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PRACTICE

Of Mice, Men, and my Father

JEREMY FIELDER

George's voice became deeper. He repeated his words rhythmically... "Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family...with us it ain't like that. We got a future . . ."

Lennie broke in, "Because I got you to look after me, and you got me to look after you, and that's why." (Steinbeck, 1993, pp. 13-14)

Of *Mice and Men* (1937) may be the quintessential American novel. Its author, John Steinbeck, sets the uncommon friendship between itinerant workers George and Lennie against a rough-and-tumble Depression-era world of poverty, loneliness, racism, sexism, ageism, and downright meanness in the thriving agricultural region of California's Salinas River Valley. While the most frequently taught themes of the book include the failure of the American Dream and the nature of friendship, these ideas resonate with readers primarily because of Lennie's debilitating mental impairment.

Students who encounter the classic are forced to untangle knotty moral questions about the gentle giant Lennie and his guardian, George. Near the end of the novella, just when it seems as though George and Lennie will make enough money to buy a farm where Lennie can tend his beloved rabbits, Lennie unintentionally breaks the neck

of Curley's wife. Curley is already furious with Lennie for crushing his hand and is out for blood. George has to make a profound and life-changing decision: let Lennie be held accountable for his actions, or help Lennie the best way he can—by killing him.

Each year I present this moral dilemma to my ninth-grade English classes, then sit back as they discuss whether Lennie should be held accountable for his actions, or whether he should be judged differently in light of his mental impairment. Students go back and forth, and, just as the smoke clears and they have rendered the kind of black-and-white solution that only ninth-graders can make, I pause, then ask them a question that is usually followed by sudden and sometimes uncomfortable silence: "So, should I forgive my dad?"

The Lessons of Schizophrenia

Crooks said gently, "S'pose you didn't have nobody . . . A guy needs somebody—to be near him . . . A guy goes nuts if he aint got nobody . . . I tell ya, a guy gets too lonely an' he gets sick." (pp. 72-73)

Before we continue with the question of Lennie's culpability, it is necessary to backtrack to October of each school year. During this time, as a way of opening up the classroom and helping students feel more comfortable, I ask them to write about a lesson they have learned at some point in their lives.

Each year, as an exemplar (and as a way of modeling openness and establishing a personal connection), I share the story of my father, whose diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia ended his marriage to my mother, ended my "normal" childhood, and created a gaping hole in my life that I've worked to fill as a father, teacher, and coach. It was this gap that inspired me to become a teacher; it became my mission in life to fill the same gap that exists in so many male students with absent fathers, who, according to Leonard Sax are simply "disengaging from school and from the American Dream..." (2009, p. 9).

My mother split from my father when I was just an infant. At that point, my father was already beginning to show symptoms of mental illness but was yet undiagnosed. Sadly, both my mother and father lost their own dads to heart attacks in 1985, and each reached a crossroad. My mother clung to the only thing she had: my older brother Jason and me. My father, however, enlisted in the Marines Corp, from which he was medically discharged when he was officially diagnosed with schizophrenia. The years passed, and my father became less and less a part of my life. Scheduled and supervised bi-weekly visits were the only "quality" time we spent with my father. To say that he struggled with his mental illness is an understatement. By the time I reached adulthood, he saw another marriage end in divorce, had some

brushes with the law, and, perhaps most disappointingly, he was eventually kept out of the lives of his two grandsons.

The story of my father's schizophrenia isn't all I share with my students. I also relate my belief that my family history drives me to be a better teacher, coach, husband, and father. I let my students know that much of what I do every day comes from my desire to be the positive male role model, especially for young boys, many of whom are growing up with single mothers, just as I did. I try to empathize with young males who seem a bit lost because, "when it comes to showing boys how a gentleman behaves," how he "responds to adversity," and "serves his community . . . there is no substitute for having a male role model" (Sax, 2009, p. 169).

Unfortunately, that's where my personal story ends and Steinbeck's heart-breaking novella begins. I'm ashamed to admit it, but it is the awful truth: regardless of my personal motivation to succeed in life that stems directly from a lost relationship with my father, I still cannot forgive him for the hole he left in my childhood, even though he, like Lennie, is afflicted by something he certainly did not ask for. I may have moved on to build a life of my own, but I simply cannot bring myself to let go. Here, at my own moral dilemma with mental illness, the true connection to *Of Mice and Men* begins.

