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# The Influence of Place

## Sacred Places & Grappling with the Concept of Home

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### THE CONCEPT

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From the rolling Gabilans to the brooding Santa Lucias, from fecund fields to the destitute workers' camps, from the rocky shores of Monterey to the open waves in the Gulf of California, John Steinbeck brought places to life for his readers.

Steinbeck takes readers to Salinas, Steinbeck's hometown, and its surrounding areas in his writing. He speaks eloquently and honestly of the land and its people, all the beauty and terror that comes with the convergence of the two. Oscillating between criticism and affection, Steinbeck's crafts authentic visuals and interactions that make us feel as though we are there with his characters. His attention to detail and understanding of place is something to admire and an aspiration to accomplish.

My goal is to have my students explore their own setting and sense of place through reading, experiential learning, and writing. How are we all influenced by setting? Outside of that, what are our sacred places and what role have they played in our lives? And, from an even larger scope, how can writing about place inspire care for community and environment?

### THE MODEL TEXTS

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The essential text of this unit is *Of Mice and Men*. The novel, at its core, is one about loneliness and isolation while grappling with the concept of home. *Of Mice and Men* invites readers to consider the role of setting, the need for community, and the longing for home or similar sacred places.

Below is a compilation of materials that address similar topics and are introduced throughout the unit. The following texts offer students opportunities to explore these large concepts in various forms. Michigan-based artists, poets, and landscapes so my students can see their own histories and settings represented. This bibliography offers adaptability to fit particular regions.

<u>Novel:</u>	<i>Of Mice and Men</i> (John Steinbeck)
<u>Short story:</u>	"The Chrysanthemums" (Steinbeck) "The End of Something" (Ernest Hemingway)
<u>Excerpts:</u>	<i>The Grapes of Wrath, East of Eden, Cannery Row, Sea of Cortez, The Red Pony</i> (Steinbeck) "Big Two-Hearted River" (Hemingway)
<u>Essays:</u>	"Harvest Gypsies" (Steinbeck) "Advice to the Newly Married Lady"(Samuel Jennings) "Thinking Like a Mountain" (Aldo Leopold)
<u>Film:</u>	<i>Of Mice and Men</i> (1939; Lewis Milestone)
<u>Art:</u>	"The Great Lakes Cycle" (Alexis Rockman) "The Influence of Place" (Rachel Van Dyke) "Plein-Air Series" (Elena Efremova) "Landscape Abstraction" and "The Pacific Crest Trail Project" (Lindsay Fox)
<u>Poetry:</u>	"Iowa: Early April" (Robert Hass) "Belle Isle, 1949" (Philip Levine) "Hands" (Robinson Jeffers) "Winter Stars" (Larry Levis) "To a Mouse" (Robert Burns)
<u>Song:</u>	"My Sister's Tiny Hands" (Andrew Bird) "Upward Over the Mountain" (Iron & Wine) "The Upper Peninsula" (Sufjan Stevens) "June Hymn" (The Decemberists)

## THE WRITING PROMPTS & PROJECTS

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This unit involves a variety of student-produced work including a personal journal, a naturalist notebook, an interview project, and a narrative piece.

The journaling helps us process complex ideas presented in the text: how is *Of Mice and Men* a novel about loneliness and isolation? What happens when you don't know a place, when you're not in your "proper background?"

The journaling offers opportunities to ground ourselves in the characters' experiences and feelings. Considering the book's opening passage and the growing significance of the riverbank, where are your sacred places? Consider, too, George and Lennie's wish for their own farm. What does that represent to them? What does home and community mean to *you*?

Our exploration of sacred places takes us into our interview project in which we'll converse with another community member about influential places in his/her life. Simply, we are pursuing the question, "How did your setting growing up influence you?" This element of the unit exposes

students to effective interview strategies, connects students to community members, and incorporates authentic, dialectal speech into creative nonfiction writing.

Our naturalist notebooks bring us outdoors into the school grounds, local parks, our own backyards. Our goal is to become more attentive observers, deepen our appreciation for the natural world, and reflect on what we see in rich, written descriptions.

Finally, as a culmination of the unit, students will craft personal narratives that demonstrate the present themes, ideas, and emotions of the novel with a heavy emphasis on description and the influence of setting.

This unit's products can extend outside of narrative writing, too, and include various mediums. Throughout the unit, models have been provided as poetry, prose, art, music, and photography and students can elect to demonstrate their understanding of the novel's themes through these additional mediums.

### **INSIDE THE CLASSROOM**

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Particular emphasis in this unit is on Michigan as we envision our landscapes and consider the influence of place on ourselves and our community.

In preparation for the interview-element of this unit, Andrea Lubberts of Plaster Creek Stewards will be invited in to speak to our students. Plaster Creek Stewards, in partnership with Calvin College, works to restore the health and beauty of the Plaster Creek Watershed, which directly affects the Greater Grand Rapids area. Lubberts and her team conducted interviews with local residents on their experiences with Plaster Creek in their youth and how that's changed in the span of a generation. She will provide interview models and tips, advocate for the importance of natural spaces, and educate students on local environmental issues.

### **OUTSIDE OF THE CLASSROOM**

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Essayist Aldo Leopold and poet Wendell Berry speak on the importance of personal connection to the natural world and how essential that connection is in order to extend our ethics outside of ourselves.

As an optional addition to the unit, students can join me for a weekend-long writing retreat in Nordhouse Dunes Wilderness in Manistee National Forest. The goal of this camping experience is to offer students direct contact with nature and perhaps inspire a new sacred place to them. This retreat invites young people to participate in intentional reflection through hiking, journaling, and poetry reading. The participants will develop stronger community with their peers, have a deeper sense of the remoteness and aloneness experienced in *Of Mice and Men*, and explore the value of natural spaces.

## SOCIAL RELEVANCE

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In addition to the main topics of this unit, *Of Mice and Men* and the additional materials explore a number of topics that have great social relevance today, including the following:

- ❖ Race & race issues
- ❖ Critiques of capitalism
- ❖ Social prejudice & the criminalization of people
- ❖ Gender roles & domesticity
- ❖ Farming & agriculture; a connection to food and land
- ❖ Farm labor & labor movements; migrant labor
- ❖ The American Dream, then and now
- ❖ Anomie & moral standards
- ❖ Poverty & unemployment
- ❖ The Great Depression
- ❖ Separation from community