

# Of Mice and Men



by John Steinbeck

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## Of Mice and Men: Introduction

*Of Mice and Men* is a novel set on a ranch in the Salinas Valley in California during the [Great Depression](#) of the 1930s. It was the first work to bring [John Steinbeck](#) national recognition as a writer. The title suggests that the best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry, a reference to Robert Burns's poem "To a Mouse." *Of Mice and Men* was selected for the Book of the Month Club before it was officially published, an honor that encouraged 117,000 copies of the novel to be sold before its official publication on February 25, 1937. Critical response to the novel was generally positive. There were, however, critics who were offended by the rough earthiness of the characters and their lives. By April 1937, the book was on best-seller lists across the country, and it continued to remain a top seller throughout that year. Steinbeck said that he was not expecting huge sales, and he was surprised by the substantial checks he received from his agents. In fact, Steinbeck became a celebrity with the publication of his novel, a status that he feared would negatively affect his work. Steinbeck conceived *Of Mice and Men* as a potential play. Each chapter is arranged as a scene, and each scene is confined to a single space: a secluded grove, a bunkhouse, and a barn.

With the success of the novel, Steinbeck worked on a stage version with playwright George Kaufman, who directed the play. *Of Mice and Men* opened on Broadway in New York City on November 23, 1937, with Wallace Ford as George and Broderick Crawford as Lennie. The reviews were overwhelmingly positive, and the play ran for 207 performances, winning the prestigious New York Drama Critics' Circle Award. The action of the novel occurs over the course of three days. Steinbeck created the novel's two main characters, George Milton and Lennie Small, to portray victims of forces beyond their control. George and Lennie are two migrant agricultural workers on a California ranch who share a dream of owning their own farm someday. They take jobs at a ranch where their hopes are at first raised but then destroyed by a tragic accident. Steinbeck depicts George and Lennie as two innocents whose dream conflicts with the realities of a world dominated by materialism and greed. Their extraordinary friendship distinguishes them from other hopeless and lonely migrant farm workers. The novel portrays a class of ranch workers in California whose plight had been previously ignored in the early decades of the twentieth century. In fact, George and Lennie are like mice in the maze of modern life. The great friendship they share does not prove sufficient to allow them to realize their dream. As a young man, Steinbeck learned about migrant laborers, usually unmarried men recruited to work during harvest seasons, from his own experience as a worker on company-owned ranches. With *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck became a master craftsman, ready to write his masterpiece [The Grapes of Wrath](#) the

following year.

## Of Mice and Men: Overview

### Background

Steinbeck drew heavily from his own experiences. Four of his novels, [Tortilla Flat](#), *Of Mice and Men*, [In Dubious Battle](#), and *The Grapes of Wrath*, and several short stories are set in and around his hometown of Salinas, California. Reflecting his own love of central California, these stories take place in towns, ranches, and valleys that lie between the Gabilan Mountains and the coastal Santa Lucia Mountains.

Steinbeck was also acutely aware of the social and economic problems of the times. Having lived during the [Great Depression](#) of the 1930s, during bread lines and soup kitchens, during labor unrest and escalating unemployment, he was spared the suffering that befell so many. But he knew first hand the problems that they faced.

Before the Great Depression, and between sessions at Stanford University, Steinbeck worked at odd jobs on California ranches. During one summer early in his college career, Steinbeck bucked barley on a ranch just south of Salinas. These experiences exposed him to the lower strata of society and provided him with material that would later appear in his novels of the 1930s.

*Tortilla Flat* (1935) drew on his experiences with Californian migrant workers living on the outer fringes of society. This was his first attempt to rouse an audience's pity for the conditions of transient laborers, but it was not to be his last.

Steinbeck continued to speak for the exploited man with *In Dubious Battle* (1936). This controversial novel was an account of migrant workers caught in a California labor strike. Steinbeck had witnessed up close the intolerable conditions under which these men were forced to work. He had seen certain groups who were badly hurt by the system in which they lived. In the novel he tried to create something meaningful from the behavior of these exploited people who were not able to speak for themselves.

*Of Mice and Men* (1937) maintains this focus on the migrant worker, here portraying his elusive dream of owning his own land. This is the same dream shared and lost by so many of the Depression era.

Following *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck continued his research into migrant worker conditions by spending four weeks with them, sharing in their living and working routines. He published several feature articles that reported on the dismal conditions he found. Steinbeck also drew from this experience while writing his Pulitzer Prize-winning [The Grapes of Wrath](#) (1939).

### List of Characters

George Milton—The migrant ranch hand who takes care of Lennie. He is one of two main protagonists in the story. He is slender, small and quick, with a dark face, restless eyes, and sharp features. Taking care of Lennie shows George's need for companionship, but also his high moral character and compassion because Lennie is such a burden and George is completely loyal to him. George dreams of owning a small farm of his own, but his dream is lost.

Lennie Small—George's mildly retarded travelling companion and the other main protagonist in the story. He is a huge man, with large, pale eyes, a shapeless face, and sloping shoulders. Lennie is frequently portrayed in animal terms and loves to pet soft things. His name is an example of irony because he is large and possesses incredible physical strength, yet he has the mind of a child. Lennie also dreams of owning a farm with his friend George, but Lennie causes the ruin of their dream.

Slim—The master “skinner” or mule driver of the ranch. He is tall man with long black hair who does not feel the need to wear high-heeled boots. Respected by all, Slim is a master at his trade and has moral authority over the other men. Quiet, grave, and perceptive, he invites confidence by accepting people as they are. Slim respects Lennie’s hard work and consoles George when Lennie dies.

Candy—The old crippled ranch hand who has lost a hand. Afraid of being fired when he gets too old to work, he offers his life savings to become a part of George and Lennie’s dream. His companion is an equally old crippled dog that stinks; after Candy allows Carlson to kill the dog, he regrets not having done it himself.

Crooks—The black stable hand who is proud and aloof. His spine has been left crooked from a horse’s kick, and he rubs liniment on his painful back. Bitter and lonely, Crooks lives in isolation in the harness room. His only recreations are an occasional game of horseshoes with other men, but most of the time he spends by himself reading. He listens with longing to Lennie tell of his dream ranch and he yearns to be part of it.

Carlson—The big-bellied ranch worker who kills Candy’s old dog. Practical and down to earth, he focuses on actions and doesn’t notice people’s feelings. He provides the gun used by George to kill Lennie.

Curley—The boss’s son. A little man, he is always looking for a fight, especially with men who are bigger than he. Curley has brown face and eyes, tightly curled hair, and a hot temper, and prides himself on having been a welterweight boxer. Recently married, he spends much of his time looking for his pretty wife.

Curley’s wife—The pretty, flirtatious, and unnamed wife of Curley. She has red lips and fingernails and wears heavy makeup. Her hair hangs in tight sausage curls, and her red shoes are decorated at the instep with red ostrich feathers. She is said by the men to give them “the eye,” and they brand her as a “tramp.” She knows Curley is mean and does not like him. In her loneliness and unhappiness, she tries to make friends with Lennie. She is never given a name in the story.

The boss—Another unnamed character. He is a short, stocky man wearing high-heeled boots with spurs to show that he is not a laborer. Like his son, the boss has a hot temper and frequently takes his anger out on Crooks. At Christmas, he brought in a gallon of whiskey for the boys in the bunk house. He is suspicious of George’s interest in Lennie.

Whit—A young laboring man on the ranch. He is friendly and likes to talk, but he is already stooped from the hard work on the ranch. He reads a letter to the editor of a Western magazine written by a former worker at the ranch.

### **Summary of the Novel**

Before reporting for work, migrant workers George Milton and Lennie Small spend the night on a peaceful riverbank. For the second time, George has to take away a dead mouse that Lennie has been petting. He consoles Lennie by recounting the story of their dream farm where Lennie will tend rabbits.

Before retiring, George tells Lennie to remember this place by the river, because if Lennie ever gets into trouble he must return here and hide in the brush until George comes for him.

Friday, in the ranch’s bunkhouse, the men meet Candy, the old, crippled swamper; the boss’s arrogant son, Curley, who is always ready to fight; and Curley’s new wife, who is pretty and flirtatious.

Also entering the bunkhouse are Slim, an experienced and respected work-team leader, and Carlson, a ranch hand. Both men are friendly and welcome George and Lennie to the ranch.

Friday night, after a half day's work, Lennie goes to the barn to visit the puppy Slim has given him. Back in the bunkhouse, George confesses to a sympathetic Slim that they left their previous job because Lennie was accused of attacking a girl.

Later that evening, when Candy's dog, lame and blind with age, enters the bunkhouse, Carlson suggests that Candy shoot it to put it out of its misery. Candy reluctantly agrees to allow Carlson to shoot the dog with his Luger pistol. Though deeply saddened at the death of his longtime companion, Candy says later that he should have shot his dog himself, instead of letting a stranger do it.

Sitting in the bunkhouse, George and Lennie again talk of their dream farm. Listening quietly, old Candy offers his life's savings, half of the money they will need to buy the farm, if he can become a partner in their dream.

Curley and Slim return to the bunkhouse, arguing about Curley's wife. Curley sees Lennie smiling and accuses Lennie of laughing at him. He punches Lennie without retaliation. When George finally gives the word, though, Lennie catches Curley's hand and crushes it.

Saturday night, while the others are in town, Lennie wanders into Crooks's room, where Crooks tells Lennie of his loneliness. After Candy joins them, Curley's wife comes in. When they try to get her to leave, she professes her own loneliness and makes a deliberate attempt to talk to Lennie, but she is driven away by the return of the other ranch hands.

The next day, Sunday, Lennie returns to the barn to pet his puppy. Curley's wife comes in, talks to Lennie, and lets him caress her hair. When she tries to make him stop, he panics and accidentally breaks her neck. Realizing she is dead, Lennie flees.

Candy and George discover the body of Curley's wife, and they know the other men will want Lennie lynched. As the men are preparing a search party, Carlson announces that his gun is missing. In spite of George's insistence that Lennie would never kill on purpose, the men want Lennie shot on sight.

At the riverbank awaiting George, Lennie is confronted with images of his dead aunt and a giant rabbit, both chastising him for disappointing George. When George arrives, he comforts his friend. As he hears the others nearing, he helps Lennie imagine, for the last time, their dream farm. With great difficulty, he places Carlson's revolver at the back of Lennie's head and pulls the trigger.

Only Slim understands what has happened. He comforts George and reassures him that this was what he had to do.

### **Estimated Reading Time**

*Of Mice and Men* is one of Steinbeck's short novels. It is only six chapters long, and about one hundred pages. It reads rather quickly, and it should take the average reader fewer than four hours to complete.

The novel can be divided into four sections, corresponding to the four days entailed in the plot, with each section taking place on a different day. Chapter 1 takes place on the Thursday night the men spend by the river. Chapters 2 and 3 cover Friday. Chapter 4 occurs on Saturday night. Chapters 5 and 6 contain the events of Sunday.

## **Of Mice and Men: John Steinbeck Biography**

Born February 27, 1902, in Salinas, California, not far from the setting of his novel *Of Mice and Men*, [John Steinbeck](#) was the grandson of a German immigrant on his father's side (whose name was originally Grossteinbeck), and of an Irish immigrant on his mother's side. Both his father and his grandfather had been independent businessmen who owned and operated their own flour mill. His father also served as county treasurer for 11 years before retiring. Steinbeck's mother was the daughter of a California rancher. She was a schoolteacher.



#### John Steinbeck

As educated people of some affluence, Steinbeck's parents offered their children a variety of cultural experiences. The family regularly attended plays and concerts. Listening to their parents read was a customary after-dinner ritual for the Steinbeck children. Books were often prized holiday gifts.

From boyhood, John Steinbeck dreamed of being a writer. This youthful aspiration was not simply a dream, though. It was the goal that shaped his life. Even as a boy he spent part of each day writing. While the rest of the neighborhood slept, he sat in his room working for hours on short stories, which he submitted only anonymously. His early material was often rejected, but he remained undaunted.

After making "B's" through high school, Steinbeck entered Stanford University. He attended college there for five years, but he never completed requirements for graduation. Constantly working on his fiction, Steinbeck took several college writing courses and published a few pieces in Stanford's literary journals, but when he submitted his creative works to magazines, he still received only rejections.

He left Stanford at the age of 23 and moved to New York, hoping to become a writer. He got a job as a reporter but was ultimately dismissed since he was, admittedly, not very good at it. Somewhat discouraged, Steinbeck returned to California where he took on various odd jobs, all the while continuing to work on his fiction.

Following Steinbeck's 1930 marriage to Carol Henning, he experienced his most successful decade. During their marriage, which lasted for a little over 10 years, Steinbeck came into his own as a writer and produced some of his best fiction. One reason was that early in the marriage, Carol allowed him to focus exclusively on his art. While he remained home writing, she worked to support them both.

Although he was writing diligently, Steinbeck won neither financial success nor critical acclaim with his early novels: *Cup of Gold* (1929), *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932), and *To a God Unknown* (1933). But all of this changed with the publication of [Tortilla Flat](#) (1935), which brought him immediate fame and wealth. This was to be the first of his best-sellers. The following year *Dubious Battle* (1936) was published. Success, financial and critical, followed with the publication of *Of Mice and Men* (1937). The novel was produced on Broadway later that same year, and it won the Drama Critics' Circle Award. The *Grapes of Wrath* (1939) won Steinbeck the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and a place in the National Institute of Arts and Letters.

But Steinbeck did not confine himself to the arena of fiction. Already practiced in publishing articles for newspapers, he wrote his first non-fiction book—[Sea of Cortez](#) (1941)—with his longtime friend Ed Ricketts. The book is based on the time Steinbeck spent with Ricketts on the Gulf of California collecting marine specimens.

With the beginning of a new decade came several endings for Steinbeck. In the late 1930s came the deterioration of Steinbeck's marriage to Carol. In 1942, Carol divorced him. The next year he married Gwyndolen Conger Verdon and moved to New York. While this five-year marriage did give him his only two children, Tom and John, it marks the point at which the quality of his fiction began its decline.

Following his second marriage, and the move from his native California, Steinbeck published nearly a dozen novels. Though each of these show merit, on the whole, none match the excellence of his works of the 1930s. He continued, however, to follow the "drive" he had identified in a letter to his publisher: "making people understand each other."

The *Moon Is Down* (1942), like *Of Mice and Men*, was written as a novel-play. As with *Of Mice and Men*, it was intended to illuminate a facet of the world Steinbeck's audience did not understand. The novel focused on [World War II](#) and the Nazi occupation of Scandinavia.

As his personal contribution to the war cause, Steinbeck wrote *Bombs Away* (1942) for the Army Air Corps. Steinbeck's wartime efforts were highly successful. The book was successful in helping to recruit soldiers, and royalties from the movie were contributed to the Air Corps. Later, for six months in 1943, Steinbeck took a more active role in the war, and served as the *New York Herald Tribune* war correspondent in the European war zone.

[Cannery Row](#) (1945) depicts a group of men who, instead of being displaced by society, have deliberately detached themselves from the social system. It is set in the pre-war 1930s and reflects his continued concern with social deviants.

[The Pearl](#) (1947) appeared first as a motion picture script. Steinbeck though, was reportedly not eager to continue in this medium. The Pearl was subsequently revised into a long magazine story and then a book. Steinbeck has called this his "folk tale" and likens it to a parable. The plot of this short novel is loosely based on a true story Steinbeck heard while he was in Mexico working on his *Sea of Cortez*. An account published in *Sea of Cortez* describes a young Indian's discovery of "the Pearl of the World." Ironically his good fortune, an assurance of physical and religious security, only brings him misery, and the story ends with the young Indian throwing the cursed pearl back into the sea.



Two of Steinbeck's final novels—[East of Eden](#) (1952) and [The Winter of Our Discontent](#) (1961)—mark a return to the past. *East of Eden* returns to his familiar California setting as he portrays the fictional account of his mother's family. *The Winter of Our Discontent* focuses on the superiority of things of the past.

During the 1950s, Steinbeck continued to express his social and political views, but in a new way. He helped write speeches for the 1952 and 1956 presidential campaigns. He even served as advisor to President Johnson. For his advisory services during the years of the Vietnam conflict, Steinbeck was awarded the United States Medal of Freedom in 1964.

Continuing to experiment with narrative forms, Steinbeck published several non-fiction forms late in his career. *A Russian Journal* (1948) is an account of his travels in Russia. *Travels with Charley* (1962) records his thoughts while traveling the country with his dog, Charley. He also published *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* (1951) which included a biographical sketch of Ricketts, his valued friend who had died a few years earlier. *Once There Was a War* (1958) was his publication of wartime dispatches.

Though Steinbeck never again recaptured the glory of the 1930s, his stature as one of America's foremost novelists remained. In 1948 he was elected to the American Academy of Letters. In 1962 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. He had won his place in American literary history.

He had also found happiness in marriage. Steinbeck married Elaine Scott in 1950. They were together, happily according to Steinbeck, until his death in late 1968.

## Of Mice and Men: Summary

*Of Mice and Men* opens with a physical description of the topography of the Central Valley of California. "A few miles south of Soledad," the Salinas river winds through an idyllic scene of yellow sands, golden foothills, and deer that come to the shore to drink at night. It is in this setting that we first meet Steinbeck's two protagonists, George Milton and Lennie Small. George is "small and quick, dark of face, with restless eyes and sharp, strong features." Lennie is "his opposite, a huge man, shapeless of face, with large, pale eyes, with wide, sloping shoulders." They have just come from the town of Weed in Northern California where Lennie had gotten into some sort of trouble, forcing them to flee south. There they are now looking for new work on a ranch. As the two talk it becomes clear that Lennie is mentally handicapped: he cannot quite remember what had happened in Weed; he speaks with a child's vocabulary; and he bursts into tears when George makes him give up the dead mouse that he has been secretly petting in his pocket. At first George lectures Lennie on what a burden he is, with the recent events in Weed as an example:

His voice rose nearly to a shout. "You crazy son-of-a-bitch. You keep me in hot water all of the time." He took on the elaborate manner of little girls when they are mimicking one another. "Jus" wanted to feel that girl's dress—jus' wanted to pet it like it was a mouse—Well, how the hell did she know you jus' wanted to feel her dress? She jerks back and you hold on like it was a mouse. She yells and we got to hide in an irrigation ditch all day with guys lookin' for us, and we got to sneak out in the dark and get outta the county. All the time somethin' like that—all the time. I wisht I could put you in a cage with about a million mice and let you have fun." His anger left him suddenly. He looked across the fire at Lennie's anguished face, and then he looked ashamedly at the flames.

After calming down, George repeats, at Lennie's request, the story of how they are someday going to get out of the lonely life of itinerant farm laborers and buy a piece of land where they can live by working their own small farm together.



The next day, George and Lennie arrive at the ranch and are brought by Candy the swamper (handyman) to the workers' bunk house to meet with the owner. After some discussion concerning their ability to work and Lennie's inability to speak, they are hired. A while later, the boss's son, Curley, comes into the bunk house, supposedly looking for his father. Curley is a small man and he approaches Lennie with "hands . . . closed into fists." "His glance [is] calculating and pugnacious," and he stands in a slight crouch. The confrontation ends with Curley leaving after telling Lennie to "answer when [he's] spoke to" in the future. As Candy explains, Curley is a good, "handy" fighter who likes to pick fights with men larger than himself; he is also very jealous of his pretty new wife who lives on the ranch and has been known to give some of the workers "the eye." Just then, Curley's wife appears momentarily at the door, pretending that she is looking for Curley. Lennie is struck by how pretty she is. Slim, the skinner (a teamster, or mule driver), also arrives and is followed by the rest of the men. The news that Slim's dog has had a litter of pups the previous night greatly interests Lennie. George promises to ask Slim if Lennie can have one.

By the next day, Slim has agreed to let Lennie have one of the pups and Lennie is out playing with them in the barn as George and Slim talk in the bunk house. Candy comes in, followed by his ancient dog and Carlson, who has just lost at horseshoes. Carlson immediately starts to complain about the smell of the feeble old dog and tells Candy that he should shoot it and take one of the new pups in its place. Candy is reluctant, but Carlson offers to shoot the dog himself and, after some deliberation, Candy agrees that it must be done. Slim leaves to fix a mule's hoof in the barn, and at the card table Whit invites George to go with the others to a brothel in town the next night. Carlson returns and begins to clean his pistol, and Lennie comes in as well. Curley then arrives, looking for his wife, and asks where Slim is. He leaves looking for them both. Slim returns shortly afterward, followed by Curley, who is apologizing for accusing him of improprieties with his wife. The men all side with Slim and tell Curley to keep her at home. Curley then attacks Lennie, who is still silently dreaming of his future ranch with George. Lennie is surprised and terrified, but after George tells him to fight back, he grabs one of Curley's fists and crushes it.

Crooks the stableman, being black, is not allowed to live in the bunk house with the white workers; he has a bunk in the harness room of the stable. The night that the men are at the brothel Lennie wanders into Crooks' room. They talk a while: Crooks tells Lennie that he is in fact not from the South but rather a native of California. Lennie tells Crooks of his and George's plans for the future. Candy then arrives and joins the conversation. Just then, Curley's wife appears at the door asking if they have seen her husband. When she continues talking with the men despite their reluctance, Candy jumps up and shouts at her to leave. She then notices the cuts on Lennie's face and realizes that it was Lennie who broke Curley's hand. She flirts with him, and when Crooks protests she reminds him that as a black man he has no rights and that she could cause anything to happen to him that she wants. Crooks realizes that she is right and sits down. After she leaves, George arrives and Lennie and Candy leave Crooks alone in his room.

Sunday afternoon finds Lennie sitting in the barn looking at a puppy he has just accidentally killed. He is confused about how he killed the puppy and afraid of what George will do when he finds out. Curley's wife walks into the stall and kneels down in the hay beside Lennie, telling him that he gave Curley what he deserved. When Lennie is obviously reluctant to talk with her she becomes exasperated, wondering why no one will speak with her, and then she recounts the story of how she came to be Curley's wife. Lennie starts to talk about the dead puppy and how he killed it only by petting it. He says he likes to "pet nice things," and she tells him to touch her hair and feel how soft it is. When he does touch her hair he is too rough, and she tells him to stop, but he continues to clutch it. When she screams for him to let go Lennie panics and covers her mouth with his hand. As she struggles to get away Lennie tightens his grasp and breaks her neck. Slowly realizing what he has done he puts the dead pup under his shirt and creeps out of the barn. Candy then comes in, discovers Curley's dead wife, and goes to get George. George sadly decides that the only thing to do is tell everyone and to hunt down Lennie. Curley and Carlson go to get their guns, but Carlson's gun turns out to be missing, which they attribute to Lennie's having stolen it. They all go out to hunt down Lennie.

The final chapter opens with a terrified Lennie appearing from the brush in the same scene by the shore where the story opened. George then appears from the brush and tells Lennie not to worry about what has happened. He calms Lennie down by repeating the story about their future plans and how they will always be together to care for one another. George tells Lennie to look across the river, that he can almost see their little farm. With Lennie gazing into the distance, George takes out Carlson's pistol and points it at the back of Lennie's head, all the while continuing the story of their future. As the voices of the other men come within earshot, George shoots Lennie. When the men all arrive, George tells them that Lennie had the gun and that he had gotten it away from him and killed him.

