An unusual form

A ‘play novelette’

Steinbeck chose an unusual form for his text: a ‘play-novelette’. He wanted to create a sort of playscript that was designed for readers rather than an audience.

Read this appraisal of the form Of Mice and Men, according to one critic:

...clearly the novel does ‘play’: Characters make entrances and exits; plainly indicated parallels and oppositions that are characteristic of the drama exist in quantity and function as they should; suspense is maintained; characters are kept uncomplicated and ‘active’ in the manner of stage characterisation; since there is little internal or implicit development, events depend on what is said or done in full view; the locale is restricted mainly to one place; the span of time is brief; the central theme is stated and restated – the good life is impossible because humanity is flawed – and in itself is deeply poignant, as Steinbeck had defined a play-novelette theme.


Now sum up the main ingredients of a ‘play-novelette’ in your own words, using the bullet points below. The first two have been completed to get you started.

- Characters make entrances and exits, as they would in a play
- There are clear parallels and oppositions, as is typical in drama
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Cycles in the text

Steinbeck uses the structural device of cycles in the text frequently. One example is the never-ending cycle of hopes and disappointment: every time something happens to raise hope in George and Lennie, those hopes get dashed.

It could be argued that these cycles echo the monotony of the lives of the men on the ranch, or the inevitability of the final events, or simply the tragedy of living through the Great Depression.

The language and style of section 5 makes the cyclical nature of the play-novelette quite clear to the reader. Answer the questions below to consider how and why Steinbeck uses cycles.

1. Find and list quotations that refer to horses in section 5. How are they described? Why does Steinbeck describe the horses throughout?

2. List five quotations of Lennie’s dialogue that show repetition of one word. Why does he keep repeating that word in particular?

3. What else is repetitive about Lennie in the text?

4. What repetitive actions and events happen in the text? Consider the use of foreshadowing, and think about Curley’s actions, George and Lennie’s situation and fantasy for instance. You may have other ideas too.

5. You could describe Steinbeck’s prose style as repetitive. Explain how it is repetitive and why this might be.

6. Why do you think Steinbeck uses so many cycles in the text?