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Summary

Introduction

John Steinbeck’s novella Of Mice and Men was published in 1937 and is considered Steinbeck’s first major achievement as an author. Of Mice and Men focuses on the lives of George Milton and Lennie Small, two friends who are working towards a shared dream of owning their own piece of land during the Great Depression. Of Mice and Men explores themes of human interaction, dependence, and the damaging effects of isolation.

Plot Summary

Of Mice and Men follows the lives of George Milton and Lennie Small over three days. On the first day, the two men sit by the Salinas River in California, resting on their journey to a ranch where they’ve found work. Lennie is large and strong but has a mental disability and relies on George’s assistance to function well in society. At the riverside, George sees that Lennie has been keeping a dead mouse in his pocket. George throws the mouse away, but Lennie later tries to retrieve it because he loves stroking its soft fur. Lennie begins to cry over the mouse, and George tries to console him. In his frustration, George complains about having to care for Lennie. When Lennie offers to leave him, however, George refuses and tells Lennie that they have to stick together. George and Lennie discuss their dream of owning a piece of land. Before going to sleep, George tells Lennie to memorize the location of the riverbank. He tells Lennie to return to that spot if he runs into any trouble while working on the ranch.

When George and Lennie arrive at the ranch, they are taken to the ranch hand’s bunkhouse. They meet Candy, an aging, one-handed menial laborer—called an “old swamper”—who keeps the bunkhouse clean. The ranch’s boss enters and admonishes George and Lennie for being late. George does all the talking for Lennie, which makes the boss suspicious. Upon hearing Lennie speak, the boss sees that Lennie has a mental disability and assumes that George is taking advantage of Lennie. George lies to the boss, telling him that Lennie is his cousin and that he was kicked in the head by a horse as young boy. This story quells the boss’s suspicion, although George realizes that the boss will be watching them from now on.

Shortly afterwards, the boss’s son, Curley, comes into the bunkhouse. When he sees Lennie, Curley immediately tries to pick a fight with him. After Curley leaves, Candy explains to George and Lennie that Curley is a boxer and is intimidated by men larger than him. George warns Lennie against getting involved with Curley. They then meet Curley’s wife, who arrives while looking for Curley. George immediately dislikes her and sees her as troublesome, whereas Lennie finds her pretty. George warns Lennie to stay away from Curley’s wife. Slim, the wise and patriarchal ranch hand, comes in and speaks with George. He proves to be much kinder than the boss or Curley. They speak about the new puppies that have been born on the ranch, and George arranges for Lennie to get a puppy.

Later on, George talks to Slim about Lennie. George tells Slim that he and Lennie grew up in the same town together and that after Lennie’s aunt died, George took him in and cared for him. George admits he used to play tricks on Lennie but stopped after seeing that Lennie would do anything he asked. George claims Lennie is simple and doesn’t mean any harm. Lennie then comes into the bunkhouse where the men are talking. George sees that Lennie is holding one of the new puppies. He tells Lennie to put it back with its mother or it will die. Lennie complies, and Slim notes that Lennie is an essentially good but childlike person.
George and Lennie then meet Crooks, the African American stable hand. Crooks calls Slim away, leaving George and Lennie in the bunkhouse. Candy comes into the bunkhouse with his very old and smelly dog. One of the ranch hands, Carlson, complains about the dog and asks to shoot it to put it out of its misery. Candy doesn’t want to do it, but he allows Carlson to.

Curley then comes in, angrily looking for his wife. He thinks Slim has been flirting with his wife and wants to fight him. The other men follow Curley, leaving George, Lennie, and Candy in the bunkhouse. George and Lennie discuss their dream again. Candy overhears and offers to contribute all his savings to help purchase the land if he can live with them. George and Lennie agree, and the three men feel confident about achieving their dream. Slim returns, followed by Curley, who failed to convince Slim to fight. Curley then aggravates Lennie, who lets Curley hurt him until George tells Lennie to fight back. Lennie then accidentally crushes Curley’s hand. Lennie feels sad about hurting Curley, and says that he never wanted to hurt anyone.

George, Slim, and the other ranch hands travel to town to visit a brothel. Lennie, Crooks, Candy, and Curley’s wife are the only ones left on the ranch, being uninvited or unable to go. Lennie visits Crooks, who speaks to Lennie about his isolation as an African American man and his lifelong experiences of overt racism. Candy joins the two and tells Crooks about the dream to own a piece of land with Lennie and George. Crooks asks if he can join and help them work the land. Then, Curley’s wife comes in and provokes Candy and Crooks. When Crooks tries to tell Curley’s wife to leave his bunkhouse, Curley’s wife threatens Crooks. Curley’s wife leaves, and Crooks claims he was joking about joining Candy, George, and Lennie in their dream for a piece of land.