## **Of Mice and Men: Summary and Analysis**

### **Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis**

#### **New Characters**

George Milton: migrant worker who cares for Lennie Small

Lennie Small: mildly retarded migrant worker, George's companion

#### **Summary**

Following a worn path from the highway, George Milton and Lennie Small come upon the peaceful banks of the Salinas River and stop to rest. After drinking from the river, George reminds Lennie of their destination, a ranch just up the highway where they will work bucking barley.

Sitting in this haven along the banks of the river, George notices Lennie has something in his pocket. When he makes Lennie give it to him, he discovers it is a dead mouse. Lennie says he has been petting it as they walked along. George throws the dead mouse away.

In the evening, George sends Lennie to collect firewood and hears him splash in the water. When he returns, George demands that Lennie hand over the dead mouse. Lennie had retrieved it from the brush pile where George had thrown it.

When Lennie begins to cry, George promises him a fresh mouse. In his frustration, he openly laments being burdened with the responsibility of Lennie. When Lennie offers to go off by himself, George recants and says they have to stick together. Together they have someone to care about them and they have a future, a dream of owning their own farm with rabbits that Lennie will tend.

Before retiring George asks Lennie to try to remember what this place looks like. If Lennie gets into trouble at the new job, he is to hide here in the brush until George comes for him.

Recalling their dream, they drift to sleep on the banks of the river beside the dying fire.

#### **Discussion and Analysis**

Setting is the physical location for the story, as well as the general time frame when it takes place. It includes the specific duration of time it takes the author to unfold his plot. Most of *Of Mice and Men* takes place on and about a ranch in the Salinas Valley, near the town of Soledad, south of San Francisco. The story begins and ends at a clearing near a pool about a quarter of a mile from the ranch, and spans only four days. Although the book was published in 1937, Steinbeck does not allude to the Depression in the novel. His characters are engaged in their smaller, private economic struggles, giving the work a sense of timelessness and universality.

Point of view refers to the vantage point from which the story is told. It is the “eyes” through which the reader sees the unfolded events, the “voice” used by the narrator to tell the tale. In *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck uses the omniscient or all-knowing point of view. He gets into the minds of his characters, revealing their inner thoughts, and he describes things that the characters themselves do not know. This omniscient point of view allows the reader a broader insight into people and events. In the opening chapter, Steinbeck describes the clearing by the pool before the arrival of George and Lennie.

The setting of the opening chapter is described in lyrical detail by Steinbeck. A few miles south of Soledad (“loneliness”), the river “runs deep and green” and the water is “warm too, for it has slipped twinkling over the yellow sands in the sunlight.” On the valley side of the Gabilan mountains, the water is lined with graceful sycamores and willows. Lizards, ‘coons, dogs, and deer come to the pool, and there is a path beaten by boys come to swim and tramps come to rest. This is a place of peace, a refuge from heat and work. To this green pool come George and Lennie, and Steinbeck has his two main characters enter in single file. Although both are dressed in nondescript denim clothes of working men, the one takes charge and the other follows. George is small, quick, nervous, and sharp. Lennie, who walks behind George even in the open, is large, shapeless, and strong. Lennie flops down and begins to gulp water, prompting George to shake his companion lest he drink too much and “get sick like you was last night.” To Lennie’s simple mind, the water is good and he does not worry if it “looks kinda scummy” and isn’t running. George’s concern for Lennie is apparent from the first scene, and so is Lennie’s adoration of his friend. Lennie even tries to sit embracing his knees with his arms, just like George, looks over to see if the posture is just right, and then “pulled his hat down a little more over his eyes, the way George’s hat was.”

George has chosen to spend the night by this pool instead of hike the remaining distance to the ranch. Tired from walking because the bus driver had let them out too early, George and Lennie need rest before they begin the heavy work of bucking grain bags. As dusk comes on, nature settles peacefully to rest. A big carp comes to the surface of the pool and disappears, tufts of willow cotton settle on the water, and sycamore leaves rustle in the night breeze. At the end of the first chapter, George and Lennie have settled to sleep by the fire, which is burning down comfortably to coals. George and Lennie are represented as part of nature here. The sound of a coyote and a responding dog serve to show the two men as comfortable with all of nature, and their stay here is much more peaceful than any foray into life among men. In an essay for the *Saturday Review*, Steinbeck writes, “I believe that man is a double thing—a group animal and at the same time an individual. And it occurs to me that he cannot successfully be the second until he has fulfilled the first.” George and Lennie always have difficulty with the first—Lennie because of his simple mind and great strength, and George because he chooses to care for Lennie. Throughout the novel, Steinbeck associates Lennie with animal movements, and Lennie’s love of dogs and rabbits brings about the tragedy of the novel.

In the description he first mentions the rabbits, which will become a significant symbol throughout the book. Their softness is Lennie’s soft heart. They represent independence and freedom. They are symbolic of everything George and Lennie hope to attain, their piece of land and their peace of mind.

On the sand banks the rabbits sat as quietly as little gray sculptured stones. And then from the direction of the state highway came the sound of footsteps on crisp sycamore leaves. The rabbits hurried noiselessly for cover. A stilted heron labored up into the air and pounded down river. For a moment the place was lifeless, and then two men emerged from the path and came into the opening by the green pool.

Steinbeck has structured this novel much like a play. The first chapter, and each succeeding section begins with a setting of the scene. Virtually all of the novel consists of dialogue, through which the characters provide an explanation of themselves, rather than being explained by the narrator. The narrator rarely intrudes into the work, except to specify a character’s words or actions, similar to the stage directions in a play.

In this first chapter Steinbeck introduces one of the major themes of the novel, the theme of loneliness. It is part of the itinerant workers' lives and it is the primary reason Lennie and George are together. This is expressed in the opening dialogue. Angry at Lennie because he wants ketchup with his beans, George erupts.

"Whatever we ain't got, that's what you want. God a'mighty, if I was alone I could live so easy. I could go get a job an' work, an' no trouble. No mess at all, and when the end of the month come I could take my fifty bucks and go into town and get whatever I want . . . An' whatta I got," George went on furiously. "I got you!"

Lennie's threat, one he has apparently made before, to run off to a cave and leave George alone, a place where he can find a mouse and keep it, is enough to stop George's protests. Their little flare up ends with George's affirmation of their bond and friendship.

"Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. . . . They ain't got nothing to look ahead to. . . ."

Lennie broke in. "*But not us! An' why? Because . . . because I got you to look after me, and you got me to look after you, and that's why.*"

Steinbeck establishes the ironic relationship between George Milton and Lennie Small. George, a small man with sharp features, is the mental and physical opposite of his companion. Lennie is a huge man with a child's mind. The basic conflict, as drawn out in Chapter 1, is not so much between George and Lennie, as it is between these two men and the rest of the world. They fight to keep alive their dream of independence in a world that defeats dreams and leaves men like themselves caught in a hopeless cycle of working and spending, working and spending.

The animal imagery used to describe George characterizes him as a pet. He drinks from the pool "like a horse" and he scoops up water with his "paw." When George demands the mouse Lennie is hiding, Lennie hands it over "like a terrier . . . to its master." Lennie is, in several respects, like George's pet. He entertains George and keeps him company in the lonely life of the migrant worker.

Throughout the novel Lennie is associated with rabbits. When the men first come upon the river, rabbits scurry into the underbrush. Lennie speaks often of tending to the rabbits on the farm he and George dream of buying. And in the final chapter, which takes place in the same setting as the first chapter, he is approached by an imaginary man-sized talking rabbit.

But Lennie is more than a pet. He is what gives purpose to George's life. As George explains to Lennie, only together can they have somebody to care about them, somewhere to belong, a future. Having each other is all that separates them from the other migrant workers who are the loneliest people in the world.

Because they have a relationship based on genuine affection, Lennie is willing to tolerate George's abuses and George is willing to suffer the frustrations and inconveniences of taking care of a childlike Lennie.

One such frustration is the situation they have just fled. They have had to run away from Weed, the last place they were working, because Lennie wanted to pet a girl's pretty dress, and scared her. While this underscores his innocent love of things that are pretty and soft, it also foreshadows the eventual death of Curley's wife. She, too, becomes Lennie's unintentional victim because she is pretty and has soft hair that he wants to pet.

Death plays an important role in the story, and Steinbeck introduces it when he describes the dead mouse carried by Lennie. Events of the following days are foreshadowed by George's words to the blubbing Lennie: "That mouse ain't fresh, Lennie; and besides, you've broke it pettin' it." Steinbeck establishes

Lennie's ability to kill simply because he is unable to control his own strength. Another example of foreshadowing is found in George's reference to Weed, the town they had to flee because of an incident involving a young woman.

“Jus’ wanted to feel that girl’s dress—jus’ wanted to pet it like it was a mouse—Well, how the hell did she know you jus’ wanted to feel her dress? She jerks back and you hold on like it was a mouse. She yells and we got to hide in a irrigation ditch all day with guys lookin’ for us, and we got to sneak out in the dark and get outta the country. All the time somethin’ like that—all the time.”

It is interesting to note Steinbeck's dual style in the work. He alternates between a poetic and a naturalistic style. The dialogue, which makes up the bulk of the novel, is written in dialect, slang, and colloquialisms. It is intentionally ungrammatical and natural. But Steinbeck's descriptions of the settings at the beginning of each chapter are flowing, lyrical and poetic.

It is worth mentioning here that Steinbeck's title, *Of Mice and Men*, comes from a poem, “To a Mouse,” published in 1785 by the Scottish poet Robert Burns. It contains the lines, “The best laid schemes o’ mice an’ men/ Gang aft a gley.” Translated as, “The best laid plans of mice and men often go astray,” it reflects the theme of the novel, the loss of a dream. George and Lennie's hopes for the American Dream, “to live off the fatta the lan’”, will be crushed as easily as the mouse.

## Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

### New Characters

Candy: the one-handed ranch custodian

The Boss: runs the barley farm

Curley: the boss's newly married, hot-headed son

Curley's wife: the pretty, flirtatious, unnamed wife of Curley

Slim: a jerkline skinner, the respected authority on the ranch

Carlson: an experienced ranch hand

### Summary

Chapter 2 takes place in the bunkhouse of the barley ranch on Friday morning. George and Lennie enter the bunkhouse behind Candy, the old crippled swamper, an unskilled laborer who cleans up the bunkhouse. He shows them to their two beds and tells George and Lennie about the ranch, about the boss, and about Crooks, the stable buck. When George sees a can of bug killer left by the man who last occupied the bed, a blacksmith, he is concerned about lice. Candy reassures him that the place is clean, and that the boss is a fair man.

After George and Lennie finish making their beds, the boss comes in. When he questions the men about reporting late for work, he notices that George always answers for Lennie. Upon hearing Lennie talk, the man realizes Lennie's mental state. It makes him suspicious and he interrogates George. He asks George if he is traveling with Lennie just to take advantage of his traveling companion. But George allays his suspicions, at least for the time, and he lies to the boss, saying that Lennie is his cousin who was kicked in the head by a horse when he was younger. When the boss leaves, George scolds Lennie for talking because now the boss is watching them. George tells Lennie to keep his mouth shut and let George do all of the talking.

Shortly after the boss leaves, Candy reappears. George accuses Candy, who was sweeping up the bunkhouse, of listening in on their conversation. Candy says, “I didn’t hear nothing you guys was sayin’. I ain’t interested in nothing you was sayin’. A guy on a ranch don’t never listen nor he don’t ask no questions.” And then their attentions turn to Candy’s old, lame dog.

Candy is followed by the boss’s son, Curley, who barges into the bunkhouse. When Curley sees the size of Lennie, he automatically goes into a boxer’s stance and insists that Lennie talk to him. But when his attempts to pick a fight with Lennie fail, he leaves the bunkhouse.

Candy tells the two new workers that Curley was a boxer and that he tries to pick fights with every man he meets, especially men who are bigger than he. Since Curley is the boss’s son, he is in no danger of getting fired. Candy also tells them about Curley’s new wife of two weeks, who has started hanging around the bunkhouse and flirting with most of the ranch hands.

After Candy leaves, the two of them discuss Curley. George explains to Lennie how Curley is the type who is always looking for trouble. His advice to Lennie is to keep away from him. Lennie is afraid that Curley will hurt him, and George tells him to keep his mouth shut and go to the other side of the room whenever Curley is around. “Don’t let him pull you in,” he advises his friend, “—but—if the son-of-a-bitch socks you—let ‘im have it.” Then he reminds Lennie of their arrangement if Lennie ever gets into trouble. George tells him that he is to go hide in the brush down by the river where they had camped the night before and wait there until George arrives.

Again their conversation is interrupted when they realize someone has come into the room. It is Curley’s young wife who enters the bunkhouse looking for her husband. Though her visit is brief, it is enough for Lennie to decide she is beautiful and for George to decide that she is a troublesome tramp.

When Slim, the ranch authority and sage, comes into the bunkhouse, he interviews the new men as did the boss and his son, but with a gentle and friendly manner. He also introduces them to Carlson, a powerful, big-stomached ranch hand. Carlson asks Slim about his dog and her puppies and suggests giving Candy one to replace his smelly, old dog. Anticipating Lennie’s request, George agrees to ask Slim if Lennie can also have one of the puppies, a brown and white one.

The chapter ends when Curley comes back into the bunkhouse looking for trouble and also for his wife. “Ya know, Lennie,” George tells him, “I’m scared I’m gonna tangle with that bastard myself. I hate his guts. Jesus Christ!”

### **Discussion and Analysis**

In this chapter Steinbeck introduces his audience to the other characters on the ranch, painting a picture of bunkhouse life for the migrant workers of the 1930s. The space needed for their personal belongings was minimal. They accumulated few possessions, for they knew that their stay in one place was only temporary and whatever they owned would have to be carried with them on their backs.

This is evident in the scene at the beginning of the chapter, when George and Lennie enter the bunkhouse. The other ranch hands have already gone out into the fields, allowing them an opportunity to settle in before going out for the afternoon. While they are inspecting their bunks, George finds a can of bug killer that belonged to the man who formerly occupied the bed. George is concerned about lice, which he calls “pants rabbits” or “graybacks.” It is only one example of Steinbeck’s use of realistic slang words and colloquialisms. Candy describes Whitey, the last man that had the bed, as a “hell of a nice fella and as clean a guy as you want to meet. Used to wash his hands even *after* he ate.” Whitey was the kind of guy who used to peel his boiled potatoes and take out every spot. And if there was a red splotch on an egg, he’d scrape it off. He’d dress up on Sundays and put on a necktie just to sit around the bunkhouse.

According to Candy's assessment, Whitey was so clean and so concerned about conditions on the ranch that he quit. "Why . . . he . . . just quit, the way a guy will. Says it was the food. Just wanted to move. Didn't give no other reason but the food. Just says 'gimme my time' one night, the way any guy would."

The boss's suspicion that George is taking advantage of Lennie emphasizes the tendency of the ranch man to avoid forming connections. When George continually speaks for Lennie and then when Lennie speaks for himself, revealing his mental condition, the boss feels certain that George is using Lennie. He asks if George is taking Lennie's pay from him, because in this walk of life a ranch man doesn't "take so much trouble for another guy." Even after George makes an excuse, saying that Lennie is his cousin who's been kicked in the head by a horse, the boss remains suspicious and promises to keep an eye on him. Note the economical way in which Steinbeck describes the man.

He wore blue jean trousers, a flannel shirt, a black, unbuttoned vest and a black coat. His thumbs were stuck in his belt, on each side of a square steel buckle. On his head was a soiled brown Stetson hat, and he wore high-heeled boots and spurs to prove he was not a laboring man.

Curley, the boss's son, recognizes something special about Lennie too, but he views him as his potential adversary instead of as a potential victim for George. As soon as he sees Lennie, he goes into a fighter's stance. The boss's son, like his father, tries to make Lennie talk. When George intervenes, Curley parrots his father's question, asking George why he's getting involved, and equally suspicious when he hears that they travel together. Steinbeck describes him as a thin young man with a brown face, with brown eyes, and a head of "tightly curled hair." Like his father, he wears high-heeled boots, which are more for show and unnecessary on a grain farm, according to Candy. He also wears a work glove on his left hand, which, Candy tells George, is "fulla vaseline" to keep his hand soft for his young wife.

Both the boss and Curley wear high-heeled boots to show they are above the others. Candy, the old swamper, tells George and Lennie that the boss has a temper and vents his anger on the black stable buck. Candy also explains that when Curley jumps a big guy and beats him, everyone says what a "game guy" Curley is; but if the big guy wins, then people say the big guy should have picked on someone his own size. It seems Curley never gives anyone a fair chance, but he doesn't care because he is the boss's son and will never be fired. The glove Curley wears, therefore, becomes a symbol of his pugnacious, vicious nature, as well as his desire to control his new wife.

Steinbeck's description of Slim is the most detailed. He is tall with long black hair. He moves with "a majesty only achieved by royalty and master craftsmen." A jerkline skinner, he is capable of driving twenty mules with a single line, of "killing a fly on the wheeler's butt with a bull whip without touching the mule." According to Candy, "Slim don't need to wear no high-heeled boots on a grain team." There is a "gravity in his manner and a quiet so profound that all talk stopped when he spoke." He is ageless, thirty-five or fifty. "His ear heard more than was said to him, and his slow speech had overtones not of thought, but of understanding beyond thought." Slim is bigger than life, the "prince of the ranch" whose "authority was so great that his word was taken on any subject." Gentle and kind, he expresses no surprise that George and Lennie travel together. Instead Slim muses over why more men don't. He concludes, "Maybe ever'body in the whole damn world is scared of each other."

Finally there is Curley's wife. She has full rouged lips, wide-spaced eyes, and heavy makeup. Her fingernails are red and her hair "hung in little rolled clusters, like sausages." She is never given a name by Steinbeck, and throughout the book she is referred to as Curley's wife. She is depicted not as a complete human being, but as an unwelcomed annoyance, a nuisance, and an obstacle to the legitimate work on the ranch. The men regard her as dangerous. Candy calls her a "tart." And George sees her as a threat, especially to Lennie who is fond of soft things. After his brief meeting with her, George tells Lennie, "Don't you even take a look at



that bitch. . . . I seen 'em poison before, but I never seen no piece of jail bait worse than her. You leave her be." It will turn out to be good advice.

At first Lennie is almost hypnotized by Curley's wife as she appears in the doorway wearing her cotton house dress and red mules with bouquets of red ostrich feathers on the insteps. Fascinated, Lennie watches as she puts her hands behind her body and arches it seductively forward. No one except Slim is comfortable with her. As he enters the bunkhouse, he casually calls to her "Hi, Good-lookin'." When she says she is looking for Curley, Slim jokes that she must not be looking very hard because Curley just entered their house. She becomes "suddenly apprehensive" and hurries away, evidently afraid of her new husband.

When Lennie says twice that he thinks Curley's wife is "purty," George pulls Lennie's ear and sternly tells him to keep away from her. Even simple-minded Lennie has a premonition of danger and "Cried out suddenly, 'I don' like this place, George. This ain't no good place. I wanna get outa here.'" George says they must stay until they get a stake, even though he doesn't like it any better than Lennie. George says, "We can't help it, Lennie." The two men are trapped by their lack of money.

Steinbeck has painted the men and the woman in this novel in their barest, most elemental terms. Lennie, in particular, is described as walking like a bear in the first chapter and drinking like a dog from the pool of water. He has simple, animal instincts and responses: he likes to pet soft things, he admires the beauty of Curley's wife, and he wants to get away from the bad place of the ranch. George admits they are trapped by society. They had to run from the last job because of Lennie's behavior, and now they must stay in this dangerous place because there is nowhere else to go.

This naturalistic portrayal of life—man victimized by his instincts, by society, by the forces of nature, by chance—is balanced primarily by the portraits of Slim and George. Slim recognizes the beauty of Curley's wife without becoming entrapped by it, and he is a recognized authority on everything. He acknowledges the bad with the good and is an example of man at his best. When his bitch has nine pups, he drowns four because she cannot feed all of them. There is no anger or judgment in Slim's decisions, only recognition of necessity. George, through his care of Lennie, is also lifted up out of the bestial. George protects and defends Lennie, even to the point of sacrificing his comfort and well-being. Even though it is unlikely George could ever achieve his dream, he could certainly live more comfortably without Lennie, but he knows Lennie could not survive without someone to take care of him. This caring for the helpless is paralleled by Candy and his old dog. The ancient dog walks lamely, is half blind, and smells. Candy feeds the dog milk because it has no teeth and can't chew. Carlson hates the old dog and can't understand why Candy still keeps it alive. Carlson suggests to Slim that he get Candy to shoot the old dog and give him a pup to raise. Carlson's insensitivity goes to the core of this issue. George and Slim understand that life is measured by more than bare necessity and self-interest; Carlson does not.

Light and dark become symbols for the Manichean cosmos of the ranch. At the beginning of the chapter, the sun "threw a bright dust-laden bar through one of the side windows", and when Curley's wife appears, "the rectangle of sunshine in the doorway was cut off." The forces of good and the forces of evil come into conflict in this novel: there is no light not subdued or cut into bars. Even in Chapter 1, the time of day is evening. This play of light and shadow continues throughout the story.

Chapter 2 continues the theme of loneliness. The boss regards George with suspicion for his connection with Lennie. "Well, I ain't seen one guy take so much trouble for another guy. I just like to know what your interest is." Slim, a loner himself, regards George and Lennie's relationship as unusual among migrant ranch workers. Curley's wife is looking for something, for her husband, or any other man, just as Curley spends much of his time looking for her.

## Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

### New Characters

Whit: one of the common farm hands who also lives in the bunkhouse

Crooks: a stable hand

### Summary

Later that same Friday, Slim and George return to the bunkhouse. Outside the other men play horseshoes, while inside Slim and George discuss Lennie. According to George, he and Lennie were born in the same town. George knew Lennie's Aunt Clara who had raised Lennie from infancy. When she died, George became his caregiver. George denies that Lennie is dumb, saying instead that he is simple. He confesses that he played tricks on Lennie in the past but stopped when he realized Lennie's loyalty was so strong that he would do anything George required.

George also tells Slim why he and Lennie left their last job in Weed. Lennie had seen a girl's dress that he thought was pretty, so he reached out to touch it. When he did, the girl began to scream. Lennie panicked, gripped the dress, and wouldn't let go until George hit him in the head with a fence picket. When the girl reported that she had been raped, Lennie was in danger of being lynched, so the two men fled.

When Lennie comes in, hiding a newborn pup that Slim has given him, George demands that he give it back to its mother. He explains that Lennie will kill the pup if it isn't returned to its mother. Slim commends George for his efforts and agrees that Lennie is a "nice fella," a good-hearted person who "ain't mean," a childlike man.

