Great change comes when enough people can imagine the world differently.

Steppenwolf’s 2008-2009 season explores the power of imagination.

Through our productions this year we hope to further understand the source of imagination, its effect on family and community, and the loss endured when imagination fails to become reality.
Congratulations to the winners of the Steppenwolf for Young Adults’ essay contest!

Last fall, students who attended our production of *The Glass Menagerie* were given the opportunity to write an essay on their interpretation of The American Dream. We are pleased to recognize the following students for their ambitious and thought-provoking essays:

**Ligin Solamen**, Carl Sandburg H.S.  
First place

**Rawan Hishmeh**, Carl Sandburg H.S.  
Second place

**Jacquelyn Guillen**, William Howard Taft H.S.  
Third place

Please visit [www.steppenwolf.org/education](http://www.steppenwolf.org/education) to read the winning essay.

Exposing your students to the world of theatre can be the start of a transformative artistic journey. Don’t let that journey end when they walk out our doors. **Tell your students how to get involved with Steppenwolf for Young Adults!**

**The Ma-TEEN-ée Series:**  
**See. Think. Speak.**

Specifically designed for high school students who want to see professional theatre on their own time, the Ma-TEENée Series is an affordable way for students to score a ticket to Steppenwolf, meet Chicago’s most celebrated artists and connect with other teens who are passionate about the arts.

**Upcoming Ma-TEEN-ées:**

**Of Mice and Men** – Saturday, April 25 at 11a.m.  
**The Tempest** – Saturday, May 16 at 3p.m.  
**Up** – Saturday, June 20 at 3p.m.

**Cost:** $15 per show. Ticket price includes lunch.

*This offer is exclusively for single-ticket buyer high school students

**The Steppenwolf Young Adult Council:**  
**Lead. Create. Collaborate.**

The Young Adult Council is a unique after-school program for passionate and motivated high school students who wish to learn the inner-workings of professional theatre from the most celebrated artists in the city. In addition to invaluable face-time with these leading professionals, Council members attend the best plays in Chicago, learn how to analyze and speak about these plays, and organize events for their peers around Steppenwolf productions in hopes of inspiring a new generation of theatre enthusiasts and practitioners. Council members receive a travel stipend for their commitment to rigorous and exciting work, and typically meet on Wednesdays from 4:30-6:00 with the occasional Saturday commitment.

*Applications for the council will become available on the Steppenwolf website [April 1](http://www.steppenwolf.org), and will be due [May 29](http://www.steppenwolf.org). Please contact Whitney Dibo with any questions at [wdibo@steppenwolf.org](mailto:wdibo@steppenwolf.org).
INSIDE THE GUIDE...

This study guide will explore Steinbeck’s classic play through three of its most prominent themes: POWER, LONELINESS and THE AMERICAN DREAM. We hope these three ideas will serve as catalysts for conversation, given their universality and enduring relevance in today’s world. Whether a play is set during The Great Depression or in the current economic crisis, whether its characters are migrant workers or Wall Street executives, these three concepts are germane to our human story.

OF MICE AND MEN:
STEINBECK’S EXPERIMENT
WITH LITERARY FORM

John Steinbeck’s classic story was originally written as a “play-novelette,” a term used by critics at the time to define the book’s unusual literary structure. Always known as a writer with an affinity for experimentation, Steinbeck’s short novel was written in three “acts,” and could be performed as a play from the lines within the text. According to Steinbeck, the original text is intended to be “a play that can be read or a novel that can be played.” However, once the novella garnered critical acclaim after its 1937 release, Steinbeck quickly transformed the book into a play using standard script format. Even though most students still read the classic story in its original literary form, it is important to remember that Steinbeck intended Of Mice and Men to be both read from the page and seen on the stage.

OF MICE AND MEN FACES CENSORSHIP

Despite its current place in the American literary cannon, Of Mice and Men spent years dodging national censorship. Numerous public libraries and schools banned both the play and the book due to the prevalence of racial slurs and profanity within the text and its supposed endorsement of euthanasia. The story’s embattled history landed Of Mice and Men on the Most Challenged Books of the 21st Century list, recently published by the American Library Association. But the story’s subtle poignancy and timeless themes have kept George and Lennie’s story alive for over seventy years now, and in the hands of countless students.
"Literature is as old as speech. It grew out of a human need for it and has not changed except to become more needed"

JOHN STEINBECK, taken from his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, 1962.