Real-World Literacy and Literature Circles

Slim looked through George and beyond him. "Ain't many guys travel around together," he mused. I don't know why. Maybe everybody in the whole damn world is scared of each other."

"It's a lot nicer to go around with a guy you know," said George. (p. 35)

Of *Mice and Men* is usually the last book that my class reads each school year. Only then, after students have gotten to trust me and the other class members, are we able to analyze and discuss its contents in literature circle groups that are designated as "home team" groups. Though not exactly the full-blown, inquiry-based groups suggested by Harvey Daniels and Stephanie Harvey (2009), the goal of the home team groups is to create real and authentic conversations between students, which can only be accomplished after students

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are comfortable with their group members. This level of comfort is achieved gradually throughout the unit, which focuses on the "speaking and listening" strand of the Common Core Standards and includes informal discussions, smaller group projects, and lighter discussion questions/prompts.

Thus, as the unit progresses, the students are learning to practice a real-world pattern of meaningful literacy, rather than the worksheet-response method that seems common in American public education. This authentic literacy involves first reading deeply and internalizing information, and then shifts to deep and meaningful discussions with those who have read the same book. These discussions focus around

the major ideas we have discovered in the novel—social critique, hope, and of course, the American Dream. Yet, in our class we move past these more standard topics and delve deeply into Lennie's mental shortcomings, and the burden that George must shoulder as he helps his best friend navigate through the world of itinerant workers.

As a way of illustrating the differences between the worksheet mentality and real-world literacy, I ask students if they have ever seen experts discussing answers to worksheets on *Huckleberry Finn*. Once the laughter dies down, I show them video clips of scholars and experts debating the censorship of the classic, and whether the racist language contained in that book is necessary for Twain to satirize the times he lived in. We also discuss social norms in our current society, asking whether the same derogatory language is still a critical part of our popular culture. After this example, students seem to understand that real-world literacy hinges upon intelligent people discussing relevant themes and topics in a social context.

Real-world literacy can only be accomplished in an authentic, collaborative environment that runs quite contrary to the traditional model (even for group discussions) of holding students accountable by requiring written responses. I've found success with the real-world literacy and analysis approach for two main reasons: first, students are actually focused on discussing, listening, and sharing their stories because they are not "bound" by a finished product for a discussion session; secondly, and perhaps most importantly, students breathe a collective sigh of relief when they can simply relax and talk comfortably with one another about topics that matter, without worrying about worksheets, filling-in-the-blanks, or

creating a paragraph to summarize their group's work (this summary or reflective writing should be done *after* the collaborative session as a way of helping students encode their group's responses, not *while* the group is working).

Yes, some groups rush through their discussions, but the majority of students continue talking past the allotted time, and some even ask for more time to finish their thoughts on a particular topic. When this happens, no worksheet is necessary. I *know* that they are learning on their own terms. I may ask for meeting "minutes" or notes from the discussion, but more often than not I evaluate these groups through observation and by filtering around the room to eavesdrop on conversations.

This approach also gives more students an opportunity to engage in the group's work. In traditional group work settings requiring a written product, students who struggle or are not deemed fit enough by the high-achieving students in their group are cast aside, and are rarely engaged in the creative process that is so essential for their learning. Thus, the middle-to-lower end students miss out on learning opportunities and, even though they don't have to work very much, come to resent being left out of the group.

In addition, this traditional group work structure places great strain on the high achievers because now they perceive that their grade (and test scores, and life, and very livelihood) hinges upon the performance of students in their group who they would not trust to borrow a pencil, let alone finish a product that is worth valuable points. Therefore, they take on three-fourths of the group's work because they do not trust the others in their group to come through when the points are on the line.

I've found that establishing a collaborative culture and advocating real-world literacy, sometimes while sacrificing small-scale accountability, has a great liberating effect on both students, who relax and turn their focus to thinking rather than simply producing, and teachers, who don't have as many meaningless worksheets to grade, especially near the end of the year.