Candy and his lame dog come in, followed by Carlson, a ranch hand. After complaining about the smell of the old dog, Carlson suggests shooting it to put it out of its misery. Candy refuses, saying that the dog has been his companion for many years. Carlson presses the issue and will not be put off by Candy's remonstrances. They are interrupted by Whit, another ranch hand, who shows them a western magazine and a letter to the editor written by a man who had worked on the ranch three months before.

When conversation turns back to Candy's dog, and Slim agrees with Carlson that the dog is no good to anyone, Candy yields to the pressure. Carlson, his gun in his pocket, leads the dog out of the bunk while Candy lies staring at the ceiling. The silence that follows is uncomfortable for all.

After the shot has sounded, Crooks, the stable buck, comes to the bunkhouse for Slim. The two of them leave to go to the barn to mend a mule's foot with hot tar.

During a card game with Whit, George is invited to go to Susie's place, one of the local whorehouses. When Curley comes looking for his wife, he hints that he is going to confront Slim about her whereabouts. The men in the bunkhouse follow him to the barn to watch the match. George and Lennie are left in the room. Candy, forgotten, remains on his bunk facing the wall.

In this private moment, Lennie again prods George to tell him again of their dream home. Lennie becomes fixated on tending the rabbits. As George describes the ten-acre farm, Candy is drawn into their dream. To become a partner in their dream, he offers to give George \$350 of the \$600 George says he would need to buy the farm. George agrees. All three are excited at the now realistic prospect of getting the farm.

Obviously irritated, Slim returns to the bunkhouse followed closely by an apologetic Curley. Carlson verbally attacks Curley, calling him "yella as a frog belly." Even Candy adds an insult, mentioning Curley's gloved

hand, “Glove fulla vaseline.” When Curley turns his glare to Lennie, Lennie is still smiling at the idea of the farm and the rabbits. Curley, however, thinks Lennie is laughing at the insults directed at him.

Curley attacks Lennie, bringing blood from his nose. Then Curley attacks his stomach and cuts off his wind. Lennie cries out and tries to escape. It is only when George has directed him to fight back that Lennie makes a move at Curley. As Curley swings to hit Lennie again, Lennie catches Curley’s fist in his own big hand and crushes it. He brings Curley to the floor “flopping like a fish on a line, and his closed fist was lost in Lennie’s big hand.”

When George finally gets Lennie to release Curley, his hand is mutilated. Lennie is miserable, insisting that he didn’t want to hurt anybody, and George is afraid that the boss will fire him and Lennie. Slim convinces Curley not to rat on Lennie, telling him to say he got his hand stuck in a machine. If not, he and the men will tell what really happened and everyone will laugh at Curley.

Lennie’s only concern is that George won’t let him tend the rabbits on their dream ranch because of what he did to Curley. George reassures him that he didn’t do anything wrong.

### **Discussion and Analysis**

Chapter 3 focuses on relationships, the code of conduct observed by the migrant ranch workers and their values. Their heroes come from the Western magazines that they read and accumulate. These heroes, unlike themselves, are always champions, triumphing over every situation. Though the tales in the magazines are unreal, and something the ranch men publicly scoff at, they offer heroes in whom the men secretly believe. Whit introduces the Western magazines to the story, and it is Slim who most symbolizes the heroes they portray.

When George and Slim discuss Lennie, George speaks of him “proudly,” as if he were George’s child. Then, with Slim’s “Godlike eyes fastened on him,” George makes his “confession” of the cruel jokes he has played on Lennie in the past. Even when he beat him, Lennie never got mad or lifted his hand against George. He describes one incident to demonstrate Lennie’s devotion to him.

“One day a bunch of guys was standin’ around up on the Sacramento River. I was feelin’ pretty smart. I turns to Lennie and says, ‘Jump in.’ An’ he jumps. Couldn’t swim a stroke. He damn near drowned before we could get him. An’ he was so damn nice to me for pullin’ him out. Clean forgot I told him to jump in. Well, I ain’t done nothing like that no more.”

The loneliness of a migrant worker’s life is echoed in George’s words:

“I ain’t got no people. . . . I seen the guys that go around on the ranches alone. That ain’t no good. They don’t have no fun. After a long time they get mean. They get wantin’ to fight all the time.”

But his special relationship with Lennie has a price. According to George, Lennie’s “a God damn nuisance most of the time . . . because he’s so dumb.”

His growing confidence in Slim enables George to confess to him what had happened in Weed that forced them to move on. Slim makes no judgments. With his eyes level and unwinking, he again absolves Lennie of any wrongdoing, saying, “He ain’t mean. . . . I can tell a mean guy a mile off.” As if to reinforce this simplicity and innocence, Lennie enters the bunkhouse beaming with delight, holding the brown and white pup Slim has given him.

Lennie tries to conceal the pup against his stomach, but George grabs Lennie and removes the tiny newborn pup. George explains to Lennie that the pup must sleep with its mother or it will die. When Lennie leaves for the barn, Slim comments, “He’s jes’ like a kid.” George bets that Lennie will sleep out in the barn by the dogs.

Lennie’s childlike, inherently good nature, and George’s power over him are displayed when Curley attacks him later that Friday night. Though Curley has pounded Lennie’s face, Lennie still stands with his hands at his side calling to George for help. Only when George has given Lennie the command does the hulking man make any sort of move at Curley. Lennie, even then, does not unleash a ferocious anger; he simply stops Curley’s fist and holds it. He does not mean for Curley’s fist to be crushed; he simply does not know his own strength. Even when the fight has ended, Lennie is crying to George that he “didn’t wanta hurt him.” Lennie hasn’t been angry, only scared.

Steinbeck draws a parallel between George and Lennie and the crippled Candy and his old dog. Like George, who watches over Lennie, Candy is the custodian of a sick and lame dog that has outlived its usefulness. But his dog is the one thing the lonely stable swamper has that passes for a friend. Carlson’s shooting of the dog with his Luger foreshadows the scene between George and Lennie in the final chapter. “I ought to of shot that dog myself,” he tells George. “I shouldn’t ought to of let no stranger shoot my dog.” Candy’s regret is that he shirked his responsibility to his old friend and violated the code of conduct. Now completely alone, Candy is drawn into George and Lennie’s dream. Desperately he offers them his hard-earned bankroll of \$350.

“Maybe if I give you guys my money, you’ll let me hoe in the garden even after I ain’t no good at it. An’ I’ll wash dishes an’ little chicken stuff like that. But I’ll be on our own place. . . . You seen what they done to my dog tonight? They says he wasn’t no good to himself nor nobody else. When they can me here I wisht somebody’d shoot me. But they won’t do nothing like that. I won’t have no place to go, an’ I can’t get no more jobs.”

Another example of the code that governs the lives of these men can be seen in Curley’s response to having his hand crushed by Lennie. Rather than admit he was bested by another man, he chooses to lie and say that it was caught in a machine. Slim, the quiet Western hero, comes to the rescue of George and Lennie.

“I think you got your han’ caught in a machine. If you don’t tell nobody what happened, we ain’t going to. But you jus tell an’ try to get this guy canned and we’ll tell ever’body, an’ then will you get the laugh.”

Crushing Curley’s hand creates problems for the future. Now Curley hates Lennie and would enjoy seeing him destroyed. It is just a matter of time.

There is sufficient symbolism in this chapter to foreshadow Lennie’s and George’s fate. The chapter opens with evening brightness outside the bunkhouse but darkness inside. Even turning on the tin-shaded electric light above the card table merely creates an oasis of light, leaving the bunk house “still in the dark.” George plays solitaire with a deliberate slowness after Carlton shoots Candy’s old dog. The game symbolizes his ultimate state of solitude, as well as the naturalistic forces of chance and fate. Lennie reaches for a face card and wants to know why “both ends are the same,” and George says that’s just the way the cards are made. Finally, Lennie is afraid the fight with Curley, even though not his fault, will be grounds for not letting him tend the rabbits.

Throughout the first part of the novel, no one thinks the farm will become a reality, if the farm even exists. But describing the farm is like a mantra. George’s voice becomes “warmer” when describing their ten acres: shack, chicken run, orchard, pig pen, smoke house, river with salmon, vegetable garden, and assorted animals, including Lennie’s beloved rabbits. However, details add unreality to the dream: catching a hundred salmon,

cream so thick it must be cut with a knife, selling a few eggs for whiskey money, and not having to work hard more than six or seven hours a day. When Candy offers to pitch in his money, the men fall silent. “They looked at one another, amazed. This thing they had never really believed in was coming true.” During the time of drifting, George and Lennie had comforted themselves with an unrealistic dream. Now, perhaps, with the help of Candy, the three misfits can escape the cruel society in which they live. The hope is short-lived.

## Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis

### Summary

Chapter 4 takes place on the following Saturday night. It is set in the tidy room of Crooks, the Negro stable buck, who tends to the horses and mends the leather items used with the animals. His room, a shed built against the wall of the barn, is decorated in much the same way as the bunkhouse, except he keeps in his room his leather working tools and medicines. His room also contains more personal items, including books. He has a dictionary and a copy of the California civil code. Crooks is himself crooked, bent to the left by a crooked spine. Steinbeck describes him as a “proud, aloof man,” who keeps his distance and demands that the others on the ranch keep theirs.

Crooks is sitting on his bed rubbing medicine onto his back when Lennie appears at his doorway, smiling. He explains that he has come into the barn to look at his puppy. He says that the others have gone into town and that he has gotten lonely. Though Crooks is at first reluctant to have one of the white farm hands in his room, he eventually yields.

Crooks decides aloud that Lennie is completely crazy and that Lennie often doesn’t understand and can’t remember what George talks about. He recognizes, too, the need of one man to have the company of another, even if it is just someone to talk to, who can’t understand completely.

Enjoying his intellectual superiority over Lennie, Crooks begins to taunt him, telling him to imagine that George never came back, and asking Lennie what he’d do. Lennie, not understanding, thinks that someone has hurt George and becomes angry. Crooks calms him and explains that he was just trying to make Lennie see how lonely things are for the only black man on the ranch. He cries to Lennie, telling him that books are not enough; reading doesn’t take the place of the companionship he is denied simply because of his color.

Lennie remains oblivious to Crooks’s point and returns, instead, to the dream of the two men to buy their farm. Crooks is scornful, saying that he’s seen hundreds of men come along with the same dream.

When Candy enters the barn looking for Lennie, Crooks calls him into his room. Candy, a little embarrassed, enters and comments that this is the first time he’s ever been in Crooks’s room even though they have both been there for a long time.

Sufficiently recovered, and prompted by Lennie, Candy returns to his original topic, the rabbits they will have on their farm. Crooks interrupts to add that their dream is an impossible one that he has seen shattered every time.

Candy defends their dream, telling Crooks that they already have the needed money in the bank. Crooks becomes drawn into the potential of this dream-about-to-become-a-reality, and he offers to work for free if they will just let him in on it.

At this moment, Curley’s wife enters. Lennie stares at her, fascinated by her beauty. Curley and Crooks scowl at her, and then each, in turn, encourages her to leave. She resists, arguing that she too should have someone she can talk to. Candy flares and stands up, insisting that she leave. He declares he is not afraid of

her trying to get them fired, because they have a farm of their own to go to. She laughs, saying that she's seen lots of men with that dream. Candy returns her derisive laugh and declares that the men will not talk to her.

Curley's wife then turns her attention to Lennie, asking him where the bruises on his face came from. Candy becomes angry and threatens to tell George on her.

Crooks stands up with Candy and tells Curley's wife that she has no business there and he insists that she leave his room. Curley's wife turns on him, scornful, and reminds him that she can easily have him hanged. It is enough to crush Crooks and he submits completely. Candy returns the threat, saying that they would reveal that she had set him up. She retaliates, saying that nobody would believe them. Candy concedes that she is right.

Candy is finally successful in getting her to leave by telling her that he hears the men returning from town.

When she slips out, Crooks asks the others to go. Candy speaks up, saying that Curley's wife has no business speaking to him that way. Crooks, though, remains in his completely submissive state.

George, coming into the barn looking for Lennie, is hailed into Crooks's room. He openly objects to Lennie being in Crooks's room. When Candy begins to tell George about the figuring he's been doing about their farm, George stops him, reminding him that he was to tell no one.

George orders the two men out of Crooks's room. As the three men are leaving, Crooks, having been reminded of his place as a black man among whites, calls out to Candy and tells him to forget his offer to work for them for free. He says that he had only been joking about wanting to go with them to their farm.

The chapter ends, as it began, with Crooks sitting on his bed rubbing his back with liniment.

### **Discussion and Analysis**

This chapter focuses on the four lonely misfits: Crooks, Lennie, Candy, and Curley's wife. Crooks is crippled physically, made crooked by his twisted spine. He is socially alienated by his color and emotionally detached by his isolation. He lives alone, with a manure pile under his window and no one to talk to. He can't even play cards with the others in the bunkhouse because he is black and the men say he stinks. When Lennie comes to his door looking for companionship, Crooks first tries to send him away, but Lennie is not easily dismissed. With George gone to the whorehouse Lennie is lonely, just as Crooks is secretly lonely, although the hurt Crooks feels prevents him from admitting his loneliness.

After a while Crooks decides that it is safe to talk to Lennie, since Lennie is obviously "crazy as a wedge." He tells Lennie about his childhood, revealing his days as a boy on a chicken ranch, playing with the white kids. He gets excited about the idea of having someone to listen to him. But Lennie doesn't understand him, and he isn't even listening. He is more concerned about the puppies in the barn and the rabbits they're going to get. Envious of Lennie's relationship with George, Crooks teases and torments him. He asks Lennie to imagine that George has left him for good, that he got hurt, and that Lennie will never see his friend George again. Crooks takes pleasure in his torture of the frightened Lennie. "Want me ta tell ya what'll happen?" he asks Lennie. "They'll take ya to the booby hatch. They'll tie ya up with a collar, like a dog." But when he sees the danger of upsetting Lennie, he reassures him that George will return.

Lennie does not readily understand, so the lonely Crooks explains that just playing horseshoes in the evening and then coming in to nothing but books isn't enough.

"You got George. You know he's goin' to come back. S'pose you didn't have nobody. Sure you could play horseshoes till it got dark, but then you got to read books. Books ain't no

good. A guy needs somebody - to be near him." He whined, "A guy goes nuts if he ain't got nobody. . . . a guy gets too lonely an' he gets sick."

When the misfit Candy enters Crooks's room, Crooks finds it "difficult . . . to conceal his pleasure with anger." As if to emphasize Crooks's isolation, Candy comments that although both he and Crooks have been on the ranch a long time, he has never been in Crooks's room.

With his dog gone, we see that Lennie and George have become Candy's "somebody." Candy knows that Lennie will not understand the figuring he has done about making a profit from the rabbits, but it doesn't matter. Candy needs their dream of getting a ranch, and he needs Lennie as an audience.

The crippled Crooks is temporarily strengthened when he is taken into the confidences of these two white ranch hands. He talks to them simply as other men, worthy of their confidences regarding the dream farm. He goes so far as admitting that he wants a part of their dream. They even consider letting him join them there.

Their plans are interrupted when Curley's wife, the biggest misfit of them all, comes into the barn. Her face is heavily made up and her lips slightly parted. She is breathing hard as though she has been running. Deprived of her husband, who has gone with the others to the whorehouse, she, too, is looking for one thing: companionship. But Crooks and Candy make her unwelcome and she confronts them. For all of her inexperience and lack of education, she is perceptive and she shows a deep insight into things.

"Funny thing . . . If I catch any one man, and he's alone, I get along fine with him. But just let two of the guys get together an you won't talk. Jus' nothing but mad. . . . You're all scared of each other, that's what."

The men do not sympathize with Curley's wife. They do not take her into their circle, but insist repeatedly that she leave.

"I ain't giving you no trouble. Think I don't like to talk to somebody ever' once in a while? Think I like to stick in that house alla time?"

She is disenchanted with her husband, who "Spends all his time sayin' what he's gonna do to guys he don't like, and he don't like nobody." She is so desperate for company that she has to come out to the barn to talk to the weak ones that the others left behind, "a bunch of bindle stiffs — a nigger an' a dum-dum and a lousy ol' sheep—an likin' it because they ain't nobody else."

She presses Lennie for an explanation of the bruises on his face and correctly guesses that he was the cause of Curley's broken hand. "I'm glad you bust up Curley a little bit. He got it comin' to him. Sometimes I'd like to bust him myself."

Imbued with a newfound strength, Crooks stands up to Curley's wife, as Candy does. Crooks, though, is immediately whipped back down. She brandishes in his face her power to take his life. She reminds him, "Nigger, I could have you strung up on a tree so easy it ain't even funny." Not even Candy can deny that she could have Crooks lynched on a whim.

Thoroughly beaten back into his socially crippled stage, Crooks tells the men to leave his room with the manure pile outside. He may not enjoy his rights—rights to isolation—but they are at least his. When George returns to find Lennie, Crooks even retracts his request to join the men on their dream farm. He instead finds comfort in the routine of his old life, a life of pain and liniment.



Evidence of man's essential cruelty appears in this chapter. Crooks baits Lennie with the idea that George might never come back; only when Lennie becomes threatening does Crooks back off and placate the frightened Lennie. Curley's wife admits feelings of hostility toward her husband and laughs at the idea of the farm. "I seen too many of you guys. If you had two bits in the worl', why you'd be in gettin' two shots of corn with it and suckin' the bottom of the glass." When Curley's wife says she might get some rabbits of her own, Crooks knows that she has no "rights messing around here at all." In trying to protect Lennie, Crooks opens himself to attack. Curley's wife viciously turns on Crooks and threatens him because he is a "Nigger" who cannot afford to open his "trap." When Candy says he will tell if she tries to frame Crooks, she replies, "Nobody'd listen to you."

## Chapter 5 Summary and Analysis

### Summary

Chapter 5 takes place in the barn on the following Sunday afternoon. As the men are playing horseshoes outside, Lennie sits alone in the barn. He is thinking and worrying about his dead puppy, upset that he accidentally killed it even though he didn't bounce it very hard. He debates with himself over whether this is a bad thing. It is not bad enough to mean he must go and hide at the clearing, but it may be bad enough to make George so mad he won't let Lennie tend the rabbits when they buy their ranch. Deciding that George will be angry, he throws the puppy across the barn. Shortly thereafter he retrieves the puppy and buries it in the hay.

When Curley's wife comes into the barn, Lennie declares that he will not talk to her because George has told him not to. If he does, Lennie will not be allowed to take care of the rabbits. Curley's wife stays, saying that she just wants someone to talk to, and she insists that the others won't be mad because they will not know.

With Lennie listening, she tells him in detail how she could have been an actress in the movies. She even confesses, as she hasn't before, that she doesn't like her husband.

Lennie, stroking his puppy throughout her discourse, shows no signs of listening to her. When she finishes talking, he begins speaking on the subject which has occupied his mind, escaping punishment for killing the puppy and being allowed to tend the rabbits.

Curley's wife asks him why he likes rabbits so much. He tells her that he likes to pet them because they are so soft. She says that she feels the same way about silk and velvet. Deciding aloud that he is "nuts" but "like a big baby," she takes Lennie's hand and lets him stroke her soft hair.

When he strokes harder, she angrily tells him not to mess it up. As she tries to jerk her head away, he closes his fingers and hangs on to her hair. In a panic to silence her scream, he closes his hand over her mouth, asking her to please be quiet, so George won't be mad and forbid him to tend the rabbits. With one hand over her face and the other at the back of her head, he shakes her. When he lays her on the ground, she is still and quiet. He has broken her neck. He realizes that she is dead and that he has done another bad thing. He covers her partly with hay. Listening to the men at horseshoes, he remembers that George has told him to go back to the river and wait in the bushes if something like this happens. Taking the puppy with him, he sneaks out of the barn.

After Lennie has left, Candy comes into the barn looking for him. Instead he finds Curley's wife. He runs out again and comes back with George. George realizes what has happened and says that they will have to tell the others and have Lennie locked up since he'd starve out on his own. Candy suggests letting Lennie escape since Curley will want him lynched. George agrees that the others will want Lennie lynched. Both men recognize that their dream of the ranch is dead along with Curley's wife.

Declaring that he will not let the men hurt Lennie, George tells Candy that he is going back to the bunkhouse. Candy is to give George some time to return to the bunkhouse and then go tell the others about Curley's wife. George is going to act as if he didn't already know. When George is gone, Candy curses Curley's dead wife for messing up everything.

Following their plan, Candy calls the men into the barn. Curley at once decides that Lennie is responsible. Showing more concern for getting Lennie than for his dead wife, Curley and Carlson go for their guns. Slim, left alone with George in the barn, convinces George that locking Lennie up would be no better an alternative than what Curley and Carlson have planned.

When Carlson returns, he announces that his pistol is gone and proclaims that Lennie has taken it. Arranging quickly for another gun, and for someone to get the deputy sheriff, Curley asks George whether he plans to join in the chase. George agrees to come, but he asks if they can just try to catch Lennie without killing him. Curley refuses emphatically.

The chapter closes, as it opened, in the still barn.

### **Discussion and Analysis**

Foreshadowing plays an important part in the story. From the dead mouse in Chapter 1, Steinbeck prepares the reader for death. He uses foreshadowing again as Chapter 5 unfolds. Once again Lennie has unintentionally killed something he wants desperately to keep alive—the brown and white puppy. He is terribly sorry, not because he really understands that his actions have caused another death, but because he fears that the worst possible thing will happen: George will be mad and will follow through on his promise not to let Lennie tend the rabbits.

Lennie is still absorbed in these thoughts while Curley's wife is confiding in him. He has no interest in the woman and views her only as a threat to his dream of tending the rabbits. Just as Crooks had said to Lennie, she expresses the strong need to have an audience, a companion who will listen. When she finally gets Lennie still, "her words tumbled out in a passion of communication, as though she hurried before her listener could be taken away."

Like the others on the ranch she has her own dream which she tries to share, her lost dream of being an actress. "I coulda made somethin' of myself," she tells him. "Maybe I will yet." She describes her chance at age 15 to leave town with a traveling show: "If I went, I wouldn't be livin' like this, you bet."

But Lennie is not attentive to her desperation. She even has to ask him if he's listening. Still, she goes on to confide in him something she "ain't told . . . to nobody before," —that she doesn't like her husband. She hurriedly married him only after she didn't get a letter from Hollywood. Her observation is that Curley "ain't a nice fella." Just as Crooks, she feels most comfortable with Lennie, after she decides that he is too crazy to remember all that she says so that it couldn't possibly be used against her. But Lennie's only concern is the dead puppy.

"Maybe," he says to her, "if I took this pup out and throwed him away George wouldn't never know. An' then I could tend the rabbits without no trouble."

As something of a reward for his willingness to listen, she lets him stroke her hair. Ironically, Lennie doesn't reach for her hair. Instead it is Curley's wife who puts his hand on her head.

He moved his hand a little and her hoarse cry came out. Then Lennie grew angry. "Now don't," he said. "I don't want you to yell. You gonna get me in trouble jus' like George says you will. . . . Don't you go yellin'," he said, and he shook her; and her body flopped

like a fish. And then she was still, for Lennie had broken her neck.

