Southwest Licking School District
Literature Selection Review

Teacher: Berry, Lively, McGinnis
School: Watkins Memorial High School
Book Title: *Of Mice and Men*
Genre: Fiction
Author: John Steinbeck
Pages: 107
Publisher: Viking Penguin
Copyright: c1937

**Book Summary and summary citation:** (suggested resources include book flap summaries, review summaries from publisher, book vendors, etc.)

The classic portrait of two outsiders struggling to understand their own unique places in the world--Clinging to one another in their loneliness and alienation, George and his simple-minded friend Lennie dream, as drifters will, of a place to call their own. But after they come to work at a ranch in California's Salinas Valley, their hopes, like "the best laid schemes o' mice and men" (Robert Burns) begin to go awry. Truly one of the unsung triumphs of its decade, this heartfelt morality tale of two itinerant migrant workers seems just as fresh and powerful decades after its release.

**Provide an instructional rationale for the use of this title, including specific reference to the curriculum map(s):** (Curriculum maps may be referenced by grade/course and indicator number or curriculum maps with indicators highlighted may be attached to this form)

Students will examine marginalization that existed historically during the Great Depression through John Steinbeck's classic novel. This text portrays several realistic examples of characters who were on the fringes of society during this particular time period. Building from what students have learned through reading novels dealing with parallel situations and characters in modern day society, they will gain a deeper understanding of Steinbeck's purpose in writing this novel. They will explore themes including friendship, marginalization, and attainment of the American dream. They will look at literary devices such as symbolism, characterization, author's style, the use of the vernacular, and foreshadowing.

Connection to the state standards:
• Acquisition of Vocabulary (1)
• Reading Application Informational (5, 6)
Include two professional reviews of this title: (a suggested list of resources for identifying professional reviews is shown below. Reviews may be “cut and pasted” (with citation) into the form or printed reviews may be attached to the form)

Review #1

From NCTE (2005)  
*Of Mice and Men* received wide critical acclaim upon its publication in 1937. It was reviewed in a variety of newspapers, popular and intellectual journals, and literary publications. Positive reviews include those by Edward Weeks (Atlantic, Apr. 1937), F. T. Marsh (The New York Times 28 Feb. 1937), and H. S. Canby (Saturday Review of Literature, 27 Feb. 1937). Many critics praise Steinbeck for his juxtapositioning of harsh circumstances and tender emotions, and for his realistic, yet also poetic, rendering of the migrant labor experience. Steinbeck's stage adaptation of *Of Mice and Men*, a play in three acts published later the same year, was reviewed by a number of publications, including Nation (11 Dec. 1937), New Republic (15 Dec. 1937), and Booklist (1 Feb. 1938). The novel was selected by the Book-of-the-Month Club one month before its release, which led to wide anticipation of and demand for the new book. Over a thousand copies were sold within the first few weeks following its release (Ferrell 97). Though the novel itself received no major awards, the author was the recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1962. The presentation speech, delivered by Anders Österling, refers to *Of Mice and Men* as Steinbeck's "little masterpiece.

Review #2

From NCTE (2005)*  
This short, sparsely narrated piece of fiction overlays 1930s social history with a portrait of the human condition. A novelist driven by social consciousness Steinbeck offers the reader a colorful rendering of a bleak period in U.S. history when migrant laborers struggled to survive through the Depression years. *Of Mice and Men* brings to life the plight of these uprooted and often desperate men. At the same time the work presents a story of love and tragedy realistic to any era. The most basic moral question raised by the novel—whether George did the right thing in killing Lennie—is a developmentally appropriate one for high school students who are at the stage of being able to appreciate and grapple with the complexities of such a decision. Debate over George's actions is likely to arise among students and thus it is crucial that the teacher prepare for facilitating
a discussion weighted with questions and opinions tied into students' value systems and possibly religious beliefs.

One quality of the work that intensifies the central moral question is Steinbeck's in-depth portrayal of George and Lennie's relationship. Juxtaposed against the tough and masculine setting of 1930s migrant farm life, the friendship between these two men emerges as a positive theme in the novel. Characters comment on the uncommon nature of two men traveling together and the companionship between George and Lennie despite the hardships it brings clearly provides each character with a purpose greater than his own survival. Showing the intricacies of men's connection to one another in a world that discourages intimacy, Steinbeck offers a message meaningful to adolescents both male and female three-quarters of a century later. Exposing students to stories of adult male friendship is especially important in an era where popular culture often promotes homophobia and plays up masculine stereotypes thus pushing underground the notion of men benefiting from positive caring relationships with one another.

While possibly not unique to fiction of the period, the intimate portrayal of mental retardation in *Of Mice and Men* is a rarity. Unlike Harper Lee's minimalist sketch of Boo Radley in *To Kill a Mockingbird* also set in the 1930s, Steinbeck's treatment of Lennie is vivid and fully integrated into the story's narrative. The reader remains with Lennie throughout the novel even at times when George is not present to watch over him. Lennie's condition elicits no commentary within the story. Instead, the reader infers from Lennie's actions as well as others' reactions to him—sometimes dismissive and derogatory, sometimes appreciative and empathic—that he has a mental disability. A class discussion focused on Lennie's character might expand into a broader examination of mental retardation as portrayed in fiction. Does Steinbeck writing in 1937 capture Lennie in a simplistic or complex manner? Staying within the story while also drawing on current ethical and social dilemmas, students could consider the implications of Lennie's mental capacity in terms of the moral issues raised by the story. Was Lennie more mouse than man and how does his condition influence one's attitude toward George's decision?

What alternate text(s) could also fulfill the instructional requirements?

- **Title:** *Summer of My German Soldier*  
  **Author:** Betty Greene
- **Title:** *To Kill a Mockingbird*  
  **Author:** Harper Lee
- **Title:** *The Grapes of Wrath*  
  **Author:** John Steinbeck

Document any potentially controversial content:
period. Steinbeck traveled around the country with migrant workers so that he could capture their stories accurately and authentically. He uses language within his novel that was used by the group of people for whom and about whom he wrote. Examples of such language include: *hell, bastard, God damn, and son-of-a bitch.*

**Keeping in mind the age, academic level, and maturity of the intended reader, what is the suggested classroom use: (check all that apply):** Regular education

**GRADE LEVEL(S): 6 7 8 9 10 11 12**

**INTEREST LEVEL(S): 6 7 8 9 10 11 12**

Date Submitted to Website: 8/10/2011

**Suggested Professional Literary Review Sources:**

School Library Journal
Horn Book
Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books
VOYA (Voice of Youth Advocates)
Library Journal
Book Links
Publisher's Weekly
Booklist
Kirkus Review
Wilson Library Catalog
English Journal (and other resources of the National Council of Teachers of English)
The Reading Teacher (International Reading Association)
Literature for Today’s Young Adults