By the end of *Of Mice and Men*, members of literature circles have already engaged in a great deal of deeper-level discussions regarding the morality behind decisions made by characters like Carlson (Was he right to shoot Candy's Dog?), Candy (Should he have shot his own dog? Who decides when an aging animal—or human for that matter—is ready to die?), Crooks (As an African American surrounded by racist ranch hands, does he have the right to belittle and agitate the mentally feeble Lennie?), and Curley's Wife (Is she a mean-spirited person or simply a lonely person who regrets giving up her dreams and marrying a jerk?). Thus, given the structure of the collaborative, home court literature circles and the open social climate of the classroom, students are more than prepared to grapple with the morality behind Lennie's disability.

The Morality Question

George looked down at the gun. . .
"Everbody gonna be nice to you.
Ain't gonna be no more trouble.
Nobody gonna hurt nobody nor
steal from 'em."

Lennie said, "I thought you was
mad at me, George."

"No," said George. "No, Lennie. I
ain't mad. I never been mad, an' I
ain't now. That's a thing I want ya
to know." (p106)

It is certainly refreshing to see students, who are programmed by years of education to "see question, make answer, move forward," break free from that pattern to synthesize, freely and openly, the events of the novella, societal/school norms, and their own personal experiences in order to answer a complex, multi-faceted question—which, of course, has no true correct answer.

Morality issues like those addressed in *Of Mice and Men* are thrust to the forefront by national news syndicates and talk-show pundits on a daily basis: cases like that of Texas' Jose Garcia Bresnio, whose mental impairment was all but disregarded by Texas judges during his sentencing, are highly relevant in studying *Of Mice and Men*. Bresnio was mercifully spared five days before his scheduled execution ("Controversial Texas Case," 2014), unlike Lennie, whose best friend took matters into his own hands. It is utterly impossible *not* to find information to relate to the themes in the novella.

Most (if not all) students also understand the pain of losing a family member, of being hurt, or of feeling like they missed something in their childhood. This is where sharing the story of my father's mental illness becomes helpful. It is at this point that the home court groups engage in a lively discussion over whether Lennie should be held accountable for murdering Curly's Wife, or whether he should be held to a different standard because of his mental impairment. Once home court groups have made their decisions and rendered their verdicts, I share the example of my father's story, and that of my own personal dilemma: should I blame my father for not being there for me throughout my childhood, or, rather, should I blame the paranoid

schizophrenia, which was beyond his control?

I build on the first with a few more questions to engage learners who might not have experienced this situation with a parent: should I continue to shut my father out of my life, or be the son and support system that would give his life meaning and stability? Obviously, most students opt for the happy ending for individuals affected by mental illness or impairment. In these scenarios, George escapes with Lennie, and I reconcile my relationship with my father, allowing him back into my life.

But a small contingent of students, those who have the same gap in their childhood due to the absence of a parent, understand my dilemma and do their best to educate their classmates as to why I still hold onto the hurt and pain toward my father and his mental illness. Here is where perspectives are changed. Here is where a story becomes more than just a story. And here is where the curriculum becomes real. Students do their best to offer their genuine and heartfelt advice. Some express sympathy, while others shame me for never taking steps to help my father fight or overcome his mental illness. Like so many moral dilemmas in our society, both large and small scale, a clear-cut verdict is never really rendered. Students are left to grapple with the morality of George's decision, and they know that their teacher isn't a perfect person but has worked to make the best of an adverse situation.

Perhaps the largest lesson is that novels are still relevant for us today. They force us to examine our own decisions in light of those made by believable characters. They expose the faults of the human condition, and, after self-reflection, can help us deal with those faults. Novels give us believable heroes

like George, who, as flawed as he is, takes true responsibility for the one he loves, and, rather than see Lennie die a horrible death at the hands of Curley, chooses instead to take his life. This forever ruins George's "American Dream" of owning a farm, but, in his mind, it is the morally justifiable thing to do; he makes sure Lennie dies a peaceful death with the image of their beloved farm and rabbits in his head, and he ensures that Lennie cannot harm anyone else. Where George succeeds in doing what is best for his only family, I continually fail to do what seems to be morally correct.

That failure puts me closer to my students in a deep way, because there are those clinging to the very same painful memories that I cling to. The story of my father's battle with paranoid schizophrenia, and the toll it took on his loved ones, has become an essential part of our study of *Of Mice and Men*. Thus, every spring, in a small English classroom in southern Michigan, at the moral crossroads of disability and an American classic, true learning takes place, even if the question has yet to be answered: "Should I forgive my father?"

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