

# Of Mice and Men

## English Language Controlled Assessment Task 2013 – setting.

Discuss how Steinbeck uses description of settings in the novel to create atmosphere.

Key extracts: Chapters 1, 5 and 6.

**“I think I would like to write the story of this whole valley, of all the little towns and all the farms and the ranches in the wilder hills. I can see how I would like to do it so that it would be the valley of the world.”**

**Steinbeck’s letter to George Albee, Salinas, 1933**

### General

Each chapter of the novel begins with some description of the setting. The action of the story happens over a weekend and there are only a few locations where it takes place: the clearing; the bunkhouse; Crooks’ room; the barn and back to the clearing. The fact that Steinbeck is beginning each chapter with description of the place where the action is to take place tells us something of his intentions as a writer: he places the descriptions at the beginning of the chapters because they are important and so he is giving them prominence. In each chapter the setting tells the reader something about the people and the way they live. The setting sets the tone for the rest of the chapter and creates an atmosphere – albeit a place of tranquillity, violence or oppression.

## Map of California showing places in the novel.



## Structure

Chapters 1, 5 and 6 all are structured in the same way. Steinbeck begins with the immediate landscape – what can be seen, in the first few sentences. He then introduces animal life into the scene and finally, human life. He allows the reader to expect the description to flow in this way. In both of these cases the image is one of tranquillity and serenity until humans are brought into the equation.

## Reality

In the first and last chapters of the novel Steinbeck uses the same description of the pool and clearing by the Salinas River, shaded by the Gabilan Mountains near Soledad in California. The sense of realism is enhanced by the fact that these are real places that Steinbeck knew: having been born in the town of Salinas and worked on many ranches during his early years. Although the story of George and Lennie is a made-up one, the settings add an air of reality and authenticity to the story. The people in the story represent the vast numbers of men and women who were just like them and whose lives were blighted by the economic depression and thwarted by weather-related phenomena.



Image of the Gabilan Mountains.

## Chapter 1 – The Clearing

The prominence Steinbeck gives to the landscape and location of the story signal its importance to him. In his lifetime he had a special interest in the nature to be found in California – a feature that is reflected in the detail of his descriptions. The reader is immediately made familiar with the landscape and its place in America. We know that Soledad was a place where many immigrants had settled and is Spanish for loneliness. The landscape has a sense of vastness and grandeur to it, with the majestic heights of the Gabilan Mountains the dominant geographical feature in the landscape. The idea that the river at this point is “**deep**” suggests that this is a major feature in the landscape.

The first use of colour in the description refers to the river as “**green**”, a soothing and calm colour, suggesting that the water is clean and clear rather than cloudy and dirty. The river and the plant-life it supports are signs of life within the landscape: an oasis of vibrancy in the sun-bleached landscape. The sense that this place is inviting is added to by the idea of the water being warm. Steinbeck’s use of the word “**twinkling**” adds an almost magical element to the description and is a beautiful way to describe the way the sunlight shimmers off the water.

The setting up of this beautiful tableau of the landscape continues with the description of the “**yellow sand**” – it is warm and seems to invite anyone passing to rest here and enjoy the scene. The warmth of the description continues with the “**golden foothills**” of the mountains which are bathed in the late afternoon sunlight in a quite beautiful way. It is almost as if this small area is in the beam of a spotlight, giving it warmth and light. The higher reaches of the mountains are

described as **“strong and rocky”** – an inhospitable contrast to the lower foothills. The river is lined with vibrant trees, affirming the river as a life-source. Steinbeck adds in the detail of types of tree growing here to enable the reader to create a more accurate picture of the scene. The **“willow”** trees provide shelter arching over the river, whilst the vast **“sycamore trees”** suggest that this area has been untouched for years, allowing these huge trees to grow.

Steinbeck gives the season as spring and suggests that in winter there is flooding in the area, reminding the reader that the tranquillity of the river and its surroundings is not permanent and that this exact setting is relatively short-lived. Steinbeck uses the interesting and very specific adjective **“recumbent”** to describe the branches of the sycamore trees. This means reclining or resting – when linked to the word **“limbs”** used to describe the branches - the trees seem like people leaning across the river, providing a place of relaxation and shelter for visitors. It also re-affirms the setting as an inviting one for anyone who comes across it. The reader is led to believe that this is a place of safety and respite from the harsh world that surrounds it. It is intimated that there is a hiding place here provided by the trees leaning over the river; a place that is cushioned by a layer of dried up leaves.

