

ACTIVITY FOUR: MIGRANT WORKERS

TEACHER DEBRIEFING SHEET

Unit: Of Mice and Men

Big Idea: Myths and Realities

Discussion Questions:

1. Describe the roles migrant workers play in Of Mice and Men.
2. How does Steinbeck make use of a variety of literary devices to address the theme of migrant workers? Be sure to discuss at least three of the following literary devices: setting, dialogue, foreshadowing, symbolism, conflict, metaphor, and characterization.
3. Compare and contrast what your Resource Cards reveal about the myths and the realities of migrant work with what is revealed in Of Mice and Men about the myths and realities of migrant work.
4. Describe at least three different connections between your life and life related to migrant workers.
5. To what extent is the portrayal of life as a migrant worker (by Steinbeck, the media, the government, etc.) a myth, and to what extent is it a reality?

TASK:

A farm owner needs you to create a Help Wanted poster for migrant workers **and** the UFW needs you to create a Wanted poster to caution migrant workers about the dangers of farm labor. Include information about migrant work from Of Mice and Men and your Resource Cards.

TASK EVALUATION CRITERIA:

- Both posters include a clear and concise message that will meet the intended need (i.e. ‘Help Wanted’ or ‘Wanted’).
- Posters include at least three different media (color, texture, photography, computer graphics, cartoons, drawing, words, etc.) to highlight the migrant worker experience.
- Each poster incorporates at least 3 pieces of accurate information about migrant work: At least 1-2 from the novel Of Mice and Men and 1-2 from today (your own experiences, popular culture, the Resource Cards, etc).
- Posters reflect differing points of view about migrant work.
- Posters and/or presentation address the myths and realities of life as a migrant worker.

Extension Questions:

1. What are the similarities between migrant workers portrayed in Of Mice and Men and migrant workers in your community?
2. In the United States, where do you think migrant workers fit on the social status scale?
3. What do you think are the most important issues facing migrant workers today? Why?
4. How do you think Steinbeck would portray a story of migrant workers in Salinas today?
5. In what ways is migrant work related to the American Dream?
6. In Of Mice and Men, how would the story be different if it was not set during the Great Depression?
7. In Of Mice and Men, how would the story be different if George and Lennie were farm owners?
8. In Of Mice and Men, how would the story be different if the UFW was in existence?

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ACTIVITY CARD



Read the CONTEXT-SETTING CARD. Then use the information on your RESOURCE CARDS to talk about the DISCUSSION QUESTIONS.



Examine the TASK and complete the project to meet all of the EVALUATION CRITERIA.

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ACTIVITY FOUR: MIGRANT WORKERS

CONTEXT-SETTING CARD

Migrant Workers

Migrant workers are people who travel from place to place providing manual labor (work) on farms across the United States. Migrant workers perform many kinds of farm work including tilling soil, planting seeds, transplanting seedlings, removing weeds, applying pesticides, staking and pruning plants, harvesting crops, packing crops and preparing them for the market. Although migrant workers exist in other parts of the world (including Africa, Australia, Canada, Europe, and South America), the migrant worker system in the United States is much larger and more complex. Migrant workers either travel alone or with their families from crop to crop, sometimes helped by a contractor hired by farmers, who transports the laborers (workers) to the fields. Some migrant workers live with their families in cities across the U.S. or abroad (in other countries) and move to the fields only when their labor is needed. Other migrants follow the crops from one place to another and live off their minimal wages while bunking (living) in the migrant housing provided by employers.

From Of Mice and Men:

“You remember us goin' into Murray and Ready's, and they give us work cards and bus tickets?”

“Oh, sure, George. I remember that now.”...

“You remember where we're goin' now?”

Lennie looked startled and then in embarrassment hid his face against his knees. “I forgot again.”

“Jesus Christ,” George said resignedly. “Well -- look, we're gonna work on a ranch like the one we come from up north.”

“Up north?”

“In Weed.”

“Oh, sure. I remember. In Weed.” ...”We're gonna work on a ranch, George.” ...

George's voice became deeper. He repeated his words rhythmically as though he had said them many times before. “Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don't belong no place. They come to a ranch an' work up a stake and then they go inta town and blow their stake, and the first thing you know they're poundin' their tail on some other ranch. They ain't got nothing to look ahead to.”

