

Steinbeck: A Natural Author

By *Cindy H. Perdue* for Blue Ridge Public Television (WBRA, WMSY, WSBN)
William Byrd High, Vinton, VA

Grade Level: 11th Grade

Time Allotment: Approximately one hour.

Overview: Students will watch a video on Steinbeck's early life and pick out experiences that influenced his interests in writing and nature. Students will practice their observation skills to come up with words to describe images or objects from nature. Students will go on a National Geographic Radio Expedition to compare a scientific voyage of Steinbeck's to a modern expedition.

Subject Matter: English 11 and Ecology or Biology

Learning Objectives:

- Students will learn how Steinbeck's early life influenced his writing and his interest in nature.
- Students will practice developing creative descriptions while observing nature.

Standards:

This lesson addresses in part the Standards of Learning for Virginia in English and Biology found at <http://www.pen.k12.va.us>

English 11 SOL: The study of both classic and contemporary American literature will enhance the student's appreciation for literature.

English SOL 11.7: The student will write in a variety of forms.

Biology: BIO.2e The student will investigate and understand the history of biological concepts. Key concepts include the collaborative efforts of scientists, past and present.

Media Components:

Video

- *Famous Authors Series: (#121) "John Steinbeck"*. This Instructional Television program can be taped for unrestricted use for educational purposes and is available from BRPTV, and United Streaming <http://www.unitedstreaming.com>

Web

- National Public Radio's *National Geographic Radio Expedition* "Echoes of the 'Sea of Cortez'" <http://www.npr.org/programs/re/archivesdate/2004/may/cortez/>
- Sea of Cortez Expedition and Education Project
<http://www.seaofcortez.org/>
- Martha Heasley Cox Center for Steinbeck Studies
<http://www2.sjsu.edu/steinbeck/>

To view the image of the Great Tide Pool, use the site above or go directly to <http://www2.sjsu.edu/depts/english/can6.htm>

Materials:

- Video - *Famous Authors Series*: (#121). "John Steinbeck"
- Six or more large pieces of paper
- Six or more markers
- Six or more photos or objects for students to observe
- Access to the Internet with the ability to project the image for the Introductory Activity

Preparation for Teachers: Observation Stations for Culminating Activity 1

Each of the six or more stations will need a poster-size piece of paper taped to the wall, a marker, and something to observe (either a photo or a natural object). Suggestions for observation subjects include rocks, fossils, leaves and pinecones. Live organisms may include a tub of worms from the tackle shop, aquarium fish, meal worms or crickets from a pet store, flowering plants, or microscopic organisms under a microscope. Calendar pictures will also work, but it is best to have at least a few objects the students can handle. Remind students to wash their hands after handling any live organisms.

Introductory Activity:

1. Go to the Martha Heasley Cox Center for Steinbeck Studies website. Click Biography, and select Steinbeck Country. Scroll down and click on the picture for the virtual tour. Select Cannery Row. Scroll down to the sixth picture, an image of The Great Tide Pool. (To go directly to this image to go <http://www2.sjsu.edu/depts/english/can6.htm>) Enlarge this image by double-clicking it so that Steinbeck's description is not visible beside the picture. Project the image so the entire class can see.
2. Call on students in the class and ask them to brainstorm adjectives or short phrases to describe the images. Encourage them to observe colors and textures, and to make guesses about the life in the tide pool. Write the students' responses on the board.

3. Click the back button so that Steinbeck's description of the tide pool from *Cannery Row* is visible. Read the description to the students. **Ask** the students, "How is Steinbeck's description different from those developed by the class?" Discuss this question.
4. **Ask** students, "Do you think that Steinbeck's ability to describe nature influenced his success as a writer?" Discuss the students' responses.
5. **Tell** the students, "We are going to watch part of a video on Steinbeck's life to try to understand where he developed his interest and understanding of nature as well as his passion for writing."

