Resource title

KS4 > Prose > Of Mice and Men by John Steinbeck > Pre-teaching / creative writing exercise

How it works

Designed as a stimulus for a piece of original writing coursework, this would work well as a taught piece in class or, heaven forbid, for catching up the late-submitters as they could work through it on their own!

Try this!

Give half a class one extract and the other half the other extract, and then get them into pairs and ask them to compare … what are the similarities and differences between the texts? What do they think are the most effective features of the texts? Why? When they’ve analysed the texts they’ve been given, then they are in a better position to create their own.

Try this!

Focus on the extracts as an introduction to Of Mice and Men. What do they notice about how the authors (particularly Steinbeck) set the scene? The first section of the method has some useful questions to guide them – put them on cards and give small groups a different card to focus on, then share responses as a whole class.

Or this!

Focus on the imagery that the writers create … they’ll think they’re just playing, but storyboarding the extracts makes students really look at how the setting and atmosphere are painted (and makes for a great display too).

Whiz this!

As always, whizz it! If it’s on IWB or OHT, it’s easy for everyone to see and share their responses.

Alison Smith
GCSE COURSEWORK  
Creative writing to explore, imagine and entertain.

The task
A piece of writing which imaginatively describes a setting in detail and introduces two characters to the scene.

Method

1. Read the following extracts in detail.
Consider the author's description of the place, and the impact of the two new arrivals.

- How are the descriptions developed in each paragraph?
- How do the authors convey a sense of atmosphere? Are there any unusual or particularly effective words or phrases? How important are adjectives to the sense of atmosphere?
- How do we gain an impression of the people who arrive? What sort of people are they? What are they doing in their new surroundings?

2. Choose your setting.
This can be a real place you know well, or an imaginary scene. It might help if you find or draw a picture to accompany your description. Brainstorm your description, using adjectives and specific features of the landscape.

3. Choose your characters.
Decide who your two characters will be, and the effect they have on the place they enter. Brainstorm a description of the two arrivals, considering where they have come from and what they are doing in their new surroundings.

4. Write a rough draft.
Remember that this piece of writing should be imaginative, descriptive and entertaining! This means you need to use lots of detail, unusual language and structure, and writing needs to be fluent and easy to read.

5. Check your work through.

6. Redraft.
A bass note sounds. It is a deep, vibrating chord that hints that the brass section may break in at any moment with a fanfare for the cosmos, because the scene is the blackness of deep space with a few stars glittering like the dandruff on the shoulders of God.

Then it comes into view overhead, bigger than the biggest, most unpleasantly-armed starcruiser in the imagination of the three-ring film-maker: a turtle, ten thousand miles long. It is Great A'Tuin, one of the rare astrochelonians from a universe where things are less as they are and more like people imagine them to be, and it carries on its meteor-pocked shell four giant elephants who bear on their enormous shoulders the great round wheel of the Discworld.

As the viewpoint swings around the whole of the world can be seen by the light of its tiny orbiting sun. There are continents, archipelagos, seas, deserts, mountain ranges and even a tiny central ice cap. The inhabitants of this place, it is obvious, won’t have any truck with global theories. Their world, bounded by an encircling ocean that falls forever into space in one long waterfall, is as round and flat as a geological pizza, although without the anchovies.

A world like that, which exists only because the gods enjoy a joke, must be a place where magic can survive.

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He came walking through the thunderstorm and you could tell he was a wizard, partly because of the long cloak and carven staff but mainly because the raindrops were stopping several feet from his head, and steaming.

It was good thunderstorm country, up here in the Ramtop Mountains, a country of jagged peaks, dense forests and little river valleys so deep the daylight had no sooner reached the bottom than it was time to leave again. Ragged wisps of cloud clung to the lesser peaks below the mountain trail along which the wizard slithered and slid. A few slot-eyed goats watched him with mild interest. It doesn’t take a lot to interest goats.

Sometimes he would stop and throw his heavy staff into the air. It always came down pointing the same way and the wizard would sigh, pick it up, and continue his squelchy progress.

The storm walked around the hills on legs of lightning, shouting and grumbling.

The wizard disappeared around the bend in the track and the goats went back to their damp grazing.

Until something else caused them to look up. They stiffened, their eyes widening, their nostrils flaring.

This was strange, because there was nothing on the path. But the goats still watched it pass by until it was out of sight.

*From Equal Rites by Terry Pratchett*
A few miles south of Soledad, the Salinas river drops in close to the hill-side bank and runs deep and green. The water is warm too, for it has slipped twinkling over the yellow sands in the sunlight before reaching the narrow pool. On one side of the river the golden foothill slopes curve up the strong and rocky Gabilan mountains, but on the valley side the water is lined with trees—willows fresh and green with every spring, carrying in their lower leaf junctures the debris of the winter's flooding; and sycamores with mottled, white, recumbent limbs and branches that arch over the pool. On the sandy bank under the trees the leaves lie deep and so crisp that a lizard makes a great skittering if he runs among them. Rabbits come out of the brush to sit on the sand in the evening, and the damp flats are covered with the night tracks of 'coons, and with the spread pads of dogs from the ranches, and with the split-wedge tracks of deer that come to drink in the dark.

There is a path through the willows and among the sycamores, a path beaten hard by boys coming down from the ranches to swim in the deep pool and beaten hard by tramps who come wearily down from the highway in the evening to jungle-up near water. In front of the low horizontal limb of a giant sycamore there is an ash-pile made by many fires; the limb is worn smooth by men who have sat on it.

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Evening of a hot day started the little wind to moving among the leaves. The shade climbed up the hills toward the top. On the sand-banks the rabbits sat as quietly as little grey, sculptured stones. And then from the direction of the state highway came the sound of sycamore leaves. The rabbits hurried noiselessly for cover. A stilted heron laboured up into the air and pounded down river. For a moment the place was lifeless, and then two men emerged from the path and came into the opening by the green pool. They had walked in single file down the path, and even in the open one stayed behind the other. Both were dressed in denim trousers and in denim coats with brass buttons. Both wore black, shapeless hats and both carried tight blanket rolls slung over their shoulders. The first man was small and quick, dark of face, with restless eyes and sharp, strong features. Every part of him was defined: small, strong hands, slender arms, a thin and bony nose. Behind him walked his opposite, a huge man, shapeless of face, with large, pale eyes, with wide, sloping shoulders; and he walked heavily, dragging his feet a little, the way a bear drags his paws. His arms did not swing at his sides, but hung loosely and only moved because the heavy hands were pendula.

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