

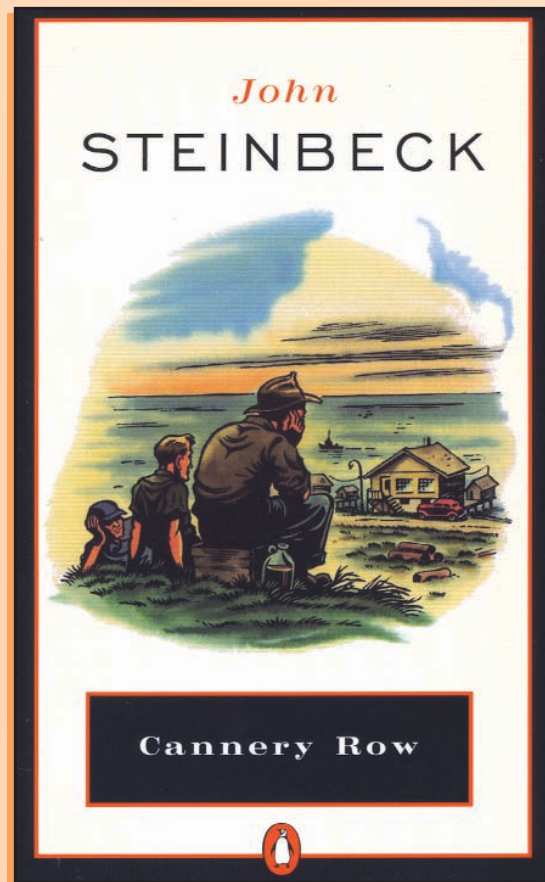


A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO THE PENGUIN EDITION OF

JOHN STEINBECK'S

CANNERY ROW

By ARTHEA J. S. REED, PH.D.



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NOTE TO THE TEACHER

This guide is designed to assist teachers in moving students beyond the surface story of Steinbeck's novella. The prereading activities prepare students for what they will read in the novel. The brief discussion of the techniques of plot, character development and theme employed by Steinbeck in his deceptively simple story provides an overview of the story as well as an understanding of its simplicity and complexity. The teaching methodologies are based on response strategies that encourage student interaction with the literary work. Teachers are encouraged to guide, help with reading, and yet allow the students to independently respond to the work.

INTRODUCTION

John Steinbeck is one of the greatest storytellers of the twentieth century. His wonderful novellas *Cannery Row*, *The Red Pony*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *The Pearl* not only introduce readers to a fascinating, realistic cast of characters, make the hills and seacoast of California and Mexico come to life, but also tell intriguing stories of the lives of real people. Steinbeck's characters are not the rich men and women of California's boom days, but are the homeless, the migrant workers, the poor fishermen, and the farmers. However, each of these people has a deceptively simple, but important story to tell, a story filled with love and pain. The stories tell us not only of the lives of the poor who seek to live off the land and sea, but of the struggles of all people. For in Steinbeck's short, easy-to-read books are packed the wisdom of not only a great storyteller, but a great philosopher. Students can respond on many levels: to the simple but fascinating story, to the odd but likeable characters, and to the beautiful but terrible settings. Or, they can go far beyond the surface story to an understanding of the times, the geography, the culture, and the myths. And those who are able can glean from each of these stories an understanding of life worth living: freedom from fear and hunger, the importance of human relationships, and the universality of all humankind.

Cannery Row, of all Steinbeck's novellas, is the simplest story. It presents a slice of the lives of the men and women who populate a strip of sardine canneries after the workers go home. Set on California's Monterey Peninsula in the days long before famed golf courses and resorts, this post-depression tale depicts of the life of an uproarious cast of characters: Lee Chong, the philosophical grocery store proprietor; Doc, the owner of the Western Biological Laboratory; Dora, the charitable Madame of the Bear Flag Restaurant, Mack, Hazel and Eddie and Hughie and Jones, the well-meaning residents of the Palace Flophouse, and, most important, Cannery Row herself, in all her ugliness and beauty, peace and violence.

BEFORE READING THE NOVEL

The overall simplicity of the tale means that it requires only limited prereading teaching. However, some limited prereading information might make it more meaningful to the students.

1. Students may not be familiar with the geography of California's Monterey Peninsula. It would be helpful to locate it on a map, discuss its climate and geographic features, and examine what types of industries are likely to survive in this type of environment.
2. Students who do know this part of West Central California likely know it in late twentieth-century terms as a rich area of tourism, warm climate, and beautiful people. It would be helpful to discuss what it was like in the 1930s before the huge migration to California. Who populated the Monterey Peninsula in those days? How did they make a living? What were their lives like?
3. Because the relationships in Steinbeck's novella are unusual to most students, it might be helpful to discuss the concept of family. What is the traditional concept of family? How many of the students' families do not fit within the traditional concept of family? What is the definition of family? What are some other types of families that fall outside of the traditional concept?