JOHN STEINBECK: AN AMERICAN WRITER

Born in 1902, Steinbeck grew up in Salinas Valley, California – the same part of the country in which Of Mice and Men takes place. During the summers Steinbeck worked on nearby ranches as a farm hand, an experience that clearly shaped his future writing and grounded him in the realities of The Great Depression.

After graduating high school, Steinbeck worked his way through Stanford University, starting off as an English major. He never finished his degree, instead opting to pursue his writing career in New York City. For years Steinbeck struggled to find work as a freelance writer, but ultimately returned home to California not having published a single piece of writing.

In 1935, Steinbeck wrote a series of short stories entitled Tortilla Flat, which garnered critical acclaim for its humorous but also sympathetic portrayal of countrymen in Monterey, California. The collection put Steinbeck on the literary map, and his next few books met with quick publication, including Of Mice and Men in 1937. Just two years later he published The Grapes of Wrath, a story about Oklahoma tenant farmers who are forced to abandon their land and head west in search of jobs and better life. The book won the 1940 Pulitzer Prize for literature, and forever marked Steinbeck as an important American writer. He died of a heart attack in 1968 while living in New York City.

Steinbeck’s impact on American literature cannot be overstated. He is credited with bringing the migrant workers’ story to light during and after The Great Depression – a narrative that is now part of the American collective conscience. His writing is also famously authentic, rich with specificity of time and place. Steinbeck is also remembered for his searing social commentary on the harshness of capitalism, and for giving voice to the hardships of the American working class.
THE GREAT DEPRESSION

*Of Mice and Men* is set during The Great Depression, a period of financial crisis in the United States that stretched from the mid-1920s well into the 1930s. The Depression marked a bleak era in American history: The U.S., once known to immigrants as the country paved with streets of gold, was suddenly crippled by mass unemployment, bank failures, widespread hunger and poverty.

Originally produced on the heels of The Great Depression, *Of Mice and Men* struck a deep chord with its American audiences. George and Lennie’s struggle for security resonated with the haggard public – most Americans, whether they were migrant workers or once-successful businessmen, could easily relate to the characters’ plight.

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**A CLASSROOM QUESTION:**

What might George and Lennie’s struggle look like in today’s financial climate? In what ways would their plight be similar? In what ways might it be different?
THE CHARACTERS IN OF MICE AND MEN

Classroom Exercise: Reading Between the Lines

What can we learn about the characters in Of Mice and Men based on what they say about each other? What can we learn from the things they say about themselves? Learn more about the characters in Of Mice and Men from the list below:

George talking about SLIM
“You’re a jerk-line Skinner? That kinda makes you Jesus Christ on this ranch, don’t it?”
—George

Candy talking about the BOSS
“He’s a nice fella. You got ta take him right, of course. He’s running this ranch. He don’t take no nonsense.”
—Candy

CURLEY’S WIFE talking about herself
“I’m jus’ lookin for somebody to talk to. Don’t you never jus’ want to talk to somebody?”
—Curley’s Wife

George talking about CURLEY
“You gonna have trouble with that Curley guy. He figures he’s got you scared. And he’s gonna sock at you first chance he gets.”
—George

WHIT is a rancher who befriends George and Lennie upon arrival

The Boss talking about GEORGE
“I never seen one guy take so much trouble for another guy.”
—Boss

CANDY talking about himself
“I ain’t much good with one hand, but I can cook and tend the chickens and hoe the garden some. How’d that be?”
—Candy

CARLSON talking about himself
“I don’t care if you’re the best boxer in the country, you come for me and I’ll kick your goddamn head off.”
—Carlson

George talking about Lennie
“Sure, he’s like a kid. There ain’t no more harm in him than a kid neither.”
—George

CROOKS talking about himself
“S’pose you couldn’t go into the bunkhouse and play rummy, ‘cause you was black. How would you like that? S’pose you had to set out here and read books.”
—Crooks
A QUESTION OF POWER
Classroom exercises on the role of power in *Of Mice and Men*

There are many definitions of power:

- The ability to act or produce an effect
- Possession of control, authority, or influence over others
- Physical might
- Mental or moral efficacy

(Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

Consider the power structure of the play, and answer the following questions:

1. How do the characters in *Of Mice and Men* utilize the power they have?
2. Do the power relationships change as the play progresses?
3. Which characters in the play use their power for good?
4. Which characters abuse their power?

