

*Study Guide*  
**OF MICE AND MEN**

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**A Play by**  
**JOHN STEINBECK**

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**Adapted from the Novella by**  
**JOHN STEINBECK**

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**Created by the Education Department**

Westport  
Country  
Playhouse

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

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Theatre Audience Etiquette and Discussion .....	3
Introduction: <i>Of Mice and Men</i> : The Play .....	4
The Author: John Steinbeck .....	5
The American Dream and the Politics of The Great Depression .....	7
The New Deal .....	9
Political Perspectives .....	9
Suggested Readings .....	10
Special Events .....	10
Suggested Topics of Discussion .....	10
Notes to Teachers .....	11
Suggested Points of Discussion .....	11
Suggested Activities .....	12
Analyzing the Script .....	13

# Theatre Audience Etiquette and Discussion

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## **SPEAKING TO YOUR STUDENTS ABOUT THEATRE ETIQUETTE IS ESSENTIAL.**

Students should be aware that this is a **LIVE** performance and that they should not talk during the show. However, honest audience reactions such as laughter and applause are warmly encouraged. If you do nothing else to prepare your students to see the play, please take some time to talk to them about theatre etiquette in an effort to help the students better appreciate their experience. It will enhance their enjoyment of the show and allow other audience members to enjoy the experience. The questions below can help guide the discussions. Thank you for your help and enjoy the show!

## **Suggested Discussion Questions Before Seeing the Show**

1. What is the role of the audience in a live performance? What is its role in a film? Why can't you chew gum or eat popcorn at a live theatre performance? Why can't you talk? What can happen in live theatre that cannot happen in cinema?
2. When you get to the theatre, look around. Observe the lighting instruments overhead and around the room. Examine the set. Does it seem realistic or abstract? Try to imagine how the set will be used during the show.
3. Discuss the elements that go into producing a live performance. What were the contributions of the people behind the scenes and how did their work contribute to the story being told? Do the elements work in concert? Were they effective?
4. Westport Country Playhouse is very attuned to its audience. Ask your students to write letters to the actors, director, designers and all those other people who work behind the scenes. Send those letters to: Westport Country Playhouse c/o Debra Baron, 25 Powers Court, Westport CT 06880 or email to [dbaron@westportplayhouse.org](mailto:dbaron@westportplayhouse.org).

# INTRODUCTION

## Of Mice and Men: The Play

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**YOU HOLD IN YOUR HAND AN IDEA BORN OF A DREAM- THE MOST PERFECT MOMENT YOUR IMAGINATION IS ABLE TO CAPTURE...A HOME.... LAND...FREEDOM. HEAVEN.**

**SHATTERED ...WITH JUST THE FLICK OF THE WRIST.**

Based on John Steinbeck's 1937 classic, *Of Mice and Men* follows the journey of George and Lennie, friends born of necessity, as they search the country for their own little corner of the American dream. Can their fragile paradise survive the rough hands of fate? Steinbeck brings Depression-era California vividly to life, as he explores the very definitions of worth, friendship, truth and Utopia.

### **OF MICE AND MEN:**

- **was selected as Book of the Month (1937)**
- **was adapted into five films (including the original in 1939 and the John Malkovich/Gary Sinise 1992 remake)**
- **appears on the American Library Association's list of the Most Challenged Books of 21st Century because of its language, racial content and promotion of euthanasia (challenged or banned in towns in Indiana, Pennsylvania, Michigan, South Carolina, New York and Tennessee among others)**

# John Ernst Steinbeck III : Our Playwright

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**JOHN STEINBECK ALWAYS WANTED TO BE A WRITER.** Born February 27, 1902 in Salinas California, to John and Olive Hamilton Steinbeck – first generation Americans – he grew up in a family of modest means. From an early age his mother, a teacher, instilled in Steinbeck a love of the written word. Among his favorite books were Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Milton's *Paradise Lost* and *Le Morte d'Arthur*. For a brief period of time Steinbeck attended Stanford University working while in school to support himself and his education. But he left before finishing his education to explore the world by freighter – working intermittently as a sales clerk, factory work and general laborer to support his adventures. In 1925 he arrived in New York City with the hope of finding a publisher and establishing himself as a writer. After working as a laborer on the construction of Madison Square Garden and a reporter for *The American* he returned to California having failed to establish himself as a published author. Still writing.