WHILE READING THE NOVEL

Because this story is both simple and complex, it is important to help students understand its simple plotline and more complex character and theme development.

1. **THE PLOT** The plot can roughly be divided into two parts: (a) Preparations for and the first party for Doc, and (b) preparation for and the second party for Doc.

However, within this major plotline are numerous subplots: Doc's own life as the owner and operator of Western Biological Laboratory; the activities within Lee Chong's grocery and dry goods (plus whatever else you might need) store; the tale of Mack, the boys, the Palace Flophouse, Darling the dog, the Model T truck and the frog hunt; the girls at Dora's and the quilt; and Sam and Mrs. Malloy who live in the boiler on the empty lot.

And, then, beyond these on-going stories are six or more embedded tales that provide more information about the character Cannery Row. These include: the story of the boy Frankie who "couldn't learn and there was something wrong with his coordination" but "he wasn't an idiot" and Doc; the odd tale of the death and embalming of humorist Josh Billings; Henri the painter who "was not French" and his boat; and "Mary Talbot, Mrs. Tom Talbot," the cat Kitty Randolph and their parties. Students can be prepared for these numerous plots and subplots and sub-subplots, by reading and discussing Steinbeck's introduction, "Cannery Row," as suggested below.

2. **CHARACTERS** For a short book, there are almost more characters than can be digested. However, if students understand that there are only a few main characters and that most of the other characters serve a supporting role and help develop the most important character, Cannery Row herself, it is much easier to enjoy the morass. For, indeed, it is an enjoyable puzzle of people and predicaments.

The main characters to be aware of throughout the story are: Doc, that "fine fellow" who is the recipient of the two parties; Mack and his cast of characters referred to by Doc as "the boys" and by Steinbeck as "the Virtues, the Graces, the Beauties," who give the parties to Doc; Lee Chong, the unwilling voice of reason, whose store is the gathering place for the people of the Row and the place at which the most important props, with the exception of the marine animals, are gathered. To some extent, we might also consider Dora Flood, the Madame of the Bear Flag Restaurant, and her girls as the counterpoint to Mack and the boys of the Palace Flophouse. And, finally, the most important character of all is Cannery Row. All of the other characters help develop her character. All the plots, subplots, and sub-subplots tell us more about this unique but common place.

3. **SETTING** Nothing, of course, is more important than the setting of this novella. It is the title of Steinbeck's short book. And, it is the place that allows the stories and the characters to develop. In chapters throughout the book, from the opening introduction to the final chapter, Cannery Row is a place that takes on human importance—a place that allows all of the humans in it to be who they are, without fear. The centrality of the setting to his work allows Steinbeck to personify without creating a fairy story.

The characters could not come together in a different setting. The ocean, the biological lab with its marine animals, the shallows along the shore where Doc captures odd creatures, the empty lot with its flophouse and boiler residence, the grocery/dry goods store that provides the beer and party supplies and, finally, unwillingly the truck, the frog pool, the whore house, and the emptiness of the Row when the factories close for the night all contribute to the development of the characters and the plot.

4. **THEMES** Although this story can simply be read as an enjoyable, good tale, the art of Steinbeck is in the simplicity of his words and stories. Many possible themes can be explored. Students will uncover some on their own; others are more interesting when explored together.

Perhaps the most important theme is the one that Steinbeck introduces in the introduction and further spells out in chapter two: things and people are not always what they seem. In the final paragraph of the introduction Steinbeck writes: "How can the poem and the stink and the grating noise—the quality of light, the tone, the habit and the dream—be set down alive?"

In chapter two he writes: "Lee Chong is more than a Chinese grocer. He must be. Perhaps he is evil balanced and held suspended by good." Also in this chapter he first calls Mack and the boys, "the Virtues, the Graces, the Beauties."

He says of Dora in the next chapter, "But on the left-hand boundary of the lot is the stern and stately whore house of Dora Flood; a decent, clean, honest, old-fashioned sporting house where a man can take a glass of beer among friends."

The Palace Flophouse had been a bare room until Mack and the boys moved in. Then, "Mack, with a piece of chalk, drew

five oblongs on the floor, each seven feet long and four feet wide, and in each square he wrote a name. These were the simulated beds. Each man had property rights..." It became a home, and, in their way, Mack, the boys, and Darling the dog, became family.

"Henri the painter was not French and his name was not Henri...About his painting there is some question." He had been living in and building his boat for ten years, but he never wanted to finish it. "It sat among the pine trees on a lot Henri rented for five dollars a year."

