



# **Understanding Of Mice and Men, The Red Pony and The Pearl: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents (The Greenwood Press "Literature in Context" Series)**

*Claudia Durst Johnson*

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Although John Steinbeck's novellas *Of Mice and Men*, *The Red Pony*, and *The Pearl* are works of fiction, they provide a window on the history of the times and places they portray. Studying the historical, social, economic, and regional background of each novella is important to fully understanding each work. This interdisciplinary collection of rich collateral materials features a variety of primary documents that shed light on the background of each of these novellas—the pioneer days and life on the Western frontier, the early history of California, the gold rush, the plight of the migrant worker during the Great Depression, the problems of the homeless and the hopeless, and oppression in Mexico in the early 20th century. Documents include memoirs of mountain men and pioneers, books of travel, sociological studies, a political treatise, a journal, reports of U.S. commissions, a comic memoir, and an interview with a Salvation Army general who worked with the downtrodden during the 1930s. Most of these materials are not available in printed form anywhere else.

The purpose of this volume is to explore through analysis and collateral readings the pervasive theme in these novellas: the universality of humankind's often futile struggle for a better existence. Steinbeck shows that the American vision is shaped by the dream of a better life represented in the myth of the West. A social and political commentator, he dramatizes in all three novellas the social issues of the time. The first chapter of this study, a literary analysis, examines key themes common to all three novellas. The remaining chapters place the works in historical context. Old California and the West includes accounts of 18th- and 19th-century travelers to California who dreamed of a better life. Land Ownership examines the meaning of land ownership in the West and its corruption. The Vagrant Farm Worker: Homeless in Paradise features memoirs and journals of itinerant workers as well as Mark Twain's *Roughing It* and a study of the hobo. Losers of the American Dream deals with the homeless and hopeless during the early years of this century and the Great Depression. The American Dream in a Mexican Setting illuminates the lives of the oppressed in Mexico which provoked a century of revolutions. Each chapter concludes with study questions, ideas for class discussion and student projects and papers, and a list of books for further reading. This is an ideal companion for teacher use and student research in English and American history classes.

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