As with the puppy and the many mice before, Lennie unintentionally kills the pretty, soft thing he wanted to pet. With this one act, the death of Curley's wife, comes the climax of the story, and it brings with it the death of all their dreams.

Candy's concern, when he brings George to see Curley's wife's body, is in part about Lennie. But his "greatest fear" is that their dream will die. He asks George if they can still pursue the dream, but for George the dream is already dead. As Candy watches George go, his sorrow and his anger grow into words.

"You God damn tramp," he said viciously. "You done it, di'n't you? I s'pose you're glad. Ever'body knowed you'd mess things up. You wasn't no good. You ain't no good now, you lousy tart. . . . I could of hoed in the garden and washed dishes for them guys."

When Candy is "blinded with tears," they are tears for the death of the dream, not for the death of Curley's wife or for the approaching death of Lennie.

To George the dream only existed as part of his relationship with Lennie. With Lennie's imminent end, his and George's dream farm is tossed on to the refuse heap with all of the other hundreds of similar ranch hands' dreams. As Crooks and Curley's wife had predicted, this dream, like the others, will not come true.

When the others come in, George tries to find a way to keep Lennie alive. Just as Candy had argued to keep his old, crippled dog alive, George searches for a way to keep his friend alive. He asks Slim if they couldn't just lock him away, instead of killing him. Slim tells George what he already knows, that locking Lennie away will be even worse. Death at the hands of Curley will be equally bad, for Curley, intent on revenge, more for his shattered hand than for his dead wife, wants Lennie to suffer. "I'm gonna shoot the guts outa that big bastard myself, even if I only got one hand. I'm gonna get 'im." George's only real choice is to handle Lennie's death himself.

The sympathy Candy expresses as George and the other men begin their pursuit of Lennie could be for either of his friends. When he says softly "Poor bastard," he may be referring to Lennie. He has said Lennie is "such a nice fella," and he knows that Lennie will now be hunted down and shot for an act he did not intend to commit. But Candy may also be referring to George, whom he knows will lose a faithful companion, just as Candy himself had done just two days before. As he did when his own pet was about to be shot, Candy lies down, now in the barn, awaiting the sound of the gun. He understands how George feels about the approaching death of Lennie.

Steinbeck uses the interplay of light and dark as well as movement inside the barn to symbolize the tragedy as it happens. When the chapter opens, the afternoon sun "sliced" through cracks in the barn wall and "lay in bright lines on the hay." When Curley's wife enters and speaks to Lennie, the sun is going down and the sun streaks are over the heads of the horses. After Lennie breaks her neck, Curley's wife lies half-covered with hay in light that "was growing soft." She appears very pretty and simple. Steinbeck writes that a moment settles and appears to hold still, then sluggishly moves on. Candy discovers the body and runs out to get George, but the barn is "alive now" with the disturbed movement of the horses. As the men all leave to find Lennie, Candy is left in the barn that is "darkening gradually" with the horses shifting in their stalls. Candy covers his eyes with his arm.

## Chapter 6 Summary and Analysis

## Summary

This final chapter takes place where the first chapter began, at the green pool of the Salinas River in the late afternoon. As before, Lennie comes to the sandy clearing and goes to the pool to drink.

Sitting on the bank Lennie begins to hallucinate and he talks to his dead Aunt Clara who had raised him. She scolds him, saying the same things George has always said to him at such times. When she disappears, a gigantic rabbit takes her place. It tells Lennie that he isn't worthy of tending rabbits. It tells him that George is going to beat him and leave him. When George comes out of the brush, the rabbit too disappears.

Lennie, at once, confesses that he has done a bad thing and invites George to scold him. George tries, but only with Lennie's prompting finishes, going through their usual routine.

When George hears the men closing in on them, he tells Lennie to look across the river. As he describes for the last time the farm that he and Lennie have so long dreamed of, he lifts Carlson's gun from his side pocket. With great difficulty he points it at the back of Lennie's head, and as his hand shakes violently, George pulls the trigger.

The men then quickly come out of the brush to join him in the clearing. Slim comes over to where George is sitting and sits beside him, consoling him.

Carlson asks how it happened. George lies and says that he took the gun from Lennie and shot him with it.

Slim, still at George's side, says again that George only did what he had to do. The two of them depart up the same trail that had first brought George and Lennie into this clearing. Curley and Carlson are left standing in the clearing watching them go.

## Discussion and Analysis

Completing their cycle, George and Lennie end this journey where they started it, back at the pond. As it was in the beginning when they arrived, it is the end of day, late afternoon in a "pleasant shade" by the "deep green" pool of the Salinas River. Symbolically, Steinbeck describes a water snake being eaten by a heron. As the "tail waved frantically" down the heron's beak, a strong gust of wind makes waves in the surface of the water and drives through the tops of the trees. When the wind dies down, the heron is awaiting the arrival of another snake swimming in the water, but the bird flies off because Lennie arrives.

Steinbeck parallels the action of the beginning, but there are contrasts. In the opening chapter Lennie walks heavily, dragging his feet the way a bear drags his paws. He drops his blankets and flings himself down to drink with long gulps, "snorting into the water like a horse." After he drinks, he dabbles his fingers in the water and splashes it. Then, he imitates George by sitting with his knees drawn up and embraced by his arms. In the opening, Lennie can be noisy, thoughtless, and heedless, secure in the knowledge that George is there to take care of him. It is a sharp contrast to the ending of the novel in which Lennie's actions are quieter and betray his fear of being caught.

In this scene at the end, Lennie comes quietly to the pool's edge and barely touches his lips to the water. When a bird skitters over the dry leaves, Lennie's head jerks up, and he does not finish drinking until he spots the bird. Then, he sits on the bank so he can watch the trail's entrance. He sits embracing his knees with his arms, waiting for George to come, but this time George cannot rescue him.

When Lennie is visited by the hallucinations of his dead Aunt Clara and the gigantic rabbit, they speak to him in his voice. With these characters he chastises himself, saying the things that George would normally say. Though the comments are negative and harsh, they are still comforting. Lennie knows that when George says those things he doesn't really mean them. In fact, George has said them so often to Lennie that they have

become part of a routine response, and the routine itself has become a comfort.

George has deliberately misdirected the others in pursuit of Lennie so that he could come back to this predetermined meeting place. He has brought Carlson's gun because he knows there is no escape for Lennie. Even if he could take Lennie and run, he knows they will be pursued until they are caught. Although they were not followed after the incident at Weed because it had not been as severe, the murder of Curley's wife is inescapable for them.

In this situation, George has only two choices. Either he can let Curley and Carlson shoot Lennie, or he can do it himself. George is now in the same position Candy had been in with the old dog that he had loved so much. But Candy had let someone else, a stranger, end his companion's life and he regretted it, and George is determined not to make that same mistake. If it has to be done, George will do it himself. Lennie means that much to him.

With great difficulty George fires the gun at the place where Carlson had told Candy to shoot the dog, the spot at which the creature would die feeling no pain. George pulls the trigger only after taking Lennie to their dream farm one last time.

With Lennie dead, George sits on the river bank. There is no question of morality as Slim, the God-like, respected ranch hand, comes directly to George's side and sits down. He tells George that he did what was right, what had to be done. Slim understands completely and he consoles George. "Slim twitched George's elbow. 'Come on, George. Me an' you'll go an' get a drink.'"

The others do not understand the drama that has occurred, and even if they knew the truth, they could never understand why George had to do it. "Now what the hell ya suppose is eatin' them two guys?" Carlson asks. Just like the typical "bindle stiff" will never share the devotion of another, Curley and Carlson cannot understand the loss George grieves.

## **Of Mice and Men: Quizzes**

### **Chapter 1 Questions and Answers**

#### **Study Questions**

1. When George and Lennie approach the river, why does George warn Lennie not to drink too much water?
2. What has George told Lennie about that he always remembers even when he forgets everything else?
3. Why does Lennie have a dead mouse in his pocket?
4. Why does George order Lennie not to talk when they get to the ranch?
5. What happened to all of the mice that Lennie's Aunt Clara gave him?
6. Why have George and Lennie run away from Weed?
7. What does Lennie want to eat with his beans?
8. Why does George say that migrant workers who travel from farm to farm are the loneliest people in the world?

9. What dream do George and Lennie share?
10. What does George tell Lennie to do if he gets in trouble at their new job site?

### **Answers**

1. George says Lennie will be sick like he was the night before.
2. Lennie always remembers that he will be the one to tend the rabbits on their dream farm.
3. He is carrying it in his pocket so he can pet it as they walk. He likes to pet soft things.
4. George says that if the boss hears Lennie talk before he sees Lennie work, the two men won't have a chance of getting the job.
5. He killed the mice by petting them too hard.
6. Lennie tried to feel a girl's dress. He wanted to pet the dress but she thought he was attacking her.
7. Lennie wants ketchup to put on his beans.
8. He says migrant workers are lonely because they don't have any family, they don't belong anywhere, and they have nothing to look forward to.
9. They share the dream of buying a small farm together and working it. On this farm Lennie will tend the rabbits and pet them whenever he wants.
10. George tells Lennie to come to this spot where they are camping and hide in the bushes until George comes for him.

## **Chapter 2 Questions and Answers**

### **Study Questions**

1. Where do the ranch hands keep their personal belongings such as soap, razors and magazines?
2. Candy, the old swamper who shows George and Lennie to their bunks, is missing what limb?
3. What evidence does the old swamper give that the ranch boss is a "pretty nice fella"?
4. What evidence is there that the boss is not a working man?
5. According to the old swamper, what is Curley good at?
6. According to the old swamper, why does Curley wear a work glove on his left hand?
7. What is the general attitude toward Curley's wife?
8. Describe Slim, the jerkline skinner.
9. Why does Carlson suggest shooting Candy's dog?

10. What is the understood question that Lennie wants George to ask Slim?

### **Answers**

1. Each ranch hand keeps his personal items in the apple box nailed over his bunk for that purpose.
2. Candy, the old swamper, is missing a hand.
3. Candy says that the boss brought a whole gallon of whiskey to the men in the bunkhouse for Christmas.
4. The boss wears high-heeled boots and spurs.
5. Candy says Curley is good at boxing.
6. Candy says Curley wears the work glove full of Vaseline to keep his hand soft for his new wife.
7. The men think she is flirting with them. Candy calls her a tart; George calls her a tramp. Lennie thinks she is pretty.
8. Slim is a master craftsman. He is an expert with the mules and his authority is respected more than anyone else's on the ranch.
9. Carlson suggests shooting Candy's dog because it is so old and it stinks.
10. Lennie wants George to ask Slim if Lennie can have one of the puppies Slim's dog has just delivered.

## **Chapter 3 Questions and Answers**

### **Study Questions**

1. Why does George say Lennie will want to sleep in the barn that Friday night?
2. According to George, how did he end up traveling with Lennie?
3. What happened that made George stop playing dirty tricks on Lennie?
4. Why did George and Lennie have to flee from Weed?
5. Who makes the final decision on whether or not Candy's old dog should be shot?
6. What is significant about the letter Whit reads from the Western magazine?
7. Why does George agree to let Candy come with them to their dream farm?
8. Why does Curley attack Lennie in the bunk house?
9. Why does Curley agree not to get Lennie fired for crushing his hand?
10. What punishment does Lennie fear he will get for hurting Curley?

### **Answers**

1. George says Lennie will want to sleep with the puppy Slim has said Lennie can have when it is weaned.



2. George says that he and Lennie are both from Auburn and that he knew Lennie's Aunt Clara who raised him. He says that when the aunt died Lennie had just come along with him to work.
3. The last time George played a trick on Lennie, he told Lennie to jump into a river and Lennie did even though he couldn't swim. Before George got him out, he almost drowned. Lennie, however, was thankful to George for getting him out instead of angry for telling him to jump in.
4. George says that he and Lennie had to flee from Weed because Lennie was accused of trying to rape a girl there. In fact, he had only been trying to feel the dress she was wearing.
5. Slim is the one who makes the final decision.
6. The letter was written by a former ranch hand they had known.
7. Candy offers to give George \$350, his life's savings, if they will let him come along. With his money they should be able to buy the farm at the end of the next month so George agrees to let him in on their dream.
8. Curley attacks Lennie because he thinks Lennie is laughing at him after Carlson has called him "yella as a frog belly." In fact, Lennie is smiling at the idea in his head of their farm.
9. Slim convinces Curley that if he tells, everyone will laugh at him for getting beaten up by a retarded man.
10. George has told Lennie that he will not let Lennie tend the rabbits if he does one more bad thing. Lennie is afraid this will be that bad thing.

## Chapter 4 Questions and Answers

### Study Questions

1. Why has Crooks been able to accumulate more personal items than the other ranch hands?
2. What reason does Crooks first give for Lennie not being welcome in his room?
3. According to Crooks, why does a person need a companion?
4. What is Crooks's initial response to Candy's account of the dream farm and what evidence is there that his attitude changes?
5. According to Curley's wife, why are the men afraid to talk to her when there is more than one present?
6. Why doesn't Curley's wife like talking to her husband?
7. What reason does Candy give when he says that they are no longer afraid that Curley's wife will get them fired?
8. What makes Crooks so bold as to confront Curley's wife and tell her to leave his room?
9. How does Candy finally make Curley's wife leave the barn?
10. What does George say about Candy and Lennie visiting with Crooks?

## **Answers**

1. Because of the type of job he has and because Crooks is crippled, he is more permanent than the other men, so he can accumulate personal items without having to worry about how he will carry them with him to the next job.
2. Crooks says at first that Lennie is not welcome in his room because Crooks is not welcome in the bunkhouse.
3. Crooks says that a person who stays alone too long goes “nuts.”
4. Crooks says that the dream will never materialize. He says he has seen hundreds of men chasing the same dream and never catching it. But when he hears that they have the money for the farm in the bank, he becomes more convinced and even offers to work for free if they will let him come with them.
5. Curley’s wife says that the men are “scared of each other... scared the rest is goin’ to get something on you.”
6. Curley’s wife doesn’t like talking to her husband because all he ever wants to talk about is beating up people.
7. Candy explains that they are no longer afraid because they now have somewhere else to go—their own farm.
8. He forgets his own limitations as a black man of the 1930s because Lennie and Candy have come in and treated him as an equal. For a moment, he later explains, he forgot how powerless he really is there.
9. Candy gets Curley’s wife to leave the barn by telling her that he has heard the other men returning from town.
10. George tells them that they should not be in Crooks’s room and that they should not have told him about the farm.

## **Chapter 5 Questions and Answers**

### **Study Questions**

1. What has happened to Lennie’s puppy and why?
2. What two pieces of information does Curley’s wife share with Lennie?
3. Why does Curley’s wife offer to let Lennie caress her hair?
4. How and why does Lennie kill Curley’s wife?
5. Why does George say that they can’t let Lennie escape to live on his own?
6. What is Candy’s greatest fear?
7. When George asks Slim about just trying to catch Lennie instead of killing him, what advice does Slim give George?
8. What makes the men think that Lennie is armed?

9. Where does Curley plan to aim if he shoots Lennie?
10. Who stays with Curley's wife as the others go off in pursuit of Lennie?

### **Answers**

1. Lennie has killed his puppy by bouncing it too hard.
2. Curley's wife tells him about her dream to be an actress, and she tells him her secret that she does not like Curley.
3. Curley's wife says that she shares Lennie's fondness of soft things and since she regards him as "a big baby," she sees no harm in letting him feel the softness of her hair.
4. Lennie kills Curley's wife by breaking her neck because he is shaking her, trying to make her be quiet so he won't get into trouble.
5. George says that Lennie will starve out on his own.
6. Candy's greatest fear is that they will not get the farm.
7. Slim tells George that if they just catch Lennie, he would be strapped down and caged, which would be worse than death.
8. The men think that Lennie is armed because Carlson comes into the barn and announces that his gun is missing.
9. Curley is planning to shoot Lennie in the stomach.
10. Candy stays with Curley's wife.

## **Chapter 6 Questions and Answers**

### **Study Questions**

1. What scenes of death does Steinbeck describe in the beginning of Chapter 6 that parallel the events of the previous chapter and foreshadow the event to come?
2. How does the chapter bring the book full circle?
3. What two imaginary visitors does Lennie have while sitting on the river bank?
4. What is the subject of the conversation Lennie has with his first visitor?
5. What does his second visitor tell Lennie that recalls an earlier conversation he had with Crooks?
6. How is George and Lennie's conversation similar to the one that they had by the pool in Chapter 1?
7. Where has George gotten the gun he takes from his front pocket while sitting with Lennie on the river bank?
8. What evidence is there that George is having a terribly difficult time bringing himself to shoot Lennie?

9. What lie does George tell about the way Lennie died?
10. What evidence is there that Slim understands what has really happened there on the river bank?

### **Answers**

1. A water snake gliding in the pool is caught by a heron and eaten while its tail waves frantically, and a strong wind blows into the clearing and dies down.
2. The book begins and ends at the pool by the clearing.
3. While sitting by the clearing Lennie is visited by a hallucination of his Aunt Clara and of a gigantic rabbit.
4. Aunt Clara accuses Lennie of doing bad things. She tells him how George is always doing nice things for Lennie and taking care of him.
5. The rabbit tells Lennie that George isn't going to let Lennie tend the rabbits and that he's going to beat him with a stick. Like Crooks, the gigantic rabbit says that George is going to leave Lennie and never come back.
6. As in the first chapter, George tells Lennie how easy his life would be if he was alone. And Lennie tells George that he will run off to the hills and find a cave to live in by himself.
7. George has taken the gun he has from Carlson's bunk.
8. The first time George raises the gun to the back of Lennie's head, he can't pull the trigger and lays the gun down again. The second time, when he does fire the gun, his hand is shaking violently.
9. George lets the men believe that he took the gun from Lennie and then shot him in the same attitude as they would have.
10. Slim shows that he understands what George has done as he consoles George and tells him that he has only done what he had to do.

## **Of Mice and Men: Essential Passages**

### **Essential Passages by Character: Lennie Small**

#### **Essential Passage 1: Chapter 1**

Lennie hesitated, backed away, looked wildly at the brush line as though he contemplated running for his freedom. George said coldly, "You gonna give me that mouse or do I have to sock you?"

"Give you what, George?"

"You know God damn well what. I want that mouse."

Lennie reluctantly reached into his pocket. His voice broke a little. "I don't know why I can't keep it. It ain't nobody's mouse. I didn't steal it. I found it lyin' right beside the road."

George's hand remained outstretched imperiously. Slowly, like a terrier who doesn't want to bring a ball to its master, Lennie approached, drew back, approached again. George snapped his fingers sharply, and at the sound Lennie laid the mouse in his hand.

### **Summary**

George and Lennie have stopped for the night at a shady spot beside a river, traveling on their way to a job on a nearby ranch. Having been let off four miles from the ranch by a bus driver who did not want to take the trouble to take two migrant workers that far out of his way, George and Lennie find a place to rest. Lennie, fascinated by soft things, has found a dead mouse beside the road. He is hiding it in his pocket, knowing that George will make him throw it away. Lennie often had mice as pets as a child, given to him by his Aunt Clara, but he always killed them by petting them too hard. Now under George's protection, Lennie follows him closely, with dog-like devotion. And it is in this way that George occasionally treats him.

### **Essential Passage 2: Chapter 2**

Lennie cried out suddenly—"I don't like this place, George. This ain't no good place. I wanna get outta here."

"We gotta keep it till we get a stake. We can't help it, Lennie. We'll get out jus' as soon as we can. I don't like it no better than you do." He went back to the table and set out a new solitaire hand. "No, I don't like it," he said. "For two bits I'd shove out of here. If we can get jus' a few dollars I the poke we'll shove off and go up the American River and pan gold. We can make maybe a couple of dollars a day there, and we might hit a pocket."

Lennie leaned eagerly toward him. "Le's go, George. Le's get outta here. It's mean here."

### **Summary**

George and Lennie, having arrived late to the ranch where they have secured a job, sit in the bunk house, meeting their new companions. Curly, the boss's surly son, has already developed a dislike for Lennie, which is not unusual since Curly dislikes and distrusts everyone. His wife, however, enjoys hanging around the bunkhouse, pretending to be in search of her husband. At Lennie's first introduction to Curly's wife, he is enthralled by her prettiness. George, however, recognizes trouble when he sees it, and he warns Lennie to stay away from her. Lennie had found himself in serious trouble on their last job when he tried to touch a girl's dress, panicking and unable to let go when she screamed. Accused of rape, Lennie and George had to escape by hiding in a ditch. George is beginning to see signs that a similar situation might occur. Suddenly, Lennie sees the danger and wants to leave the ranch. "This ain't no good place," he says, detecting the underlying tension among the ranch inhabitants and sensing trouble. George, however, tells him they have to stay, since they are trying to earn money, not just to survive, but to buy a place of their own so they can give up the migrant work.

### **Essential Passage 3: Chapter 6**

George came quietly out of the brush and the rabbit scuttled back into Lennie's brain.

George said quietly, "What the hell you yellin' about?"

Lennie got up on his knees. "You ain't gonna leave me, are ya, George? I know you ain't."

George came stiffly near and sat down beside him. "No."

"I knowed it," Lennie cried. "You ain't that kind."

George was silent.

Lennie said, "George."

"Yeah?"

"I done another bad thing."

"It don't make no difference," George said, and he fell silent again.

### **Summary**

Lennie, after accidentally breaking the neck of Curly's wife, has escaped to the clearing by the river where the story began. This is where George, anticipating the possibility of trouble, had told Lennie to run to and hide if need be. In a quiet panic, Lennie sits by the river and waits, for what he does not know. He has a vision of his Aunt Clara, berating him for doing another bad thing, when he should have been doing what George told him to. Suddenly, a giant rabbit appears and tells him he is worthless, unable to actually care for the rabbits he has so long been wanting. The rabbit tells Lennie how tired George is of him, and how much better George would be without him. At this point, George finds Lennie and the rabbit disappears. Calmly, George approaches Lennie, knowing what he must do. Lennie admits he is done "another bad thing." George, looking at the meaningless of life, says makes no difference.

### **Analysis of Essential Passages**

In the setting of the Great Depression of the 1930s, Lennie is a misfit, an outcast who cannot exist on his own without the guidance and protection of the more worldly-wise, though cynical, George. It is a time when the American Dream has evaporated. Poverty and meanness are the standard order of the day for many. Trapped in this world, Lennie personifies the loss of the American Dream and innocence.

Lennie is enchanted by the sensuous touch of soft things. Whether it is puppies, mice, a dress, or a woman's hair, Lennie abandons himself to the physical comfort he derives from these things. Not meaning anything of a lecherous or destructive nature, Lennie nevertheless finds himself harming that which he loves. In the same way, the American Dream is presented by Steinbeck as a lovely idea of innocence and comfort, but one that has led to economic disaster and despair. Like the dead mouse, that innocence has "broken" the people.