ACTIVITY FOUR: MIGRANT WORKERS

RESOURCE CARD 1 (OF 4) Getting out of the Dust Bowl

The stock market crash on Tuesday, October 29, 1929 triggered the Great Depression, one of the worst economic disasters ever to hit the world and the United States. In the 1930s banks failed, businesses closed and more than one-quarter of the American work force (15 million people) lost their jobs.

In addition to financial hardships for those who had invested in Wall Street stocks, farmers in portions of the Plains states (parts of eastern Colorado, Kansas, northern New Mexico, Oklahoma and northern Texas) suffered from a severe drought (dry weather conditions) that caused their crops to die and soil to erode. Formerly rich soil turned into huge fields of dried dirt and when the winds started to blow, huge dust storms took over the land. The damage to farms in these states was called the “Dust Bowl” by Robert Geiger, a reporter for the Associated Press. In his 1935 travels of the region, he wrote; “Three little words achingly familiar on a Western farmer's tongue, rule life in the dust bowl of the continent - if it rains.” The term “Dust Bowl” was used again and again in radio broadcasts, newspapers, private letters and public speeches. A letter from an Oklahoma woman, later published in Reader's Digest magazine, recalls June of 1935. “In the dust-covered desolation of our No Man's Land here, wearing our shade hats, with handkerchiefs tied over our faces and vaseline in our nostrils, we have been trying to rescue our home from the wind-blown dust which penetrates wherever air can go. It is almost a hopeless task, for there is rarely a day when at some time the dust clouds do not roll over. 'Visibility' approaches zero and everything is covered again with a silt-like deposit which may vary in depth from a film to actual ripples on the kitchen floor.”



The dust storm that turned day into night. Many believed the world was coming to an end.



The Dust Bowl migration was the largest in American history. By 1940 200,000 people had moved from the Plains states to California.

When the drought and dust storms showed no signs of letting up, many people abandoned their land. Others would have stayed but were forced out when they lost their land in bank foreclosures. In all, one-quarter of the population left the area affected by the Dust Bowl, packing everything they owned into their cars and trucks, and headed west toward California. The mass exodus thinned out the population drastically in certain areas. In the rural area outside Boise

City, Oklahoma, the population dropped forty percent, with 1,642 small farmers and their families moving west in hopes of work and money.



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RESOURCE CARD 2 (OF 4)

The Californian Reception

As drought (dry weather conditions) spread across most of the Plains states (parts of eastern Colorado, Kansas, northern New Mexico, Oklahoma and northern Texas) in the 1930s, many farmers and their families left those states to travel west, fueled by the hope that they would find work and a new life in the rich farming regions of California. Nearly 7,000 new migrants a month overwhelmed the state of California, a state that had previously been in desperate need for farm laborers. One response to the overwhelming number of migrant workers occurred in 1936 when the Los Angeles Police Department sent 136 deputies to the state line to turn back migrants who didn't have any money. Bordering states like Arizona were angry that California was trying to “dump hoboes” back on them. After several months, the police were ordered to return to Los Angeles and the migrants kept coming. There was some farm work available in California, but there was not enough work for everyone who came. Instead of immediate riches, the migrant workers often ended up living in dirty roadside camps. These American migrants, who competed with Mexicans and other immigrants for work, were offered “not land, but jobs on the land.” The land was held by relatively few owners. In 1935 one-third of the farm acreage in the six hundred square miles of the Imperial Valley consisted of large farms; seventy-four individuals and companies controlled much of the cropland.



Squatter camp in California. 1936

Jack Bryant Firebaugh, 1940

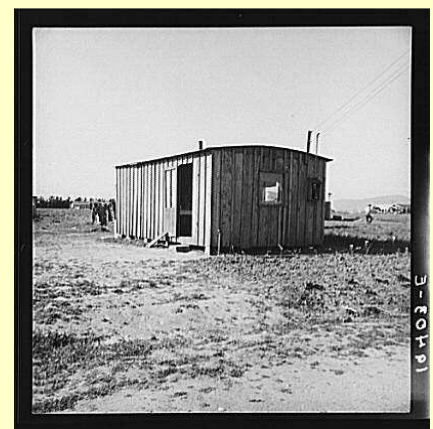
You've all heard the story
Of old Sunny Cal
The place where it never rains
They say it don't know how.

They say, "Come on, you Okies,
Work is easy found
Bring along your cotton pack
You can pick the whole year round.

