Kevin Bermudez

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Unit of Study

Growing up, I did not always enjoy reading a good book nor did I appreciate literature of any kind because I found myself being entertained by more physically active tasks. In my family, education has always been important but not necessarily modeled due to the circumstances in which my older relatives had to be raised. For my parents, aunts, uncles, and grandmother (she is the only one of my grandparents that I have ever met), working has been at the forefront of their lives as far back they remember. Whether it was waking up early, before they migrated here from El Salvador, to tend to their family’s land, feed the animals, go to the local well for water, or wash their clothes at the nearest river, it had always been ingrained in their minds that work was the only way to survive and there was never enough time, money, or other resources available to them to pursue and education. Therefore, although they always remind me that I must “ponerme las pilas,” or “put on my batteries,” I had never really seen it modeled before so I did not find any true motivation to help me find the joy in reading or school in general; it mostly felt like I was getting things done because I was told to and because I did not want to end up in the same difficult economic situation that they ended up in. Up until my freshman year of high school, I never got deep into literature, other than reading the *Captain Underpants* series by Dav Pilkey in my elementary school days. When I reached high school, however, I realized that there is more to books than just reading a random story that did not really have any significance. I noticed that novels, short stories, plays, and poems bring forth themes and issues that are akin to lifelike events and circumstances. From reading books such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* and plays including *Cyrano De Bergerac,* I was able to find more meaning in the texts that I read which caused me to value reading much more.

With this being said, when trying to piece together what my main focus would be for this unit of study, I knew I wanted to choose a text that would hook students into reading in a similar way that I became more interested in literature. Personally, apart from the two aforementioned works, I found John Steinbeck’s 1937 novel *Of Mice and Men* to be particularly refreshing as a ninth-grade student. I especially enjoyed the diverse cast of characters that included people of different classes, races, personalities, and did not feel like the typical type of people who would be grouped together. Furthermore, this canonical piece of literature touches on many themes that many people, including teenagers, face in their lives. These include feelings of loneliness, homosocial bonding, innocence, road trips, friendship, othering, and making difficult decisions, among others. With this wide range of subject matter, there is little doubt that most, if not all, young adult readers will find something or someone to connect to in this novel, much like I did.

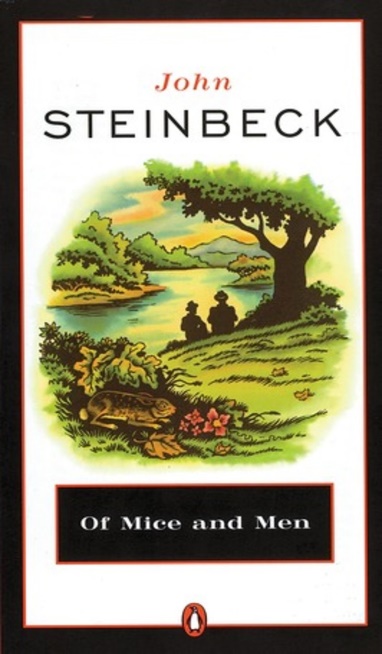
**Introducing the Unit:**

I personally believe that one great way to engage students is through auditory enhancement, which most often than not includes music. Sticking to the theme of the American Dream, I would play the song “American Dream,” by pop duo MKTO. This song is a good way to begin with this book because it outwardly expresses the meaning of the American Dream that many people relate to and attempt to achieve, such as George and Lennie do in Steinbeck’s novel. Although this song was released in 2014, about 77 years after the book was published, it still relates the same dreams and aspirations that George and Lennie shared as well as the hope they shared as social underdogs. As I introduce and play this song to the students, I would ask them to listen closely and write down one or two lines that they believe resonate with the idea of the American Dream the most. Once the song ends and the students have their representative lyrics written down, I would have them write their first daily journal entry down explaining in a paragraph why their specific lyrics encompass the American Dream more than the other lyrics do.

Once the students complete their journal entries, I would put them into groups of three or four and have them share their findings and opinions of the lyrics that they picked. Then, I would bring the class together again and have the groups share what they wrote down, and if any of them changed the lyrics that they chose because they were convinced by one of their group member’s reasoning. Also, I would share the lyrics that I would choose as representative of the American Dream and tell my students why.