Yet in that innocence, Lennie does have a sense of the evil that is in the world, especially an evil that may be brought on by himself. He describes the ranch as "mean," as unaccepting of the innocence of one such as himself. He has a premonition, as has George, that their time there will end in trouble, though the extent of it is unguessed by Lennie. He simply feels that it is "not a good place" and wants to leave. Yet they must stay for the sake of earning a living. Rather than heeding the warning, George and Lennie stay, seemingly resigned to the disaster that they know will overtake them. Yet they hold on to the dream, believing that, through their own efforts they can make it come true.

Yet they cannot. The innocence of Lennie brings it all to a crashing halt. Devoid of evil, Lennie nevertheless kills. In the same way, the lifestyle that was pursued in the 1920s, not necessarily bad, still brought on hard times for all. But destruction brought on through innocence is destruction nonetheless. Fatalistically, Steinbeck presents the ineffectiveness of the value system that has stabilized the American culture from its beginning. The delusion of meaning in life has brought the people, and the world, to this present crisis. It does not matter whether one is good or bad. All that matters is that one realizes that nothing matters. People are the victims of the fate in which they find themselves. Hopes and dreams of a better, more comfortable life only lead to destruction, both of the dream and the dreamers.

George, knowing that the other men will kill Lennie, decides that he must do it himself. Like Lennie, the dream must die. It does not make a difference anymore. There is no good or bad, in the sense that good will be rewarded and bad punished. This belief is what brought America to its knees, Steinbeck seems to be saying. The innocence of the American Dream brought on the American Nightmare. Thus, the American Dream must die, hopefully by a loving hand.

## Essential Passages by Theme: Friendship

### Essential Passage 1: Chapter 1

George went on. "With us it ain't like that. We got a future. We got somebody to talk to that gives a damn about us. We don't have to sit in no bar room blown' in our jack jus' because we got no place else to go. If them other guys gets in jail they can rot for all anybody give a damn. But not us."

Lennie broke in. "*But not us! An' why? Because...because I got you to look after me, and you got me to look after you, and that's why.*" He laughed delightedly. "Go on now, George!"

"You got it by heart. You can do it yourself."

"No, you. I forget some a' the things. Tell about how it's gonna be."

"O.K. Someday—we're gonna get the jack together and we're gonna have a little house and a couple of acres an' a cow and some pigs and—."

"*An' live off the fatta the lan',*" Lennie shouted. "An' have *rabbits*. Go on, George! Tell about what we're gonna have in the garden and about the rabbits in the cages and about the rain in the winter and the stove, and how thick the cream is on the milk like you can hardly cut it. Tell about that, George."

### Summary

As they camp beside the river, George and Lennie plan their next move as they take on a new job, hoping to make some money. Their dream is to buy a small place that George knows off, owned by an elderly couple the wife of whom needs an operation. For a small price George and Lennie can become home owners, the goal of every true-blooded American, so the idea goes. Their plan is to have a small, self-sufficient farm, where they can be free and independent. More than anything, Lennie is looking forward to the rabbits, which George has promised him that he could take care of. It is scene that has been rehearsed so many times that Lennie can repeat George's words by heart. But a dream always bears repeating. However, more than the dream, they have each other, Lennie and George forever. While other drifters and migrant workers may be solitary, these two have each other for support, protection, and guidance.

### Essential Passage 2: Chapter 4

Crooks said gently, "Maybe you can see now. You got George. You *know* he's goin' to come back. S'pose you didn't have nobody. S'pose you couldn't go into the bunk house and play rummy 'cause you was black. How'd you like that? S'pose you had to sit out here an' read books. Sure you could play horseshoes till it got dark, but then you got to read books. Books ain't no good. A guy needs somebody—to be near him." He whined, "A guy goes nuts if he ain't got nobody. Don't make no difference who the guy is, long's he's with you. I tell ya," he cried, "I tell ya a guy gets too lonely an' he gets sick."



### Summary

It is a Saturday night, and most of the ranch hands are in town. Crooks, the sole black hand, is in his room, a mere shed attached to the barn. He is segregated from the white crew and resents it. He thus guards his imposed privacy, unappreciative when Lennie comes to pay a visit on his way back from seeing his puppy. Reluctantly, Crooks lets him in, more out of sheer loneliness than friendship. The discrimination has given him a cruel streak, and he teases Lennie with the idea that George may never come back. At first, Lennie is unfazed, knowing of George's loyalty. But then, Crooks manages to get him to explore the possibility that at some time, something could happen to George, and Lennie would be alone. When Lennie becomes truly upset, Crooks apologizes, assuring him that George will indeed return. Crooks tries to make Lennie see the point: Lennie has George. Crooks, on the other hand, has no one, simply because he is black. He is excluded from all the activities of the white men, other than work. At night, all he has is his books. But books do not provide true companionship. Crooks is willing to talk to anybody, as long as they are "there."

### Essential Passage 3: Chapter 6

"You ...an' me. Ever'body gonna be nice to you. Ain't gonna be no more trouble. Nobody gonna hurt nobody nor steal from 'em."

Lennie said, "I thought you was mad at me, George."

"No," said George, "No, Lennie. I ain't mad. I never been mad, an' I ain't now. That's a thing I want ya to know."

The voices came close now. George raised the gun and listened to the voices.

Lennie begged, "Le's do it now. Le's get that place now."

"Sure, right now. I gotta. We gotta."

And George raised the gun and steadied it, and he brought the nuzzle of it close to the back of Lennie's head. The hand shook violently, but his face set and his hand steadied. He pulled the trigger. The crash of the shot rolled up the hills and rolled down again. Lennie jarred, and then settled slowly forward to the sand, and he lay without quivering.

### Summary

Lennie, running away from the ranch after the accidental death of Curly's wife, has sought refuge in the place that George had told him to come to in anticipation of trouble. George finds him there after desperately trying to locate him before the other ranch hands, who have a lynching on their minds. George, bowing to the inevitable, has taken Carlson's gun in preparation for what he knows must be done. Lennie admits he has done "another bad thing." George assures him it does not matter. Lennie is afraid that George will leave him, as George has many times threatened to do. Since George never has left him, Lennie finds comfort in hearing once again George's litany of complaint. Reassured that he will not be left alone, Lennie speaks again of their dream of a place of their own. Together, he and George repeat the run of the plans that they have chanted many times before. Knowing he is comforted and now happy, George takes out the gun and painlessly puts Lennie to death.

### Analysis of Essential Passages

In a world that has descended to almost a survival level, true friendship is seen as odd at best. Among the migrant workers especially, the friendship that Lennie and George share is seen as suspicious, as if George is merely using Lennie or taking advantage of him. The meanness and mistrust that the two men find on the ranch is opposite to what they share with each other. The friendship of George and Lennie thus serves as a

backdrop against which the tragedy of the story is played.

George has become, how willingly is uncertain, Lennie's caretaker. After the death of his Aunt Clara, Lennie is unable to care for himself, so George takes him under his wing. At times finds the task a burden, and expresses openly his desire for freedom from responsibility. But Lennie knows that George, in his intense loyalty, would never desert him. Mutual protection and support is a strong foundation for their friendship. Not only that, they also share a dream. Their dream is the American Dream, the dream of a home that they can say they own. At a time when the Dream was fading, the friendship of George and Lennie personifies the continuation of that dream. Whether or not that friendship can continue when reality hits is a matter of perspective.

Crooks personifies the alienation of the minorities, especially in a time of hardship. He is without friends, not from his own choice but from the choice of others. At first he holds his alienation around him like a shield to protect him from emotional hurt. Yet he lets Lennie in, as well as Candy. The three of them are the outcasts, shut out from society because of their "differentness." Yet in their differentness, the need for companionship is still great, as Crooks relates. With the biblical concept of "It is not good that man should be alone," Crooks personifies the need, the physical need, for companionship. Without that, his very life is in question.

The death of Lennie at the hands of George is the ultimate act of friendship. It is clear that Lennie must die. In the self-imposed justice system of the ranch, the men become judge, jury, and executioner. No thought of outside justice is mentioned. In the enclosed world of the ranch, Lennie has committed the ultimate act of "not fitting in." Knowing the outcome, George chooses to take that outcome into his own hands. Rather than Lennie's death be the result of hate and revenge, George chooses to kill Lennie himself, so that he would die out of love.

Yet with that death, Steinbeck seems to be showing the inadequacy of friendship in the modern world. Since ancient times, the idea of self-sacrifice for the sake of a friend has been a given. Yet the world has changed. In fact, that world existed under false pretenses. There is no room in this world for true friendship, at least the kind of friendship that George and Lennie share. Theirs is the old style of friendship based on mutual care, one where each friend is willing to lay down his life for the other. But there is a new definition of friendship. In this world, friendships are created for the benefit of one's self, which is not really friendship at all. This George knows. With resignation, he accepts the world as it is.

## **Of Mice and Men: Characters**

### **Candy**

Candy is the old, disabled ranch hand who is helpless to stop the shooting of his dog and who knows that he too will be banished when he is no longer useful. He is sweetly hopeful of joining Lennie and George on their dream farm, offering to contribute his savings of \$350 to buy the farm.

### **Carlson**

Carlson is a skilled worker, a mechanic at the ranch who assumes an arrogance forbidden the others. He is the one who orders Candy's dog to be put to death. Carlson has no feelings about the animal and no concept that anyone else might care about the old creature. He is insensitive, brutal, violent, and fanatical; his only contributions to the group are destructive. His callousness is especially evident at the end of the novel. Upon seeing Slim and George sadly walk off for a drink after George has shot Lennie, Carlson says, "Now what the hell ya suppose is eatin' them two guys?"

### **Crooks**

Crooks, the despairing old Negro stable worker, lives alone in the harness room, ostracized from the ranch

hands. On the one occasion when he briefly talks to Lennie and Candy, the bunkhouse worker who wants to be part of the dream farm Lennie and George are planning to buy, Crooks tells them they will never attain their dream. Crooks is excluded from the rest of the ranch hands, except at Christmas when the boss brings in a gallon of whiskey for the entire crew.

### **Curley**

Curley, the son of the owner of the ranch where George and Lennie work, is willing to fight at the drop of a hat, yet he is really a coward. Lennie stands up to Curley and crushes his hand in his iron grip. Later, Curley organizes the posse to find Lennie after he has killed Curley's wife.

### **Curley's wife**

Curley's wife (as the boss's son's flirtatious wife, she is not identified by any other name) wanders around the ranch searching for some human contact. She is stereotyped by the men as a "tart." Indeed, she plays the vamp, which enrages her jealous husband. George tells Lennie to avoid her, calling her "poison" and "jailbait." But she is pathetically lonely and had once had dreams of being a movie star. Both she and Crooks crave company and "someone to talk to." On Sunday afternoon, while the others are playing horseshoes, Curley's wife gets Lennie to feel her soft hair. When he begins to muss it, she panics, and he accidentally breaks her neck. When George discovers what has happened, he realizes that their dream is over.

### **George Milton**

George Milton, a migrant laborer, is like a mouse: "small and quick, dark of face, with restless eyes and sharp strong features. Every part of him was defined: small, strong hands, slender arms, a thin and bony nose." George has brains and ambition. He is the most complex of the characters in *Of Mice and Men* because he has not accepted his present lot in life. He has a dream to save money, buy a small farm, and be his own boss. George is loyal in his friendship with Lennie, and he is also remarkably pure of heart. When George is driven to shoot Lennie after Lennie accidentally kills Curley's wife, he destroys his own dream, too. Its fulfillment is doomed by insensitive materialists. Along with the destruction of his dream, George loses the chance to become a better man.

Above all, George is a survivor, proving himself to be shrewdly adaptable to migratory life. Still, he has weaknesses, he yells at Lennie from time to time and needs to feel better about his own ordinariness. But George is essentially a good man. Throughout the novel, he is loyal and committed to Lennie. In fact, George takes complete responsibility for Lennie, even to the point of killing him, because he ultimately feels responsible for Lennie's actions. George had promised Lennie's aunt that he would look out for Lennie, and although George complains about having to take care of him, their friendship gives George someone with whom he can share his dream. By the end of the story, George has achieved some control over his instincts, yet, despite his obvious commitment to Lennie, the mouselike George is helpless to overcome the injustices of an imperfect world.

### **Slim**

Slim, the mule driver, is a superior workman with "God-like eyes" who is kind and perceptive. He alone understands and tries to comfort George at the end of the novel after George has killed Lennie. Emphasis is placed on Slim's skill and craftsmanship; he does his job exceedingly well. Slim is a doer, not a dreamer. "His ear heard more than was said to him, and his slow speech had overtones not of thought, but of understanding beyond thought." Slim is the really heroic man in the novel.

### **Lennie Small**

Lennie Small, an itinerant ranch hand like his friend, George Milton, is a tall, powerful man who is mentally handicapped. He and George share a dream of someday buying their own farm, and Lennie is excited about the prospect of taking care of the rabbits they plan to keep. For a while, it appears as if the dream might come true. Lennie is a good worker and has the strength to do much of the farm work. Yet, handicapped by his lack

of adult intelligence, Lennie is doomed in the world of the migrant worker. Though an innocent and not violent by nature, he has the potential for violence; his incredible strength leads him to accidentally kill the mice and puppies whose fur he likes to stroke. Lennie is repeatedly associated with animals and described as childlike. In the opening scene, for example, he appears dragging his feet "the way a bear drags his paws," and in the book's final chapter, he enters the clearing in the brush "as silently as a creeping bear." Lennie dies because he is incapable of living within society and is in fact a menace. His contact with living creatures, from mice to puppies to Curley's wife, results in destruction. Although his weakness dooms the dream of the farm, it is his innocence that keeps it alive throughout the novel until his death. His brute strength threatens society, yet it is Lennie's extraordinary mixture of human dreams and animal passions that are important. Without Lennie, George is friendless and alone. While their partnership lasts, George and Lennie share a brotherly, mutual concern and loyal companionship. There is joy, security, and comfort in their relationship. As Steinbeck once wrote, "Lennie was not to represent insanity at all but the inarticulate and powerful yearning of all men."

## Of Mice and Men: Themes

### **Idealism vs. Reality**

*Of Mice and Men* tells the story of two simple men who try to escape homelessness, economic poverty, and emotional and psychological corruption. Otherwise, the fate of those who do not abandon the lives they lead as itinerant workers is bleak and dehumanizing. As George tells Slim, the mule driver "I seen the guys that go around on the ranches alone. That ain't no good. They don't have no fun. After a long time they get mean." George and Lennie dream of owning a farm, but by the end of the novel the dream has failed. Their plan is doomed because human fellowship cannot survive in their world and also because their image of the farm is overly idealized. It is likely that even if they had obtained the farm, their lives would not have been as comfortable as they had imagined; they would not have enjoyed the fraternal harmony that is part of their dream. In fact, their dream of contentment in the modern world is unpractical and does not accurately reflect the human condition. Crooks, the black stablehand, expresses his doubts about the dream. "Nobody never gets to heaven, and nobody gets no land. It's just in their head. They're all the time talkie' about it, but it's jus' in their head." Crooks is referring not only to literal ownership but to the dream of contentment about which these simple men fantasize. Implicit in the theme is the ironic idea that maturity involves the destruction of one's dreams. George "matures" by killing Lennie, thus destroying the dream that could not survive in modern civilization. George survives because he leaves behind his unrealistic dreams. Dreaming, however, is humanity's only defense against an indifferent world. The title of the novel itself implies that people are at the mercy of external forces beyond their control. Steinbeck writes with sincere compassion for the victims of these chaotic forces.

### **Alienation and Loneliness**

Loneliness is a recurrent theme in the novel. "Guys like us," George says, "that work on the ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don't belong noplase." Lennie replies: "But not us. And why. Because . . . because I got you to look after me, and you got me to look' after you, and that's why." The alternative to the companionship that George and Lennie share is loneliness. George frequently affirms the fraternity between them. "He's my . . . cousin," George tells the ranch boss. "I told his old lady I'd take care of him " The boss is suspicious of the bond between George and Lennie, and the other characters in turn also question this friendship: they have simply never seen anything like it. In their world, isolation is the norm. Even Slim, who is usually sympathetic and understanding, expresses surprise. "Ain't many guys travel around together. I don't know why. Maybe ever'body in the whole damned world is scared of each other." Distrust is the quality of the modern world in which people live in alienation from one another. Later, the theme of loneliness is further explored in the solitude borne by Crooks and Curley's wife, who dies as a result of seeking human companionship. Both these characters crave company and, as Curley's wife says, "someone to talk to."

Despite everyone's suspicion, the friendship between George and Lennie remains solid. In fact, Candy becomes part of their dream to buy the little farm, and later Crooks also expresses his desire to become part of the expanding fellowship. This is the high point of optimism in regard to the theme of overcoming loneliness in the modern world, when it seems most likely that alienation and loneliness will be overcome. After this point, however, the dream of fellowship on the farm begins to lose its promise, and at the moment that George and Candy discover the body of Curley's wife, they both realize that the dream is lost; their partnership dissolves. Actually, the dream was doomed from the start, because fraternal living cannot survive in a world ruled by loneliness, homelessness, and poverty.

This outcome also suggests that loneliness is an essential part of humanity's nature. This theme of loneliness has been implied from the beginning of the novel, when the author establishes the setting as "a few miles south of Soledad." Soledad is the name of a town in central California, but it is also the Spanish word for solitude. Yet Steinbeck's emphasis is on the greatness of his characters' attempt to live as brothers. Although the dream is doomed, the characters devote themselves to pursuing human fellowship.

### **Race and Racism**

Somewhat related to the theme of loneliness is racism, which also results in personal isolation. Crooks, the old black man on the ranch, lives alone, ostracized by the ranch hands because of his race. The barrier of racial prejudice is briefly broken, however, when Crooks becomes an ally in the dream to buy a farm. Crooks has a bitter dignity and honesty that illustrate Steinbeck's own criticism of American society's failures in the Depression era of the 1930s.

### **Class Conflict**

Although George and Lennie have their dream, they are not in a position to attain it. In addition to their own personal limitations, they are also limited by their position in society. Their idealistic dream is eventually destroyed by an unfeeling, materialistic, modern society. The tensions between the characters are inherent in the nature of American capitalism and its class system. Curley, the son of the ranch owner, is arrogant and always looking for a fight. This is not merely a personality trait. His position in society has encouraged this behavior; his real strength lies not in his fighting ability but in his power to fire any worker. Similarly, Carlson, the only skilled worker among the ranch hands, is arrogant and lacks compassion. Carlson would be difficult to replace in his job as a mechanic; therefore, he feels secure enough in his status to treat the other workers sadistically. This trait is seen when he orders Candy's dog to be shot and when he picks on Lennie. The other workers go along with Carlson because they are old or afraid of losing their jobs. Lennie's mental retardation also symbolizes the helplessness of people in a capitalistic, commercial, competitive society. In this way, Steinbeck illustrates the confusion and hopelessness of the Depression era. The poor were a class of people who suddenly had captured the imagination of American writers in the 1930s. This was an example of the shift in attitudes that occurred during the Depression. Previously, American fiction had been concerned with the problems of middle-class people. Steinbeck's novel was a sympathetic portrayal of the lives of the poorest class of working people, while exposing society's injustices and economic inequalities in the hope of improving their situation.

### **Mental Disability**

Lennie's mental limitations also serve to illustrate another way in which people separate themselves from one another. Because of his handicap, Lennie is rejected by everyone at the ranch except George. The ranch hands are suspicious of Lennie and fear him when they recognize his physical strength and his inability to control himself. For example, when Crooks maliciously teases Lennie that George might decide to abandon his friend and that Lennie would then end up in "the booby hatch," Lennie becomes enraged. Eventually, Crooks backs off in fear of what Lennie could do to hurt him. Despite Lennie's potential for hurting people, however, Steinbeck makes it clear that it is the malice, fear, and anger in other people that are to blame for Lennie's violent actions (Crooks torments Lennie out of his own frustration for being rejected because he is black). When Curly starts to hit Lennie for supposedly laughing at him, Lennie at first retreats and allows his face to

become bloodied until George tells him he should fight back; and when Lennie accidentally kills Curly's wife, it is a direct result of her inappropriate advances toward him. Steinbeck's portrayal of Lennie's handicap is therefore completely sympathetic; the other characters have only themselves to blame for provoking Lennie, who is merely a child in a world of selfish adults. That Lennie has to die at the novel's conclusion is a poignant commentary on the inability of the innocent to survive in modern society.

### **Loyalty**

George is steadfastly loyal throughout the novel, honoring his commitment to take care of the retarded Lennie. After Lennie accidentally kills Curley's wife, Curley forms a posse to lynch Lennie. George then steals a pistol and goes to the spot where he has told Lennie to hide in case there is trouble: the same spot where the novel begins. George then kills Lennie himself before the mob can find him so he can save Lennie from a lynching. Together the two men recite the dream of their farm for the last time. George mercifully kills Lennie with a shot to the head while Lennie is chanting the dream, unaware of what is about to happen to him. George, with all his personal limitations, is a man who has committed himself in a compassionate relationship. The grief he feels over the necessity of killing Lennie is also evidence of George's essential decency. Although the dream perishes, the theme of commitment achieves its strongest point in the novel's conclusion. Unlike Candy, who earlier abandoned responsibility for his old dog and allows Carlson to shoot the animal, George remains his brother's keeper. In his acceptance of complete responsibility for Lennie, George demonstrates the commitment necessary to join the ranks of Steinbeck's heroes.

### **Friendship**

The one ingredient essential for the fulfillment of George's and Lennie's dream is friendship. And because the dream is so remarkable, that friendship must be special. There are other friendships in the novel: Slim and Carlson, Candy and Crooks, but these are ordinary friendships. The bond between George and Lennie, which goes back many years, is different. Lennie cannot survive on his own, and he needs George to guide and protect him. Without George, Lennie would live in a cave in the hills, as he sometimes threatens to do, or he would be institutionalized. George, for his part, complains regularly about having to take care of Lennie. His tolerance of Lennie also gives him a sense of superiority. At the same time, George feels a genuine affection for Lennie that he will not openly admit. Most importantly, without this friendship, neither George nor Lennie alone could sustain the dream, much less see it become a reality. The friendship lends hope to the dream, but the reality of their brutal life destroys the dream and the friendship. Although George is a survivor at the end, he is doomed to be alone.

## **Of Mice and Men: Style**

### **Structure**

*Of Mice and Men*, with its highly restricted focus, is the first of Steinbeck's experiments with the novel-play form, which combines qualities of each genre. The novel thus needed few changes before appearing on Broadway. The story is essentially comprised of three acts of two chapters each. Each chapter or scene contains few descriptions of place, character, or action. Thus, the novel's strength lies in part in its limitations. Action is restricted usually to the bunkhouse. The span of time is limited to three days, sunset Thursday to sunset Sunday, which intensifies the sense of suspense and drama.

### **Point of View**

The point of view of the novel is generally objective—not identifying with a single character—and limited to exterior descriptions. The third-person narrative point of view creates a sense of the impersonal. With few exceptions, the story focuses on what can be readily perceived by an outside observer: a river bank, a bunkhouse, a character's appearance, card players at a table. The focus on time, too, is limited to the present: there are no flashbacks to events in the past, and the reader only learns about what has happened to Lennie and George before the novel's beginning through dialogue between the characters. Thoughts, recollections,

and fantasies are expressed directly by the characters, except when Lennie hallucinates in Chapter 6 about seeing a giant rabbit and Aunt Clara.

