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*Cannery Row* by John Steinbeck Teaching Strategy

1. **The Book**
2. Unit Introductory Quotes (Non-teleological thinking/Warp)
3. "Who would see a replica of man's social structure has only to examine the abundant and various life of the tide pools . . . A study of animal communities has this advantage: **they are merely what they are**, for anyone to see who will and can look clearly . . . here the struggle is unmasked and the beauty is unmasked." (Ricketts *Between Pacific Tides*)
4. For both Steinbeck and Ricketts the tidepool is a metaphor for the complexity of all life, as suggested in one of the most famous passages in *Sea of Cortez*: “…a man looking at reality brings his own limitations to the world. If he has strength and energy of mind the tide pool stretches both ways, digs back to electrons and leaps space into the universe and fights out of the moment into non-conceptual time. Then ecology has a synonym which is ALL.” (72). Their sense of connectivity included invertebrates, their environments, man’s impact on that environment, and the philosophical implications of it all, what Ricketts called the “toto picture.” (Shillinglaw *About John Steinbeck*)

B. Essential Questions

1. Who has value in society and who does not? Why? How does this division stand if all humanity is joined?

2. What are the parameters for a happy life?

3. What is the difference between happiness and contentment?

C. Themes

1. Society’s views re: who has value, who has none, and why each is true.
2. “Cannery Row in Monterey in California is a poem, a stink, a grating noise, a quality of light, a tone, a habit, a nostalgia, a dream. Cannery Row is the gathered and scattered, tin and iron and rust and splintered wood, chipped pavement and weedy lots and junk heaps, sardine canneries of corrugated iron, honky tonks, restaurants and whorehouses, and little crowded groceries, and laboratories, and flophouses. Its inhabitants are, as the man once said, “whores, pimps, gamblers, and sons of bitches,” by which he meant Everybody. Had the man looked through another peephole he might have said, “Saints and angels and martyrs and holy men,” and he would’ve meant the same thing.” (*Cannery Row* 1)
3. “Mack and the boys . . . are the Virtues, the Graces, the Beauties of the hurried mangled craziness of Monterey where men in fear and hunger destroy their stomachs in the fight to secure certain food, where men hungering for love destroy everything lovable. . . Mack and the boys are the Beauties, the Virtues, the Graces. In a world ruled by tigers with ulcers, rutted by strictured bulls, scavenged by blind jackals, Mack and the boys dine delicately with the tigers, fondle the frantic heifers, and wrap up the crumbs to feed the seagulls of Cannery Row,” (*Cannery Row* 15)
4. “[Mack and the boys] . . . are your true philosophers. . . [they] survive . . . better than other people . . . In a time when people tear themselves to pieces with ambition and nervousness and covetousness, they are relaxed. All of our so-called successful men are sick . . . with bad stomachs and bad souls but Mack and the boys are healthy . . . It has always seemed strange to me . . . the things we admire in men, kindness and generosity, openness, honesty, understand, and feeling are the concomitants of failure in our system And those traits we detest, sharpness, greed, acquisitiveness, meanness, egotism and self-interest are the traits of success.” (*Cannery Row* 141 - 143)
5. Human need for home (safe space, sacred space) to belong and to expunge loneliness.
6. “A deep vein in Steinbeck’s fiction . . . is the significance of home, and again and again he explores the kaleidoscopic meanings of homes lost, gained, imagined, and replaced.” (Shillinglaw 210)
7. “In 1935 Mr. and Mrs. Sam Malloy moved into the boiler. . . And Sam lay beside her and rubbed her back for a long time before she went to sleep.” (*Cannery Row* 48 – 49)
8. “Because it sheltered them the house grew dear to them. . . With the great stove came pride and with pride the Palace became a home.” (*Cannery Row* 41 – 42)
9. Need for family (*Cannery Row* Chapter 28)
10. Nostalgic longing for a golden (treasured) time by use of actual places/people/events as models
11. “Were his characters reflections of a familiar reality, or pure invention cobbled from bits and pieces to fit a specific literary rationale? . . . it was . . . all of the above. But for John Steinbeck, who was a socially attuned journalist at heart, external realities held far more interest than pure invention. Therefore . . . Steinbeck preferred to explore the realities expressed in the everyday lives, motives and aspirations of the people he knew and observed.” (Thomas Steinbeck 9)
12. Real places that became locations - Hotel Del Monte, Wing Chong Market (Lee Chong’s grocery), La Ida Café (Bear Flag Restaurant), Holman’s Department Store.
13. Real people who became characters – Ed Ricketts (Doc), Flora Woods (Dora Flood), Bruce Ariss (Henri), Gabe Bosknell (Mack), Frankie Bergara (Frankie), Josh Billings (Josh Billings), Crew on Cortez trip (Sparky and Tiny), Sprague family (Sprague family), watchman, old Chinaman, and boiler residents.
14. Real events that became part of fiction – Sky Skater, Josh Billings’ death, parties at DelMonte Hotel, Flora Woods’ IRS woes, July 4 parade, reverse ascent of Carmel Hill.
15. Emergence as both theme and metaphor
16. “Look at the animals; this is what we seem to know about them but the knowledge is not final and any clear eye and sharp intelligence may see something we have never seen.” (Steinbeck 1948 Foreword to *Beyond Pacific Tides* 1948)
17. Other themes identified by students as they read

D. Steinbeck’s Four Levels of Meaning

1. For Steinbeck, certain elements must be present in his fiction, particularly the complex juncture where the philosophical becomes manifest and the figurative meets the literal; it was the summation of all that he had experienced in life until that point. “[T]he novel . . . asks . . . [w]hat is life, what is death . . . what are the most important things in life . . . The answers are simple: life is process; death is part of life. . . neither means anything – they simply are; and the important things in life are love and beauty, which bring joy to the process of living . . . [it is] another presentation of the Steinbeck – Ricketts philosophy . . . which to him was the most important element . . . and the power of Ricketts’s philosophy resulted in large part from the appeal of Ricketts’s unique personality.” (Benson 553 – 554).

