or less able to realize our dreams than the characters in this story?