

Essay on John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*

"Most people are *on* the world, not *in* it—have **no conscious sympathy or relationship** to anything about them—undiffused, separate, and **rigidly alone** like marbles of polished stone, touching but separate."
—John Muir, author and environmentalist

"We are here to awaken from **the illusion of our separateness.**"
—Thich Nhat Hanh, author and Buddhist monk

"Today everything comes under the laws of **competition and the survival of the fittest**, where the powerful **feed** upon the powerless. As a consequence, masses of people find themselves excluded and marginalized: without **work**, without **possibilities**, without any means of **escape.**"
—Pope Francis

"**Self-absorption** in all its forms kills empathy, let alone compassion. When we focus on ourselves, our world contracts as our problems and preoccupations loom large. But when we **focus on others**, our world expands. Our own problems drift to the periphery of the mind and so seem smaller, and we increase our capacity for **connection**—or **compassionate action.**"
—Daniel Goleman, author and psychologist

I. Introduction

Of Mice and Men is not only the story of George Milton and Lennie Small, but the story of many living beings who all face a similar struggle: the struggle to find or create a safe space for themselves in this world. John Steinbeck is interested in human relationships and the ways we humans view one another, treat one another, and act as members of a larger "society." In a small space, Steinbeck portrays the *respect, kindness, and acceptance* we can give to our fellow beings; the *aggression and even violence* we can direct towards our fellow beings; and the *use and exploitation of our fellow beings* that continues to occur on planet Earth today. Through the relationships Steinbeck depicts, he reveals both our human capacity for fellowship, compassion, and love; and also our human capacity for indifference, callousness, competition, and even cruelty.

When Steinbeck was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1962, the person who presented the award called Steinbeck "**an independent expounder of the truth with an unbiased instinct for what is genuinely American, be it good or bad.**" The presenter added that, through his short stories and novels, John Steinbeck became "**a teacher of good will and charity, a defender of human values.**"

In his speech accepting the Nobel Prize, Steinbeck said that **the serious writer "is charged with exposing our many grievous faults and failures, with dredging up to the light our dark and dangerous dreams for the purpose of improvement."** Steinbeck also said **it is the writer's responsibility "to declare and to celebrate man's proven capacity for greatness of heart and spirit—for gallantry in defeat—for courage, compassion and love. In the endless war against weakness and despair, these are the bright rally-flags of hope and of emulation."**

II. Instructions

Choose one of the essay prompts on the following pages. Then plan and write a **well-organized five-paragraph essay** in which you develop your thesis with a series of claims (main ideas or arguments) that are supported by textual evidence and clearly-explained reasoning.

- For an "A," effectively incorporate two significant quotations into each body paragraph.
- Use all the writing skills we have been practicing all semester to build a fully-developed argument in each body paragraph.

III. Writing Prompts

1. THE CIRCLE OF COMPASSION

“A human being is a part of the whole called by us 'the Universe,' a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.” —Albert Einstein

How do Albert Einstein’s observations apply to *Of Mice and Men* and help readers understand author John Steinbeck’s moral concerns?

Discuss how Steinbeck’s novel illustrates a world of mainly isolated people who feel little compassion for others—or how Steinbeck’s story communicates to readers how widening one’s “circle of compassion” is necessary to create a better world.

2. WHY THE WORKING CLASS *STRUGGLES* TO ACHIEVE THE AMERICAN DREAM

“I ain’t so bright neither, or I wouldn’t be buckin’ barley for my fifty and found. If I was bright, if I was even a little bit smart, I’d have my own little place, an’ I’d be bringin’ in my own crops, ‘stead of doin’ all the work and not getting what comes up outta the ground” (39).

“I read plenty of books out here. Nobody never gets to heaven, and nobody gets no land. It’s just in their head. They’re all the time talkin’ about it, but it’s jus’ in their head” (74).

For a brief period of time, George and Lennie seem to be within reach of achieving their dream of owning their own land and home. In fact, when Crooks learns that Candy’s money is making it possible for the three of them to buy their own farm, Crooks changes his opinion; instead of saying their dream will never become a reality, Crooks reveals that he would like to go live with George, Lennie, and Candy. However, as you know, George, Lennie, and Candy never achieve their dream.

According to the novel, why is it so difficult for working people to achieve the “American Dream”? Given that the novel focuses mainly on the lives, relationships, struggles, and dreams of the ranch workers, what does the novel seem to communicate about working people’s situation and their struggles to possess a home of their own?

- What key factor or factors does the novel suggest make it very challenging—if not impossible—for working people to break the cycle of working menial jobs so that they can buy their own home and create their own “safe space” for themselves and the people they care about?
- Does Steinbeck suggest that working people themselves are to blame for their inability to earn and save enough to buy their own land? Or, in contrast, does Steinbeck suggest that working people are victims of larger forces—ranging from *more powerful people*, to *key aspects of human nature*, and even to *the larger social and economic structure*—that don’t give them a fair chance and that are too powerful to defeat?
- Consider the realities the workers face, the way of life Steinbeck depicts in the novel, the relationships among human beings (and among animals) that govern their daily lives, the social and economic system displayed both on the ranch and in the world surrounding the ranch, etc.

3. SELFISH DISREGARD & DESTRUCTION OF FELLOW LIVES

Lennie Small destroys other lives in the process of satisfying his own needs.