While working as a watchman of a house in the High Sierra, Steinbeck's first novel, the mythological *Cup of Gold* (1929) was published. This first work failed to earn back even the \$250 advance the publisher had given him. Steinbeck's first critical success was *Tortilla Flat* – the story of young men in Monterey during the Great Depression which began a pattern by subsequently being made into a film in 1942 (this first film adaptation of Steinbeck's featured Spencer Tracy, Hedy Lamar and John Garfield). With *Of Mice and Men*, a story of shattered dreams, Steinbeck had his first literary triumph. He actually wrote the novel with the stage in mind, limiting each chapter to a single scene in a single location. Following the critical acclaim of the novel, he and George Kaufman worked together to create the play. Opening on November 23, 1937 at the Music Box Theatre on Broadway *Of Mice and Men* ran for 207 performances and featured in the role of Crooks the first African-American member of the Actors' Equity Association – Leigh Whipper. In 1938 the show won the Best Play award from the New York Drama Critics Circle. The original film version was nominated for four Oscars in 1939 (Best Picture, Best Sound Recording, Best Musical Score and Best Original Score).

Steinbeck followed *Of Mice and Men* with *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). Based on a series of newspaper articles he had written in San Francisco, *The Grapes of Wrath* is considered by many to be his finest work. When the book first appeared, it was attacked by US Congressman Lyle Boren who declared it “a lie, a black, infernal creation of twisted, distorted mind.” Controversial as always the Swedish Academy saw it differently awarding the novel the Nobel Prize in 1940, and declaring it “an epic chronicle.” The novel was subsequently made into a film directed by John Ford and starring Henry Fonda.

Seventeen of his novels became screenplays including *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Of Mice and Men*, *Viva Zapata*, *Cannery Row* and *The Pearl* with Steinbeck also crafting scripts for such films as Alfred Hitchcock's *Lifeboat* (1944), *A Medal for Benny* (1945) and his own *East of Eden* (1952) featuring the film debut of James Dean.

**Pegasus the flying pig was used by John Steinbeck as a symbol of himself- 'earthbound but aspiring'**

## John Ernst Steinbeck III (cont'd)

Steinbeck's liberal political views shone a light on "the ugly side of capitalism and mythical reinterpretation of the historical events of the Dust Bowl migrations." The uproar caused by his interpretation of the inhumane living conditions among migrating 'Okies' (Okies and Arkies were the names attached to the Anglo migrants from the Great Plains) caught the attention of Eleanor Roosevelt who came to Steinbeck's defense – with her involvement eventually leading to congressional hearings on migrant camp conditions and changes in labor laws.

In 1962, upon winning the Nobel Prize for Literature for his "realistic and imaginative writing, combining as it does sympathetic humor and keen social perception" Steinbeck reflected:

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**"...the writer is delegated to declare and to celebrate man's proven capacity for greatness of heart and spirit – for gallantry in defeat, for courage, compassion and love. In the endless war against weakness and despair, there are the bright rally flags of hope and of emulation. I hold that a writer who does not passionately believe in the perfectibility of man has no dedication nor any membership in literature."**

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To date, John Steinbeck remains the quintessential California writer. Steinbeck established his own literary voice – a style which later came to be known as 'California' or 'Dust Bowl' fiction. It was through this style that Steinbeck found both his voice and his success. Beginning in the 1930s when he shone a light onto the plight of the common man and reflected in his writings the political and social human dramas that he saw proliferating the landscape. More than any other writer in the 1900s, he consistently reflected the struggles of Americans: from his social histories in the 1930s and deeply ecological works in the 1940s to his accounts of the Cold War while covering the Soviet Union in 1947 and the Vietnam War in the 1960s.

