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05 December 2021

Friendship and a Common Dream in Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*

**Rationale:**

Friendship is a very basic theme that transcends race, age, and gender. Anyone can experience close bonds with other people, and the beauty of it is that it leads to stronger communities, friendships that may last for life, or even short friendships that serve to teach a lesson. Combined with a common dream or aspiration, friendships may become stronger than ever.

Thankfully, many novels contain the themes of dreams and friendships. *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck is no exception. This novel is the centerpiece for my unit of study because I am interested in observing and analyzing the bond between George and Lennie, as well as their common dream of owning a farm together. I would like students to see how two unlikely characters can come together and work towards a goal.

However, as great as the novel is, the characters are not very diverse. For example, the only Black man in the novel, Crooks, experiences a lot of racism from the other characters. Curley's Wife is the only female character who appears frequently in the novel, but she has no name and is portrayed as the property of Curley. Every other character is a White male. For this reason, I would like to pair *Of Mice and Men* with young adult novels that deal with a diverse friend group.

As a student, I realized that a lot of books we read in school do not have many diverse characters. Because of this, I think we could start with a discussion about the “literary canon.” Students could then compare and contrast the different friend groups in their assigned companion novels, then the unit can end by discussing if they would add any of the works they read into the canon.

***Into* the Text:**

I would begin by using a PowerPoint presentation to introduce Steinbeck. Steinbeck often wrote a lot of detail about place, so I would highlight this fact and talk about how he is from Salinas, CA and wrote about the surrounding area often. Some novels he wrote that give a lot of details about the landscape include *East of Eden*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and *Of Mice and Men*. I would also include some pictures from the National Steinbeck Center, which is located in Salinas.

Additionally, I would share a poem that inspired *Of Mice and Men* called “To a Mouse” by Robert Burns. I would instruct students to look closely at stanza seven, which has the lines “the best-laid schemes of Mice and Men/go oft awry.” I would ask students what they think the meaning of the poem is and to predict what they think *Of Mice and Men* will be about just based on the poem.

We would also have a short explanation of what the literary canon is, what type of books are included in it, and I would explain that *Of Mice and Men* is part of the literary canon.

**Companion Novels:**

The five companion novels include *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky, *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* by Jesse Andrews, *We Were Here* by Matt de la Peña, *Eleanor and Park* by Rainbow Rowell, and *Whale Talk* by Chris Crutcher. Students will be expected to read these outside of class and in their groups on certain days. All novels listed fit in with the theme of friendship in *Of Mice and Men* and fit into chapter four of *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning: Tapping the Powerful Resource of Story*, “Books about Real-Life Experiences.” All summaries listed below, with the exceptions of *We Were Here* and *Whale Talk*, have been paraphrased from its respective author’s webpage.

* *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky is told from fifteen-year-old Charlie in the form of letters. In this coming-of-age novel, Charlie uses the support of his friends to help him become less shy and enjoy life.
* *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* by Jesse Andrews focuses on Greg Gaines, who does not want anyone paying attention to him. He makes two friends, Earl Jackson, whom he makes movies with, and Rachel, who has cancer.
* *We Were Here* by Matt de la Peña is a story about three boys -- Miguel, Rondell, and Mong -- and their unlikely friendship as they run away from a group home and attempt to escape to Mexico.
* *Eleanor and Park* by Rainbow Rowell takes place in 1986. It follows Eleanor and Park as they become friends and then pessimistic lovers.
* *Whale Talk* by Chris Crutcher follows T.J. Jones as he builds a swim team from scratch that consists of only unlikely athletes. They all eventually bond and become close friends through their dedication to swimming.

***Through* the Text:**

Students will be reading a companion novel outside of class and on select days in class in groups while we read *Of Mice and Men* as a class. Students will have a “blind date” with a book. I would cover each of the five companion novels with paper and write a vague description and the first line of the book on the front of it. For example, for *We Were Here*, I might write: “Three teenage boys rebel against the law and travel along the coast of California as they run away from a group home. First line: ‘Here’s the thing: I was probably gonna write a book when I got older anyways.’” Then, I would instruct students to read the description, look at how many pages the novel has, but specifically tell them to not open it. After reading through the choices, they will sign up for the novel they wish to read.

In class, we will read *Of Mice and Men* together on most days. I would have students read in small groups or individually, sign up to read before class, or listen to an audiobook. This way, students are not forced to read if they are uncomfortable and they have a variation on how they read the book so they will hopefully become more interested in reading it. Before reading, I would preface by saying the novel includes use of the n-word, which we will skip when it comes up.

Activities would include asking students to keep track of how George and Lennie are characterized, responding to prompts such as:

* Is George a good friend to Lennie? Why or why not?
* Who do you identify with the most in the novel? Why?
* Do you think George and Lennie will ever achieve their dream to ‘live off the fatta the lan'’? Why or why not?

I would also ask students to describe what their own dream is and if they would need a friend to help them achieve it. All of these writings would be done in a journal and given credit for completion.

At the same time, students should also be reading their respective companion text outside of class. At least once a week, I would give students a chance to meet with their group mates and discuss the novel or read together if they need to catch up. They should keep track of the theme of friendship in both novels, the characters in their novel and how they are different from the characters in *Of Mice and Men*, any goals the characters in their novel may have, and which novel they like better and why. Since it probably will not take too long to read *Of Mice and Men*, since it is only about one hundred pages, I would give students extra time after we finish the novel to read their companion novel with their groups in class and work on their presentations.

**Beyond the Text:**

After we have finished reading, I would have them read Burns’s “To a Mouse” poem again. This time, I would have them read the prediction they wrote before we read the text and write about and discuss what they thought and if their prediction was correct. I would also ask them that, between George and Lennie, who they think the speaker of the poem would be and who the mouse would be and why.

We would also do presentations on their companion works. Instead of getting in front of the class and presenting, students would answer the questions posed at the beginning of the unit on a piece of poster paper. They would also include a summary of the text in their own words and three favorite quotes. Students will then do a gallery walk, where they read the posters and take notes. Afterwards, we would get together as a class and discuss which novel was their favorite, which one relates to *Of Mice and Men* the most, and why they think so.

Afterwards, we would revisit our discussion of the literary canon. I would ask students to do a response to the following prompt:

* The novels we read in school are part of the “literary canon.” Such novels include *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, and *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck. The literary canon is described by TCK Publishing as “the most important, influential, or definitive works.” In other words, they are the most *essential* novels to read because of the impact they have had. Do you think the novel you read as your companion work should be included in the literary canon? Why or why not? If not, is there another companion novel that should be part of the literary canon?

After students respond to the prompt, I would have them vote on the novel they think should be included in the literary canon, and we would have a discussion about what they wrote.

Works Cited

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