Get your money ever' night
Spread your blanket on the ground
It's always bright and warm
You can sleep right on the ground."

But listen to me Okies
I came out here one day
Spent all my money getting here
Now I can't get away.

Once the American migrant workers arrived in California, they were met with prejudice from the local residents. Many Californians believed that the migrant workers from the Plains states were biologically and culturally inferior to the resident population. Though the migrant workers often referred to themselves proudly as “Okies,” “Arkies,” and “Texies,” (from Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Texas) these names became negative terms when used by California-born residents. The hopes and dreams of the migrant worker slowly eroded (disappeared) with the reality of their situation.



Housing for rapidly growing settlement of lettuce workers on the fringe of the town of Salinas, California. These houses were built by the occupants. 1939

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RESOURCE CARD 3 (OF 4)

Migrant Farm Workers in the United States: From WWII to the Present

Bracero Program

As the U.S. entered WWII, jobs in many important industries were left behind as men joined the military, and numerous farm laborers (workers) moved into these higher paying “war jobs.” The severe farm labor shortage led to the creation of the “Bracero Program,” through which Mexican citizens contracted for employment on U.S. farms as nonimmigrant guest workers.

Experienced Mexican farm laborers left their rural Mexican communities to work as braceros in the United States, inspired by the illusion that they would earn large sums of money to send home to their families. In reality, the Bracero Program exploited (took advantage of) willing Mexican labor. Contracts to protect their rights were either overlooked by their employers or ignored by the United States government. Lee Williams of the U.S. Department of Labor described the program as a system of “legalized slavery” and, in 1964, the program that brought more than three million Mexicans to labor in U.S. agricultural fields was ended.



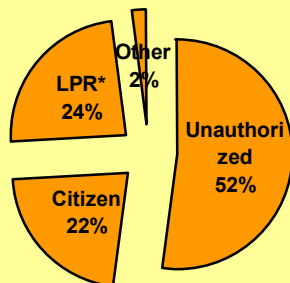
Thousands of Mexicans eager to work in the U.S. stand for days outside this stadium to apply for the Bracero Program.

Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers

Cesar Chavez grew up as the son of migrant workers and knew firsthand the terrible conditions of life in the fields. His life experiences led Chavez to become a leading labor activist and in 1962, he organized the National Farm Workers Union (UFW) that rallied thousands of workers to campaign for improved living conditions and fair pay.

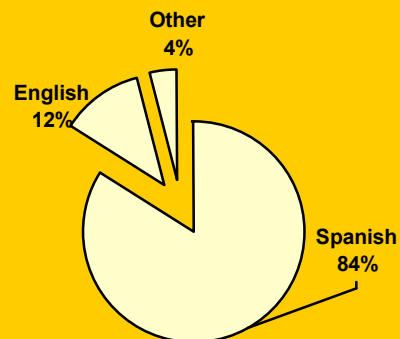
The union implemented nonviolent tactics such as strikes, boycotts and fasts. In 1965, Chavez and the UFW brought international attention to the plight of the migrant worker when organizers called for people to boycott the purchase and consumption of grapes grown in the United States.

The boycott resulted in contracts to protect workers from exposure to dangerous pesticides, a rise in wages, fresh water and toilets in the field, a medical plan, and the construction of health clinics. While Chavez improved conditions for workers in the grape fields, terrible conditions still remain elsewhere.



Percent Distribution of Farmworkers by Current Legal Status, National Agricultural Workers Survey, 2000

*LPR (Legal Permanent Resident)



Native Language of U.S. Farmworkers, National Agricultural Workers Survey, 2000

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RESOURCE CARD 4 (OF 4) Child Migrant Farm Workers

Children and teens can be found working in fields, orchards, and packing sheds across the United States. It is estimated that between 300,000 and 800,000 children in the United States work on farms, performing jobs such as picking fruit and vegetables, weeding fields, and bagging produce. Their grueling (extremely hard) twelve-hour workdays include climbing ladders to pick fruit from trees, stooping over strawberry plants and lifting heavy watermelons. These children work in order to help their families survive. Migrant farm workers, on average, earn less than \$10,000 a year. According to Len Morris, the producer and director of *Stolen Childhoods*, a recent documentary film about child labor, “The people who pick the food we eat can’t get by and make a living wage without having their children help.”