The next day, Lennie accidentally kills his puppy in the barn. Lennie hides it, unsure of what to do and afraid of getting in trouble. Curley’s wife comes in and sits next to Lennie. Lennie at first refuses to talk with her, but she reassures him. Curley’s wife tells Lennie about her disappointment with Curley, her isolation on the ranch, and her dream of becoming an actress. Lennie then shares his fears over having killed the puppy, his desire to own rabbits, and his penchant for petting soft things. Curley’s wife then offers to let Lennie pet her hair. When he pets her too hard, she panics, which makes Lennie latch onto her more firmly. When Curley’s wife tries to scream, Lennie shakes her and accidentally breaks her neck. Lennie flees to the riverbank where George told him to hide in the novella’s opening scene.

Candy finds Curley’s wife’s body and calls for George. When George sees her body, he realizes what happened. He and Candy both know that Curley and the other men will want to lynch Lennie for killing Curley’s wife. George knows where Lennie has gone and takes Carlson’s gun. He runs ahead of the other men to find Lennie first. George finds Lennie at the riverside. At first he tries to scold Lennie, because Lennie asks to be punished for accidentally killing Curley’s wife. When George hears the men approaching from behind him, he asks Lennie to look out across the river. George describes their dream of owning a piece of land and starting a farm. Lennie listens with joy. George then takes Carlson’s gun and aims it at the back of Lennie’s head. George shoots Lennie before the other men can arrive and hurt him. Slim consoles George, understanding what happened and why George killed Lennie. George lies to the other men, telling them that he had to take the gun from Lennie and shoot him out of self-defense. The novella ends as Slim reassures George that he did the right thing. The two men walk away together, leaving Lennie’s body with Curley and another ranch hand.
Chapter Summaries and Analysis

Chapter Summaries 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 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 blubbery 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 Summaries and Analysis: 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 ast 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 Summaries and Analysis: 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 Summaries and Analysis: 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.

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 Summaries and Analysis: 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.

“As maybe,” he says to her, “if I took this pup out and threwed 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 Summaries and Analysis: 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.
Themes

Although the novella is short and spare, Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* explores major themes of loneliness and alienation, dreams versus reality, and friendship and loyalty. These universal themes are revealed through Steinbeck’s detailed characterization and succinct and graceful prose.

**Loneliness and Alienation**

Steinbeck explores the theme of loneliness and isolation through specific character interactions. For instance, Candy, Crooks, and Lennie all exemplify the experience of alienation.

Candy is an aging and disabled ranch hand who has been relegated to cleaning the bunkhouse. Due to his age and physical disability, he cannot participate with the other men in ranch work and is excluded by the men when they visit the town. Steinbeck uses Candy’s old dog to parallel Candy’s own advanced age and diminished ability on the farm. Despite Candy’s reservations, the other ranch hands advocate for killing Candy’s dog, whom they believe is too old to be useful anymore. The ranch hands view Candy as being just as useless as his old dog, representing how the farm treats its own members once they've outlived their purpose. The men can exercise the power of putting the dog “out of its misery,” which is something they cannot exercise over Candy.

Crooks embodies the isolation and loneliness that arise from racial differences. As the only African American on the ranch, Crooks is ostracized and mistreated. At the time of the Great Depression, when *Of Mice and Men* is set, African Americans experienced a great deal of racism. Crooks exhibits an understanding of this; he realizes how and why he has been alienated from the other men. When Crooks and Curley’s wife get into a disagreement, Crooks’ belief that he can partake in the dream of owning land is dashed. He is quickly broken down again by Curley’s wife’s threats against him. Crooks sees that living in isolation is safer than interacting with the white men and women, whom he obviously cannot trust, because they will inevitably mistreat him.

Lennie faces the fear and stigma attached to having a mental disability, and we see the reverberations of this alienation throughout the novella. Although Lennie is cared for by George, he is misunderstood by many who encounter him, such as Curley’s wife. Lennie doesn’t wish to hurt anyone, but he lacks the social knowledge and physical control to avoid doing so. Lennie is left out of activities such as going to the town with George and the other men. However, Lennie also stands as a foil to loneliness through his absolute loyalty and friendship to George.

**Dreams versus Reality**

The clash between the lure of dreams and the harshness of reality is a major theme in *Of Mice and Men*. Lennie and George hold on to their version of the American dream: owning their own piece of farmland. Steinbeck shows how the American dream is an ideal that is impossible—or at least very hard—to attain. For Lennie and George, their shared dream dissolves when Lennie accidentally kills Curley’s wife.