After serving as the conscience of his country for nearly 40 years John Steinbeck died on December 20, 1968 of a heart attack mid-novel. In 1976, *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights* was posthumously published bringing to vivid life the Arthurian world and its code of honor.

**Steinbeck's inspiration for the title OF MICE AND MEN was a poem by the Scottish poet Robert Burns (1759 - 96):**

**The best laid schemes o' mice and men  
Gang aft agley [often go awry]  
And leave us nought but grief and pain  
For promised joy!**

# The American Dream and the Politics of The Great Depression

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In 1937 Americans were struggling to feed themselves and their families. In the midst of days filled with loss and confusion, the desire to reach beyond the day in front of them gave birth to the American Dream. Reflecting the America Steinbeck observed, with the taste of the Depression still in the air, *Of Mice and Men* offers an examination and reflection of a time when social change, economic collapse and environmental catastrophe defined the day.

We first heard the phrase “the American Dream” in *The Epic of America*, written in 1931 by James Truslow Adams. He wrote:

**“...the dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement.**

**It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.”**

America's economy crumbled. Seemingly overnight over 15 million people, were unemployed. Few were spared. Millions of homeless were forced to live in the decrepit shantytowns which sprang up across the nation. Hoovervilles, named for President Herbert Hoover in response to his belief that economic and social relief should be left to the private sector, changed America's view of herself forever.

## ONE DREAM

**Bill Gates dropped out of college to write software – his dream that one day every home would have a personal computer. Imagine that.**

## ONE DREAM

**Hold fast to dreams  
For if dreams die  
Life is a broken-winged bird  
That cannot fly.  
Hold fast to dreams  
For when dreams go  
Life is a barren field  
Frozen with snow.**

**(‘Dreams’, a poem by Langston Hughes first published in WORLD TOMORROW May 1923)**

# The American Dream and the Politics of The Great Depression (cont'd)

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By the beginning of the next decade, as a result of the institution of an assortment of commissions set up to regulate Wall Street, the banking industry, and other business enterprises regulatory agencies, the United States had transitioned into an economy regulated by the federal government. The debate over which is the best course of action still rages today.

From the first colonists and through the history of the United States, the promise of something better has brought people to our country. It was a dream of escape that first brought people to our shores but our history gives witness to the fluid dreams of Americans through the decades. What have we learned from the struggles of the past- how our world has come to be defined by our actions and reactions to the world we now live in- and how will we define the dreams of this new decade. These are the new questions.

## ONE DREAM

**“I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.”**

**I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.**

**I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.**

**I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”**

**(excerpt from Martin Luther King speech August 28, 1963)**

# The New Deal

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**FOLLOWING BLACK TUESDAY ON OCTOBER 29, 1929**, President Herbert Hoover declared – what was later referred to as the worst economic collapse America had ever seen – a “passing incident,” and assured the country that America would return to business as usual within 60 days. But history proved him wrong – The Great Depression consumed the country. In 1932 with his promise of a New Deal, Franklin Delano Roosevelt became president. Roosevelt’s New Deal included legislation to stabilize the banking system, create government relief employment and prohibit discrimination, sustain the arts as well as conservation programs designed to rehabilitate the Dust Bowl.

Agencies like Murray and Ready’s (referred to in *Of Mice and Men*) were created to send migrant farm workers where they were most needed. The Agricultural Adjustment Act provided funding to farmers unable to sell their crops to a bankrupt public. During this time, a massive drought coupled with years of poor farming conservation destroyed the once fertile soil of the Great Plains in a series of dust storms that reached all the way to the Atlantic Ocean. A new challenge: the Dust Bowl.