A Closer Look…. Analyze the text to discover the power structure in *Of Mice and Men*

Does Curley have **POWER** over his wife?
“If you can’t look after your own wife, what do you expect me to do about it?”
- Slim to Curley, Act II scene i

Does George have **POWER** over Lennie?
“Why, he’d do any damn thing I tol’ him. If I tol’ him to walk over a cliff, over he’d go.” - George speaking about Lennie to Slim, Act I scene ii

Does the Boss have **POWER** over his workers?
“If the Boss finds out what a crazy bastard you are, we won’t get no job.”
- George to Lennie, Act I scene i

Does Crooks have **POWER** over Lennie?
“I ain’t wanted in the bunkhouse and you ain’t wanted in my room.”
- Crooks to Lennie, Act II scene ii
THE EFFECTS OF LONELINESS

Throughout the play, almost every character comments on how peculiar it is that Lennie and George travel around together. Most of these ranchers live out their lives in transient solitude, making George’s steadfast devotion to Lennie something of an anomaly. “I never seen one guy take so much trouble for another guy,” says the Boss when George and Lennie first arrive at the ranch, “I just like to know what your percentage is.” It doesn’t seem plausible to the Boss that two men would voluntarily travel together solely on the basis of friendship.

A Closer Look… Analyze the text to discover the role of loneliness in Of Mice and Men

1. Do you believe Curley’s wife leaves the ranch as a result of loneliness?
   “I’m jus’ lookin’ for somebody to talk to. Don’t you never jus’ want to talk to somebody?”
   – Curley’s Wife

2. How does Crooks’ loneliness differ from that of the other men?
   “A guy goes nuts if he ain’t got nobody. Don’t make no difference who it is as long as he’s with you.” – Crooks

3. Is Candy’s offer to pitch in money for the farm motivated by loneliness?
   “S’pose I went in with you guys? That’s three hundred and forty bucks I’d put in. I ain’t much good, but I could cook and tend the chickens and hoe the garden some. How’d that be?” – Candy

4. Does Lennie escape loneliness because he has George?
   “Because I got you to look after me…..and you got me to look after you!” – Lennie

5. Does George escape loneliness because he has Lennie?
   “Guys that work on ranches is the loneliest guys in the world…With us it ain’t like that. We got a future. We got somebody to talk to that gives a damn about us.” – George

Who is the loneliest character in Of Mice and Men?

Is it Lennie, because his handicap inherently isolates him from the other ranchers?

Is it Curley’s Wife, because she is stuck in an unhappy marriage?

Is it Crooks, because the color of his skin ostracizes him from the other ranchers?

Is it the ranchers, because it is against the social norm for them to get close to one another?
GEORGE AND LENNIE’S AMERICAN DREAM

The prospect of a better life is what initially propels Lennie and George to work the ranches in Salinas Valley. The pair hope to save up enough money to buy a little farm of their own, a small piece of land they can tend without a boss’s supervision. Lennie and George’s American Dream is rooted not only in prosperity, but also in ownership, control and security. The possibility of guiding their own lives – dictating their own schedules, their own pay, forever freeing themselves from the constant threat of unemployment – this dream is just within reach when things fall apart.

A Closer Look... Analyzing the text to discover the character’s dreams:

Ownership
“And I'll wash the dishes and little chicken stuff like that. But hell, I'll be on our own place. I'll be let to work on our own place.”
– Candy

Independence
“S’pose there was a carnival, or a circus come to town or a ball game or any damn thing. We’d just go to her. We wouldn’t ask nobody if we could. Just say we’ll go to her, and by God, and we would.” – George

Security
“Nobody could can us in the middle of a job.” – George

Responsibility
“I bet I can let you tend the rabbits – specially if you remember as good as that! - George
“I can remember, by God!” – Lennie

Inclusion
“If you guys would want a hand to work for nothing – just his keep, why, I’d come and lend a hand.” - Crooks

A CLASSROOM QUESTION:

Does this sound like an American Dream of today?

“We’d have a little house. And a room to ourselves. And it ain’t enough land so we’d have to work too hard. Mebbe six, seven hours a day. We wouldn’t have to buck no barley eleven hours a day. And when we put in a crop, why we’d be there to take that crop up. We’d know what come of our planning.” – George

1992

Of Mice and Men is made into a feature film, featuring John Malkovich and Gary Sinise.
Hallie Gordon: When I first approached you about directing *Of Mice and Men* you said that it was one of your favorite stories. Why is it so meaningful to you?