Mrs. Malloy buys "real lace curtains and edges of blue and pink" to decorate her windowless boiler home. In many ways, nothing in the story is quite what it seems, including Doc and Cannery Row, itself.

Another theme students might explore is the importance of family and relationships. Although the traditional families in Steinbeck's tale are few (one might think of Sam Malloy and Mrs. Malloy as traditional, except that they live in a boiler), there are numerous family relationships in the story: Mack and the boys take in Gay when he decides he can't get any rest because his wife hits him in his sleep and then he must wake up and beat her up. They also take in Darling the dog, and when she becomes ill the boys quit whatever jobs they have so they can sit by her side and nurse her back to health. Doc, too, has a family in his aloneness. He lets Frankie stay in the lab. All of Cannery Row is an extended family. Each of its residents looks out for the others.

Students might also explore the theme of humanity. Steinbeck creates characters who care about each other far more than they care about a steady job or material possessions. In spite of their poverty, lack of social graces, and outcast status, they attempt to help each other. Although their plans are frequently ill-conceived and poorly executed, their actions come from the heart, creating both the warmth and pathos of the story.

TEACHING METHODOLOGY

Both the length and the storytelling quality of Steinbeck's *Cannery Row* make it a perfect book for reading aloud. Less than two-hundred, easy-to-read pages, its imagery and voice come to life when read orally by a good reader. The teacher may want to select chapters to read aloud that provide students with a picture of the Row, setting her up as one of the major characters of this enjoyable tale. The introduction, "Cannery Row," is a good example. After the teacher reads this three page description of Cannery Row, the students can orally respond to it as an entire class or in small groups. Questions such as these might be posed for discussion: What does Cannery Row look like? What does it smell like? Why does Steinbeck use the derogatory terms of "Wops and Chinamen and Polaks" in juxtaposition to "shining cars bring the upper classes down?" How does he show the passage of time on Cannery Row? Why does he say that "its normal life returns" after all of these people leave? What is this normal life of the Row? From the last line of this introduction, "And perhaps that might be the way to write this book-to open the page and to let the stories crawl in by themselves," what do you expect the rest of the book to be like?

After reading the introduction orally, teachers may want to let the students read the first chapter of the book silently, followed by an oral reading of chapter 2. The students can keep a dialogue journal of their reactions and responses to the book after each silent reading, with a discussion following each oral reading. This book lends itself to being read in class, during class time, with students given the time to respond individually in writing to the story and as a group to the more subtle aspects of Steinbeck's deceptively simple style and the "hidden" qualities and messages of the setting and characters.

By reading selected chapters aloud to the class and discussing them, teachers can help students go beyond the simple plot outline of the story. Chapter two, for example, is a good selection to be read orally. It begins with: "The word is a symbol and a delight which sucks up men and scenes, trees, plants, factories, and Pekinese. Then the Thing becomes the Word and back to Thing again, but warped and woven into a fantastic pattern. The Word sucks up Cannery Row, digests it and spews it out, and the Row has taken the shimmer of the green world and the sky-reflecting seas." If students read this silently, most are likely to say, "What?" But, when read orally and later discussed, the students can begin to understand what Steinbeck is suggesting. Teachers can lead them toward this by asking such questions as: Are things always what they seem? What is Steinbeck suggesting here about Lee Chong? How about Mack and the boys? Teachers can tell students to look for things (or people) who are not what they seem as they silently read chapter three. They can then write about this in their response journals. This alternating oral reading with small or large group discussion and silent reading with written response can be continued throughout much of the book. After students are aware of Steinbeck's style and know some of the themes to search for in his work, teachers may want to vary this approach. Perhaps, students can read several chapters silently, particularly those chapters in which Steinbeck relates the two main stories of Doc's first and second parties and the sad and humorous antics of Mack and the boys as they prepare for them. Throughout this silent reading, the students continue to respond in writing in their dialogue journals.

Periodically, the teacher can collect a group of these journals (perhaps five at a time) and respond to the students in writing. This works particularly well if the students are encouraged to write their responses to each chapter or each group of chapters or respond to one of several questions in letter format to the teacher. The teacher can then respond back, writing directly to the student. A variation of this approach is to have the students write letters to either a partner in the class, or, if it can be arranged, to a student at a local college or university who is also reading the book. If you have access to telecomputing networks, this approach can provide almost immediate feedback.

