Of Mice And Men: Narrative Techniques In A Novel

John Steinbeck utilises narrative techniques such as foreshadowing, conflict and mood to appeal to his audience during a time of misery within his 1937 novella, Of Mice and Men. Set during the Great Depression, Of Mice and Men follows the desperate story of two men, George and Lennie who travel from place to place, in hopes of achieving the American Dream. Steinbeck creates memorable, yet simple symbolic creations through schemes that later unravel in the plot to uncover depth and hidden emotions. Throughout the story, the protagonists of this novella, George and Lennie argue constantly, unable to resolve, nor establish why, presenting an ongoing conflict. Through the device of mood Steinbeck has created an environment of constant fear and anxiety that ultimately sets the mood for the story. From the second that the protagonists enter the ranch, the primary setting of the story, the tense ambience of the environment becomes evident. Steinbeck's use of narrative techniques employs a visionary style, leaving an impact that is still highly recognised and acknowledged to this day.

Frequently throughout this novella, Steinbeck uses foreshadowing to create suspenseful tension and to convey key information to create an enticing atmosphere for the readers. Steinbeck presents certain events, people and/or information in a seemingly irrelevant style, but when unveiled later, uravels to create a symbolic and profound significance that would typically fly over a readers mind. Within the first chapter of the book, the tragic conclusion at the end of the novella is laboriously foreshadowed through a series of calamities. A repeating theme within the novella is Lennie's obsession with touching soft objects, and his superior strength. Before Soledad, an incident involving Lennie inappropriately touching a woman's dress forced George and Lennie to flee the city. These recurring events highlight that Lennie unfortunately ends up damaging everything he pets unintentionally. In the very first encounter of George and Lennie, it is known that Lennie had accidentally crushed a mice in the grip of his hand, without realising. George says to Lennie "that mouse aint fresh Lennie, and besides you've broke it pettin' it." This quote indicates that Lennie had murdered the mouse, but was unaware of it, further signifying Lennie's abnormal strength. This was the beginning of the multitude of symbolic events that foreshadowed the eventual death of Lennie himself. In chapter 5, Lennie kills his puppy fortuitously by petting it too aggressively and his previous encounter with the mice is referred to again. This motif of Lenny unintentionally harming animals is a device that Steinbeck implemented to prepare readers to understand that Lennie is innocent, and that he means no harm. These recurring motifs only lead up to the climax of Lennie unintentionally snapping Curley's wife's neck, and ultimately killing her. Steinbeck's application of foreshadowing builds the anticipation for the forthcoming events that will unfold, and is evident through his placement of both subtle and direct foreshadowing into the text.

Steinbeck incorporates the literary device of conflict into the novella to create tension within the story, engaging readers by leaving them uncertain and doubtful of which characters or forces will prevail. And through George and Lennie's ambivalent relationship Steinbeck integrates the use of conflict to drive the narrative forward and make it more compelling. The main theme and conflict of Of Mice and Men, is George and Lennie's struggle for self preservation. Their one goal in life is to be financially stable enough to own their own property and be their own boss. However as migrant workers floating from town to town, barely surviving, their journey to their goal/dream is made even more strenuous whenever Lennie creates a problem, forcing them to

leave potential employment opportunities. Lennie is seemingly holding George back from opportunities, however George feels a sense of responsibility for Lennie, and cannot bring himself to leave him behind. ”Lennie, for God’s sakes don’t drink so much…. You gonna be sick like you was last night.” Early in the novella, George shows his parent-like figure in Lennie’s life, despite the issue being something as simple as drinking water, this quote demonstrates that Lennie needs and depends on George to help him show restraint. ‘'God, you're a lot of trouble,' said George. 'I could get along so easy and so nice if I didn't have you on my tail. I could live so easy and maybe have a girl.'' Through this dialogue, George is declaring that if it wasn't for Lennie, he could have found a woman and been happier. This further accentuates the conflict of man vs. man. and it is this conflict that Steinbeck utilises through the characters and setting that he creates, and the other details that are simply produced to add to the experience.

A technique Steinbeck successfully utilises to engage readers by establishing an empathetic connection between the characters is through setting the mood by expressing their thoughts and emotions through dialogue, narration and actions. By creating tension and fear between the characters through conveying their interactions, Steinbeck captures the reader’s attention through an apprehensive atmosphere. When the protagonists first meet Curley, his cold demeanour becomes evident as he assesses the two protagonists, “his glance was at once calculating and pugnacious.” Through describing Curley’s glance as ‘calculating’ and ‘pugnacious’ indicates that Curley may have been threatened by his first impression of Lennie’s hefty build. This interaction establishes a tense relationship between Curley and Lennie, further setting the mood for future exchanges. Steinbeck’s ability to create an animus atmosphere between the characters by expressing their actions and dialogue engages readers by immersing them in the rich setting of the novella. In doing this, readers are able to develop empathy and a personal connection with certain characters. This absorbs the reader into the text, due to an emotional investment in the outcome of the novel. The overall mood of Of Mice and Men can be seen as pessimistic, fatalistic and dark in which men are merely pawns in an unjust and apathetic world. With the death of Curley’s wife comes with the devastating destruction on George and Lennie’s dream of owning a ranch.

Steinbeck’s array of literary conventions used within Of Mice and Men is successful in appealing to the readers and creating an emotional and soul-stirring experience. Through the use of foreshadowing, conflict and mood, Steinbeck captivates the attention of the readers with his use of heavy descriptive text and presentation of imagery.