

Using
Bloom's Taxonomy to
Explore Literature

Levels of Understanding



Of Mice and Men

By John Steinbeck

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Introduction to Levels of Understanding

FOR MANY STUDENTS, studying literature is like being lost in an alien universe, filled with hidden symbols, structures, and meanings that only a scholar can uncover. Without a teacher's direction, students lack the skills and confidence to evaluate a work of literature on their own, and instead, will frequently turn to resources such as the Internet for guidance. As a result, they assume another writer's views instead of developing their own.

Levels of Understanding breaks down complex questions students will encounter into smaller parts, showing the steps a critical reader should take in order to develop a sound evaluation of a text. Each section of the guide contains five types of questions representative of Bloom's learning domains—starting with the most basic and foundational skill, knowledge and comprehension, and gradually building to the highest skill, evaluation. All the way, reluctant students are provided with the scaffolding they need to advance from one level of understanding to the next.

The five types of questions, again, representative of Bloom's domains, are as follows:

- **Comprehension**—will ask the most basic questions to ascertain the students' fundamental understanding of the text: plot facts, character identification, etc.
- **Reader Response**—will ask the students to “respond” to the text by relating it to personal experience or by presenting an opinion on a character or event.
- **Analysis**—will require students to study how various techniques and literary or theatrical devices (diction, symbolism, imagery, metaphors, asides, soliloquies etc.) function in the text. Analysis questions do not ask the student to merely identify or define a literary, theatrical, or rhetorical device.
- **Synthesis**—will bridge the gap between the analysis and evaluation questions, requiring students to look at other scenes in the text and draw conclusions about themes, motifs, or a writer's style. Often, a synthesis question will require the student to draw on prior knowledge—what has been learned in class or through research—and/or information from sources other than the literary title being studied in order to arrive at a satisfactory answer.
- **Evaluation**—will ask the student to make a qualitative judgment on the text and determine whether a particular aspect of it is effective or ineffective.

Other books may list Bloom's taxonomy, define the terms, and offer a general example or two. *Levels of Understanding*, however, provides the teacher with the title-specific questions to allow you to effectively bring Bloom into your classroom.

In addition, unlike other available products that claim to address Bloom's “higher order thinking skills,” *Levels of Understanding* does not teach students how to answer questions about a particular text, but instead, helps them develop skills to evaluate literature critically and without guidance. These are skills that will not only help students prepare for standardized tests like the Advanced Placement Language and Literature exams, the SATs, and the ACTs, but will also give students the self-assurance to develop and articulate a personal view—a skill that will be highly advantageous to them in college.

This product, however, is not geared toward upper-level students only, but is a versatile guide that can be used for students of all ability levels—remedial through honors. The teacher may customize the product to fit the class's objectives and goals, determining which questions the students will answer. Additionally, the guide is entirely reproducible, and each major division begins on a new page, so you may use *Levels of Understanding* for the whole work of literature or only a specific section. ♡



How to Use this Unit

Each *Levels of Understanding: Using Bloom's Taxonomy to Explore Literature* unit is intended to be a deep and rich component of your literature program, whether your goal is to prepare your students for a large-scale assessment like the AP Literature exam or to challenge your students to read carefully and to think deeply about what they have read.

The questions in this guide are designed to be flexible and meet your needs. They can be used as

- homework questions when students read the text independently.
- in-class reading check questions and “bell-ringer” journal entries.
- class discussion questions and prompts.
- focus questions for pre-writing and essay planning.
- review and study questions for assessment.

While the Teacher's Guide contains an answer key, you will find that the higher-order questions (especially synthesis and evaluation) have model answers that represent more than one possible response. It would be inappropriate to penalize a student whose well-reasoned and supportable answer did not match the “correct” answer in the guide.

For this reason, we strongly recommend that you view the questions in this guide as learning activities and not as assessment activities.

Many of your students are likely to find the higher domains new and perhaps intimidating. Others might be alarmed at having to support their reader-response reactions and their evaluations with an accurate comprehension of the text. The questions in this guide should act as both scaffolding and safety net, guiding your students through a new reading and thinking process and allowing them to practice without fear of “failure.”

The writing prompts, however, provide rich assessment and evaluation opportunities. Every prompt is designed to invite your students to operate in one of the higher order domains, thus giving students the opportunity to demonstrate their ability, and giving you the opportunity to evaluate their progress.

