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Of Mice and Men and “Social Contract”

Patsy C. Carruthers

One of the most successful units I have taught involves John Steinbeck's novel *Of Mice and Men*. Many students recall the novel as “my favorite” or “the only novel I really wanted to read cover-to-cover” or even “the only novel I have read cover-to-cover.”

The novel is about the relationship between two men, George Milton and Lennie Small, as they work as ranch hands in Depression-era California. Lennie is mildly mentally handicapped, and his friend George does his best to keep him out of trouble. Deceptively simple in its presentation, the novel addresses issues of friendship, loneliness, prejudice, “normality” and social acceptance as well as “social contract”—whether we as human beings have a responsibility to care for each other.

Before Reading

As a warm-up my students discuss what is “normal” and what is not, eventually finding that normal as they define it resides only within themselves. I encourage them to share stories about personal experiences with people who differ from themselves in some way, allowing students to discover new information about their peers. The most interesting discussion, after initial embarrassment, results when special needs students in the class reveal their own differences and how they feel they are treated.

After students have their say, I talk to them about previous treatment of special needs. We start with President John F. Kennedy's sister and how she came to be institutionalized. Using maga-

zine articles, we examine his and his family's efforts on behalf of the handicapped, and then we move back in time, eventually discussing Helen Keller's teacher Annie Sullivan and her childhood experiences in an institution.

Afterward, we address students' feelings about institutionalization and when they believe it is necessary. Many passionately feel that they could never institutionalize a family member or a friend, that they could take care of that person no matter what happened. This is the point at which we are ready to begin the novel.

Getting Into the Book

As the novel opens, the students find Lennie a rather comical figure, imitating George in habit and dress. They are amused when George curses at Lennie and calls him dumb. At the beginning they see no compelling reason for George to tie himself down to such a dunce.

I then encourage them to be honest about their own behavior toward others. They tend to be split on the idea of social contract, or responsibility toward others in their society. Some who say they would not put a friend or family member in an institution admit they probably would not stop to help a person in trouble and often laugh at the infirmities of people they do not know (although by this point most are beginning to be embarrassed by that admission). Several students will say that, no, we do not have an unwritten social contract to be concerned about our fellow man.

In the context of the social contract, I like to propose to them the situation of a stoplight at

3:00 a.m. No one appears to be crossing the intersection; do you run it or do you wait? Two excellent opposing views on that question are found in David Schoenbrun's "A Traffic Light Is a Brainless Machine" and Andy Rooney's "In and of Ourselves We Trust," both of which can be found in *Patterns of Exposition 8*. Students start to feel uneasy about answering ethical questions at this point. It becomes harder to say, "That's different! Running a stoplight has nothing to do with your fellow man!" because the idea that their own choices do affect others has begun to creep into their minds.

The discussion prepares them well for the reading. As they delve into the novel, students begin to examine the relationships among the characters as well as each character's isolation and/or dependence on others. The outcome is that students take the lead in analyzing the novel and comparing and contrasting it to their own ethical dilemmas.

Role-Playing

The types of activities that can be used within this unit are without number. The subject is simply timeless. One activity that I have developed and continued to use because of enthusiastic response involves role-playing within small groups. I divide the class into groups of five, ensuring students in each group are of mixed backgrounds and opinions. Within each group, students draw for a role and then have a specified amount of time (I usually give them about 15 to 20 minutes) to role play.

Group one is a school board in 1934 that must decide what to do about a physically handicapped child who has been brought to their school. One group member is superintendent, others are business owners and parents. Group two consists of two special education teachers and three parents of non-special education students who, in present day, are arguing against mainstreaming. Group three is employed in 1975 by a major corporation in our area. One is the parent of a special needs child, one is that parent's boss, and the rest are his co-workers. Initially their stance is to be that the parent cannot bring his or her child to the company's first "Take Your Kid to Work Day." Finally, group four contains sixth-graders on a

school playground in present day. One is handicapped and wishes to play the game the rest are engaged in. One is open to allowing him or her to play, the rest are against it. They are to use sixth-grade reasoning and vocabulary in their discussion. Groups are repeated if more are needed.

The groups produce discussion that is at first entertaining, then argumentative, and finally thoughtful. I can never predict what decision a group will reach. Sometimes the major corporation fires the parent of the special needs child; sometimes it institutes new sensitivity policies. During one class, the parents and special education teachers could not reach any sort of conclusion within the given time frame. They were disappointed, but upon sharing results with the class they found that they had learned something valuable about the difficulties of meeting the needs of all students.

The Novel's Impact

The study of this novel has the power to alter perspectives, even if only slightly. Students may not sign the social contract when they are finished, but often they are more aware of and sympathetic toward others' needs. I learn something new from my students every time I teach *Of Mice and Men*. It offers exciting possibilities for the high school teacher.

Works Cited

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About the Author

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