Of Mice and Men essay- setting

**Choose a novel or a short story or a work of non- fiction in which setting is an important feature.**

**By referring to appropriate techniques, explain how the writer creates the setting, and then go on to show how this feature contributes to your understanding of the text as a whole.**

Throughout his novel, “Of Mice and Men” John Steinbeck creates a harsh, predatory setting where men compete with each other in order to get work. It follows George and Lennie, while they are working to achieve their dream of owning their own land. However, Lennie is not aware of his own strength which eventually results in the death of the wife of the boss’s son, Curley. Steinbeck uses prose techniques such as foreshadowing, characterisation and setting which helps us to understand how the setting makes people lonely and bitter and the text as a whole.

~~John~~ Steinbeck effectively uses a cyclical structure to help the reader understand that the characters living on the ranch, in this harsh setting are unable to escape their fate; a cycle of hard work and constant work. This novel is set in the 1930’s during which time unemployment was rife and poverty rates were high. The novel opens and concludes at the river near the ranch house, “a few miles south of Soledad.” The town’s name means Lady of Loneliness in Spanish and the ranch itself is a predatory place where only the fittest survive. At the start of the novel we see George and Lennie camp out before heading to the ranch the following morning; “The water is warm too, for it has slipped twinkling over the yellow sands in the sunlight before reaching the narrow pool”. Steinbeck uses language with positive connotations to suggest this is a place of security where George and Lennie can rest safely. They discuss their dream of owning their own land and, because their current setting is idyllic and appears to represent the freedom from drudgery, they so desire, at this stage their dream does not seem unattainable. However, when they return to this setting at the end Steinbeck makes the same place seem hostile and dangerous; “the sun had left the valley to go climbing up the slopes of the Gabilan Mountains”. The dying of the day provides a suitable backdrop for Lennie’s death – and with him so too dies their dream of owning their own farm which was always out of reach. This helps us to understand that in this setting- at this time-it was very unlikely for the ranch hands to have friendships as the competition for jobs was so high- this then leads them to loneliness.

Throughout the novel we see George and Lennie’s friendship and Steinbeck conveys how unusual it is for migrant workers like them to value companionship in this setting. Steinbeck characterises Lennie as childlike and he makes clear that his inability to think for himself or make good decisions leads to trouble. It is obvious that Lennie relies heavily on George, who is there for his friend in this difficult setting, even though Lennie gets them into trouble frequently. However their friendship and their hope to own their own land helps them to escape the loneliness which they would be facing if they were own their own;

“Guys like us that work on ranches are the loneliest guys in the world.” This shows that George is aware of how demanding this setting will be for them and knows that the ranch is a lonely place. They both take comfort in each other and Lennie is aware that George would never leave him on his own and will protect him no matter what.

However George and Lennie’s friendship is tested throughout the novel; Lennie breaking the boss’s sons hand, killing Curley’s wife and killing his puppy. Their friendship was also tested when they had to flee from their previous jobs in Weed because Lennie touched a little girls’ dress and in doing so frightened her;

“Well how the hell did she know you just’ wanted to feel her dress?” This foreshadows the future trouble Lennie will cause and the future strain that their friendship will undergo due to the challenging setting. George clearly gets frustrated with all the problems Lennie causes, but he always looks out for him and feels responsible for him. His admonishments are frequent however, as much as he gets annoyed by him, their friendship is what gets them both through this harsh setting and it’s clear that George cannot bear to be angry with Lennie. It prevents them from experiencing loneliness in the same ways that the other ranch men do, as they have each other.

Steinbeck continues to create the image of how hostile this setting is going to be and the loneliness it will inflict other, vulnerable characters. When Lennie and George arrive at the ranch we meet some of the other ranch workers and quickly become familiar with their characters. One of whom is Candy, the one-armed swamper in the ranch. We understand the theme of loneliness better when Candy’s old and infirm dog is shot by Carlson. We see that Candy is very attached to his dog and the thought of losing it breaks his heart. When the men are discussing shooting the dog Candy pleads with them not to, when he says;

 “I’m so used to him.” This shows the reader that his dog was his only real friend. Carlson shot the dog as he thought it smelled bad and got in their way too much. He was able to shoot his dog without feeling guilty as they are solitary and the harshness of the setting has made them cold and predatory. Candy is old, vulnerable and powerless in this particular setting so he realises that just like his dog, once he is no longer of use to the other men they will get rid of him too. This helps to understand how lonely this time was- Candy only had his dog now he is completely alone.

Another character that George and Lennie meet at the ranch is Crooks, who is a particular victim of the novels setting as he is black and has experienced racism all his life which has made him bitter and unfriendly. We understand how lonely he has become when he says; “A guy goes nuts if they ain’t got nobody.” Here we see Crooks just wants compassion and acceptance from the other men because without this he appears to lose his own humanity. Through the character of Crooks John Steinbeck is able to show the reader that Crooks just wants a friend to save him from the dreadful loneliness he cannot escape in this setting.

George and Lennie’s companionship is proven to be really strong and special. They are the only characters in this setting who have someone to rely on. We witness George looking out for Lennie trying to prevent him from getting into trouble, however, we also know, through Steinbeck’s skilful use of foreshadowing that Lennie is too childlike to be helped especially in this tough setting; keeping dead mice in his pocket, crushing Curley’s hand, being too rough with the puppy and killing it. He does not mean to hurt anyone, but he just isn’t in full control of his ability to seriously injure, or potentially kill, someone due to his incredible strength. He relies so heavily on George that when Curley was attacking him he would not defend himself until George ordered him too. However yet again his strength got the better of him, after crushing Curley’s hand he says;

“I didn’t wanta hurt him.” This illustrates that however dangerous he is, he is not a malicious character. George knows this and despite everything Lennie does he always protects him. Once Lennie killed Curley’s wife he went back to the river where the novel began, George finds him and kills him himself to save him from Curley. We know that their dream was always important for them and gave them hope that they would escape their fate. So before George killed Lennie he told him to think of the dream, to make sure he died happily, dreaming about the rabbit farm they always planned to buy. George said;

“We’ll have a cow. An’ we’ll have maybe a pig an’ chickens… an’ down the flat we’ll have a … little piece alfalfa.” “For the rabbits," Lennie shouted.” Here we see George’s love for his friend. His final act of friendship saves Lennie from pain and torment that he would receive in this setting if Curley found him. This deepens our knowledge of how important companionship and dreams were for both George and Lennie which made them different from the other ranch men and saved them from isolation during the harshness of this setting- George has no companion, he is alone in this setting and his dream is gone.

And so it is clear that John Steinbeck has cleverly created an unfriendly and aggressive setting which contributes to the readers’ understanding of the loneliness that his characters face. In “ Of Mice and Men” Steinbeck uses foreshadowing, characterisation and setting to give the reader a deep understanding of how difficult life for itinerant workers was in the 1930’s, during the time of the Great Depression, especially for getting work and making friendships.