### **Setting**

Set in California's Salinas Valley, the story takes place on a large ranch during the Great Depression. The agricultural scene in California in the 1930s, particularly in Salinas Valley, was dominated by large collective farms, or "farm factories," owned by big landowners and banks. These farm factories employed hundreds of workers, many of whom were migrants. Small farms of a few hundred acres, such as the one Lennie and George dream about, were relatively scarce. On the large farms, low wages for picking fruit and vegetables often led to economic unrest. In September 1936, thousands of lettuce workers in the Salinas Valley went on strike over low wages. The situation grew tense, and an army officer was brought in to lead vigilantes against the strikers. The strike was crushed within a month. Steinbeck covered the strike as a reporter for the *San Francisco News*.

### **Symbolism**

The most important symbol in the novel is the bank of the Salinas River, where the novel begins and ends. In the story's opening, when George and Lennie come to the riverbank, it serves as a symbol of retreat from the world to a natural state of innocence. In this first scene, George tells Lennie that he should return to this riverbank if there is trouble at the ranch where they plan to work. The riverbank is a "safe place" for the two characters. A second symbol is the rabbits: Lennie repeatedly asks George to tell him about the rabbits, which, when they are mentioned, also come to symbolize the safe place that George and Lennie desire and dream about. The fundamental symbol is the dream itself: "a little house and a couple of acres and a cow and some pigs." This ideal place keeps the two men bonded to each other and offers hope, however briefly, to two other men whom George and Lennie will meet the next day at the ranch. When George and Lennie arrive at the ranch, the bunkhouse and farm symbolize the essential emptiness of that world, offering only minimal physical security.

### **Foreshadowing**

Foreshadowing, where events subtly hint at things to come, serves to heighten suspense in the novel. Lennie's rough handling of the mice and the puppy, the shooting of Candy's old dog, the crushing of Curley's hand, and the frequent appearances of Curley's wife all foretell future violence. Steinbeck tells the reader about the mice and puppy, as well as the scene in which Lennie breaks the bones in Curley's hand, so that when Lennie kills Curley's wife it is completely believable and convincing—and seemingly inevitable—that this could happen. Also, at the very beginning of the book, the reader learns that George and Lennie had to leave Weed because Lennie got into trouble when he tried to touch a girl's dress. The incident in which Candy's dog is shot also foreshadows George's shooting of Lennie, an ironic comparison of the value placed on the life of a dog and a man.

## **Of Mice and Men: Historical Context**

### **Agriculture during the Great Depression**

During the late 1930s, California was struggling not only with the economic problems of the [Great Depression](#), but also with severe labor strife. Labor conflicts occurred on the docks and packing sheds and fields. Steinbeck wrote movingly about the struggles of migrant farm workers in three successive novels [In Dubious Battle](#) (1936), *Of Mice and Men* (1937), and [The Grapes of Wrath](#) (1939).

Migrant field hands sitting on bags of wheat, near Moro, Oregon, c. 1880.

Agriculture as a working-culture was undergoing an historic change. In 1938, about half the nation's grain was harvested by mechanical combines that enabled five men to do the work that had previously required 350. Only a short time before, thousands of itinerant single men had roamed the western states following the harvests. Their labor had been essential to the success of the large farms. By 1900, about 125,000 migrants travelled along a route from Minnesota west to Washington state. Many traveled by rail in the empty boxcars that were later used to transport grain. At the turn of the century, the men were paid an average of \$2.50 to \$3 a day, plus room and board. The "room" was often a tent.

Wages had risen somewhat at the time of [World War I](#), partly because of the Industrial Workers of the World, which established an 800-mile picket line across the Great Plains states. The "habitual" workers lived the migratory life for years until they grew too old to work. By the late 1930s there were an estimated 200,000 to 350,000 migrants: underpaid, underfed, and underemployed. The migrant worker was always partially unemployed, the nature of the occupation making his work seasonal. The maximum a worker could make was \$400 a year, with the average about \$300. Yet California's agricultural system could not exist without the migrant workers. It was a problem that would continue for decades. The farms in the state were more like food factories, the "farmers" were absentee owners, remaining in their city offices and hiring local managers to oversee the farming. In short, California's agriculture was not "farming" in the traditional sense. It was an industry like the lumber and oil industries. At the end of the 1930s, one-third of all large-scale farms in the United States were in California, reflecting the trend toward corporate farming. These farms had greatly fluctuating labor demands, and owners encouraged heavy immigration of low-wage foreign workers, usually Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos. Mexicans began arriving in large numbers around 1910 and represented the largest percentage of the migrant workforce for about twenty years.

During these years, there were thousands of white Americans among the migrants, usually single men who followed the harvesting. Steinbeck writes about them in *Of Mice and Men*. These "bindle-stiffs," as they were known, had no union representation for several reasons: They had no money to pay dues, and they moved from location to location so often that it was difficult to organize them. In addition, American unionism, with its traditional craft setup, did not welcome unskilled workers like farm laborers. In 1930, the Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union, a Communist-led union, organized the first effective drive among the migrants. During 1933, the group followed the migrants and harvests, organizing a nine-county cotton pickers' strike that affected 12,000 workers. By mid-1934 the union had led about fifty strikes involving 50,000 workers. The group's leaders claimed to have a membership of 21,000 and said they had raised the basic hourly field wage from an average of 15 cents to 17.5 cents an hour in 1932 to an average of 27.5 cents in 1934.



In the summer of 1934, the union was broken up by the anti-Communist activities of employers and state authorities. Its last stand was at an apricot pickets strike in June 1934. Deputies herded 200 strikers into a cattle pen, arrested some of the leaders, and transported the rest of the strikers out of the county. In trials, the union's president and secretary and six of their associates were convicted of treason. Five of the eight prisoners were later paroled and the other three were freed when an appellate court reversed the convictions in 1937. The existence of a strike was the greatest threat to California's growers. The harvest could wait while negotiations dragged on. Crops had to be picked within a few days of ripening or the result would be financial ruin. This situation created much social unrest. In the 1930s, vigilante activity against strikers and organizers was bloody. Many workers, as well as a number of strike breakers and townspeople, were injured. Vigilantism was not uncommon in early union activities, but in California's farming industry it was particularly vicious, which was odd because the growers could not have existed without the migrants' labor. During peak seasonal demand, growers hired as many as 175,000 workers.

Yet after the harvests most of these workers were not needed. Growers argued that they could not be responsible for paying workers year-round when they were needed only for a few weeks or months. Steady work was impossible not only because of the seasonal nature of the industry, but also because jobs were widely separated and time was lost traveling on the road. Steinbeck wrote *Of Mice and Men* at a time when he was becoming involved in California's social and economic problems. In the novel, he wrote about a group of people, the white male migrant workers, who were to shortly disappear from American culture. [World War II](#) absorbed many of the workers in the war effort in the 1940s. Although farm workers were generally exempt from the draft, the expansion of the defense industries to supply the U.S. military needs reduced the pool of surplus labor. The novel's continued popularity over the decades clearly shows that it has transcended its historical times.

## Of Mice and Men: Critical Overview

The critical reception of *Of Mice and Men* was the most positive that had greeted any of Steinbeck's works up to that time. The novel was chosen as a Book of the Month Club selection before it was published, and 117,000 copies were sold in advance of the official publication date of February 25, 1937. In early April, the book appeared on best-seller lists across the country and continued to be among the top ten best-sellers throughout the year. Praise for the novel came from many notable critics, including Christopher Morley, Carl Van Vechten, Lewis Gannett, Harry Hansen, Heywood Broun, and even from First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. Henry Seidel wrote in the *Saturday Review of Literature* that "there has been nothing quite so good of the kind in American writing since Sherwood Anderson's early stories." *New York Times* critic Ralph Thompson described the novel as a "grand little book, for all its ultimate melodrama."

At the time of the book's publication, critical reaction was mostly positive, although at the end of the 1930s, after Steinbeck had written [The Grapes of Wrath](#), there was some reevaluation of Steinbeck's earlier work. Some critics complained that *Of Mice and Men* was marred by sentimentality. Other critics faulted Steinbeck for his portrayal of poor, earthy characters. When Steinbeck won the Pulitzer Prize for *The Grapes of Wrath*, one of his strongest critics, Arthur Mizener, condemned Steinbeck's receipt of the award, faulted the author for his love of primitive characters, and criticized his sentimentality. In 1947, an article by Donald Weeks criticized Steinbeck both for sentimentality and for the crude lives of his characters. Obviously, Steinbeck caused problems for many reviewers and critics, who wrote contradictory attacks on the novelist, alternately blasting him as too sentimental and too earthy and realistic for their tastes.

In addition, Steinbeck had written three novels about migrant labor in California by the end of the 1930s. Many critics at the time dismissed these novels as communist or leftist propaganda. In fact, Steinbeck's work has often been discussed in sociological, rather than literary, terms. This is unfortunate because it misses the author's intentions: whatever politics or sociology are contained in Steinbeck's works are minor elements in

novels of great literary merit. After the 1930s, there were several decades of what can only be described as a critical trashing of Steinbeck's work. When the author was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962, very few critics praised the choice. Many publications neglected to even cover the event. Writing in the *New York Times*, Arthur Mizener attacked Steinbeck in an article entitled, "Does a Moral Vision of the Thirties Deserve a Nobel Prize?" The article was published just before the Nobel Prize was presented to Steinbeck in Sweden. The article stated: "After *The Grapes of Wrath* at the end of the thirties, most serious readers seem to have ceased to read him " He went on to state that the Nobel Committee had made a mistake by bestowing the award on a writer whose "limited talent is, in his best books, watered down by tenth-rate philosophizing." Most of the critical opinion at the time was that Steinbeck's career had seriously declined since 1939. *Time* and *Newsweek* did not write favorably of the Nobel Prize to Steinbeck. An editorial in the *New York Times* went so far as to question the process of selection for the award: "The award of the Nobel Prize for Literature to [John Steinbeck](#) will focus attention once again on a writer who, though still in full career, produced his major work more than two decades ago. The award will bring back the vivid memory of the earlier books: the . . . anger and compassion of *The Grapes of Wrath*, a book that occupies a secure place as a document of protest. Yet the international character of the award and the weight attached to it raise questions about the mechanics of selection and how close the Nobel committee is to the main currents of American writing. Without detracting in the least, from Mr. Steinbeck's accomplishments, we think it interesting that the laurel was not awarded to a writer—perhaps a poet or critic or historian—whose significance, influence and sheer body of work had already made a more profound impression on the literature of our age."

The irony was that Steinbeck's books were still widely read at that time, long after many of Steinbeck's contemporaries from the 1930s had been forgotten. Some critics have written that *Of Mice and Men* is one of Steinbeck's most pessimistic works. In spite of this, Steinbeck scholar Louis Owens wrote that "it is nonetheless possible to read *Of Mice and Men* in a more optimistic light than has been customary. In previous works, we have seen a pattern established in which the Steinbeck hero achieves greatness." Recent criticism, beginning in the 1980s, has acknowledged that Steinbeck's best work is timeless at its deepest level. There are questions about existence and not merely the Depression era's political agenda. Was Steinbeck a sentimentalist, or a political ideologue, or an earthy primitive? Steinbeck himself understood that the wide range of criticism of his works reflected the mindset of the individual critics. He said that many critics were "special pleaders who use my work as a distorted echo chamber for their own ideas." Jackson Benson, a Steinbeck scholar and author of *The True Adventures of John Steinbeck, Writer*, wrote that "what saved Steinbeck from constant excess was a compassion that was, in much of his writing, balanced and disciplined by a very objective view of the world and of man." Sixty years after its publication, *Of Mice and Men* is a classic of American literature read by high school and college students across the United States. It has been translated into a dozen foreign languages. Although the critics may argue for another sixty years about its merits, this "little book," as Steinbeck called it, will continue to expand people's understanding of what the writer called "the tragic miracle of consciousness."

## Of Mice and Men: Essays and Criticism

### Dreams and Reality in *Of Mice and Men*

John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* is a powerful and vivid depiction of life in rural America. It recounts the tragic story of George Milton and Lennie Small, two lonely itinerant farm workers who belonged nowhere and to no one but themselves. George has accepted the burden of protecting the mentally incompetent but uncommonly strong Lennie from the thefts and tricks of both ranch bosses and other hands, but, in so doing, George has considerably reduced the possibilities of his own successful attainment of independence and peace. In order to placate his childishly effusive companion, George has invented a fantasy in which both of them operate their own farm and Lennie, in particular, is in charge of the rabbits. It is a vision which immediately quiets any of the good-natured giant's anxieties, as well as bringing a comforting repose to the

otherwise realistic and rather cynical George.

When the two friends arrive at the latest farmhouse, Lennie promises faithfully to obey his companion and be good. A somewhat skeptical George arranges jobs for both of them, and the fate of these two friends of the road is sealed. Curley, a sadistic paranoid, takes an immediate dislike to Lennie simple because of his strength. After a series of provocations, Lennie is driven to put Curley in his place. Unable to control his massive strength, the brutish innocent breaks the bones of Curley's hand before his co-workers can pull him away from the unwitting victim. From this moment on, Curley plans full revenge.

The opportunity tragically presents itself in the guise of Curley's own wife, a rather coarse but pathetically lonely creature who frequently attempts to attract advances from hired hands to relieve the tedium of her life on the ranch. Driven away from the bunkhouse in which the men have their quarters by her jealous husband, the young woman waits until all but Lennie have left the ranch, and then proceeds to engage him in conversation. So preoccupied with her own misery is the girl that she does not realize her companion's potential danger. Enthusiastically recalling an opportunity she once had to appear in Hollywood films, she invites Lennie to feel the soft texture of her hair. At first reticent, the fellow is soon persuaded by the friendly insistence of the girl. Suddenly she is locked in his uncomprehending grasp; moments later, her dead body slumps to the floor of the bunkhouse.

When George and Candy, a down-on-his-luck worker who had expressed great interest in joining the friends in their dream farm, realize what has happened, Lennie is told to take refuge in a secret place George had once designated for some emergency. Taking Curley's gun, George waits for the others to form a search party. Raging with jealous anger and despair, Curley makes it clear that, when found, Lennie will not be brought back alive. During the course of the chase, George manages to separate from the others. Finding his friend at the appointed meeting place, he suggests that Lennie watch out across the river and try to picture that farm they will one day share. As his burly friend complies, George raises the gun and fires into the back of Lennie's head. When the others catch up to him, George explains that he had happened to stumble upon Lennie who was killed in a struggle for the gun which he tried to use against George.

There are a great many indigenously American elements in the plot and characterization that Steinbeck provides in *Of Mice and Men*. In the first place, the novel was written in 1937, a time during which the plight of the nation's migrant workers was beginning to be a subject of concern among thinking Americans. It remained, of course, for Steinbeck's [The Grapes of Wrath](#), presented in 1939, to furnish a definitive portrait of this tragedy, but the saga of George and Lennie takes as its basic material the frustrations and touching hopelessness that characterize the lives of all such unfortunate men and women.

It would seem, having established the background of the narrative, that the distinctive American flavor of the characters is worth commenting upon. Perhaps Steinbeck might be accused of an uncompromisingly cynical attitude, but, nevertheless, the novel underscores with poignant irony the characteristic belief in tomorrow that is, at one and the same time, the saving grace and the inherent weakness of American life or, more accurately, American life at that particular point in history.

The major figures in Steinbeck's story are all driven by a compelling faith in the possibility of dreams coming true. George and Lennie are the protagonists and, in a certain sense, the author has them epitomize all the dreams of the others. George is the prototype of one who is torn by the need for a kind of solution to the painful enigma of life and by a realization, at the same time, that there is none that might ever be considered satisfactory. George is perfectly aware of the impossibility and total impracticality of the dream he has projected for Lennie; however, he is also keenly conscious of the fact that the fantasy keeps Lennie in a certain dubious contact with reality and, therefore, in a position where he is determined to prove his ability to work productively and keep out of trouble. Using the fantasy to this advantage, George is able to protect the hapless imbecile and see to it that he remains properly clothed and fed. There is, however, another

consciousness of the part of Lennie's loyal companion that should be noted, even emphasized. Although George clearly realizes how he uses the fantasy to keep Lennie in check, he is also rather painfully conscious of the fact that he cannot himself keep the fantasy in check. He, too, is moved by it to hope that someday soon his friend and he might find that safe harbor from the world that would exploit innocence and helplessness. When the equally cynical Candy hears of their dream, and cannot help but express his interest and desire to join them in the achieving of it by adding his own financial support, George finds it difficult to maintain a real hold on reality. His nature and his experience have taught him that life offers little; one wonders with him whether or not he dare hope nature and experience have deluded him; the novel's conclusion indicates they, of course, have not.

George and Candy are similar victims of the twists which fortune manufactures for humankind; they suspect anything that looks good. Lennie and Curley's wife represent a different view of reality. Both dream their impossible dreams and are unable to relate them to the realistic situation in which they are enveloped. Lennie does not know his own strength nor how to control it; Curley's wife can only conceive of life as movie glamour and happy-ever-aftering; she's too caught up in fantasy even to realize the threat Lennie poses to her unhappy life.

Steinbeck's documentation of frustrated dreams, though utilizing a regional locale, offers a basic universality in the manner in which the reader is able to sympathize with the desires of those characters trapped within the confining strictures of the debasing lives they lead. George is a more approachable figure than the unfortunate Lennie, but even the latter is appealing in his well-meaning innocence.

Of course, one might suppose that, despite Lennie's death, George could very well decide to persevere in his dream, and take Candy on as his new partner. The relationship between George and Lennie, however, suggests this is not a probable event. The former is frequently out of patience with his relentlessly confused companion; he frequently complains that there is no reason to put up with such stupidity as Lennie's. However, he does, for they are tied to each other for the whole of their journey on the road of life; they are tied to each other as body is tied to soul. When the body finally dies, a victim of the cruelties of daily and inexplicable reality, the soul is left to wander by itself. It is the feeling of this reader that it is for such a reason that George will remain alone.

## **Of Mice and Men: George and Lennie**

The relationship between the intelligent but weak George Milton and the retarded but strong Lennie Small is the focal point of Steinbeck's novella, and a surface reading strongly suggests that "friendship" or "personal commitment" is one of this work's salient themes. As the half-witted Lennie dutifully intones, the two men are distinguished from all of the other characters in the story "because I got you to look after me, and you got me to look after you, and that's why." (p.15). The initial interview by the ranch boss underscores the unusual quality of this bond, and the jerkline skinner Slim later echoes his employer's bewilderment when he says to George, "'Funny how you an' him string along together.'" (p.43). George confides that he and Lennie are not, in fact, cousins, but we learn that they have known each other since grammar school. They are linked together by a shared past, by a dream of the future, and by current circumstances. All of this implies a substratum of mutual affection.

Yet theirs is a symbiotic relationship. The two men are forced together by common necessity rather than genuine emotional attachment. Lennie, of course, depends entirely upon his long-time comrade, and the very thought of George abandoning him sends the childlike giant into a state of panic. It is evident from the start that Lennie could not possibly function in the harsh world that they inhabit without George, who holds his companion's work card and always does the talking for him. The stable buck Crooks is unsparingly accurate in his assessment that without George's continual guidance, Lennie would wind up chained like a dog in an

institution for the feeble-minded. Lennie wears the same clothes as George and even imitates his gestures. The extent of Lennie's psychological integration with the George is acutely apparent in the novel's concluding chapter when the giant rabbit of his stricken conscience mouths George's words in Lennie's own voice.

By the same token, just as Lennie needs mice and pups and rabbits to take care of, George needs Lennie to tend. As George discloses to Slim, the incident that sealed the bond between the duo came when he told his utterly compliant friend to jump in the rushing Sacramento River and was then forced to save the huge man from drowning. Lennie furnishes George with an object for his own lower-case ennoblement. George also uses Lennie as an excuse for the menial hardships that he must endure. He repeatedly claims that life would be "so easy" for him were it not for the burden of caring for Lennie. This is plainly an expression of wishful thinking. With or without Lennie in tow, George would still be compelled to eke out a meager, inane existence as a lowly ranch hand. But most of all, George needs Lennie to concur with and to prop up his "dream" of owning a little farm and thereby preserve it from dissolving under the brutal force of reality. It is a web of dependencies, not brotherly love, which binds the two men together.

A profound, primordial isolation runs through the lives of all of the characters in *Of Mice and Men*, and it is this separateness that constitutes the novel's predominate theme. George and Lennie are adrift and, at bottom, on their own in the world that Steinbeck depicts. Although this lack of anchorage is particularized as an historical manifestation of the Depression Era, people in this story are basically divided by a timeless and universal feature of the human condition, a distrust born of vulnerability. As Slim muses, the reason that ranch hands are loners is that "everybody in the whole damn world is scared of each other." (p.38). In one of the novel's most touching episodes, the black stable worker Crooks (set even further apart from his fellows by virtue of his race) tells Lennie that lacking someone to share his experience, he can't even tell if what he sees before him is real or merely a dream. (p.80).

Curley's wife is there to remind Crooks that his subordinate status is all too real when she responds to a felt insult: "Nigger, I could bet you strung up on a tree so easy it ain't even funny" (p.89). As a black man, Crooks is clearly liable to such false charges, for it is his social identity as a "nigger" that defines his fate. In this, however, he is not alone. The identities of the characters in Steinbeck's tale are constrained by the narrow mechanical functions that they respectively perform in the closed world of the ranch. The boss makes only a brief appearance at the novel's outset because there is no need for active supervision in a realm in which characters are all too keenly aware of what is expected of them. Not only does Slim's skill as a mule driver afford him a superior job status, it confers upon him an authority in all domains of the ranch life, including issues of life and death. Curley's role is determined by his biologically determined function as the boss's son and his pugilistic talents. What each character does, indeed, what each is, depends completely upon his or her role, the specific part that they have in the economy of the barley-growing enterprise. Curley's wife is not even given a first name. She enacts the supporting role of an unfaithful tramp, marrying a man for whom she feels no sense of affection because she is trapped in the caged environment of small-town life. Her assertion that she could have been in a "show" or become a starlet in Hollywood "pitchers" is just self-deception. In a story that spans a short period of time, we would not expect much in the way of character development to occur. But what really counts is that none of the figures in this story appears to be capable of growing beyond what they already are. Each is trapped into an identity that is determined by their social lot in life. The main source of change, if it can be called that, is the physical disability that occurs in working within the hard-edged domain of bucking barley. As in the cases of the old swamper Candy and of Crooks, such injury yields only a further slide down the ladder toward eventual disposal. Like Candy's ancient dog, the hands of the ranch are expendable and can be readily replaced once they have outlived their usefulness.