Michael Patrick Thornton: For me, it’s the relationship between George and Lennie, and the compassion that these two grown men feel for each other. When this book is taught, George is usually a pretty morally sanitized character, in terms of his reasons for traveling with Lennie. But you know, upon further reading the relationship gets more uncomfortable. George has a lot of guilt when it comes to his friend—he feels awful for having abused Lennie in the past, making him the butt of jokes back home, basically playing a destructive game of Simon Says with Lennie over the years. And I think he’s aware of that.

There is also so much we don’t know about George and Lennie’s relationship. George plays his cards close to his chest. We don’t know what happened between George, Lennie, and Lennie’s Aunt Clara. We don’t know the details about what happened in Weed, apart from what George tells Slim. There is just so much back story that remains a big question mark.

H: Do you feel like the book and the play are still relevant for high school students?

M: Yes, certainly. *Of Mice and Men* is both a story about identity, and a cautionary tale about what happens when people do not pursue their dreams. I think that all the men in Steinbeck’s story don’t really follow their dreams, and this essentially causes them to lose their identities. And high school is such a defining, wonderfully awful, purifying part of identity development. We all make decisions based on how we’re received or shunned, and on how much of ourselves we want to reveal to our peers. I think what we see in *Of Mice and Men* is what happens when people adhere to this “someday I’ll get there” mentality— which is really just a way of staying afraid.

H: Talk to me a little bit about how you’re going to approach the play.

M: In keeping with the season of the imagination, I’m going to try and approach the play through Lennie’s eyes; to have the audience experience the world like he does. We as audience members are very interested in the world as we see it. But as soon as Lennie hits the stage, our “real world” will fade away and we will start to see the play in bright color and experience it through sound and touch—the way Lennie does. His world is a lot more sensorial than ours. And at the end of the play, once Lennie is gone, that high sensory world will fade away and we’ll be left with only what we started with.
H: And that brings up the question of the final scene. George’s decision really makes us consider what we value as humans, and where we stand on this very morally controversial act.

M: You know, there doesn’t seem to be an overriding, objective morality in place in *Of Mice and Men*. Usually, when characters go against the moral order, there is punishment of some kind – from God, from the law. I can’t think of another story in which a character bucks and usurps the natural order of the world, and nothing bad happens to him. A few seconds after the gunshot, the play is over. We don’t see any punishment, so it seems like Steinbeck wants to leave that judgment to us. It’s endlessly fascinating to me.

H: It brings up so many questions. Steinbeck’s characters are all so filled with defects; they all have dreams and desires that aren’t being met.

M: Absolutely. There’s a line in the book that says Crooks has “reduced himself to nothing.” Steinbeck really insinuates that the characters are destroying themselves here. Dreams are great, but I wonder if on some level George keeps Lennie around because he knows that Lennie basically prevents the actualization of his dreams. As long as Lennie is around they’ll never get that farm, because they’ll always be on the run. This goes back again to the theme of identity and being careful how you define yourself. If you define yourself by things that are going to happen in the future, you’re not living in the now. You’re essentially missing life.

H: It seems like the only character who is true to himself is Lennie.

M: But he doesn’t get moral credit for that because it isn’t a choice. Lennie can’t be anyone but who he is.

H: What do you think makes this story a classic?

M: I think what makes it a classic is that culturally, Americans are very dream-oriented. These are familiar themes - the American dream, the act of going out west, Curley’s wife wanting to get into the pictures. We define ourselves by our possessions, what we are going to be, our status, our awards and our accomplishments. None of that has changed. But I think during The Great Depression, a time during which people couldn’t afford external things, they were left with a quite an uncomfortable spotlight on their identities. Because all you have is you; you’re reduced to your most basic levels. The questions become where are you going to sleep, where are you going to eat, how are you going to find work. And unfortunately, we have the unique opportunity to produce this play during a time that might very well be the beginning of the next Depression.

H: And when people fall on hard economic times their dreams become minimized, because it’s all about survival.

M: If you really consider economic recession and depression, they are just natural parts of capitalism. Markets are run by human beings and human beings are driven by greed. We always want more - it makes up the story of who we are.

H: And now we’re come full circle, back around to the natural defects in human beings.