Students can share their responses in small groups, reading them and then discussing them. While in these groups, they can be encouraged to read certain more difficult chapters orally. The teacher can provide the students with questions to help them discuss these more complex sections of the work. For example, after reading chapter three silently and responding to it in their dialogue journals, students might be told to read chapter four orally in each of several small groups. They might respond to these questions in their small groups following their reading: Why does Steinbeck introduce the old Chinaman? Why does he come by just at dusk and leave just at dawn? How does his presence relate to what Steinbeck told us about the “normal life” on the Row? Why does he relate the story of Andy from Salinas? How does this contrast to the Chinaman’s “normal life” on the Row? What does the Chinaman and the juxtaposition of Andy tell us about the Row herself? How would you characterize the Row?

AFTER READING THE NOVEL

WRITTEN OR ORAL RESPONSES

Students can write about or explore a variety of ways in which to respond to *Cannery Row*. In addition to the dialogue journal techniques suggested above, students can respond in the following ways:

1. **PERSONAL STATEMENT**—these include emotional reactions, expressions of identification or empathy with characters or places, conjecture about characters, and autobiographical associations.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITY—React in writing to chapter eight when the Hediondo Cannery blows a tub for the third time in two weeks and the old boiler becomes the home of Mr. and Mrs. Sam Malloy.

2. **DESCRIPTION**—statements which attempt to classify or describe the form, language, structure or content of the work; such responses can range in complexity from the simple recall of explicitly stated information to an analysis of the stylistic properties. **Suggested Activity**—Orally, in your own words describe the frog gathering at the frog hole. Be sure to include those elements that make the story funny.

Write about why Steinbeck calls Mack and the boys “the Virtues, the Graces, the Beauties.” What is the irony of these titles?

3. **INTERPRETATION**—responses aimed at identifying the symbolic or thematic meaning of a work;; interpretation requires of readers an ability to infer the intentions of Steinbeck. **Suggested Activities**—Write your own interpretation of chapter three. Provide examples from the story of how Lee Chong is “evil balanced and held suspended by good” or how Mack and the boys “dine delicately with the tigers, fondle the frantic heifers, and wrap up the crumbs to feed the sea gulls of Cannery Row.”

4. **EVALUATION**—responses aimed at assessing the construction, meaningfulness, or appropriateness of *Cannery Row*.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES—write about the humor you found in the novel; or write about what makes it sad. Do you find *Cannery Row* both funny and sad? Why?

In a small group talk about the theme of the importance of family. How does Steinbeck deal with this theme in *Cannery Row*. In what ways are Mack and the boys family? Who else is part of their family?

How is *Cannery Row* ironic? Talk or write about some of the ironies found in the novella: the names applied to Mack and the boys, the lace curtains in the Malloy’s boiler home, the party decorations and favors.

ABOUT THE EDITORS OF THIS GUIDE

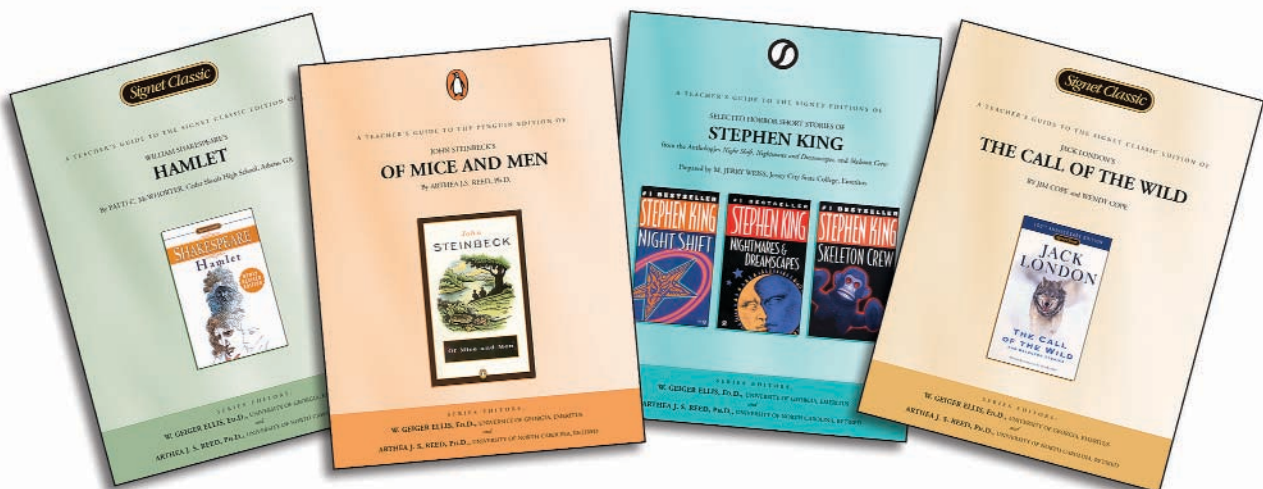
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