Every novel has a setting, and sometimes several. The writer depicts a society, influenced by the time and place in which the novel is set, and part of what we do as readers is to form an understanding of that world. Sometimes we’re helped to do this by our existing knowledge of a particular time or place, but we rely mainly on the details given by the writer within the novel itself and the aspects of society that he or she chooses to highlight.

You will be assessed on your knowledge and understanding of the society Steinbeck depicts in Of Mice and Men – the American West in the 1930s. You’ll need to have read the novel carefully, identifying the clues Steinbeck gives the reader about this society, and thinking about the impression this society makes on you.

How do we define a society?

In 2014, The Sunday Times profiled all of the 64 cities in the UK. The measures they took into account included the following: housing, schools, transport links, employment levels, culture and heritage, social scene, countryside, sense of community. Bristol came top, as the ‘best city to live in the UK’.

These measures are selective, of course. They’re typical of the kind of things people look at when they evaluate what a society is like, but they concentrate on things that are likely to be different within the UK now. If you were to compare cities across the world, or at different periods in history, you’d need to include other measures – for example, gender equality, or the level of democracy.

Task 1

What measures can you think of that would help you to establish what a society is like? Make a list.

Now think about the place where you live – not just ‘England’ or ‘the UK’, but your specific area. For each measure on your list, give it a mark out of 10.

Task 2

Now try to imagine the place where you live as it would have been when your grandparents were young. Give each measure on your list a new mark out of 10, according to what your area would have been like then – you probably won’t be sure about all the answers, but have a go and give your ‘best guess’.
Society under scrutiny

Of Mice and Men by John Steinbeck

Society in Of Mice and Men

Steinbeck’s novel was written and is set in the 1930s. The society he shows us in Of Mice and Men is different from the society you’ve just been thinking about, because it’s a different place, with different environmental, social and economic conditions from the UK. This society is not just America in the 1930s, but a particular place in America.

Here are some measures to help you think about the society shown in Of Mice and Men:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wealth</th>
<th>How prosperous are most characters? What proportion of characters own their own home or land?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jobs</td>
<td>How much job security do characters have? What is their work like? How much job satisfaction is there for them?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>What access to education do characters have? How does their level of education affect their lives and their prospects?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>How are men and women expected to behave? How far do men and women have equal opportunities? How do men regard women, and vice versa?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>How integrated or segregated is this society? To what extent are characters defined by their race?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>How supportive and co-operative are characters of one another? How much trust and friendship is there? How much distrust and hostility? How hierarchical is this society?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare</td>
<td>How does this society support its most vulnerable characters? How are the elderly treated, or the sick, or people with physical disabilities?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law and order</td>
<td>How law-abiding is this society? How is crime dealt with? How far can characters expect justice?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom</td>
<td>How much control do characters have over their own destinies? How far can they choose how they live? To what extent are they able to speak their minds? Do they have freedom of speech?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Society under scrutiny

**Task 3**

The above list of measures isn’t exhaustive – there are different ways of looking at any society. Look at your list of measures from Tasks 1 and 2. Do you have measures which haven’t been included above which you think are relevant to the novel? Can you think of any additional measures now? If so, add them above. Some of the measures may overlap; that doesn’t really matter. What’s important is that you’re thinking about this society in different ways.

**Task 4**

Now for the real work! Collect evidence from the novel for each aspect of society listed above. Be specific – your job is to identify the parts of the novel which help you to understand and evaluate this society. Your evidence should include short quotations (remember to make a note of which character is speaking and the page number, so that you can refer back to it) as well as references to Steinbeck’s descriptions and things characters do (again, remember to record page numbers).

You can present your evidence as a mind map, or as a sheet of notes, or a PowerPoint presentation. Choose whichever format you will find most memorable. You might like to try different formats for different aspects.