It is at this point in the description that Steinbeck introduces the local animal life into the description. The reader already has a picture of the scene but the addition of animals actually brings it to life. The fact that the river and trees provides shelter and safety for many animals reinforces the idea that this is a place unspoiled by human life, where animals are at home in their natural habitat. The use of the onomatopoeic word **“skittering”** introduces sound into the description of the landscape. The description here can be described as a sensual one in that it appeals to the senses of the reader, who is able to imagine the noise of the lizard; the texture of the dried up leaves and the warmth of the evening sunlight.

The symbolic image of the rabbits is first used here – it is to be one that is repeated throughout the story to represent Lennie’s dream. The rabbits here are real ones, whereas at the end of the novel they are in his imagination.

Other indigenous species add to the natural imagery of the scene – racoons, deer and dogs all frequent the area – yet another affirmation of this as a place of safety and life. Steinbeck includes in his description mention of the imprints these animals leave in the sand: **“night tracks”** and **“split-wedge tracks”**, these will be washed away by the river when it floods just as the trace left by man will be as the ash-pile made by fires will also disappear. Everything leaves its mark but ultimately nature will erase that mark and the scene will return to its original state.

Overall, Steinbeck sets up an image of a perfect little oasis in this vast landscape.

Finally, human life is introduced into the landscape, with the mention of how men use the area – to rest and refresh themselves. It is suggested that the place provides water and shelter from tramps that have been travelling the dry and dust highways during the day. Animals and humans share the place in a completely harmonious way, being nourished and supported by the river.

There is a repetition of the description of the sycamore branch in this section of the description: **“the low horizontal limb of a giant sycamore”**. It reminds us of the ideas that the tree is resting and leaning. The fact that the ash pile of the men’s fires is in front of this natural sets reinforces the image of the place welcoming humans and offering a place of rest and hospitality, in stark contrast to the ranches where the men work. The sense of safety is further reinforced by the fact that men have worn the seat down by sitting on it, so this is a place that has obviously been visited a lot over the years.

Steinbeck returns to the sensual elements of the landscape again, just before our first introduction to George and Lennie. The stillness of the image is especially prominent here: **“the rabbits sat as quietly as little gray sculptured stones”**. It is like a freeze-frame of perfection where the peace of the evening is about to be fractured by the arrival of the men. The simile has the effect of creating an image of complete stillness. Another point of interest here is that the sun is now setting and some of the warmth has disappeared out of the day: **“the shade climbed up the hills toward the top”**.

The arrival of the men is signalled through sound rather than sight. The image of the **“Crisp sycamore leaves”** is repeated as part of the sound, and suddenly all animal life disappears, so that the scene the men see is the one Steinbeck first described to the reader. It is interesting that the rabbits disappear **“noiselessly”** from the scene – just as they will when they evaporate from Lennie’s vision.

## Chapter 5 – The Barn

The structure of the opening paragraphs of this section of the novel take the same basic form as the description of the clearing in Chapter 1. There is a short description of what can be seen followed by the introduction of animal life and finally humans. The use of repetition of format in this way reminds us of the unchanging state of nature and the beauty that can be found before mankind enters the scene.

The same sense of vastness is created by the referral to the barn as **“great”**. There is the same sense of abundance that the clearing has, created by the huge pile of

hay being stored here. The reference to the “**Jackson Fork**” is evidence that Steinbeck knew about farming equipment and was writing for people who were also familiar with it. This small detail adds authenticity to the scene.

The hay is reminiscent of the slope of the Gabilan Mountains in Chapter 1: “**the hay came down like a mountain slope**” There is contrast here between the lush and vibrant trees surrounding the pool and the hay which is dead and being stored here. Both areas provide life and sustenance for the animals but the hay is to be used in the winter when everything else is dead.

