Discuss Steinbeck’s use of animals/animal imagery as a clue to the novel’s outcome

**Overview**
This unit of work should enable your brightest students to think deeply about the writer’s craft. It assumes students have read the first chapter of the novel. The basic premise is that Steinbeck provides clues that the novel will end tragically and, in the tradition of Greek Tragedy, this outcome is inevitable from the outset. One of the unifying devices in providing the sense of tragic inevitability is the use of animals and animal imagery, in the title and in the opening.

The focus on one aspect of the opening – Title – Characterisation, – Setting – Theme will enable students to specialise and then to feedback. You might want to get them to do this as a formal presentation using the OHP. This would give you opportunity to assess En1.

The three prompt questions on each aspect are only a starting point; students should be encouraged to be original and add to these ideas.

Possible responses (for the teacher!) are provided below, but these are a guide only and should not be considered the “right” answers.

**Possible discussion points might include:**

**Title**
- Alliterative connection between mice and men – both subject to fate. Context of title gives biggest clue of tragedy/pessimism for the dream
- Struggle for survival of subject of Burns’s poem – hints strongly at vulnerability – powerful image of innocent helplessness against a much stronger force. Underlined in Lennie’s character in first chapter
- Simple logic. Dead mice in 1st chapter signals possible human tragedy given the novel’s title

**Characterisation**
- Bear metaphor significant. Legendary strength. Bear hug – over-enthusiastic and therefore painful – pre-cursor to Curley’s wife incident. Bear-baiting is effectively the catalyst which propels the plot towards its tragic conclusion
- Lennie and mice both vulnerable – mice physically, Lennie emotionally
- Lennie’s childlike “blubberin’” when mouse is thrown away is further evidence of his emotional vulnerability, easily susceptible to exploitation

**Setting**
- Mystery of events in Weed. Lennie petting girl’s dress, “jus’ wanted to pet it like it was a mouse” – trouble in the past – recurring cycle of events?
- Rabbits run for cover when situation becomes dangerous. Parallels with description of how “we got to hide in a irrigation ditch all day and...sneak out in the dark.” Probability of this happening again with tragic result
- Tranquillity of setting is deceptive. Rabbits presented as innocent, cute and playful in their natural setting, but hint of calm before the storm hallucinatory, grotesque rabbit of last chapter

**Theme**
- Rabbits’ story represents the dream that from the outset seems unrealistic
- Other animals used to paint picture of land ownership and self-sufficiency, but through George relating the story to the childlike Lennie, has the quality of fairytale set against struggle for survival
- Rabbits description at the end of chapter 1 used to eliminate possibility of any aspect of dream having any realistic meaning – fantasy world of the imagination only
Task: Discuss the use of animal imagery in Of Mice and Men

The Title
The title is faithful to Robert Burns's poem from which it is taken. In Burns's poem "To a mouse" we read:

"The best laid schemes o' Mice and Men, Gang aft a-gley (often go wrong) An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain For promis'd joy."

In your discussion, you might want to consider the following:

- Steinbeck's use of the alliterative “Of Mice and Men” and the context of the title in Burns's poem
- The fact that the poem is about the struggle for survival of a fieldmouse
- The fate of the mice in the first chapter

Characterisation
In your discussion, you might want to consider the following:

- The animal imagery used to introduce Lennie and associations with that animal
- The powerful link between Lennie and the mice
- Lennie’s “blubberin’” when his mouse is thrown away

Setting
In your discussion, you might want to consider the following:

- Where George and Lennie have come from and what seems to have happened there
- The fact that the rabbits “hurried noiselessly for cover”
- The disturbance of the animals in their natural, calm environment

The Theme
In your discussion, you might want to consider the following:

- The story “about the rabbits”
- What immediately precedes the story “about the rabbits”
- The significance of the more ‘colourful’ description of the rabbits at the end of the chapter