M: Exactly, but I think *Of Mice and Men* is not only about human defect. It’s also a wonderful love story about companionship, despite George’s character flaws. The theme of loneliness is pervasive too, and everyone has been lonely. We all know what loneliness can do to you. And in this play, Steinbeck really takes loneliness to its natural conclusions.
“The free exploring mind of the individual is the most valuable thing in the world.” JOHN STEINBECK

DISCUSS.
What parallels do you see between Candy’s dog and Lennie?

DEBATE.
Do you believe Curley’s wife when she says she is lonely? Or do you believe the ranchers’ assertions that she is simply a “tart?”

DELIBERATE.
How has the American Dream changed since The Great Depression? Do people today still want the same things that Lennie and George want in Of Mice and Men?

A QUESTION OF ETHICS
At the time, Steinbeck was accused of promoting euthanasia (or mercy killing) through Of Mice and Men’s controversial ending. Given that killing a person is universally deemed to be wrong – why then, do we sympathize with George in the play’s final scene?

Do you understand George’s decision at the end of the play? Why or why not?

A QUESTION OF FRIENDSHIP
George and Lennie’s unlikely friendship has, over the years, become an iconic literary relationship. What makes George and Lennie’s friendship so unique? What makes it universal?
DON’T STOP HERE!

Additional resources relating to John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*:

*John Steinbeck: A Life in Letters*
By Elaine Steinbeck and Robert Wallsten

*Critical Companion to John Steinbeck: A Literary Reference to his Life and Work*
By Jeffrey Shlutz and Luchen Li

John Steinbeck’s Nobel Prize in Literature speech, 1962:
http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1962/steinbeck

John Steinbeck, the California Novels:
http://www.ac.wwu.edu/~stephan/Steinbeck/

Photos by Dorothea Lange of migrant workers during the Great Depression:
http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/fsahtml/fachap03.html

*Breadline: Economic Depression Triggers Unemployment on a Global Scale*
PBS Peoples Century episode on the Great Depression 1929-1934:
Produced and directed by Archie Baron; the narrator is John Forsythe.

Contributors to the SYA Program:

- **Fidelity Investments** is the Corporate sponsor of Steppenwolf for Young Adults and the Fidelity Investments Inspire the Future Award.
- **Kraft Foods, Inc.** is the Corporate Sponsor of Steppenwolf for Young Adults.
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- **The Motorola Foundation** is the Production Sponsor for *Of Mice and Men*.
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- **Steppenwolf’s Auxiliary Council**, a community of dynamic young professionals, dedicates their support to Steppenwolf for Young Adults.
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Steppenwolf for Young Adults is a citywide partner of the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) School Partner Program.
Steppenwolf for Young Adults proudly announces its **2009-2010 Season**!

### October 13 – November 1, 2009

**The House on Mango Street**

based on the book by **Sandra Cisneros**
adapted by **Tanya Saracho**
directed by **Hallie Gordon**

Based on the book by celebrated Chicago writer Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* is a touching and humorous collection of vignettes told by a young girl growing up in one of Chicago’s Latino neighborhoods. Esperanza Cordero dreams of a new life far away from her tiny home on rundown Mango Street in this classic coming-of-age story about those defining experiences that shape our beliefs and help us discover who we are.

### February 23 – March 14, 2010

**A Separate Peace**

based on the book by **John Knowles**
adapted by **Nancy Gilsenan**
directed by **Jonathan Berry**

Set at an all-boys boarding school in New England during World War II, *A Separate Peace* is a fascinating look into the dark side of adolescence. The complex bonds of friendship between shy, studious Gene and his athletic, daredevil roommate Finny are tested—with shocking consequences. Based on the best-selling novel, *A Separate Peace* is an quintessential American classic about trust and betrayal, war and peace.

Include these classic books in your next year’s curriculum, and see them come alive on the Steppenwolf stage.
Encourage them to apply to the

Steppenwolf Young Adult Council

Students in our Young Adult Council…

- Lead their peers in artistic discussion
- See the best plays in Chicago
- Learn from the most celebrated actors, artists and writers in the city
- Collaborate with Steppenwolf staff on the process of new play development
- Become an invaluable voice in the Steppenwolf community

- Application materials will be online at www.steppenwolf.org/education on April 1. Applications will be due May 29th
- Students interested in applying to the Young Adult Council are encouraged to attend our MaTEENée production of The Tempest, May 16 at 3 p.m.