Steinbeck again hints at the earlier description when he writes: “**there was a level place, as yet unfilled with new crop.**” This reminds the reader of the flat area by the pool and hints at the final scene where Lennie is shot. This is the place where Curley’s wife is to die.

Again, in a repeat of the structure of Chapter one the animal life is revealed after the first few sentences: “**between the slats the heads of horses could be seen.**”

There is an air of tranquillity about the barn as it is a Sunday afternoon. This is similar to the atmosphere created in Chapter one. Everything is very quiet and undisturbed. The human world is not immediately obvious in the scene. The idea of death disturbing the tranquillity is created in both this section and Chapter six.

Steinbeck uses sound effectively to add detail to the description: “**they stamped their feet ....and rattled their halter chains.**” Again it is the animal life that first makes the gentle noises, but they are natural and restful sounds, rather than the sounds of work. There is some irony here in that this is a place designed for humans to take care of their animals and to provide them with a place of safety and shelter, yet this is the place where Lennie kills both the puppy and Curley’s wife.

The sun appears through the slats of the barn, creating gentle warmth to the scene, but also creating shadows at the same time, just like the sun warming the water by the rivers and shining between the branches of the trees.

Again, the sense of peace and calm is emphasised through the line: “**There was a buzz of flies in the air, the lazy afternoon humming.**” The sounds are delicate and gentle. The effect is to make the violence that follows all the more shocking in this quiet place.

There is contrast toward the end of the description when the sounds of the men from the ranch are introduced: the sounds here are jarring compared to the quiet of the barn: “**the clang of horseshoes on the playing peg and the shouts of men, playing, encouraging, jeering.**” The noise of the men seems to intrude on the place and seem like they are too loud.

There is again a sense of isolation and secrecy shrouding this place – it is set apart from usual human activity and belongs to the horses, not to man. It is not a place where human activity usually takes place.

The final sentence of the scene is an affirmation for the reader of the calm and safety of the barn: **“In the barn it was quiet and humming and lazy and warm.”**

Overall, this section of the story reflects what has been described before and hints at what is to happen later.

## Chapter 6 – The Clearing

The key feature of this section is that Steinbeck repeats many of the words and phrases from the description of the clearing in Chapter 1.

Some of the description is used to remind the reader of the scene. He also enables the reader to empathise with how Lennie feels when he returns to the clearing. This is a place of safety, far away from the danger of the ranch. The sight of the **“deep green pool”** and the **“slopes of the Gabilan Mountains”** are a familiar and reassuring landscape. They have not changed in the preceding three days whilst Lennie’s world has come crashing down around him.

The inclusion of the heron and the water snake provide some intricate detail about the wildlife in the area; but also serves as a reminder to the reader about the transient and fragile nature of life and the fact that it can be extinguished suddenly and without warning.

It is a reminder of the death of Curley’s wife, which has only just happened. She was as powerless against the inevitability of Lennie’s onslaught as the snake is against the Heron. The movement of the snake when it has been caught even mirrors her struggle after she is held by Lennie: **“its tail waved frantically.”**

The death of the snake occurs in this tranquil place in just the same way that the death of Curley’s wife also occurs in a seemingly harmless setting; just as any violent death can take place in a setting of great beauty.

The landscape is disturbed by a gust of wind in the trees: **“a far rush of wind sounded.”** The wind is a harbinger of what is to come – a small disturbance in the landscape that is to be followed by something much more violent. The simile used to describe the movement of the leaves in the wind **“like a wave”** is exactly mirrored in the movement of the waves of the surface of the pool – indicating the perfect unit of nature and introducing a sense of foreboding and fear into this part of the description. Steinbeck wants the reader to feel slightly apprehensive at this point at what is about to happen.

Steinbeck again uses sound to create atmosphere in this final description of setting: “a rush of wind sounded”, “the brown, dry leaves on the ground scudded a few feet.” These are both minor sounds but help the reader to sense fully the scene that Lennie arrives at.

Steinbeck again creates a pause by adding a moment of complete silence – a feature which has punctuated all of the descriptions.

The reader can make the link between the heron and Lennie again at the end of the description as it stands, waiting for the next water snake to innocently cross its path, just as the two women innocently crossed Lennie’s with the same fatal consequences.