Learning Activities:

1. Write two headings on the board, "Writing" and "Nature." **Tell** students, "While we view the video, I want you to watch for things in Steinbeck's early life which influenced his interests in nature and in writing."
2. **PLAY** the video from the beginning. Play approximately 50 seconds until the narrator says, "When Steinbeck was young it stood near the edge of town so he could hear the frogs croak in the as yet unfilled marsh."
3. **Pause** the video. **Ask** students, "What information did you learn that may have influenced Steinbeck?"
REPLAY if students are unable to answer. Write "lived near a marsh" on the list under "Nature."
4. **REFOCUS** students by asking them to continue to listen for influences on Steinbeck.
5. **RESUME PLAY** for approximately one minute until the narrator says, "Otherwise, he made life in the house on Central Avenue a rather stern affair."
6. **Pause** the video. **Ask** students to add what they learned to the charts. Under "Writing" you can add that his mother was once a teacher. Under "Nature" you can add that there were animals at the house, and that his father encouraged gardening.
7. **REFOCUS** students by asking them to continue to watch for things which influenced Steinbeck.
8. **RESUME PLAY** for approximately one minute until the narrator says, "...which became his favorite reading."
9. **Pause** the video and ask students to add what they learned to the charts. Under "Writing" you can add that books and magazines were always available and that his mother encouraged him.
10. **REFOCUS** students by asking them to continue to watch for things which influenced Steinbeck.
11. **RESUME PLAY** for approximately two and a half minutes until the narrator says, "In this photograph, Steinbeck is the little boy with the hat."
12. **Pause** the video. **Ask** students to add what they learned to the charts. Under "Nature" you can add that his family spent summers by the ocean at Monterey.
13. **RESUME PLAY** for approximately two minutes until the narrator says, "...which would be so valuable to him as a writer in later years."

14. **STOP** the video. **Ask** students to add what they learned to the charts. Under “Nature” you can add that Steinbeck worked in the fields.
15. **Ask** students to look at the charts and think about the description of the tide pool that was read at the beginning of class. As a class, discuss how his interest in both writing and nature came together to allow him to create such vivid descriptions.

Culminating Activity 1

1. Set up 6 or more observation stations around the room as described above under Preparation for Teachers
2. Divide the class into groups. Start each group at a different station.
3. Ask the groups to come up with as many descriptive words as they can for the object or picture they are describing. The descriptions should include visual information (size, color, movement), but also sounds, textures, and smells.
4. After a few minutes, ask the groups to rotate and come up with additional descriptive words.
5. After all groups have been to each station, ask the students to have a seat. (Remind students to wash their hands if they handled any live organisms.)
6. Discuss what happened as the lists got longer – it became more difficult for students to come up with new words, so they had to be more observant and more creative. Discuss how using more creative and descriptive words can improve both their creative writing and scientific observations.
7. Ask students to select one of the stations and write a paragraph describing what they saw at the station. Encourage them to use some of the words written by the class. Teachers may wish to include specific goals that relate to their curriculum. For example, a biology teacher using invertebrate animals as the observation subjects may wish to have students include a description of the organism’s symmetry.

*NOTE: This activity could also be conducted outdoors by placing clipboards in areas outside the school. Students could describe a tree, a flower, an ant hill, or the sky.

Culminating Activity 2

1. Tell students that Steinbeck’s interest in nature was not only observational. He and Ed Ricketts (a biologist and friend on whom he based the character of “Doc” in *Cannery Row*) made a scientific voyage in which they researched the organisms in the tide pools along the Sea of Cortez. Modern scientists were so interested in the work that Steinbeck and Ricketts did that they decided to revisit the same areas to learn how the ecology has changed since Steinbeck’s time.
2. Go to National Public Radio’s *National Geographic Radio Expedition* “Echoes of the ‘Sea of Cortez’ ” <http://www.npr.org/programs/re/archivesdate/2004/may/cortez/>
3. FOCUS students by asking them to listen for similarities and differences between the observations of Steinbeck and Ricketts as compared to those found by modern biologists.

4. Play one or both of the Radio Expeditions.
5. Write on the board a list of similarities and differences between the two expeditions. Students should observe that in some areas the researchers found the same type of organisms described by Steinbeck and Ricketts, but in other areas the ecology has changed due to human activities.

Cross curricular extensions:

Culinary Arts:

Ask students to predict what the crew of a ship would eat during a scientific voyage. Visit the site for the Sea of Cortez Expedition and Education Project to find out. See especially the logs for March 16 - 18, 2004.

Geography:

Trace the path of the Sea of Cortez Expedition and Education Project using the map provided at the website.

Community Connections:

Read the questions that people in the community wrote to the crew of the Sea of Cortez Expedition (<http://www.seaofcortez.org/>). What questions would you have asked?

Student materials:

Pen/pencil and paper for writing descriptions.

Adaptation for English Language Learners or Special Needs Students

Students who have difficulty writing a paragraph at the end of Culminating Activity 1 could list their favorite descriptive words from the chart created by the class, then illustrate their paper with a drawing of the object being observed.