Whether you use *Levels of Understanding: Using Bloom's Taxonomy to Explore Literature* as the core of your literature curriculum or as a supplement, the guide and writing prompts are designed to help your students attain a deep understanding of the works they read. Ideally, they will gain the type of understanding demanded by Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and most state standards, including the Common Core State Standards of the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association. 🍷



Introduction to *Of Mice and Men*

Publication and Reception of the Novel

OF *MICE AND MEN* WAS published in 1937 and was both a popular and critical success. It was selected by the Book-of-the-Month Club, and Steinbeck was then chosen as one of the Ten Outstanding Men of the Year. Despite its success, the novel has also been listed on the American Library Association's list of *Most Challenged Books of the 21st Century*.

Many schools contend that the novel promotes euthanasia and conveys prejudice of race, gender, and intellectual impairment. Steinbeck's use of profane words such as "Jesus Christ," "God," and "nigger" have incited

further outrage. Many educators object to the novel's frank discussions of sexual intercourse; Curley's wife is portrayed as a "tart," the men visit a house of prostitution, and George and Lennie's flight from Weed is due to an accusation of rape. Finally, the overall violence depicted in the novel, particularly toward women, has placed it on many lists of banned books.

In recent years, many of the protests have been lifted, and the novel has returned to lists of required reading in numerous American, Irish, British, Canadian, and New Zealand high schools. 🐻

Autobiographical Nature of the Novel

JOHAN STEINBECK WAS BORN ON February 27, 1902, in Salinas, California, to a working class family. His mother, a schoolteacher, and his father, a local government official, encouraged his literary pursuits and read literature from around the world to him. Steinbeck graduated from Salinas High School in 1919 and enrolled in Stanford University in the fall where he studied literature and writing.

For the next five years, Steinbeck attended Stanford sporadically due to illness and indecision about his academic and career goals. He worked as a ranch hand, clerk, and field laborer during this time as well. His time on farms would inspire his novel *Of Mice and Men* fifteen years later.

Steinbeck garnered both critical and commercial success with *Of Mice and Men*, which was also adapted into a play on Broadway. Ironically, Steinbeck was living in a migrant camp the night of the show's opening.

As a naturalistic and realistic writer, Steinbeck took great pride in preparing for his novels by living and working amongst the people and communities he chose to write about. He joined migrant workers in Oklahoma and rode with them to California, searching for work alongside them, living with them in "Hoovervilles" (the shanty towns built by the homeless and the migrants during the Depression).

He observed firsthand the living and working conditions in several of these camps and catalogued the plight of the workers in magazine articles, hoping to improve their circumstances.

His personal camaraderie with these displaced migrants allowed him to create the lonely world of *Of Mice and Men*. As George tells Lennie, "Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They do not belong no place." George and Lennie struggle against that loneliness throughout the novel, asserting that their circumstances are different as they dream of ceasing their endless movement and settling on a farm of their own.

The author was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962 for his lifetime contributions to the literary canon. In his acceptance speech, Steinbeck said:

[the] writer is delegated to declare and 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. I hold that a writer who does not passionately believe in the perfectibility of man has no dedication nor any membership in literature.

Seen through this lens, the closing of *Of Mice and Men* can be seen less as a tragedy and more as an affirmation of the possibility of love and compassion, despite circumstance and forces beyond our control. 🐻

Social and Historical Context

STEINBECK SETS *OF MICE AND MEN* against the backdrop of the Great Depression in the United States in a town near Soledad, California. Soledad in Spanish means "solitude," and this choice of setting defines the loneliness

of Steinbeck's characters.

After World War I, economic and environmental factors brought an influx of migrant agricultural workers to California from Great Plains states, such as Oklahoma,

Levels of Understanding:

Using Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning Domains
to explore John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*

Writing Prompts

Chapter 1: Analysis, Synthesis, Evaluation

Write a well-organized and –supported essay in which you explain the extent to which the first chapter succeeds (or fails) to establish Lennie as a sympathetic character. Consider the effect will this success (or failure) may have on your reading of the novel?

Chapter 2: Analysis, Synthesis, Evaluation

In a thoughtful and well supported essay, analyze and evaluate Steinbeck's choice of the swamper as the vehicle to introduce several key characters. What is the overall effect on the reader of this structural, narrative choice?

Chapter 3: Analysis, Synthesis

On one level, *Of Mice and Men* is the story about a specific ranch. On another level, this ranch of these characters can be interpreted as archetypes. Write a thoughtful and well-argued essay in which you analyze the archetypal interpretation of this novel.

Chapter 4: Comprehension, Analysis, Synthesis

One of Steinbeck's purposes in writing this novel was to reveal the plight of the socially disadvantaged on the time period. Write a well-argued and –supported essay in which you analyze the difficulties inherent in attempting to provide an accurate historical and sociological portrait of racism in a novel for a modern audience. Be certain to support all of your assertions with direct references to the novel as well as citations to other reliable literary criticism.

