Teaching notes

The sources and comprehension questions below introduce students to the background context to Steinbeck’s novel.

Sources 1-4 and questions 1-8 should be accessible to most students. Sources 5 and 6, and their accompanying questions (9-12) are designed for Higher Tier students. For further challenge, mix up the questions and remove the source references.

Please note that due to copyright restrictions source 6 can only be accessed via the separate PDF file.

If you’d like to try a more active approach, catering to students’ competitive spirit and any desire they may have to start leaping out of their seats, try this team game.

Instructions for the team game

1. Your class will be working in groups of three. Each group needs a set of sources and a set of questions.
2. Cut up the questions for each group, numbering them on the back and stacking them with number 1 on top. Put each set of questions on a desk at the front of the classroom.
3. Give each group a copy of the source texts and time to read them through before you begin.
4. When you (and they) are ready, call ‘go’, and at this point, one student from each group should ‘run’ to the front for the first question only, and return to their team.
5. The team agree an answer and a second team member takes the answer to the teacher, which is checked before permission is given to pick up the second question from their colour pile. If the answer is incorrect, the student must return to their team for another go.
6. Students should rotate their roles and keep familiarising themselves with the texts while they await their next question.
7. This process should be repeated until you have a winning team.

Follow-up activities

- Students could write a descriptive piece about ranch life, using the relevant sources.
- Students could create their own fictional ranch character, who has experienced losing his livelihood and leaving his family in search of work in the West. They could write a diary entry for this character about his experience, or write a third person narrative of the events.
Historical context

Source 1

The subject of Of Mice and Men was an incident occurring a dozen years earlier: In the mid-1920s, Steinbeck had seen a troubled man kill a straw boss*, and he told a New York reporter that this gave him the story. Characters most likely emerged from his past as well: Lennie is one of several ‘unfinished people’ in Steinbeck’s canon, those with the sensibilities of a child. He knew one such boy in Salinas, a child most often seen outside Bell’s Candy Store. Each Easter the boy was given a rabbit, and in the week following he would pet the rabbit to death ...

Extract from Susan Shillinglaw, A Journey into Steinbeck’s California

* straw boss: a junior supervisor who has some responsibility but little authority

Source 2

(A description of Tom Collins, the man on whom the central character in Steinbeck’s Grapes of Wrath is based.)

An intrepid, resourceful and exceptionally compassionate man, Collins was the manager of a model Farm Security Administration camp, located in Kern County at the southern end of California’s Central Valley. The Arvin Sanitary Camp was one of several proposed demonstration camps intended to provide humane, clean, democratic – but temporary – living conditions for the growing army of migrant workers entering California from the lower Middle West and Dust Bowl region ... He and Steinbeck, both Rooseveltian Democrats, hit it off immediately in the late summer of 1936, when the novelist went south on the first of several gruelling research trips with Collins during the next two years to investigate field conditions ... Collins guided Steinbeck through the intricacies of the agricultural labor scene, put him in direct contact with migrant families, and permitted Steinbeck to incorporate ‘great gobs’ of information into his own writing. ‘Letter from Tom ... He is so good. I need this stuff. It is exact and just the thing that will be used against me if I am wrong,’ Steinbeck noted in Working Days on June 24, 1938.

Extract from the Introduction to John Steinbeck, Grapes of Wrath, (1939)

Source 3

About the Dust Bowl

For eight years dust blew on the southern plains. It came in a yellowish-brown haze from the South and in rolling walls of black from the North. The simplest acts of life — breathing, eating a meal, taking a walk — were no longer simple. Children wore dust masks to and from school, women hung wet sheets over windows in a futile attempt to stop the dirt, farmers watched helplessly as their crops blew away.

The Dust Bowl of the 1930s lasted about a decade. Its primary area of impact was on the southern Plains. The northern Plains were not so badly affected, but nonetheless, the drought, windblown dust and agricultural decline were no strangers to the north. In fact the agricultural devastation helped to lengthen the Depression whose effects were felt worldwide. The movement of people on the Plains was also profound.

Extract from http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/depression/dustbowl.htm
Source 4

The physical background for *Of Mice and Men* came from Steinbeck’s own early years in a California agricultural valley ... In his childhood he spent a good deal of time on a ranch near King City, south of Salinas, that was owned by relatives of his mother, and during his high school years he worked summers in the fields and orchards near home.