With farmland rendered virtually worthless and bank foreclosures forcing families out of their homes, millions of people made their way to California in hopes of a new start. So severe was California’s overcrowding that some cities posted station guards at the state line.

The New Deal also gave birth to five Federal One projects sponsored by the Works Projects Administration (WPA) – one of which was the Federal Theatre Project (FTP). Established by Executive Order No 7034 on May 6, 1935, Hallie Flanagan – a theatre professor from Vassar College – was chosen to lead the FTP and build a national theatre program designed to employ theatre professionals. Consuming a mere 29.1% of Federal One’s budget (less than 3/4 of 1% of the total WPA budget) followed their mandate to keep FTP “free, adult and uncensored” and to ensure that FTP-funded projects were supported regardless of their political or social content. Problems first arose with the publication of the first *Living Newspaper Ethiopia* which described Haile Selassie and his nation’s struggles against Benito Mussolini’s invading Italian armies. The US government responded with a new mandate: the FTP could not depict foreign heads of state on stage for fear of diplomatic retribution. Elmer Rice, playwright-director and head of the New York office, resigned in protest. Finally the FTP lost its funding in 1939 in response to strong Congressional debate over the “overtly left-wing political tones” of many of their productions.

The legacy of the Federal Theatre Project lives today in the work of Arthur Miller, Orson Wells, John Houseman, Martin Ritt, Elia Kazan, Marc Blitzstein, Arthur Arent and Abe Feder.

## Political Perspectives

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Steinbeck’s life regularly brought him into close contact with leftist authors, journalists and labor union leaders. In 1935, he joined the League of American Writers, a communist organization whose purpose it was to foster ideological support in the literary community. While definitely sympathetic to the political left, Steinbeck himself was a fierce individualist who was never fully committed to socialism, stating, “socialism is just another form of religion and thus delusional.” During World War II, he was found ‘ideologically unqualified’ by the United States Army Intelligence when determining his suitability for an officer’s commission.

While seen as a political activist/Marxist by many right wing Americans, Steinbeck was criticized in later years by the very leftists he had supported for what they saw as his “insufficient ideological commitment to Socialism” (*Daily Worker* (1955) condemning him for his portrayal of the American Left).

# Suggested Readings

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*John Steinbeck: A Biography* by Jay Parini (1995)

*Working Days: The Journal of The Grapes of Wrath* edited by Robert DeMott (from the Steinbeck's journal written as he wrote the novel in 1938)

*The True Adventures of John Steinbeck* by Jackson J. Benson

Steinbeck Centennial: [www.steinbeck100.org](http://www.steinbeck100.org)

# Special Events

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**Sunday Symposium.** *October 12, 2008, immediately following the 3:00pm matinee.* Free and open to the public.

**Prologue.** *October 17, 2008 at 7:00pm (30 minutes).* This pre-show, half-hour conversation with our artistic staff offers a glimpse into the creative process and provides details about the production that you can't find anywhere else.

**Open Caption.** *October 19, 2008 3pm.*

**Backstage Pass.** *October 23, 2008. Immediately following the 2:00pm matinee.* Get a first hand look behind the curtain! Playhouse production staff shares the tricks of the trade with you and discuss the set design, lights, props, sound, costumes and other special effects involved in our production of *Of Mice and Men*.

**Thursday Talkback.** *October 23, 2008, immediately following the 8pm performance.* Free and open to the public. Join the cast members of *Of Mice and Men* to discuss their experience working on the production. Artist attendance subject to availability.

