Steinbeck: John Steinbeck was born in Salinas, California in 1902. Salinas was nicknamed 'The Salad Bowl' because it was famed for the farming of many greens. He sets Of Mice and Men in the Salinas region near a town called Soledad- Spanish for 'solitude'. Although his family was wealthy, he was interested in the lives of the farm labourers and spent time working with them. He used his experiences as material for his writing. He wrote a number of novels about poor people who worked on the land and dreamed of a better life, including The Grapes of Wrath, which is the heartrending story of a family's struggle to escape the dust bowl of the West to reach California. Steinbeck was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962, six years before his death in 1968.

The American Dream: This ideal has been around for yonks! The American Dream is a national ethos of the United States, a set of ideals in which freedom includes the opportunity for prosperity and success, and an upward social mobility achieved through hard work. In the definition of the American Dream by James Truslow Adams in 1931, "life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement" regardless of social class or circumstances of birth.

The idea of the American Dream is rooted in the United States Declaration of Independence which proclaims that "all men are created equal" and that they are "endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights" including "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." As far as Of Mice and Men is concerned, the American Dream relates to the beliefs of the men struggling through the depression that their hard work will eventually be rewarded.

The Great Depression: In 1929, there was a devastating crash in the American stock markets, resulting in America's banks going 'bust' and millions of dollars were wiped out. This meant that hundreds of thousands of American citizens lost all of their life savings 12 - 15 million men and women - one third of America's population - were unemployed. There was then no dole to fall back on, so food was short and the unemployed in cities couldn't pay their rent. Some ended up in settlements called 'Hooeivals' (after the US president of the time, Herbert C Hoover), in shanties made from old packing cases and corrugated iron. Many families were split up, as men left to find work, but never returned to their wives and children. It was nicknamed the Great Depression, and lasted from 1930-1936.

Migrant Farmers: As if man-made financial disasters weren't enough, nature was putting it's two-pennies worth in! A series of droughts in southern mid-western states like Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas led to failed harvests and dried-up land farmers were forced to move off their land: they couldn't repay the bank-loans which had helped buy the farms and had to sell what they owned to pay their debts. Some men headed west to 'Golden' California, thinking there would be land going spare, but the Californians turned many of them away, fearing they would be over-run with migrants and have no land left for themselves (a bit like current fears in Britain about immigration!). Sadly, the refugees had nowhere to go back to, so they set up home in huge camps in the California valleys - living in shacks of cardboard and old metal - and sought work as casual farmhands.

Ranch Hands: Desperate to find work and earn money, many men worked as 'ranch hands', meaning they worked as labourers on farms. They usually had basic accommodation, food and a very low wage- all of which they were grateful for, as the economic situation meant that without such work, they would have been homeless and jobless.

Society: Society was not as open-minded as it is nowadays. People who did not fit into the 'social norm' were often treated very badly. 'Normal' is hard to define, but we can be sure that being ethnic or disabled certainly wasn't considered normal. People who fit into either of these categories were marginalised by society- left to live on the edges of normal life. They were not included in many (if any) social activities, given sub-standard accommodation/ objects/ meals etc, and considered to be less worthy than others. Whilst slavery was abolished in America long before the 1930s, it was still legal for 'existing slaves' to remain as slaves- whites just simply couldn't legally trade new slaves. It was simply accepted that blacks were lower life forms- they had no purpose in society other than to serve whites. The treatment of black people in western culture didn't really change until the 1960s- the start of a long, slow and painful process of integration. When the ranch hands call Crooks 'nigger', it isn't even meant as an insult, it was casual and simply a force of habit, but it demonstrates the difference between them and him. Physical and mental disabilities were treated in a patronising way- medical science was not as advanced and people had less understanding of the various conditions. Candy and Lennie are not included in the social activities of the other ranch workers as they presume they are incapable. Women were more powerful in the 1930s than they had been for a considerable time- the 1st world war helped with this- but still were considered lower than men. Without being married, women had very little purpose or opportunity. In a way, men 'owned' women like commodities- Steinbeck certainly shows this with Curley's wife: nameless, and a possession of Curley. Women certainly had few rights- no real right to vote, no right to education, no rights to own houses or property unless it was purchased by a man, no rights to work in a majority of jobs... The social hierarchy was clear!
Steinbeck presents the bunkhouse as a very basic and simplistic environment “the floor unpainted... an apple box with the opening forward so that it made two shelves”. This reflects the lack of luxury that ranch hands would have experienced during the time. The room itself is sparse and the only furniture are 8 beds with blankets, and a table with “grouped boxes” as makeshift chairs.

He describes the windows as “small” and adds a “solid door” which gives the reader a sense of claustrophobia, suggesting that the men that stayed in that bunkhouse would have perhaps felt trapped by their situation. The lack of light- “a dust-laden bar”- adds to the sense of being trapped and without hope, as sunlight often represents hope and optimism. In the bunkhouse, there is very little of either.