Although the United States Fair Labor Standards Act (which has been in effect since 1938) sets standards for safe working conditions and limits the number of hours children can work, the law does not apply to child farm workers. As a result, children and teenage migrant workers face many challenges. Children and teenagers working on farms often use dangerous equipment and are exposed to poisonous pesticides. Over 100,000 children and teenagers suffer injuries on farms every year. Farm work often gets in the way of schooling for child and teen farm workers. The school dropout rate for migrant farm workers is approximately 65%.

Damaris A., now nineteen, started working in the broccoli and lettuce fields when she was thirteen years old and continued until she was nearly eighteen. During the five months of peak season, she usually worked fourteen hours a day, with two fifteen-minute breaks and a half-hour for lunch. She often worked eighty-five or ninety hours a week. For months on end she suffered nosebleeds; several times her blood pressure plummeted (fell) and she nearly passed out. She was exposed to pesticide drift and fell ill, yet was required to keep working. “I just endured [suffered through] it,” she said, of her time in the fields. “It was very difficult.”



Mariella, age 10, cuts onions in a field in Eagle Pass, Texas.

Elda Hernandez, now 19, the seventh child of a farmworker family, fell so far behind in her schoolwork that she dropped out of school at 16. When she was six, her family worked in an area of California that was so remote (located in an out-of-the-way place), she and her siblings (brothers and sisters) ended up missing an entire school year. “There wasn’t anything there. My parents couldn’t take us to school,” she recalled. Elda started helping her family in the fields when she was in the fifth grade, missing two months of school to pick cherries and raspberries. By the time she was 12, her wrists hurt too much to work. She resumed work a year later, continuing to miss the last two weeks of each school year. Poor grades her freshman year, partly caused by missing school to do farm work, may have contributed to her decision to drop out as a sophomore. Later, she returned to school and, like many farmworker children, valiantly (bravely) struggled to catch up with her course work.

ACTIVITY FOUR: MIGRANT WORKERS

LITERARY DEVICES CARD

Characterization: The author's means of conveying to the reader a character's personality, life history, values, physical attributes, etc. Also refers directly to a description thereof.

Conflict: A struggle between opposing forces that are the driving force of a story. The outcome of any story provides a resolution of the conflict(s); this is what keeps the reader reading. Conflicts can exist between individual characters, between groups of characters, between a character and society, etc., and can also be purely abstract (conflicting ideas).

Dialogue: Where characters speak to one another; may often be used to substitute for exposition.

Foreshadowing: Where future events in a story, or perhaps the outcome, are suggested by the author before they happen. Foreshadowing can take many forms and be accomplished in many ways, with varying degrees of subtlety. However, if the outcome is deliberately and explicitly revealed early in a story (such as by the use of a narrator or flashback structure), such information does not constitute foreshadowing.

Imagery: Language that describes something in detail, using words to substitute for and create sensory stimulation, including visual imagery and sound imagery. Also refers to specific and recurring types of images, such as food imagery and nature imagery.

Metaphor: A direct relationship where one thing or idea substitutes for another.

Mood: The atmosphere or emotional condition created by the piece, within the setting.

Setting: The time and place where a story occurs. The setting can be specific (e.g. Salinas in 1930) or ambiguous (e.g. a large farm during economic hard times. Also refers directly to a description thereof.

Symbolism: The use of specific objects or images to represent abstract ideas. This term is commonly misused, describing any and all representational relationships, which in fact are more often metaphorical than symbolic. A symbol must be something tangible or visible, while the idea it symbolizes must be something abstract or universal.

Verbal irony: Where the meaning is intended to be the exact opposite of what the words actually mean.

ACTIVITY FOUR: MIGRANT WORKERS

INDIVIDUAL REPORT

As a high school student studying Of Mice and Men and migrant workers, write a business letter to the manager of your local supermarket. The intent of the letter is for the store to ban the purchase of all fruits and vegetables from farm owners who take advantage of migrant workers.

Evaluation Criteria:

- Letter addresses the intended audience appropriately.
- Letter structures ideas and arguments in a sustained and logical fashion.
- Letter includes at least three pieces of information about migrant workers from Of Mice and Men and the Resource Cards to highlight central ideas or images.
- Letter uses appropriate vocabulary, tone, and style to take into account the nature of the relationship with, and the knowledge and interests of, the recipient.