# Suggested Topics of Discussion

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- Naturalistic writers were influenced by Darwin's theory, in that they believed that one's heredity and surroundings determine one's character. Realism seeks only to describe subjects as they really are. Romanticism espouses a highly symbolic, idealistic or even supernatural treatment of its subjects. Do you see elements of these styles in Steinbeck's work?
- Social critic, author and *New York Times* journalist Barbara Ehrenreich – who lived, worked and fought along side low-wage workers – spoke on the disparity of wages in America with Bill Moyers. Here she describes a different dream: "There was one woman who said something to me that was so poignant. Speaking of her hopes for the future she said, 'My big wish would be to have a job which if I missed work one day, like for a child home sick or something, I would still be able to buy groceries for the next day.'" How would you define the American Dream? Has it changed for you over time? Do you think your children or even your grandchildren will define it the same way?
- Explore your own family history – perhaps create an oral history. How did your family survive The Great Depression?
- Some believe that many in this country are living the American dream in reverse. Adjusting for inflation average, wages are lower than they were in the 1970s; our minimum wage (adjusting for inflation) is lower than it was in the 1950s; and the income and wealth inequality has gone back to the 1920s. Do you agree with the fear that we are back at levels that we saw right before the Great Depression? What effects are you experiencing? Your family?

**The Bookstore is now open! Visit our website at [www.westportplayhouse.org](http://www.westportplayhouse.org) to purchase your copy.**

# Notes to Teachers

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**WE SUGGEST THAT YOUR STUDENTS BE FAMILIAR WITH THE ORIGINAL NOVELLA OF *MICE AND MEN* SO THEY CAN DISCUSS AND COMPARE THE STAGE ADAPTATION OF THE STORY TO THE ORIGINAL FORM. CURRICULA TIE-INS INCLUDE: LANGUAGE ARTS, DRAMA, HISTORY, LITERATURE, SOCIAL STUDIES**

## Suggested Points of Discussion

- Was it a successful adaptation? What would you have done differently?  
Students may create their own adaptation from their reading of the novella.
- Investigate the job of the playwright/adaptor. Why do you think Steinbeck chose to keep the story details he did, why did he choose to cut the details he cut? (For further study, take a look at both the original and the adaptation of *East of Eden* or *The Grapes of Wrath*)
- Using the selected passages below discuss the following excerpts from the text:

***“Oh I don’t know. Hardly none of the guys ever travels around together. I hardly never seen two guys travel together. You know how the hands are. They come in and get their bunk and work a month and then they quit and go on alone. Never seem to give a damn about nobody. Jest seems kinda funny. A cuckoo like him and a smart guy like you traveling together.”***

**DISCUSS:** Slim seems puzzled by the strong friendship that exists between George and Lennie. Why is their relationship odd to him? What social and historical factors would make this friendship different.

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***“God Almighty, that dog stinks....Got no teeth. All stiff with rheumatism. He ain’t no good to you, Candy. Why don’t you shoot him?...This ole dog jus’ suffers itself all the time. If you was to take him out and shoot him—right in the back of the head...why he’d never know what hit him....Aw, he’d be better off dead.”***

**DISCUSS:** Carlson badgers Candy quite a while before the old man agrees to give up his dog. What does this attitude say about the characters’ views of life? How do they react differently to these events? How does this scene relate to the rest of the play?

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***“S’pose they 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, by God, and we would. Just milk the cow and sling some grain to the chickens and go to her.”***

**DISCUSS:** George and Lennie have big dreams about a farm of their own. Much of their dream was based on the idea that this farm would offer them true freedom. What does this excerpt demonstrate about the importance of freedom? Is this feeling unique to George, or do you think others share this feeling.

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***“Why, he’d do any damn thing I tole him. If I tole him to walk over a cliff, over he’d go. You know that wasn’t so damn much fun after a while. He never got mad about it, neither. I’ve beat hell out of him and he could bust every bone in my body jest with his hands. But he never lifted a finger against me.”***

**DISCUSS:** When George is explaining Lennie’s condition to Slim, we see how much Lennie truly relies on George to care for and protect him. How has this duty changed George’s life? How has it changed Lennie’s? What responsibilities come with this friendship?