The description of the bunkhouse is quite dull: “rectangle”, “square”, “straight up”. These adjectives make you think that there is little joy or spontaneity in the workers lives whilst they live in this environment. The uniformity of the beds and identical shelving makes it seem like they have no personality; even their personal items: “soap and talcum powder, razors...” are pretty much the same and are basic necessities rather than little luxuries or sentimental keepsakes. The fact that there doesn’t seem to be any items of sentimental value suggests that these men have no real family or home, and gives a sense of them being lonely or isolated. Although the detail of the table being “littered with playing cards” suggests that they do allow themselves to break out of the ‘sameness’, and gives us the impression that they are not completely isolated as they have the company of other ranch workers.

The limited possessions and personal details show that they perhaps do not expect to stay- ranch workers moved a lot, and so did not invest much time or effort into personalising their living spaces, perhaps because their bunks are never really theirs. The detail of the neckties suggest that the workers did once experience a lifestyle with some social aspects and chances to ‘dress up’, the fact that they still carry them with them to their work on ranches suggests they have hope that they may be able to enjoy socialising and life again.

The playing cards and western magazines suggest that the workers do enjoy some time to relax. The cards perhaps suggest that they enjoy games with rules and risks alike. They put their trust into fate- and hope it ‘deals them a good card’. The magazines “men love to read and scoff at and secretly believe” show that they believe in the American dream and invest time in reading about successful people- hoping that they will become one themselves one day. The imagery of dust-laden sun beam through which “flies shot like rushing stars” is interesting as it contrasts hopeful images of sunlight and the simile of rushing stars (connotations of shooting stars) with images of decay like dust (dead skin particles) and flies. This perhaps shows that the men may have dreams but reveal their dreams to be hopeless.

When George checks out his own bunk, he isn’t afraid to question Candy “What the hell kind of bed you giving us, anyways”. He shows some pride and standards- suggesting that the ranch workers were not beggars at all, and expected a decent standard of living conditions.

Overall, the extract presents the bunkhouse as a dull and impersonal space which provides very basic conditions for its inhabitants, who have very little other than hope that they may one day leave the bunkhouse to go somewhere bigger and better.
Of Mice and Men: Revision

Plot wise - things happen pretty quickly! This is perhaps to reflect how transient and impermanent life was back then. As you can see by the table, the whole ‘fiasco’ takes place in just 4 days.

You will also notice that there are only 4 settings - this is easily adaptable as a play with so few set changes! Most importantly, it ends where it began: the beautiful and picturesque clearing. What is interesting though, is how Steinbeck’s descriptions of nature change at the end - in the opening Steinbeck describes the beauty of the surrounding and the gentle movements of animals. In the final chapter, the heron and water snake from chapter one feature again, only this time the heron kills and gobbles up the water snake just before George meets Lennie and shoots him.

Cyclical Storyline - The idea of ‘cycles’ and ‘repetition’ is important. The novel literally ends in the same place it began, but also with the same sort of situation: in the beginning the two pals had been run out of weed because Lennie had roughly handled a girl in a red dress, it’s no coincidence that he is back in the clearing, on the run, as a result of hurting a girl in a red dress. The reason it isn’t a ‘coincidence’ is because Steinbeck is making a point about how lives are just cycles or routines. He is showing how we rarely learn from our mistakes. It also reflects the never-ending circle of the workers’ lives. We are creatures of habit - maybe the fact that things end sourly for the guys is a comment on how being habitual isn’t necessarily a good thing.

Other things that are cyclical: the shooting of the useless dog/the shooting of Lennie who is often compared to a dog, the mens lives of getting up-going to work- spending money in cathouses- sleeping and then doing it all over again, Lennie kills the mouse then the dog then the girl(he is in a routine of crushing things he likes), George walks into the clearing with Lennie at the opening of the novel and walks out of it with Slim at the end.

Foreshadowing - Steinbeck uses lots of this to give the reader clues: Trouble in weed with girl C’sW death; drowning puppies downfall of the weak; shooting of candy’s dog Lennie’s death; Lennie killing little animals Lennie killing C’sW.

Steinbeck’s Intentions

It’s worth knowing that although Steinbeck was wealthy and privileged, he did go off to work as a “bindlestiff” (ranch worker) during summers. Doing this made him aware of the lifestyles of difficulties facing many American men. In an interview with a New York Times reporter, he claimed that a lot of Mice and Men was based around real experiences and people he knew:

“Lennie was a real person. He’s in an insane asylum in California right now. I worked alongside him for many weeks. He didn’t kill a girl. He killed a ranch foreman. Got sore because the boss had fired his pal and stuck a pitchfork right through his stomach. I hate to tell you how many times I saw him do it. We couldn’t stop him before it was too late.”