Furthermore, in keeping with the theme of road trips and othering, I would provide my students with background of the novel’s setting, which is Soledad, California during the Great Depression because it helps explain why George and Lennie are going from place to place looking for work. Therefore, while using inspiration from Toby Emert’s article “Of Porcupines and Trusty Sidekicks and Road Trips to Infinity” from the Summer 2017 edition of *The ALAN Review,* I would incorporate an activity in which I would have the students answer the following questions: Which regions of the US are most familiar to us and why? How might the elements of setting serve as metaphors in a story? And What role do language and dialect play in the identity of people of various regions? These questions can help serve as a guide for discussion before delving into the text to allow for a general overview of how the setting affects the people in the novel and how the way they speak force the reader to apply an image of each character. Additionally, to keep with these issues, I would have the students keep Chapter 10 of *Literature for Today’s Young Adults,* to aid students in understanding the various archetypes offered in many stories and how they affect the other characters as well as showing their individual roles. Keeping these archetypes in mind, they could apply one to most, if not all, the characters in the novel.

**The Main Text:**



When talking about the main text, I would begin by giving contextual information about John Steinbeck and how one of his other famous novels, *The Grapes of Wrath,* also features a journey. I would also establish that Steinbeck, as he lived through the Great Depression, even while writing this book, understood the trials that the people of this time, especially those working on farms, went through which gives him credibility for writing about this specific moment in history. I would also add that Steinbeck spent the summers of his teen years working on different farms near him as well as part of a group of migrant workers. This can help teens see how other teens in a different era experienced their youth and help compare it to their own lives, even if it does not specifically connect in terms of the work that Steinbeck engaged in but rather in the responsibility given to them during this time in their lives.

After going through the introductory materials, we would begin the book as a class on the third day, reading the first chapter. After this, I would have them write in their journals which archetypes they believe they have seen thus far in the characters that have been introduced, as well as a prediction of what is to come in the following chapter. Since the chapters are somewhat lengthy, I would assign two chapters a day, giving a reading check quiz consisting of just five questions to make sure they are keeping up with the reading. This would leave us to read the final chapter in class so that we would be able to discuss what happens in the final moments of the book and how they feel about the ending.

To prepare for the next part of the unit, I would have the students write in their journals how they felt as they read how the story finalized and whether they believe George made the right decision by shooting his friend and why. Before writing, though, I would have them listen to Dan Seals’s country hit *One Friend* because I feel that it very much relates to the mutual feelings of friendship and solidarity that George and Lennie share. While writing, I would have them listen to this song in order to have a better understanding of why this decision was so difficult for George to make.

**Outside Reading**

Matt De La Peña’s novel *We Were Here* works well as a pairing for Steinbeck’s novel because it brings together a group of misfits who would otherwise never be seen together and puts them on a sort of unconventional road trip. Miguel, Mong, and Rondell go from enemies to close friends as they go on a metaphorical journey to find themselves, the truth, self-acceptance, and forgiveness. This can tie in together with *Of Mice and Men* because it features mild racism, loneliness, desperation.

F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* relates to the central work in that it heavily features the theme of the American Dream and how Jay Gatsby finds the economically successful side of this dream. Despite Gatsby achieving this goal, he still feels an emptiness and loneliness inside him that can not be filled with material wealth. Much like the main characters in Steinbeck’s work, loneliness and isolation comes forth in the Fitzgerald’s titular character.

Robert Burn’s 1785 poem “To a Mouse” serves as the inspiration for the title of Steinbeck’s book, as the exact words are written in line 39 of the poem. This poem is written from a man’s perspective to a mouse in which he compares and contrasts them. This poem can be used to compare Lennie to the mouse and George as the speaker.

W. R. Philbrick’s YA novel *Freak the Mighty* introduces an unlikely friendship in Max and Freak. Much like George and Lennie, they are complete opposites but manage to remain close friends. They go through various ordeals which leave them closer together as friends, similar to Steinbeck’s main characters.

**Final Project**

As a final writing assignment, I would have my students write an argumentative essay in which they detail whether or not George made the right decision by killing his friend. They would have to cite textual evidence to support their argument in a 3-5-page paper. Additionally, the students would have to turn on their creative side and write a song, poem, rap, or short story OR draw, paint, or digitally create an image representing George and Lennie’s friendship progression throughout the novel.

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