**Task 5**

Evaluate your evidence. For each measure, decide what Steinbeck is showing us about life in this society and write down your thoughts. Weigh things up: if the evidence is complex or seems to be contradictory or conflicting, try to think about why this is. Avoid simplifying what you think this society is like – different characters have different experiences and therefore different attitudes, and it can be the exceptions and the subtle differences which create the most tension and interest.

Now think about the following:

How far do you think Steinbeck is simply reflecting a particular society (‘showing life as it is’) and how far do you think he is giving us a message or trying to provoke a particular response in his readers?

Some aspects, such as the racial discrimination shown towards Crooks and the attitudes many of the men show towards women, are more shocking to us now than they would have been to most of Steinbeck’s readers at the time. How far do you think Steinbeck wanted readers to question these attitudes and sympathise with the characters he presented?

**Extension task**

Make a television news feature or write a newspaper article about this society, focusing on one or more of the measures you’ve researched. You could be investigating the lives of itinerant workers, or the difficulties and dangers faced by vulnerable people. File your report.
Reference sheets for Task 4

Use the summary of each section below to help locate your evidence for Task 4. Page numbers refer to the New Longman Literature edition of the book.

Section 1
- Bus driver makes George and Lennie walk to the ranch (p.4)
- George reminds Lennie why they had to leave Weed (p.7)
- George decides they'll sleep under the stars rather than go straight to the ranch (p.8)
- George tells Lennie how well off he'd be on his own (pp.11-12)
- George tells Lennie how the two of them are different from other workers (pp.14-15)

Section 2
- Description of the bunk-house (p.19)
- Candy tells George about the ‘last guy’ (pp.20-21)
- First mention of Crooks (p.21)
- The boss meets George and Lennie (pp.23-25)
- George accuses Candy of listening in on them (p.26)
- Curley meets George and Lennie (pp.27-28)
- George and Candy talk about Curley (pp.29-30)
- Candy talks about Curley’s wife (p.30-31)
- Curley’s wife comes into the bunk-house (p.34)
- George and Lennie talk about whether to stay or quit (p.35)
- George and Lennie meet Slim (pp.36-39)
- Slim and Carlson talk about the puppies and Candy’s dog (p.39)

Section 3
- Slim and George talk about Lennie (pp.42-44)
- George tells Slim why he doesn't travel alone (p.45)
- George tells Slim about Lennie and the girl in Weed (pp.45-64)
- Carlson tries to persuade Candy to shoot his dog (pp.48-50)
- Bill Tenner’s magazine letter (pp.50-51)
- Carlson shoots Candy’s dog (pp.52-54)
- Crooks tells Slim Lennie’s been handling the puppies (p.55)
- Whit talks to George about Curley’s wife (pp.55-56)
- Whit tells George about old Susy’s place (p.57)
- George tells Lennie about the place they’re going to get (pp.61-64)
- Candy has been listening and offers to put in his injury compensation (pp.64-67)
- Candy picks on Lennie and Lennie crushes his hand (pp.68-70)
Society under scrutiny

Section 4

Description of Crooks’ shed and Crooks (pp.73-74)
Lennie comes in and Crooks talks about his life (pp.74-77)
Crooks taunts Lennie (pp.78-79)
Crooks explains why he reads books (p.80)
Lennie, Crooks and Candy talk about their plan to get land (p.81-84)
Curley’s wife comes in to the shed (pp.84-87)
Curley’s wife threatens Crooks (pp.88-89)

Section 5

Lennie has killed the puppy (pp.92-93)
Curley’s wife talks to Lennie about her life (pp.94-97)
Lennie kills Curley’s wife (pp.99-100)
Description of Curley’s wife’s body (p.101)
George and Candy find Curley’s wife dead (p.102-4)
The other men find Curley’s wife dead and get their guns (p.105-7)

Section 6

Lennie waits for George in the brush (pp.109-110)
Lennie imagines Aunt Clara talking to him (pp.110-111)
Lennie imagines a giant rabbit talking to him (pp.111-12)
George talks to Lennie and, as he hears the other men coming, shoots him (pp.113-16)
The men head back to the ranch (pp.116-17)