The character Slim is often considered to be the rational God-like voice of Steinbeck himself. Kind, cruel, omnipotent - he is the voice of reason, and treats people considerately. Steinbeck once wrote in a journal:

‘Try to understand men. If men understand each other you will be kind to each other. Knowing a man well never leads to hate and nearly always to love.’

Can you see how Steinbeck tries to reflect this belief in Of Mice and Men? It is the marginalised characters who no-one takes the time to understand, the least understood suffer the most. But what is worth thinking about is how Steinbeck tries to get us to think the same way as him… Do we understand the characters completely? Does he allows us to understand and ‘love’ all characters equally in the book?

Steinbeck wanted his readers to understand the dehumanisation that migrant workers suffered as they travelled around the ranches of California. One of the most important messages of the book is that migrants are people with feelings, not just cheap labour to be worked to exhaustion for the lowest possible wages.

We see ranch life as hostile and unhealthy. It is a place where men are crippled by machinery, hopes and dreams are destroyed and innocent creatures are killed.

As Lennie says in Chapter Two “This ain’t no good place...It’s mean here.”
Of Mice and Men: Revision

Religion:
- The dream farm = heaven/garden of eden
- Slim = "God-like" figure
- CsW = temptress like Eve/ the apple that Lennie bites

Animals:
- The way that animals are treated represent the cruelty of life during the 1930s e.g. A dead mouse is simply thrown away, Candy's old dog is shot.
- Rabbits represent the dream and the failure to achieve it: Lennie wanting different coloured rabbits represents the unlikeliness of them ever achieving the dream.
- Mice show how the weak get destroyed (being weak is not always to do with size and physical power)

Settings:
- The Pool = safety
- The Barn = being trapped, hostility, poverty
- Crooks' room = hostility, isolation, intelligence

Prejudice: A lot of the characters are victims of prejudice, but Crooks, Candy and Curley's Wife probably suffer the most.

Language:
- Steinbeck uses phonetic spelling and slang so that the characters have an accent- this makes them realistic.
- Simple language reflects the lives of the workers.
- Descriptive techniques, and 'cinematic' description is used to describe nature. This makes nature seem more desirable and pure than men.
- He uses simple and blunt language to describe deaths to make them more shocking.
- His use of racist terms reflects the attitudes of the time.
- What he names things (places, characters) are relevant e.g. Weed is an unwanted plant, something that is destructive.

Light and Dark:
- The colour red: Red is the colour of DANGER and SEX. CsW wears red clothes, and red lipstick.
- These symbolise HOPE and DESPAIR. They repeatedly talk about how dark it is in the bunkhouse;
- CsW cuts off the light in the bunkhouse doorway;
- The light in Crooks' room is described as "meagre";
- Crooks' eyes are described as both dark and "glittering";
- When Cs W is dying the light in the barn grows softer;
- Before Lennie's death the sun begins to go down;

Loneliness
- All of the characters are lonely in some way or another. The town's name 'Soledad' translates as solitude. Men on the ranch have no family, they spend their earnings on drink and prostitutes; they don't make friends because they are always on the move- they are suspicious of George and Lennie because they travel together. Lennie and George are lonely as well though- Lennie's mind isolates him from adults, and George's responsibilities isolates him from the 'carefree' ranch hands. They play the card game 'Solitaire'. Whenever they try to communicate with each other a tragedy happens e.g. A fight, dog shot, CsW dies.

Dreams
- No-one in the book is happy- not even satisfied really! Just like every American in the 1930s, the characters all have a dream, only in Of Mice and Men they never achieve them. All of the dreams are simple and modest (except perhaps Cs W's dream of being a movie star), and focused on improving their lives and becoming independent. The dreams are important because they give characters hope. When George talks about his dream, it sounds like a story- which implies he thinks it is improbable. All of the dreams are destroyed, and mainly by Lennie:
  - causes trouble in Weed, ends first wave of farm dream for George;
  - crushes Curley's hand, ends his boxing dreams;
  - kills CsW, ends the farm dream for George, Candy and himself.

Death and Destiny
- No-one is control of their own destiny. Lennie's actions often decide the other characters' futures. Lennie is doomed from the start and would never have had a happy ending- if Curley's ranch hands had got hold of him he would have definitely met a much more disturbing end than if George hadn't shot him.
- The title of the book tells us that things will go wrong- remember the poem by Robert Burns!
- Death is a part of life. Lennie's murders are not deliberate showing that death is unpredictable and inevitable. Death is the ultimate end to dreams. Each character reacts to death differently, showing that although lives are routine and ugly, deaths are individual and can reveal people's true natures- for example, Cs W becomes pretty as a corpse.