***“I seen hundreds of men come by on the road and on the ranches, bindles on their back and that same damn thing in their head. Hundreds of ‘em. Jus’ like heaven. Everybody wants a little piece of land. Nobody never gets to heaven. And nobody gets no land.”***

**DISCUSS:** When Crooks hears of George and Lennie’s plans to get a farm of their own, he attacks their plan. If he actually has seen hundreds of men with the same dream, what does this say about human nature? What are all these men truly striving for?

**George:** ***“Guys like us got no families. They got a little stake and then they blow it in. They ain’t got nobody in the world that gives a hoot in hell about ‘em!...But not us...Because I got you and...”***

**Lennie:** ***“And I got you.”***

**DISCUSS:** At the end of the play, this exchange between George and Lennie shows the true nature of their relationship. What does this scene tell us about the nature of George and Lennie’s relationship- of human relationships? About loneliness and friendship? What do you think of George’s decision to “save” his friend from the lynch group?

## Suggested Activities

- The characters in *Of Mice and Men* all represent a certain type of person. Create a list of character types giving them short descriptive names. Now examine *Of Mice and Men* – Steinbeck created a universal message not specific to time or place. Think about each of the minor characters – what do their names say about them? What universal personality type might each represent? How do these different types of people come to affect George and Lennie?
- In order to more easily enter the world of the play, investigate and define these terms particular to their time:

<i>Skinner</i>	<i>Stable Buck</i>	<i>Cultivator</i>
<i>Swamper</i>	<i>Gray-Backs</i>	<i>Valise</i>
<i>Bucker</i>	<i>Luger</i>	<i>Euchre</i>
- In *Of Mice and Men* George and Candy both struggle with decisions about ending the life of a friend. The word ‘euthanasia’ which comes from the Greek words for ‘good’ and ‘death’ in contemporary terms is known as assisted dying. Research both the *Million Dollar Baby* and the Terri Schiavo case – how are these cases different? Who do you believe has the authority to decide the outcome of similar situations?
- Investigate the themes and symbols prevalent in *Of Mice and Men* – how do these contribute to the play- why did Steinbeck chose each theme or symbol as a tool to tell his story? (examples: Bunkhouse – a symbol of the real world; Candy’s dog – represents both Candy and Lennie’s status on the ranch)
- List the differences between migrant workers in the 1920/30 to the present day.
- Research The Great Depression and the New Deal – how was New England affected?
- Following the performance, have your students write a review of our production.
- Using another piece of literature or poetry, which your students are reading, have them write a theatrical adaptation. Then read this aloud in class.
- Following the performance, have your students create a poster and/or collage of images in response to our production.
- Introduce the idea of ‘tableau’ to the class. Tableaux are living sculptures or frozen images made up of living actors’ bodies. Make sure that the poses they create should be both easy to hold for a few minutes and easy to recreate. Attached you will find eight suggested passages. Have each group select one passage and work together for about 5 minutes. And then present these tableaux to the class – first reading the passage to the audience and then having the group present their work to the class.

# Analyzing the Script

**PLOT:** what happens in a play; the story/stories being told as revealed by what the characters say about themselves or each other; the action of the play.

## STRUCTURE OF A PLAY SCRIPT

**INCITING INCIDENT** The launching pad of the play; the action or short sequence of actions that constitutes the point of attack.

**RISING ACTION** The sequence of actions and events that leads to the climax.

**CLIMAX** The action that resolves the conflict; the central dramatic question is answered; comes late in the play.

**FALLING ACTION** The acceptance of the situation derived from the climax; the resolution.

What is the Inciting Incident in *Of Mice & Men*? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

List three events in *Of Mice & Men* that can be considered Rising Action?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

What is the Climax in *Of Mice & Men*? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

What is the Falling Action in *Of Mice & Men*? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**A GOOD  
PLOT...**

**keeps you guessing.**

**will have multiple themes.**

**surprises you.**

**builds on a strong central conflict.**