How does the above statement apply not only to Lennie Small, but to multiple other characters and forces in the novel, either literally or figuratively? What might Steinbeck be suggesting to readers about the way most human beings—or perhaps human beings with any sort of power—tend to view and treat one another?

- Which people in the novel try to satisfy their needs by acting or speaking in a way that causes harm to others (whether intentionally or unintentionally)?
- Besides individual people, does society itself (the social and economic system depicted in the novel) intentionally or unintentionally destroy lives or treat some lives as less important than others?
- How about the opposite? Is there anyone or anything in the novel who does not view and treat others as Lennie does—who does not destroy other lives in the process of satisfying its own needs?
- Given that Lennie possess a body that has “grown up” but a mind or understanding that remains “child-like,” what is Steinbeck suggesting about anyone in the real world who views or treats others the way Lennie does? To Steinbeck, what might it mean to truly “grow up”?

4. WOMEN'S REALITY IN A MALE-DOMINATED WORLD

In *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck depicts a world dominated by men, in which few women actually appear. The only female human we meet in person is Curley's wife. (Steinbeck does keep reminding us of the animal world, and Lulu, Slim's dog, briefly appears. You might want to think about that.) However, Steinbeck does make sure that we hear about other women in the men's world: Lennie's Aunt Clara; the businesswoman named Suzy who operates a “parlor house”; the “five girls” who work for Suzy; and Suzy's competitor, Clara.

Through *Of Mice and Men*, what does Steinbeck suggest or imply about women's roles and about the ways women are viewed and treated by men and by those with power?

- Do any female characters struggle under the burden of prejudice or struggle with being trapped in roles determined for them by the people or society around them?
- Does anyone in the novel truly care about a woman, or are all the women in the novel depicted in a way that suggests they are simply objects to the men in their lives?
- Does the novel seem sexist, or is the novel actually protesting sexism by depicting it in a negative way?

5. ANIMALS, NATURE, & HUMAN LIFE

For such a short novel, Steinbeck spends a significant amount of time and details portraying animals. In fact, the entire story is framed by descriptions of the natural habitat by the Salinas River where a variety of animals converge because of the water—and food—available there. George and Lennie's whole story is literally *framed* by a reminder of the constant process of animal life in nature.

Why does Steinbeck include so much detail of animal life and the ways of nature? How are these concepts relevant to human life and the human-created society portrayed in the novel?

- Does Steinbeck suggest that we humans are no different from other animals, and that human life and human relationships are subject to the same “laws of nature” as the rest of the animal world? Or does Steinbeck suggest that we humans are more noble than other animals, that human life and human relationships should be subject to “higher laws,” and that we humans can choose to live with one another in a better way than the “laws of nature”?

6. WHAT'S WRONG WITH SOCIETY & HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

Through *Of Mice and Men*, what does John Steinbeck communicate is wrong with human society and how or why human society needs to change?

When you consider the important elements of the story (including not only George and Lennie's story, but the other key characters and the meaningful patterns Steinbeck creates with his details in the novel), which specific elements or aspects of the novel help readers understand the meaning that Steinbeck wants readers to take away from his novel?

IV. Tips for Recognizing Theme in Short Stories & Novels

There are at least three ways readers can recognize theme (or recognize *what a novel or short story tells us about life, human nature, human relationships, etc.*):

1. **Authorial statements** – Sometimes the author makes a clear statement about life, human nature, relationships, or values—either through the narrator or through one of the characters. Does either the narrator or a character make a statement that *suggests a central idea or theme* of the novel? (Note: A statement may also be ironic, which means that the author may want us to question the statement or even disagree with it.)
2. **What is learned** – Often a central character learns something valuable from his or her experiences in the story. Or, sometimes readers learn something from the experiences of a story even though the characters fail to learn anything. (This is also another example of *irony*—when *readers recognize* something important that characters *miss*.) Does anyone in the novel learn anything important, or can we readers recognize a lesson that a key character fails to understand?
3. **Literary devices that “compress” meaning**
 - Motif – A **motif** is a pattern created by the repetition of an image, word, action, or idea, which points to some sort of meaning. Which details in the novel seem to form patterns, parallels, contrasts, or even symbols? How do these patterned details suggest Steinbeck’s moral concerns?
 - Character Foils – A **foil character** is a person whose traits and qualities contrast meaningfully with those of another character. Often, a writer will use a minor character as a foil to emphasize the significant traits of a main character. Which characters does Steinbeck juxtapose for his readers so that we can learn from their important similarities and differences?
 - Allusion – An **allusion** is a reference to another story, poem, song, book, myth, or person that *suggests* a key idea or theme. Steinbeck chose the novel’s title “Of Mice and Men” as an allusion to the poem “To A Mouse” by Robert Burns. How does this reference help illuminate Steinbeck’s moral concerns? Are there any other allusions in the novel that point us toward meaning?
 - Irony – **Irony** is an intentional discrepancy or incongruity created by the author—between *appearance* and *reality*, between *expectation* and *outcome*, or between what the author seems to be saying and what the author actually is saying. When an author uses irony, the author wants readers to recognize and understand something significant that one or more characters fail to recognize or understand. (For example, Steinbeck gives “the last word” in *Of Mice and Men* to Carlson. What is *ironic* about Carlson’s statement at the novel’s end, and what does ending the novel with *this statement emphasize*?) How many specific examples of irony are there in the novel, and what does each instance of irony suggest to us about Steinbeck’s intended meaning?