Chapter Two
Standards Focus: Analyzing Poetry

While some students may think that the title Of Mice and Men comes from the fact that Lennie likes to pet mice and other soft things, the title is really taken from the poem “To a Mouse” by Robert Burns. Robert Burns (1759 - 1796) is probably the most famous of all the Scottish poets. After accidentally turning up a mouse’s nest while he was plowing in 1785, he wrote an ode to this mouse, expressing his feelings toward the mouse and his home.

For the average English speaker, Burns’s poetry can be quite archaic and complex. On the left is the original poem by Burns. On the right is a translation of the words into modern English.

Wee, sleekit, cowran, tim'rous beastie, Small, sleek, cowardly, nervous little beast,
O, what panic's in thy breastie! Oh, what a panic is in your breast!
Thou need na start awa sae hasty, You need not run away so hastily,
Wi' bickering brattle! With a quick scurry!
I wad be laith to rin an' chase thee, I would hate to run and chase you,
Wi' murd'ring pattle! With a murdering shovel!
I'm truly sorry Man's dominion I am truly sorry that Man’s power
Has broken Nature's social union, Has broken Nature’s union between man and beast
An' justifies that ill opinion, And justifies that sad opinion
Which makes thee startle, Which makes you startle,
At me, thy poor, earth-born companion, At me, your poor, earth-born friend,
An' fellow-mortal! And fellow mortal!

I doubt na, whyles, but thou may thieve; I do not doubt that sometimes you may steal;
What then? poor beastie, thou maun live! But so what? Poor beast, you must also live!
A daimen-icker in a thrave 's a sma' request: A corn stalk in a field is a small request:
I'll get a blessin wi' the lave, I will be blessed with more,
An' never miss't! And will never miss it!

Thy wee-bit housie, too, in ruin! Your tiny little house, now, is ruined!
It's silly wa's the win's are strewin! Its impractical walls the winds are blowing!
An' naething, now, to big a new ane, And nothing now, to build a new one,
O' foggage green! Of green foliage!
An' bleak December's winds ensuin, And bleak December’s wind beginning,
Baith snell an' keen! Both severe and sharp!

Thou saw the fields laid bare an' wast, You saw the fields bare and vast,
An' weary Winter comin fast, And the tired Winter coming fast,
An' cozie here, beneath the blast, And cozy here, beneath the hearth,
Thou thought to dwell, You thought to make your home,
Till crash! the cruel coulter past Until crash! the cruel plow passed
Out thro' thy cell. And destroyed your home.

That wee-bit heap o' leaves an' stibble, That tiny, little heap of leaves and sticks,
Has cost thee monie a weary nibble! Has cost you many a tired nibble!
Now thou's turn'd out, for a' thy trouble, Now you are homeless for all of your trouble,
But house or hald. Without house or home.
To thole the Winter's sleety dribble, To live in the Winter’s sleety dribble,
An' cranreuch cauld! And harsh cold!
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But Mousie, thou are no thy-lane,
In proving foresight may be vain:
The best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men,
Gang aft agley,
An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain,
For promis'd joy!

Still, thou art blest, compar'd wi' me!
The present only toucheth thee:
But Och! I backward cast my e'e,
An' forward, tho' I canna see,
I guess an' fear!

But Mousie, you are not alone,
Your planning may be in vain:
The best laid plans of Mice and of Men,
Often go awry,
And leave us nothing but grief and pain,
For the joy we expected!

Still, you are blessed, compared with me!
The present moment only affects you:
But Oh! I think back
On sad moments!
And although I cannot see my life ahead
I guess what may be, and I am afraid!

Directions: After reading the original poem and the translation, answer the following questions on a separate piece of paper.

1. _______ The author’s attitude toward the mouse is best described as:
   a. sympathetic    c. heartless
   b. skeptical       d. aloof

2. Use a dictionary to look up the word “awry.” What do you think Burns meant by “The best laid plans of Mice and of Men / Often go awry”?

3. Which statement best describes the theme of this poem?
   a. Men are superior to mice and other small creatures.
   b. Life is made up of the simpler moments.
   c. Nature may not always be around, so we should appreciate it while we can.
   d. Even the most well-constructed plans can fail.

4. Why do you think Steinbeck chose his title from this poem?

5. What kind of ending do you think the novel will have, based upon what you have learned from the theme of this poem?

6. Many of us look back on our lives and although we may have had the best intentions or plans, things did not work out the way we wanted them to, for one reason or another. Think about a time that you had planned for something to turn out one way, and it ended up another. What was the situation? What was your reaction? How did you adapt to the situation? How are you dealing with the situation now? Would you have done anything differently, knowing what you know now?

Bonus: Write a short poem expressing what happens when you have a dream and it doesn’t come true.