More important in planting the germ of the novel was an experience he had during a period when he dropped out of college. He entered Stanford in 1919, already ambitious to become a writer and determined to follow his own particular interests in the curriculum. Experiencing some difficulty with courses and grades the following year, he decided to break away, shed his identity as a university student, and make his way for a while as a workingman. ‘I was a bindle-stiff* myself for quite a spell,’ he told reporters some years later. ‘I worked in the same country that the story is laid in.’

Tall and husky, he was hired as a labourer on a ranch near Chualar, a short distance – in miles – from the prosperous neighbourhood in Salinas where he was born, and for a time he became a part of this very different world. The fact that he was promoted to straw boss suggests that he got on well with his fellow workers. He had a talent for being inconspicuous: they probably learned very little about him while he was gathering impressions of them.


* bindle-stiff: someone carrying their clothes or bedding

Source 5

In the camps the word would come whispering, There’s work at Shafter. And the cars would be loaded in the night, the highways crowded – a gold rush for work. At Shafter the people would pile up, five times too many to do the work. A gold rush for work. They stole away in the night, frantic for work. And along the roads lay the temptations, the fields that could bear food.

That’s owned. That ain’t our’n.

Well, maybe we could get a little piece of her. Maybe – a little piece. Right down there – a patch. Jimson weed now. Christ, I could git enough potatoes off’n that little patch to feed my whole family!

It ain’t our’n. It got to have Jimson weeds.

Extract from John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939)
### Historical context

**1.** What was the inspiration for Steinbeck writing *Of Mice and Men?*  
(Source 1)

**2.** How is Lennie described and what was the inspiration for him?  
(Source 1)

**3.** Where did Steinbeck go that gave him research material for writing his novels?  
(Source 2)

**4.** How are the living conditions of the camps described? Quote from the text.  
(Source 2)

**5.** What effect did the dust storms have on children, women and farmers?  
(Source 3)

**6.** What were the more permanent effects of the dust bowl?  
(Source 3)

**7.** What childhood experience had an impact on Steinbeck’s novels?  
(Source 4)

**8.** When Steinbeck dropped out of college, what did he do? Why is this relevant to *Of Mice and Men?*  
(Source 4)

**9.** How did Steinbeck fit in to ranch life?  
(Source 4)

**10.** What metaphor is used to describe the desperate scramble for work?  
(Source 5)

**11.** What were the temptations for the travelling ‘bindlestiffs’.  
(Source 5)

**12.** What is in the foreground of the picture, and what is in the background, and why is this relevant?  
(Source 6)
Answers

1. What was the inspiration for Steinbeck writing Of Mice and Men? (Source 1)
   An incident Steinbeck had witnessed in the 1920s when a troubled man killed a straw boss.

2. How is Lennie described and what was the inspiration for him? (Source 1)
   An ‘unfinished character’, again from Steinbeck’s own experience, who was inspired by a child in his home town Salinas.

3. Where did Steinbeck go that gave him research material for writing his novels? (Source 2)
   The Arvin Sanitary Camp, a camp for migrant workers in California.

4. How are the living conditions of the camps described? (Source 2)
   Quote from the text. ‘humane, clean, democratic – but temporary’

5. What effect did the dust storms have on children, women and farmers? (Source 3)
   Children wore dust masks to and from school; women draped wet sheets over windows to attempt to stop the dust; farmers lost their crops.

6. What were the more permanent effects of the dust bowl? (Source 3)
   Drought, windblown dust and agricultural decline, as well as mass movement of the people.

7. What childhood experience had an impact on Steinbeck’s novels? (Source 4)
   Working on a ranch owned by some relatives.

8. When Steinbeck dropped out of college, what did he do? Why is this relevant to Of Mice and Men? (Source 4)
   He worked as a ‘bindle-stiff’, travelling the country just like the characters in the novel.

9. How did Steinbeck fit in to ranch life? (Source 4)
   He obviously got on well with the work as he was promoted; he managed to keep a low profile but gathered information too.

10. What metaphor is used to describe the desperate scramble for work? (Source 5)
    ‘A gold rush’.

11. What were the temptations for the travelling ‘bindle-stiffs’? (Source 5)
    The fields either side of their road, where they could have their own ‘patch’ of land. (The references to Jimson weeds are explained in the part that follows: they are necessary for creating secret vegetable patches to conceal this illegal use of land.)

12. What is in the foreground of the picture, and what is in the background, and why is this relevant? (Source 6)
    Damaged property and land are in the foreground; men rebuilding are in the background. The legible part of the article suggests that at this time, Americans were trying to claw back some use for their damaged land – albeit non-agricultural.