

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Cannery Row

by

John Steinbeck

Book Information

John Steinbeck, Cannery Row
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Book Level: 6.0
Interest Level: UG

This earthy book portrays the lives of benign bums and social outcasts who, unburdened by the material necessities of the more fortunate, discover rewards unknown in a more traditional society.

Topics: Adventure, Life Changes; Classics, Classics (All); Community Life, Social Iniquities; Emotions, Love; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12

Main Characters

Darling the boys' pointer puppy

Doc the owner and manager of the biological supply company, who acts as a employer, counselor, and physician to the people of Cannery Row

Dora the madam of the Bear Flag Restaurant, the brothel on Cannery Row

Frankie a mentally challenged eleven-year-old boy whom Doc mentors

Hazel, Gay, Eddie, Hughie, and Jones the boys living in the Palace with Mack

Henri an eccentric artist

Lee Chong the owner of a general store in Cannery Row

Mack an unambitious man and leader of a group of similar, mostly single men who live with him at the Palace Flophouse and Grill

Vocabulary

avaricious greedy

carborundum an abrasive material

concupiscent lustful

erudite scholarly

excelsior wood shavings used for packing

satyr a mythological woodland creature having goat-like features

Synopsis

The story is set in Cannery Row near the sardine canneries of Monterey, California in the late 1930s. Lee Chong, the local grocer, accepts the storage building where he keeps his fish meal as a man's payment for a grocery debt. The man then commits suicide. A group of homeless men, led by Mack, "twists Lee's arm" by promising to protect Lee's recently acquired building from awful things that may happen to it. They move into the building and promptly name it the Palace Flophouse and Grill. The reader is introduced to the other businesses on the row. The house of prostitution, known as the Bear Flag Restaurant, is a well-ordered establishment run by Dora, and the biological supply house is owned and operated by Doc. Because of Doc's generosity and caring nature, everyone is indebted to him.

Mack thinks buying some whiskey and throwing Doc a party would be a nice gesture. In order to finance this proposal, he arranges a deal to collect frogs for Doc for which he would be paid, gets a note for gas money, and convinces Lee Chong to lend him his truck if one of his boys would fix it. On the frog expedition, Mack sweet-talks the landowner on whose property he and the boys are trespassing. They have a great time drinking, eating, and talking and come away with a jug of whiskey, a pointer puppy, and an incredible number of frogs. Arriving back in Cannery Row, they use the frogs as money at Lee Chong's grocery to buy food and decorations for the party. They plan to surprise Doc in his own home when he returns from a collecting trip that night. While waiting for him, the party begins and soon gets out of hand. Doc's laboratory is ravaged, windows and doors are destroyed, and Doc's precious phonograph and some records are damaged. When Doc arrives near dawn and surveys the damage, he punches Mack in the mouth.

Although Doc forgives Mack, the other residents

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ostracize the boys. A number of events mirror the gloom that has settled over Cannery Row. The mood shifts when Darling, the boys' pup, recovers from distemper. Mack would like to make up for his former mistake and seeks Dora's advice. She suggests another party, but with the stipulation that Doc shows up this time. They agree on holding a birthday party, and as the word creeps out, people begin to prepare gifts for Doc. Doc gets wind of the party and starts preparing himself by locking up his valuables and stocking up on provisions. The party begins rather formally, with a role reversal of sorts, Doc acting as host and the people as guests, but as the evening wears on, a sense of relaxation develops. After a fight and reconciliation with some party crashers, the story ends with a sense that all is good again.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Why do Mack, Doc, and the men of Monterey respect Dora?

While Doc is the father figure for the community, Dora is the mother figure. The men trust her business sense, especially in an occupation such as hers, and they recognize her contributions to the community. Likewise, Doc knows he can count on her to help with any problems that may arise in Cannery Row.

Literary Analysis

Steinbeck intersperses the story line with short reflections on events that occurred in the past or descriptions of natural phenomena or animal's lives. How do these "interruptions" add to the story?

They offer the reader a means to compare the current situation to what happened before or to prepare the reader for what is to come in the story. Examples include the descriptions of the balance of life within the tidal pools reflecting the balance of life in Cannery Row; Mary Talbot creating a party out of nothing for any reason, foreshadowing the birthday party for Doc; and Horace Abbeville's suicide revealing the despair caused by the previous suicides of William and Joey's dad.

Inferential Comprehension

A venture capitalist will invest in an enterprise with considerable risk. While the potential for money making is very high, it could all be quickly lost. How is Mack's frog adventure a parody of venture capitalism?

Doc and Lee are the venture capitalists, with Mack and the boys having an idea, but needing the means to finance it. The boys approach Doc to give them a job, ask for money for gas, borrow a car from Lee Chong, and trespass on land to perform the job. They return and pay for goods they want in a way Lee does not really want (with frogs), although he could turn it into money. In the end, Doc and Lee lose a substantial amount of money, while the boys end up well fed and drunk, with no monetary losses.

Constructing Meaning

How has this book affected your opinion of the poor, homeless, and disenfranchised in society?

The students should state what their beliefs were before they read the book and how they may have changed afterward. They could comment on any number of areas in the lives of the poor: industriousness, intellect, hygiene, spirituality, thoughtfulness, etc.

Teachable Skills

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Recognizing Setting Steinbeck carefully details the description of various places in the narrative: the location of the buildings in juxtaposition to each other; the insides of Western Biological, the Palace Flophouse and Grill, the Bear Flag Restaurant, and Lee Chong's grocery. Have the students act as illustrators for the book by using the narrative to sketch these places so they come to life for a reader.

Extending Meaning Hazel asks Doc if he thinks Henri is "nuts," and Doc responds that he probably is, but no more than anyone else, only different. Is Doc's assessment true? Ask students to try to define the difference between being peculiar and being mentally ill.

Recognizing Details Both Doc and Mack prepare for the upcoming birthday party that is to be given for Doc. Have the students pretend to give a party of their own. Have them choose an occasion or a theme and attend to the details of planning the party. It might add a challenge to have the students work within a shoestring budget. They might come to see the wisdom in potlucks and how it adds to the sense of camaraderie among the guests.

Identifying Persuasive Language Steinbeck has been criticized as an author for the ease with which his books can be read and for his sentimentality. Have the students read some literary criticisms of Steinbeck's works and evaluate the validity of these arguments. Debate these issues in class with the intent of encouraging students to develop their own points of view.