The historical setting of Steinbeck's novel is highly specific. It is the particular world of migrant workers in California during the 1930s, the [Great Depression](#) with all of its material deprivations and insecurities. The description of the pathetically scant personal possessions of the bunk house residents, each of whom has no more than can be held on the two shelves made up by an apple crate, is all too realistic. The author never



shows us the boss's quarters, for they are irrelevant to the lives of men who have no hope for any sort of upward mobility. They labor eleven hours a day for the fifty dollars they receive each month, squandering even this on two-bit whisky and a "throw" with a prostitute at Suzy's brothel. As in many of his earlier works, *Of Mice and Men* embodies a sharp critique of capitalist America. It is not a protest novel. Nor does the author insist that social reform is a moral necessity, as he declares in [The Grapes of Wrath](#). Still, the reader cannot help but detect economic injustice afoot, even though the characters themselves give no direct voice to their plight, taking it as a given.

A powerful sense of determinism propels the plot forward. Steinbeck originally conceived of the story as a stage piece, and like the audience of a Greek tragedy, the reader is alerted from the start that a bad ending is bound to occur. Indeed, after realizing that Lennie has killed Curley's wife and that they cannot realize the dream of owning a "little land," George acknowledges this by saying: "I think I knowed from the very first. I think I knowed we'd never do her. He usta like to hear about it so much I got to thinking maybe we would." (p.103). Not only does the reader anticipate a tragic end, the means by which it will occur are apparent at an early juncture. The narrator tells us that Lennie does "bad things" and is unable to control his reactions. George knows, as we do, that Curley's wife is "gonna make a mess" (p.57). When she appears in the Sunday afternoon of the story in a bright cotton dress and red ostrich feathers, the reader recognizes that the moment is at hand for Lennie to do another "bad thing." All of the elements, including the mercy killing of Lennie are in place and specifically foreshadowed in the text.

There is, however, the dream. Steinbeck furnishes the notion that George and Lennie can somehow escape their otherwise futile lives by purchasing a small farm with an aura of plausibility. After all, George appears to have a specific ten-acre plot in mind along with a particular price, and Candy's entrance into the partnership appears to advance this vision of a brighter future. Yet well before Crooks dashes Lennie's hopes by saying, "Everybody wants a little piece of lan'. . . Nobody ever gets to heaven and nobody gets no land. It's just in their heads" (p.81), we know that this eminently American dream is merely an illusion. It is a comforting fairy story that one tells to a child, or, as in this case, a palliative that George uses to calm the excitable Lennie. Worse, not only is the dream an illusion, it is instrumental to the tragedy that unfolds. When Lennie sees that the ranch "ain't no good," that some danger is in the offing and that they should leave at once, the smart George responds that they must keep their jobs there until they "'get a stake.'" (p.36). Human life as portrayed in *Of Mice and Men* is a matter of despair, and to think otherwise simply accelerates an inevitable march toward mindless ruin.

## Themes and Concerns of Social Realism in *Of Mice and Men*

John Steinbeck's work is most often considered in the literary tradition of Social Realism, a type of literature which concerns itself with the direct engagement with and intervention in the problematic (usually economic) social conditions in society. The height of Social Realism—and of its close relative, Naturalism, which blends social critique with a tragic narrative structure wherein a sort of natural fate irresistibly propels the characters toward their downfall—dates from the end of the nineteenth century and is represented by such authors as George Gissing, [Theodore Dreiser](#) and Frank Norris.

By the 1930s, this literary style was already waning, having given up its position of primacy to what has come to be called [Modernism](#) which, although not uninterested in social or political thinking, is far more experimental in the way it uses and manipulates literary and aesthetic techniques. [James Joyce](#), [Virginia Woolf](#) and [Ezra Pound](#) are some representative Modernist writers from Ireland, England and the United States respectively. Steinbeck's decision to forego very radical experimentation and use the more explicitly engaged realist style in his work from the 1930s may owe to the urgency of the social problems of the [Great Depression](#) and Steinbeck's desire to register an immediate and direct critical protest.

*Of Mice and Men*, like Steinbeck's two other major works from the 1930s, [In Dubious Battle](#) and [The Grapes of Wrath](#), takes its subject and protagonists from the agricultural working class of California during the Great Depression. George and Lennie are itinerant laborers who roam the state looking for any sort of temporary work on large commercial ranches and farms. They work in these places as long as there is a specific task to be done—in *Of Mice and Men*, for example, George and Lennie are hired to bag the barley harvest on a farm near the city of Soledad—and when they are finished they collect their wages and move on in search of another ranch and another temporary job. In these two interrelated aspects of life in California's agricultural working class—the nomadic root-lessness of the itinerant laborer and the wage system wherein the workers are paid cash for specific tasks but are not consistently involved in the process of agricultural production from beginning to end—Steinbeck sees a problematic relation between the workers and the land that they work.

This problem provides the central thematic concern for *Of Mice and Men*. To be sure, it is a story about dreaming of the future, and this is often the thematic thread which first gets picked up in discussions of the novella. But *Of Mice and Men* is not simply about dreaming in general, for the nature of the dream at the center of this story is specifically related to Steinbeck's critical understanding of a specific aspect of society in his contemporary California. The rootlessness and alienation which Steinbeck sees in the lives of California's migrant farm laborers are the real social conditions which he chooses to structure his story, and they thus must be considered as primary thematic concerns of the novella; that is to say, George and Lennie's dream is specifically necessitated by and responds directly to the limitations placed on their lives, and their story is meant to illuminate the social conditions which Steinbeck seeks to critique. As in all Social Realist literature, this direct engagement with the actual world in all its specificity must be rigorously considered in any thorough reading.

When the reader meets George and Lennie, their nomadic existence is one of the first things Steinbeck establishes. They have just come from the town of Weed, where they have been temporarily employed but where Lennie has gotten into trouble scaring a young girl. They have escaped from the angry townspeople and now George is going to try to secure a new job for them on a farm near Soledad, hundreds of miles to the south. Further details here accentuate the hard travelling, the ceaseless moving that the two constantly have to undertake. For example, as they pause by the river in the opening pages George mentions that the bus they were on had left them ten miles short of their destination, forcing them to walk the rest of the way to the farm where they are not even sure they will find work. When they do arrive and are about to be taken on, George is given the bunk of a man who, as Candy indifferently says, had "just quit, the way a guy will. . . . Just wanted to move. Didn't give no other reason but the food. Just [said] 'gimme my time' one night, the way any guy would." Walking for miles, finding a bit of work, sleeping in a bunk house and disappearing one day, these are the exemplary images of the itinerant worker's life, the details with which Steinbeck strategically develops a precise setting and milieu for George and Lennie's story.

Against the exposition of the itinerant laborer's lonely life of moving and working, Steinbeck counterposes the dream that George and Lennie share. As mentioned above, it is not just any dream, or even simply the dream of a better life. In the opening chapter, when George repeats (as he often does) the story for Lennie he begins not by talking about their own individual plans but rather about the state of many men like them. He says: "Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don't belong no place. They come to a ranch an' work up a stake and then they go into town and blow their stake, and the first thing you know they're poundin' their tail on to some other ranch. They ain't got nothing to look ahead to." This is the kind of life that George and Lennie dream of leaving, and, as George suggests, the hardships of that life have primarily to do with solitude and with not having a stable place or enough money to maintain oneself. But George and Lennie have other plans for themselves. A few moments later:

Lennie broke in "*But not us! An' why? Because . . . because I got you to look after me, and you got me to look after you, and that's why* " He laughed delightedly. "Go on now, George!"

"O.K. Someday—we're gonna get the jack together and we're gonna have a little house and a couple of acres an' a cow and some pigs and.."

"An' live off the fatta the lan'," Lennie shouted.

George then goes on to describe their modest farm, the security and freedom of having their own piece of land, and the way they will be able to work for themselves instead of for an occasional wage. A reading of these particular desires and ambitions which George and Lennie cling to, and of the particular things they want to overcome, suggests that Steinbeck rather than writing a story about "dreaming" or "hoping" in general is instead making a very precise and pointed critique of certain aspects of what it is like for many people to live in California, and, by extension, American society. More specifically, *Of Mice and Men* is a critique of the plight of a certain stratum of that society—the landless, poor, agricultural workers—and in the figures of George and Lennie, Steinbeck tries to dramatize on an individual level the tragic story of an entire class of people.

It is worth noting that in the story George and Lennie's dream is by no means unique to them, for it proves also to be the dream of every ranch hand to whom they tell it; Candy and Crooks, for example, each ask if they can join in on the plan. Candy, of course, is accepted, while Crooks seems to have second thoughts (Steinbeck also devotes a large part of one chapter to the figure of Crooks, and to a critical exposition of racism in rural California). The characters in *Of Mice and Men* then can be seen as archetypal insofar as their story is meant to be understood as emblematic of a larger, nonfictional story. They represent the people who work on the farms and in the factories but do not own any part of them, people who earn a wage and have little or nothing more. And in constructing the novella this way Steinbeck wants to draw the readers attention to what he sees as certain urgent and widespread social problems. This sort of direct engagement with social concerns is typical of fiction within the Social Realist tradition.

Even the dramatic climax of the story must be interpreted with an eye toward the social. Curley's wife is the catalyst for Lennie's tragic end, and through most of the story she appears as a purely menacing figure—an ominous portent, one might say. But as she recounts her personal history to Lennie the reader realizes that she, too, must be understood within the context of her surroundings. We see that insofar as she is constrained by unjust social norms, she is not unlike the figures of George and Lennie and Crooks. In her life she is trapped first by her mother's tyranny and the claustrophobia of small town Salinas (Steinbeck's own hometown), and then by her unfortunate marriage to Curley, whom, she tells Lennie, she does not even like. Her actions and her catastrophic role in the story are thus understood not simply as willful destructiveness and licentiousness, or even as the workings of an abstract "tragic fate." Her role is more concrete and complex: her actions and the events resulting from them are likewise the negative upshot of the specific norms and practices which govern society and contemporary life (in her case, the normative models of family and marriage). The novella's ending, then, further develops and indeed emphasizes Steinbeck's analysis of the ways social conventions and practices can have detrimental effects on the lives of people within that society.

Steinbeck's debt to and lineage from Social Realist and Naturalist fiction, then, is made clear through a reading of the way he constantly places his characters and narrative within the context of very specific and, more importantly, actual social situations. The narrative of *Of Mice and Men*—from George and Lennie's hopeful dreaming to the calamitous end to those dreams—is founded upon a rigorous analysis and critique of the encompassing structures of social organization and the ways they affect the people who must live within them.

Source: Kevin Attell, in an essay for *Novels for Students*, Gale, 1997. Attell is a doctoral candidate at the University of California, Berkeley.



# A Teachable Good Book: Of Mice and Men

For *Of Mice and Men* is a [Tragedy](#), a tragedy not in the narrow modern sense of a mere 'sad story' (though it certainly is that), but a tragedy in the classic Aristotelian/Shakespearean sense of showing humanity's achievement of greatness through and in spite of defeat.

Some people seem to believe that the function of literature is to provide vicarious "happy endings," to provide in words a sugary sweetness we would like to have but cannot always get in real life. To such people, true literary tragedy is distasteful. But the greatest writers and the best readers know that literature is not always only mere sugar candy; it can sometimes be a strong medicine: sour perhaps—at least to the untrained taste-but necessary for continued health[.]...

Some readers may object to the book's presentation of low class characters, vulgar language, scenes suggestive of improper sexual conduct, and an implied criticism of the social system. But none of this is presented indecently, or beyond the ordinary norms of contemporary literature. Compared to many modern works, (or to movies and TV) this book is tame indeed. Furthermore, these features are necessary in this book in two ways.

First, they are part of the accurate precise reporting of the reality of a particular time and place and environment. Part of Steinbeck's literary point is that this is *true to life*. As such, the dirty details are part of Steinbeck's enlargement of the realm of Tragedy, the democratization of the tragic world. Traditionally, the subjects of Tragedies have been Kings and other Great Ones: Job, Oedipus, Lear. But Steinbeck's point—a truly American point—is that all men are created equal: Tragedy exists even among the lowly of the earth; even the least of us—even a Lennie or a George—has the human potential for tragic nobility. *Of Mice and Men* is a tragedy in the modern tradition of [The Hairy Ape](#) and [Death of a Salesman](#).

Second, the grossness is a way of presenting briefly the complex turmoil of life. This book is not stereotype melodrama. It is not a simpleminded book. There are no purely bad people in it. Conversely, there are no purely good people in it either. All the characters are complex mixtures of good and bad, or rather of bad results from good intentions. They are all—in their ability and in their outlook—limited. And they live in a gross and dirty world. Given their position in that world, they are not able to achieve much. But they are trying to do the best they can; they are trying to be good people and to have good lives. They have good intentions. They have noble aims.

The tragedy is that, limited as the characters are, the world they live in is even *more* limited, it is a world in which the simplest dream of the simplest man—poor dumb big Lennie—cannot come true. "The best laid plans of mice and men gang oft a-glae [go oft a-stray]," wrote Robert Burns in the poem which provides the book's title and its theme. And Steinbeck's story shows why: The best laid plans go oft astray because they come in conflict with one another. The simplest good intention— simply to stay alive—of a simple mouse, a simple pup, a simple young woman, is thwarted by Lennie's urge to pet something soft and beautiful. Lennie's drive to touch beauty kills the things he loves.

But his problem is the same problem that bothers Curley, the Boss's son, the closest thing to a villain in the book. Like Lennie, Curley doesn't know how to hold on to what he finds important: his young wife, his status as the Boss's son, his reputation as a man. He loses each by trying to hold on too tightly. Curley's aim to be a respected husband/boss/man is foiled by his own limited abilities.

The similar but simpler aim of Lennie and George to have a small place of their own where they can "live offa the fatta the lan'" is doomed to frustration also by their own limitations and the tragic chain of circumstance and coincidence that ends with Lennie dead by George's hand.

The point, of course, is that they all—we all—live in a too limited world, a world in which not all our dreams can come true, a world in which we—all of us some of the time and some of us all the time—are doomed to disappointment. The tragic dilemma is that for our basic humanity, for the goodness of our aims, we all deserve better than we get. But because of our human limitations, by our weaknesses of character, none of us is ever good enough to *earn* what we deserve. Some philosophers, seeing this dilemma, pronounce profound pessimism for humanity. Some religions promise for this world's disappointments supernatural intercession and other-worldly compensations. The tragic viewpoint (the view of Shakespeare, the Greek tragedians, the Old Testament Job, and John Steinbeck) finds in it the chance for nobility of soul: even in the blackest of disappointments, a human can achieve individual greatness. One may be defeated physically—but one need not be crushed spiritually. One can remain true to one's dream and true to one's friend. We humans may die, but we can love one another.

Friendship. Love. That too is what *Of Mice and Men* is all about. Lennie and George, disparate types, are, against all good reason, friends. They share a good dream. They love one another. They are too limited, too inarticulate, to know how to say it, but they do show it—or rather Steinbeck shows it to us readers.

So the book treats the great themes of Dreams and Death and Love with simple powerful clarity. It does so with a classically elegant structure—another reason for using the book as a teaching tool: it allows a reader—especially an untrained or beginning reader of literature—to see (or be shown) how structure supports and presents content. *Of Mice and Men* has the classic situation/complication/twist/and/resolution plot structure uncluttered by diversions, distractions, or subplots. There is an inevitableness, a starkness that makes the point of the story unavoidable.

The story has the classic unities of time and place and action. It begins in a small spot of beautiful nature, a secluded camp in the woods by a stream; it moves to the buildings of a California ranch, and ends back in the woods by the stream.

The style is simple: clear, direct sentences of description and action, direct quotation of the speech of simple people. Few long words, no hard words.

The action is simple: two poor and vagrant workers, big, dumb Lennie and small, clever George, take jobs at a large ranch. Lennie has trouble with the Boss's son, Curley. Lennie accidentally—more or less—kills Curley's wife. George kills Lennie to save him from the horrors of a lynch mob led by Curley, bent on revenge.

The settings are simple in detail, and simply powerfully symbolic. The secluded spot in the woods by the stream is the uncomplicated world of Nature; the bunkhouse is the bleak home of hired working men trying to make sense of their lives and gain comfort in a limited environment; the barn is the place of working life, of seed and harvest, birth and death, the harness room with Crook's bunk symbolizes social constraints; the "little place of our own" about which George and Lennie dream and all too vaguely plan is the Paradise on earth we all hope for.

The characters, too, are simple yet significant. "Begin with an individual, and before you know it you find you have created a type," wrote [F. Scott Fitzgerald](#), "begin with a type, and you find that you have created—nothing." Steinbeck begins with individuals: clearly and sharply crafted characters, a whole set of individuals who are so clearly realized that *each*—without surrendering individuality—becomes a *type*, an archetype, a universal character: There is Candy, the old, one-armed worker with no place to go, as useless as his toothless dog; there is Carlson, gruffly and deliberately "unfeeling," who can coolly kill old Candy's ancient dog simply because "he stinks" and "he ain't no good to you"; and there is Crooks, the dignified "proud and aloof but helpless and lonely victim of racial discrimination. There is Slim, calm, reasonable, compassionate, the real leader of men. And there is Curley, the arrogant but inept Boss's son. The man who could lead well does not have the position; the one who has the position and the authority is not a true leader.

Curley hides his insecurities behind a mask of macho toughness. His competitive bravado makes him push too far and Lennie, after enduring much, is given permission by George to "get him." Lennie in self-protection crushes Curley's fist in his own big hand, crippling Curley somewhat as Candy and Crooks have been crippled by the punitive harshness of life.

Curley is also the one man who has a woman. But clearly he does not—does not know how to— relate to her as a person. She is to him a thing, a possession, a sex-object and a status symbol. For the men, in braggadocio, he flaunts the sexuality of the relationship; and yet, out of his own self-doubts he is intensely jealous of the men's awareness of her.

The young woman has no name—she is merely "Curley's wife." She knows she wants—and somehow deserves—something better than this. "I don't *like* Curley," she says of her husband. She has grandiose ambitions of being a Hollywood star "in the pitchers." She is a lost little girl in a world of men whose knowledge of women is largely limited to memories of kind old ladies and rumors of casual prostitution. All these men are afraid of Curley's wife, afraid and aware that her innocent animal appeal may lead them into temptation and trouble. In self-protection they avoid her. Only Lennie, in naive goodness, actually relates to her as a person to a person. She talks to him. For a little time they share in their aesthetic sense; they both admire beauty. Unfortunately, she is too naive, and Lennie is too strong and clumsy. In trying—at her invitation—to pet her lovely hair he is panicked by her quick resistance, and ends by killing her. Just as he had earlier killed a puppy and a mouse. Curley's wife, a naive Romantic, wants love and tenderness in a harsh crude Naturalistic world; Lennie, big and ignorant, tries to give love. But he is too weak in the mind, too strong in the body. His tenderness is too powerful for weaker, unsuspecting creatures.

We readers can identify with Lennie. We sympathize, we empathize. We care. We have—most of us—been in his position; not quite able to cope with the complexities of the world around us, wanting only security, peace, comfort, and something soft and beautiful to pet and love.

Perhaps one reason that this book has evoked controversy and censorious action is that it is so simple and clear and easy to understand—and so painful! It *hurts* to read this book. And some people don't like their books to hurt them; they want soothing. But great Tragedy is *meant* to hurt. One needn't subscribe wholly to the Aristotelian doctrine of 'catharsis' by Art to see that one function of literature is to help us deal with the pain of real life by practicing with the vicarious pains of tragic art.

Of course *Of Mice and Men* contains unpleasant attitudes; there is brutality, racism, sexism, economic exploitation. But the book does not advocate them; rather it shows that these too-narrow conceptions of human life are part of the cause of human tragedy. They are forces which frustrate human aspiration.

Lennie and George have a noble dream. They are personally too limited to make it come true, but they do try. They try to help each other, and they even enlarge their dream to include old one-handed Candy and crippled black Crooks. Theirs is the American Dream: that there is somehow, somewhere, sometime, the possibility that we can make our Paradise on earth, that we can have our own self-sufficient little place where we can live off the fat of the land as peaceful friends.

What is sad, what is tragic, what is horrible, is that the Dream may not come true because we are— each and all of us—too limited, too selfish, too much in conflict with one another. "Maybe ever'-body in the whole damn world is scared of each other," says Slim. And George expresses the effects of loneliness, "Guys that go around . . . alone . . . don't have no fun. After a long time they get mean. They get wantin' to fight all the time."

What is *ennobling* in this tragedy of mice and men is the Revelation of a way beyond that loneliness and meanness and fighting, a way to rise above our human limitations: Two men—Lennie and George—who have

nothing else, do have each other. "We kinda look after each other" says George. And they do have their Dream. And the Dream is there even in the final defeat. For in the end the one thing George can do for Lennie is to make sure he's happy as he dies. He has Lennie "look across the river . . . you can almost see [the place] " And as Lennie says, "Let's get that place now," George kills him mercifully. It's a horrible thing to do, and George knows that. And we know that. But in this limited world in this limited way it is all that George can do for his friend. And he does it. That is the horror and the nobility which together make up Tragedy. The Tragic pattern closes. There is a sense of completeness, of both defeat and satisfaction.

In *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck has shown us something about the pain of living in a complex human world and created something beautiful from it. In true great literature the pain of Life is transmuted into the beauty of Art. The book is worth reading for a glimpse of that beauty—and worth teaching as a way to show others how such beauty works.

Source: Thomas Scarseth, "A Teachable Good Book: *Of Mice and Men*," in *Censored Books: Critical Viewpoints*, edited by Nicholas J. Karolides, Lee Burrell, and John M. Kean, Scarecrow Press, 1993, pp. 388-94.

## Motif and Pattern in *Of Mice and Men*

Shortly after sending off the manuscript for *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck wrote to his agents, "I'm sorry that you do not find the new book as large in subject as it should be. I probably did not make my subjects and symbols clear. The microcosm is difficult to handle and apparently I did not get it over." Despite the agents' initial disappointment, *Of Mice and Men* became a great success as novel, play, and motion picture. That Steinbeck's audience found his "subjects and symbols clear" is doubtful; that the critics did not is certain. For the most part, those critics who saw nothing beyond the obvious plot disliked the work immensely. Those who suspected more important levels of meaning were unable to offer specific and thorough explication. Today, almost twenty years later, it is generally accepted that the success of *Of Mice and Men* was an accident of history: Steinbeck merely cashed in on his audience's readiness to shed a tear, even a critical tear, over the plight of lonely migrant laborers. As one critic put it ten years later, "This is a negligible novel, seemingly written with a determined eye on the cash register" [George D. Snell, in his *The Shapers of American Fiction*, 1947].

This essay is a much belated attempt to discover just what Steinbeck's "subjects and symbols" are and how they are utilized in *Of Mice and Men*, which he once referred to as "a study of the dreams and pleasures of everyone in the world."

To present his larger subject in terms of a microcosm Steinbeck makes use of three incremental motifs: symbol, action, and language. All three of these motifs are presented in the opening scene, are contrapuntally developed through the story, and come together again at the end. The first symbol in the novel, and the primary one, is the little spot by the river where the story begins and ends. The book opens with a description of this place by the river, and we first see George and Lennie as they enter this place from the highway to an outside world. It is significant that they prefer spending the night here rather than going on to the bunkhouse at the ranch.