[Note to Teacher: Depending on your goals and intents for this class, this prompt could motivate a “mini-research” project in which students themselves seek information on race relations in the first half of the twentieth century, or the “other reliable criticism” can simply be that which appears in the instructional materials you are using. The point is simply for the student to synthesize information from more than one source in order to argue his or her point.]

Chapter 5: Analysis, Synthesis, Evaluation

In this chapter, the protagonist commits two heinous acts, yet Steinbeck attempts to preserve reader sympathy for this character. In a reasonable and well-supported essay, evaluate Steinbeck's success in maintaining sympathy

for Lennie. Include in your evaluation an analysis of the techniques employed in this chapter, including but not limited to diction and characterization.

Chapter 6: Analysis, Synthesis, Evaluation

One of the social issues addressed in this work of literary naturalism is the morality of euthanasia, or mercy killing: the shooting of Candy's dog, the drowning of the puppies whose mother would not be able to feed them, etc. Write a well-supported and - organized essay in which you analyze George's decision to kill Lennie and evaluate the ethics or morality of his act. Be certain to consider the society depicted in the novel at least as much as you consider the values of contemporary American society.

For the Novel as a Whole: Comprehension, Analysis, Synthesis, Evaluation

Immediately upon the publication of *Of Mice and Men*, a theatrical adaptation of thenovel opened on Broadway. Write an organized and reasonable essay in which you analyze how the structure, action, and narrative devices of *Of Mice and Men* are similar to those of a play. To what extent do Steinbeck's artistic choices enhance or detract from the overall impact of the novel? 🍷



Levels of Understanding:
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 to explore John Steinbeck's*

Of Mice and Men

CHAPTER ONE

Comprehension

1. What is the setting at the beginning of the novel? How does Steinbeck describe this setting?

2. What physical descriptions of the two men does the author give the reader upon their initial entrance?

3. How does Lennie behave when we first meet him? How does George behave?

4. Why is Lennie so excited by talk about the rabbits?

5. What troubling fact do we learn about Lennie and George's background and why they are on the road?

6. How did the two men come to travel together?

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CHAPTER TWO

Comprehension

1. How do the objects that George puts on his shelves compare with those of the men already in the bunkhouse?

2. What important information that will become important as the chapter unfolds does the swamper reveal about the boss, the stable buck, Curley, Curley's wife, and Slim?

3. What is Lennie doing during George's interactions with the swamper? With the boss? With Curley? What had George previously instructed Lennie to do?

4. What is Lennie's reaction to Curley's wife?

5. What inferences can you make about Curley's attitude towards George and Lennie in the following text:

"He glanced coldly at George and then at Lennie. His arms gradually bent at the elbows and his hands closed into fists. He stiffened and went into a slight crouch. His glance was at once calculating and pugnacious."

6. How does George feel about Curley's wife?

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CHAPTER THREE

Comprehension

1. What new information do we learn about the history of George and Lennie's friendship in this chapter? About what happened in Weed?

2. Why is Lennie so happy in the first portion of this chapter? What are George's reactions to his happiness?

3. Why do Carlson and the other men want Candy to get rid of his dog? Why is Candy so resistant?

4. Who provides further information about Curley's wife in this chapter? Is this information consistent with what we already know about her?

5. What is Susy's place, and why do the men go there occasionally? Why do they not frequent Clara's house?

6. Why do Carlson and Whit leave the bunkhouse after Curley comes in? Why do George, Lennie, and Candy stay?

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CHAPTER FOUR

Comprehension

1. Describe Crooks's living quarters.

2. How does Crooks initially greet Lennie? Why is Lennie there?

3. What is strange about Curley's wife's question: "Any you boys seen Curley?"

4. What upsets Lennie most about the conversation he has with Crooks? When does Crooks know that he has gone too far?

5. How does Curley's wife feel about her husband?

6. Why does Candy tell Curley's wife about their plan?

7. Why do Crooks and Curley's wife not believe Lennie and Candy's claims about getting their own land?

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CHAPTER FIVE

Comprehension

1. What sounds are heard in the barn at the beginning of the chapter?

2. What dramatic event has happened at the start of the chapter? How long is it before we know exactly how it happened?

3. When Curley's wife first enters, what phrase does Lennie repeat to remind himself of George's instructions?

4. What information do we learn about Curley's wife's dreams?

5. Trace the events in this chapter which lead to Curley's wife's death.

6. With what is Lennie most concerned throughout this chapter?

7. When Candy and George discover Curley's wife's body, what are their individual plans for what to do next? What are the primary concerns of each man?