To this end, Doc must be simultaneously an appealing character (“Doc tips his hat to dogs as he drives by and the dogs look up and smile at him” and the conscience of the book . . . his face tells the truth . . . “ *Cannery Row* 28). Steinbeck explained the book thus: “It’s written on four levels and people can take what they can receive out of it. . . I find I go back to extensions of things we talked about years ago [when] we were thinking more universally.” (Steinbeck qtd. in Benson 554)

a. Characteristics of each human specimen (characters’ habits and behaviors; detailed connections of humans to place)

i. “Place is where the writer has roots . . . place is where he stands; in his experience out of which he writes . . . it provides the base of reference.” (Eudora Welty)

ii. “Place has a good deal to do with making the characters real and keeping them so . . . “ (Eudora Welty)

b. Interconnectedness of humans (universal principles regarding human behavior/bonding by creation of homes/families).

c. Fragmented histories of individuals (universal principles regarding humans’ experience/interaction with society; society’s misfits are not relegated to only one time or place).

d. Universality/breakthrough moments (emergent ideas; “thinking, feeling, intuition, and sensation” (Shillinglaw); human potential/possibility/understanding). Characters grow spiritually in the liminal space between action and understanding.

1. Doc’s finding of the dead girl in the intertidal as indication of the intensity of loneliness inherent in the human existence and the fragility of life itself; despite Doc’s role as a scientist and his acceptance of death as a part of life, he recognizes the power and finality of death. “He can kill anything for need but could not even hurt a feeling for pleasure.” (*Cannery Row* 28)
2. Andy, a “brave and beautiful boy of ten,” grows in understanding of the vulnerability of the human condition after teasing an old Chinese man that “some people thought was God and some people thought was Death” and hallucinating “one huge brown eye as big as a church door,” epitomizing the “desolate cold aloneness” (*Cannery Row* 23 – 24) that awaits everyone.

iii. “She got out of hand,” said Mack . . . It took him all day to clean up the mess.” (*Cannery Row* 131 – 133). Doc has reached plane of understanding concerning Mack and the boys; although Mack is fluttering around self-understanding, he has not yet reached transcendence.

E. Allegorical Characters

1. Doc as non-teleological hero. “In Steinbeck’s work the non-teleological hero – Doc Burton, Casy, and Doc in *Cannery Row* – is always something of an outsider, and by being so, he can observe more clearly the entire pattern outside of the small preoccupations of individuals.” (Benson 245)

2. The rest of the characters are “fringe dwellers all” (Shillinglaw 76). They comprise the Cannery Row that emerges when the tide washes away, different from external society and from one another, yet interdependent and loyal.

**II. Beneath/Beyond the Book**

1. Additional Resources (Excerpted)
2. Meyer, Michael. *Thinking and Writing About Literature, Second Edition* (explanation of biographical lens). Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2000.
3. Hemp, Michael Kenneth. *Cannery Row: The History of the Old Ocean View Avenue.* The History Company, 1986.
4. Knox Maxine. *Steinbeck’s Street: Cannery Row.* Presidio Press, 1980.
5. Lundy, A.L. *Real Life on Cannery Row.* Angel City Press. Santa Monica, CA. 2008. (Foreword by Thomas Steinbeck).
6. Lang, Fritz. *Clash by Night.* RKO, 1952. [Opening sequence depicts sardine canneries in 1940s]
7. Steinbeck, John. “About Ed Ricketts.” *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*. Viking, 1941. Penguin, 1995.
8. Steinbeck, John. Chapter 14. *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*. Viking, 1941. Penguin, 1995.
9. Steinbeck, John. *A Life in Letters*. Viking, 1975. Penguin, 1989.
10. Benson, Jackson J. *The True Adventures of John Steinbeck, Writer*. Penguin, 1984.
11. Shillinglaw, Susan. *Carol and John Steinbeck*. Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2013.
12. Shillinglaw, Susan. *On Reading The Grapes of Wrath*. Penguin, 2014.
13. Assorted poetry (Jeffers, “Carmel Point”).
14. My photos.
15. Metaphor of tide pooling – Steinbeck’s characters are not quotidian, workaday Cannery Row; rather they are intertidal Cannery Row, the “twilight ecosystem revealed only . . . when the tide went out revealing the specimens: Mack and the bums, Dora Flood and her girls, Doc and Frankie and the Malloys – fringe dwellers all: (Shillinglaw 76). They comprise the Cannery Row that emerges when the tide washes away, different from external society and from one another, yet interdependent and loyal.
16. Classroom aquarium procured with funds from MFEE Excellence in Education grant.
17. Methodology
18. Close reading
19. What do you think you will see? What do you actually see? What conclusions can you draw from your observations? What things emerge that are inconsistent with looking only at the sum of parts?
20. Allow students to see themes emerge as characters emerge.
21. The importance of eyes/I’s in mapping the world (warp) – what we expect to see - how we see what we see - locations with a deep sense of place.
22. Assessments
23. Minor (40%) - Do Nows, reading quizzes
24. Major (60%) - Photo/quote/poetry collages of favorite spaces, sacred spaces; mapping the places that stay in their hearts.
25. Major (60%) - Analytical essay