Steinbeck's novels and stories often contain groves, willow thickets by a river, and caves which figure prominently in the action. There are, for example, the grove in *To a God Unknown*, the place by the river in the Junius Maltby story, the two caves and a willow thicket in [The Grapes of Wrath](#), the cave under the bridge in [In Dubious Battle](#), the caves in *The Wayward Bus*, and the thicket and cave in [The Pearl](#). For George and Lennie, as for other Steinbeck heroes, coming to a cave or thicket by the river symbolizes a retreat from the world to a primeval innocence. Sometimes, as in *The Grapes of Wrath*, this retreat has explicit overtones of a

return to the womb and rebirth. In the opening scene of *Of Mice and Men* Lennie twice mentions the possibility of hiding out in a cave, and George impresses on him that he must return to this thicket by the river when there is trouble.

While the cave or the river thicket is a "safe place," it is physically impossible to remain there, and this symbol of primeval innocence becomes translated into terms possible in the real world. For George and Lennie it becomes "a little house an' a couple of acres." Out of this translation grows a second symbol, the rabbits, and this symbol serves several purposes. By the figure of synecdoche it comes to stand for the "safe place" itself, making a much more easily manipulated symbol than the "house an' a couple of acres." Also, through Lennie's love for the rabbits Steinbeck is able not only to dramatize Lennie's desire for the "safe place," but to define the basis of that desire on a very low level of consciousness—the attraction to soft, warm fur, which is for Lennie the most important aspect of their plans.

This transference of symbolic value from the farm to the rabbits is important also because it makes possible another motif, the motif of action. This is introduced in the first scene by the dead mouse which Lennie is carrying in his pocket (much as Tom catches the turtle in *The Grapes of Wrath*). As George talks about Lennie's attraction to mice, it becomes evident that the symbolic rabbits will come to the same end—crushed by Lennie's simple blundering strength. Thus Lennie's killing of mice and later his killing of the puppy set up a motif of action, a pattern, which the reader expects to be carried out again. George's story about Lennie and the little girl with the red dress, which he tells twice, contributes to this expectancy of pattern, as does the shooting of Candy's dog, the crushing of Curley's hand, and the frequent appearances of Curley's wife. All these actions are patterns of the mice motif and predict the fate of the rabbits and thus the fate of the dream of a "safe place."

The third motif, that of language, is also present in the opening scene. Lennie asks George, "Tell me—like you done, before," and George's words are obviously in the nature of a ritual. "George's voice became deeper. He repeated his words rhythmically, as though he had said them many times before." The element of ritual is stressed by the fact that even Lennie has heard it often enough to remember its precise language "*An' live off the fatta the lan'. . . . An' have rabbits. Go on George! Tell about what we're gonna have in the garden and about the rabbits in the cages and about. . . .*" This ritual is performed often in the story, whenever Lennie feels insecure. And of course it is while Lennie is caught up in this dream vision that George shoots him, so that on one level the vision is accomplished—the dream never interrupted, the rabbits never crushed.

The highly patterned effect achieved by these incremental motifs of symbol, action, and language is the knife edge on which criticism of *Of Mice and Men* divides. Mark Van Doren, for example, sees this patterning of events as evidence of a mechanical structure: "Lennie, you see, cannot help shaking small helpless creatures until their necks are broken, just as Curley cannot help being a beast of jealousy. They are wound up to act that way, and the best they can do is to run down; which is what happens when Steinbeck comes to his last mechanical page" ["Wrong Number," *The Nation* CXLIV (6 March 1937)]. This view is shared by Joseph Wood Krutch, who insists [in his *The American Drama since 1918*, 1939] that "everything from beginning to end" is "as shamelessly cooked up as, let us say, the death of Little Nell" On the other hand, Mr. Stark Young sees this patterning as a virtue: "And instead of losing . . . by this evident manipulation for effect, the play gains in its total impact and imaginative compulsion. In the characters, too, we get a sense of arrangement or design, so definitely carried through that we have almost a sense of types, an almost classic designation and completeness to each" ["Drama Critics Circle Award," *The New Republic* XCIV (4 May 1938)]. Frank H. O'Hara comes to a similar conclusion [in his *Today in American Drama*, 1939], though admitting that "the constituents of melodrama are all here."

Thus while Steinbeck's success in creating a pattern has been acknowledged, criticism has been divided as to the effect of this achievement. On one side it is claimed that this strong patterning creates a sense of contrivance and mechanical action; and on the other that the patterning actually gives a meaningful design to

the story, a tone of classic fate. What is obviously needed here is some objective critical tool for determining under what conditions a sense of inevitability (to use a neutral word) should be experienced as catharsis effected by a sense of fate, and when it should be experienced as mechanical contrivance. Such a tool can not be forged within the limits of this study, but it is possible to examine the particular circumstances of *Of Mice and Men* more closely than has been done in this connection.

Although the three motifs of symbol, action, and language build up a strong pattern of inevitability, the movement is not unbroken. About midway in the novel (chapters 3 & 4) there is set up a counter movement which seems to threaten the pattern. Up to this point the dream of "a house an' a couple of acres" has seemed impossible of realization; the motifs have been too insistent. But now it develops that George has an actual farm in mind (ten acres), knows the owners and why they want to sell it: "The ol' people that owns it is flat bust an' the ol' lady needs an operation." He even knows the price—"six hundred dollars." Also, the maimed workman, Candy, is willing to buy a share in the dream with the three hundred dollars he has saved. It appears that at the end of the month George and Lennie will have another hundred dollars and that quite possibly they "could swing her for that." In the following chapter this dream and its possibilities are further explored through Lennie's visit with Crooks, the power of the dream manifesting itself in Crooks' conversion from cynicism to optimism. But at the very height of his conversion the mice symbol reappears in the form of Curley's wife, who threatens the dream by bringing with her the harsh realities of the outside world and by arousing Lennie's interest.

The function of Candy's and Crooks' interest and the sudden bringing of the dream within reasonable possibility is to interrupt, momentarily, the pattern of inevitability. But, and this is very important, Steinbeck handles this interruption so that it does not actually constitute a reversal of the situation. Rather, it insinuates a possibility. Thus, though working against the pattern set up by the motifs, this counter movement makes that pattern more aesthetically credible by creating the necessary ingredient of free will. The story achieves power through a delicate balance of the protagonists' free will and the force of circumstance.

In addition to imposing a sense of inevitability, this strong patterning of events performs the important function of extending the story's range of meanings. This can best be understood by reference to Hemingway's "fourth dimension," which has been defined by Joseph Warren Beach as an "aesthetic factor" achieved by the protagonists' repeated participation in some traditional "ritual or strategy," and by Malcolm Cowley as "the almost continual performance of rites and ceremonies" suggesting recurrent patterns of human experience. The incremental motifs of symbol, action, and language which inform *Of Mice and Men* have precisely these effects. The simple story of two migrant workers' dream of a safe retreat, a "clean well-lighted place," becomes itself a pattern or archetype.

Thus while John Mason Brown [in his *Two on the Aisle*, 1938] calls the play "one of the finest, most pungent, and most poignant realistic productions," Frank H. O'Hara says that "we are likely to come away with more . . . feelings for the implications of the story than the story itself . . . sketching behind the individual characters the vast numbers of other homeless drifters who work for a toe hold in a society which really has no place for them" [In "Steinbeck of California," *Delphian Quarterly* XXIII (April 1940)] Carlos Baker sees the book as an allegory of Mind and Body. Edmund Wilson calls the book "a parable which criticizes humanity from a non-political point of view" [ *The Boys in the Back Room*, 1941] The French critic, Mme. Claude-Edmonde Magny sees George and Lennie as "l'homme et le monstre," or "la conscience et l'humanite" [*L'Age du roman americain*, 1948].

As these remarks make clear, three levels have been observed in *Of Mice and Men*. There is the obvious story level on a realistic plane, with its shocking climax. There is also the level of social protest, Steinbeck the reformer crying out against the exploitation of migrant workers. The third level is an allegorical one, its interpretation limited only by the ingenuity of the audience. It could be, as Carlos Baker suggests, an allegory of Mind and Body. Using the same kind of dichotomy, the story could also be about the dumb, clumsy, but

strong mass of humanity and its shrewd manipulators. This would make the book a more abstract treatment of the two forces in *In Dubious Battle*—the mob and its leaders. The dichotomy could also be that of the unconscious and the conscious, the id and the ego, or any other forces or qualities which have the same structural relationship to each other as do Lennie and George. It is interesting in this connection that the name Leonard means "strong and brave as a lion," and that the name George, of course, means "husbandman."

The title itself, however, relates *Of Mice and Men* to still another level which is implicit in the context of [Robert] Burns' poem:

But, Mousie, thou art no thy lane,  
In proving foresight may be vain.  
The best laid schemes o' mice and men  
Gang aft a-gley  
An' leave us nought but grief an' pain  
For promis'd joy

In the poem Burns extends the mouse's experience to include mankind; in *Of Mice and Men* Steinbeck extends the experience of two migrant workers to the human condition. "This is the way things are," both writers are saying. On this level, perhaps its most important, Steinbeck is dramatizing the non-teleological philosophy which had such a great part in shaping *In Dubious Battle* and which was to be explicated in [Sea of Cortez](#). This level of meaning is also indicated by the book's tentative title while it was in progress—"Something That Happened." In this light, the ending of the story is, like the ploughman's disrupting of the mouse's nest, neither tragic nor brutal but simply a part of the pattern of events. It is amusing in this regard that a Hollywood director suggested to Steinbeck that someone else kill the girl so that sympathy could be kept with Lennie.

Source: Peter Lisca, "Motif and Pattern in *Of Mice and Men*," in *Modern Fiction Studies*, winter, 1956-57, pp 228-34.

## Of Mice and Men: Suggested Essay Topics

### Chapter 1

1. George and Lennie are obviously committed to each other, yet they often criticize each other or threaten to leave. Examine the negative aspects of this relationship, and then consider why they stay together in spite of all of this. Contrast the language of each, their threats and complaints, with what they really feel. What is it that so strongly binds these two together?

2. Write a character profile of Lennie and George. In addition to describing their physical characteristics, focus on their personalities, their hopes, and their dreams. How is each character different, and how do they complement each other?

### Chapter 2

1. It seems very unusual for two people in this work, which presents the reader a real slice of life, to have established companions. Consider the pairs presented in this chapter: George and Lennie, Curley and his wife, Candy and his dog. Discuss the relationships involved in the various pairings. What is the basis for each relationship? What are the positive and negative aspects of each?

2. Steinbeck paints a picture of life on the ranch through his characterization, giving the reader important information about them. Compile a list of characters presented by Steinbeck in this chapter and describe the qualities of each. What do the details tell you about each of them? What, in your opinion, does each character represent and why?

### Chapter 3

1. Trace the parallels that are developed between Candy and his dog and George and his companion. Consider the amount of time they have spent together, the way they view the limitations of their companions, the way they defend their companions, and any other points of similarity you see.
2. George and Lennie's plan to buy a ranch in the first chapter is nothing more than an unattainable dream. How does it become a more concrete plan in the second chapter, and what is the role that Candy plays in taking this dream closer to reality?

### Chapter 4

1. Several characters have suggested a need to have a companion or just a person who will listen. What evidence is given here that this is a strong desire of many of the characters? Consider, too, the effect that having a companion gives to Candy and Crooks as they confront Curley's wife.
2. Crooks, Lennie, Candy, and Curley's wife are lonely people with specific needs. Compare the four characters and discuss what they need and want to end their respective feelings of loneliness.

### Chapter 5

1. After Candy has brought George to the barn to show him Curley's wife, George leaves and Candy cries. What is the true source of Candy's sadness and why? Compare the killing of Curley's wife to the night Candy's old dog was shot and killed by Carlson.
2. Death is the beginning and the culminating event in the chapter, but the killing of Curley's wife is regarded with a lack of emotion by the characters, even less than the killing of the puppy or the shooting of Candy's dog earlier in the book. Why do you think this is so? Why is the moral issue of her murder, the question of right and wrong, never really an issue when Curley's wife's body is discovered by the men?

### Chapter 6

1. When George shoots Lennie, is this a sign of the strength of his love or the weakness of his love for Lennie? Has he finally followed through on the threat to abandon Lennie? Why does he shoot Lennie in the middle of their imagining the farm one last time?
2. Murder is a crime, in some states punishable by death. By all definitions, George plans and carries out the murder of his best friend. But there seems to be no concern for taking a human life. Why do you think this is so? When, if anytime, do you think it would be justified?

## Of Mice and Men: Sample Essay Outlines

The following analytical paper topics are designed to test your understanding of this novel as a whole and to analyze important themes and literary devices. Following each question is a sample outline to help you get started.

#### • Topic #1

Loneliness is a dominant theme in *Of Mice and Men*. Most of the characters are lonely and searching for someone who can serve as a companion or just as an audience. Discuss the examples of character loneliness, the efforts of the characters in search of companionship, and their varying degrees of success.

#### Outline

I. Thesis statement: In his novel *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck depicts the essential loneliness of



California ranch life in the 1930s. He illustrates how people are driven to find companionship.

II. Absence of character names

- A. The Boss
- B. Curley's wife

III. George and Lennie

- A. Consider each other family
- B. Lennie described as a kind of pet
- C. George's philosophy about workers who travel alone
- D. The Godlike Slim as George's audience

IV. Candy

- A. Candy's attachment to his dog
- B. The death of his dog
- C. His request to join George and Lennie
- D. His need to share his thoughts with Lennie

V. Crooks

- A. Isolated by his skin color
- B. His eagerness for company
- C. His desire to share the dream of the farm

VI. Curley's wife

- A. Flirting with the workers
- B. Talking to Crooks, Candy, and Lennie in the barn
- C. Persuading Lennie to listen to her

VII. The hope and power when people have companions

- A. George and Lennie
- B. Candy
- C. Crooks

VIII. The misery of each when companionship is removed

- A. Crooks
- B. Candy
- C. George

• **Topic #2**

The novel *Of Mice and Men* is written using the same structure as a drama, and meets many of the criteria for a tragedy. Examine the novel as a play. What conventions of drama does it already have? Does it fit the definition of a tragedy?

**Outline**

I. Thesis statement: Steinbeck designed his novel *Of Mice and Men* as a drama, more specifically, a tragedy.

II. The novel can be divided into three acts of two chapters (scenes)

- A. First act introduces characters and background
- B. Second act develops conflicts
- C. Third act brings resolution

III. Settings are simple for staging

IV. Most of the novel can be transferred into either dialogue or stage directions

- A. Each chapter opens with extensive detail to setting
- B. Characters are described primarily in physical terms

V. The novel fits the definition of tragedy

- A. The protagonist is an extraordinary person who meets with misery
- B. The story celebrates courage in the face of defeat
- C. The plot ends in an unhappy catastrophe that could not be avoided

• **Topic #3**

There are many realistic and naturalistic details in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*.

Discuss how Steinbeck is sympathetic and dispassionate about life through the presentation of realism and naturalism.

**Outline**

I. Thesis Statement: Steinbeck displays a sympathetic and a dispassionate attitude toward man's and nature's condition through the use of realistic and naturalistic details.

II. Realism—things as they are

- A. Setting of chapter one
  - 1. Water
  - 2. Animals
  - 3. Plants
  - 4. People
- B. Description of the bunk house
- C. Dialect and slang of the characters
- D. Dress and habits of the characters
- E. Death as a natural part of life

III. Naturalism—fate at work

- A. Animal imagery to describe people
  - 1. Lennie
  - 2. Curley's wife
- B. Lower class characters
- C. Place names
  - 1. Soledad
  - 2. Weed
- D. Foreshadowing
  - 1. Light and dark
  - 2. Dead mouse and pup
  - 3. Lennie's desire to leave the ranch
  - 4. Candy's crippled dog
  - 5. Solitaire card game
- E. Symbolism in the last chapter
  - 1. Heron and snake
  - 2. Gust of wind
  - 3. Slim's comment

• **Topic #4**

The story of George and Lennie lends itself to issues found in the question: Am I my brother's keeper? Does man have an obligation to take care of his fellow man, and what is the price that must be paid if the answer is "yes" or if the answer is "no"?

### **Outline**

I. Thesis Statement: Steinbeck shows that there is a great price to be paid for not being sensitive to the needs of others as well as for taking care of others.

II. The vulnerable ones

- A. Lennie
- B. Candy
- C. Crooks

III. The heartless ones

- A. The boss
- B. Curley
- C. Curley's wife

IV. The insensitive one—Carlson

V. The sensitive ones

- A. Slim
- B. George

### **• Topic #5**

The American Dream is for every man to have a place of his own, to work and earn a position of respect, to become whatever his will and determination and hard work can make him. In *Of Mice and Men* the land becomes a talisman, a hope of better things. Discuss the American Dream as presented in the novel.

### **Outline**

I. Thesis Statement: For the characters in this novel, the American Dream remains an unfulfilled dream.

II. The dream

- A. Owning a home
- B. Enjoying freedom to choose
  - 1. Activities
  - 2. Companions
- C. Living off the fat of the land
- D. Not having to work so hard
- E. Having security in old age or sickness

III. The dream's unrealistic aspects

- A. Too good to be true
- B. A pipe dream for bindle stiffs
- C. Lack of money

IV. George and Lennie's attitude toward the dream

- A. Was a comfort in time of trouble
- B. Did not really believe in the dream

- V. Crooks's attitude toward the dream  
A. His belief  
B. His disappointment

- VI. Candy's attitude toward the dream  
A. His belief  
B. His money  
C. His disappointment at the end

## Of Mice and Men: Compare and Contrast

- **1930s:** The [Great Depression](#) and severe drought in the Midwest (leading to what became known as the Dust Bowl) forces a population shift from rural to urban areas. People leave their farms and move to the cities to find jobs. This change in demographics spurs industrialization within the cities, a trend that is accelerated in the 1940s with the beginning of World War II. Farms once owned by families begin to be bought out by corporations and consolidated into "farm factories."

**Today:** Though the stock market skyrockets in the 1990s, the "Electronic Revolution" encourages more efficient business practices which, in turn, fosters corporate downsizing. Workers begin to move out of centralized urban office settings to work out of their homes in the suburbs, using computers and the Internet, while factory workers are increasingly replaced by improved automation techniques and must retrain to find jobs requiring higher skills. The number of individual farms decreases from over six million in the 1940s to two million and are largely owned by businesses.

- **1930s:** Labor unions see an incredible growth in memberships and, with the help of the federal government and dynamic union leaders like United Mine Workers president John L. Lewis, strike successfully against powerful corporations. The Roosevelt administration puts laws into effect, including the National Labor Relations Act of 1935, that facilitate unionization. Disputes among skilled versus unskilled laborers causes unskilled workers to split from the American Federation of Labor (AFL) to found the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).

**Today:** The ability of large unions like the Teamsters and the United Auto Workers (UAW) to strike effectively against businesses is compromised and membership is down as federally mandated worker benefits have become widespread and public sympathy for workers diminishes. However, the practice of corporations to hire more part-time laborers in order to bypass laws that demand full-time employees receive medical and retirement benefits creates new labor problems as ordinary workers find it increasingly necessary to work two or more part-time jobs.

- **1930s:** Communism becomes a popular social movement in America and the 1930s are later dubbed the "Red Decade." Intellectuals and common workers alike support the concepts of communism, and this new social consciousness leads to support of the Social Security Act and the repeal of Prohibition. By 1936, the Communist Party favored Roosevelt's New Deal, a series of governmental programs designed to support workers with federal funds.

**Today:** Communism, unpopular in America since the 1950s, collapses around the world as a political movement, especially in Europe after the breakup of the Soviet Union. However, government-funded programs have become standard in the United States, and by 1997 some 43 million Americans receive Social Security benefits and individuals become dependent on socialistic government programs.

## Of Mice and Men: Topics for Further Study

- Research the migrant farm labor movement's attempts to organize unions in the 1930s in California and compare with the work of Cesar Chavez's United Farm Workers Union in the 1970s.
- Investigate the claims of People for the American Way that John Steinbeck's novel *Of Mice and Men* is the book most frequently challenged by school censors. Other controversial books include J. D. Salinger's [The Catcher in the Rye](#) and Steinbeck's [The Grapes of Wrath](#).
- Research and compare how the number of farms in the United States has declined from the 1930s to the 1990s, including the average acreage of individual farms during these decades and the percentage of farms owned by corporations versus those owned by private farmers.

## Of Mice and Men: Media Adaptations

- *Of Mice and Men* was adapted by Steinbeck as a play, which opened on Broadway on November 23, 1937, and was directed by playwright George S. Kaufman. The play won the prestigious New York Critics' Circle Award for 1937 and ran for 207 performances.
- The novel was also adapted as a film in 1939 and was nominated for three Academy Awards: Best Picture, Best Score by Aaron Copland, and Best Sound. The film starred Burgess Meredith as George and Lon Chaney Jr. as Lennie, and was released by Universal; it was directed by Lewis Mileston. As of 1997, unavailable on video.
- The novel was adapted as a film for television by ABC in 1968; it was directed by Ted Kotcheff, produced by David Susskind, and starred George Segal and Nicol Williamson.
- Another made-for-television movie version was broadcast in 1981, starring Robert Blake and Randy Quaid, and directed by RezaBadiyi. This version is available from Pnsm Entertainment Home Video.
- A more recent film adaptation of the novel was made in 1992. Director Gary Sinise received permission from Elaine Steinbeck, the writer's widow, to film the novel. The movie starred Gary Sinise as George and John Malkovich as Lennie; the screenplay was written by Horton Foote, it is available from MGM/UA Home Entertainment.

From the film *Of Mice and Men*, starring Gary Sinise and John Malkovich, MGM, 1992.

## Of Mice and Men: What Do I Read Next?

- [The Grapes of Wrath](#) (1939) is Steinbeck's masterpiece about the Dust Bowl era of the 1930s which won the Pulitzer Prize. It was a timely, provocative book when published and has become a classic of American literature.
- [In Dubious Battle](#) (1936) is the first in Steinbeck's trilogy of books that look at the migrant labor problems in the 1930s. This is a book about labor organizers and a strike in California's apple fields. The book caused an uproar from both the political left and right. *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) followed in what has become known as Steinbeck's period of greatness.
- *A Time of Troubles* (1990), by Pieter Van Raven, is set during the Depression and tells about a boy and his father who move to California. Roy works in the orange orchards while his father tries to get a job with the growers association, and they end up on opposite sides of the labor issues there.
- *Factories in the Field* (1939), published in the same year as *The Grapes of Wrath*, is a factual account by a California state agency of the lives of migrant workers.
- *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (1970), by Studs Terkel, is a compilation of interviews with Americans who lived through the Depression.
- *The Unfinished Nation* (1993) is Alan Brinkley's concise history of the American people which provides a clear and readable look at the American past.

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## **Of Mice and Men: Pictures**

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