However, the dream is present throughout the novella, attracting the most isolated and desperate characters to begin, if only momentarily, to imagine a better life for themselves. Candy, who is physically disabled, aged, and almost useless on the ranch, takes comfort in George and Lennie’s dream and even offers to put his life’s savings toward it. Crooks, who is alienated for being an African American, takes comfort in the dream and imagines himself working alongside others. Lennie and George’s dream is to “live off the fatta’ the lan.’’
Such land ownership and control of natural resources stands at the very core of the American dream. Last, for Lennie, the ideal future is one in which he owns rabbits on the land that he can take care of and pet, which is his strongest desire throughout the novella.

This dream also stands in juxtaposition to the Great Depression. The Great Depression was marked by a dire scarcity of land and wealth for the majority of Americans. For Lennie and George, life as itinerant workers means unsteady pay, unsteady work, and an unsettled life. It is hard for these two men to create savings with the low wages they are given.

Given that George and Lennie are job searching during the Great Depression, finding work is made even more difficult by the lack of job opportunities. Further, Lennie’s mental disability puts a strain on George as a caretaker. Lennie is presented as a character who is both George’s partner but unable to function on his own. Lennie’s innocence and mental disability stop him from being able to care for himself. Lennie’s innocent and simple state either cannot exist or will struggle to exist in society. Since Lennie kills Curley’s wife and is then killed in return, this suggests he is a danger to both himself and others and that there is no place for him in the current system. Similarly, the dream in its idealism and innocence cannot exist in reality either. For Lennie and George, the dream of owning their own space is a source of comfort and happiness. The dream represents an escape; however, their circumstances make their dream a nearly impossible goal to attain.

Friendship and Loyalty

The theme of friendship and loyalty is most clearly seen through the relationship between George and Lennie. George is Lennie’s caretaker, and although George openly admits to feeling trapped by his responsibility to Lennie, he refuses to leave Lennie to fend for himself. Lennie, in turn, shows a huge amount of loyalty towards George.

George had at first taken advantage of Lennie’s mental disability, but he realized that Lennie’s loyalty to him knew no bounds. When asked to jump into a river by George, Lennie did so, despite not being able to swim. Although George meant the request as a joke, it almost killed Lennie. George learned to stop messing with Lennie after that, because he realized his responsibility in the face of Lennie’s enormous trust in him.

George later shows his friendship and loyalty towards Lennie after seeing that Lennie has accidentally killed Curley’s wife. George understands that Lennie’s fate is either to be lynched by the ranch hands or to be locked up in an asylum. He knows that either end results in great suffering. George chooses to kill Lennie himself—quickly and humanely—after soothing Lennie with wistful reflections about their dream. Thus, Lennie’s final thoughts are joyful. Although a morally questionable action and possibly problematic commentary towards mental disability, George’s decision to kill Lennie reflects his loyalty and love for his friend. George chooses to end Lennie’s life in the best of circumstances, rather than let Lennie fall into the uncaring hands of the other men.
Characters

Characters: List of Characters

George Milton

One of the protagonists of *Of Mice and Men* George Milton is a shrewd migrant worker “with restless eyes and sharp, strong features.” In many ways, he resembles a mouse: “Every part of him was defined: small, strong hands, slender arms, a thin and bony nose.” (Read our extended character analysis of George Milton.)

Lennie Small

Lennie Small, George’s companion and fellow migrant laborer, is not “small” at all. Lennie's ironic last name highlights how the two main protagonists, Lennie and George, represent a study in contrasts. While George is small and shrewd, Lennie is a “huge man, shapeless of face, with large, pale eyes, and wide, sloping shoulders.” (Read our extended character analysis of Lennie Small.)

Curley

Curley is the son of the ranch owner. He is characterized by his curled hair, hot temper, and “pugnacious and calculating” glance. Once a Golden Glove finalist and lightweight boxer, Curley vainly and incorrectly believes he can physically defeat men who are larger than he is. He often fights with bigger men to demonstrate his strength. When he wins, he is seen as strong; when he loses, he is seen as a martyr. Despite his machismo, Curley is cowardly. He often worries that his wife is flirting with other men, and he makes excuses to explain away his crushed hand after Lennie fights and defeats him. When his wife dies, Curley is more preoccupied with vengeance than with mourning her. Although the laborers encourage Curley to stay with his wife’s body, he vows to “shoot the guts outa that big bastard [him]self.”

Curley’s Wife

The only female character in the story, Curley’s wife is frequently referred to as the “tramp” and the “tart.” She wears a velvet red dress and has “full, rouged lips,” “wide-spaced eyes,” red fingernails, and “hair hung in little rolled clusters, like sausages.” Lonely and unfulfilled, Curley’s wife—who goes unnamed throughout the story—once had dreams of becoming a movie star. Now that she lives on Curley’s ranch, she simply seeks human connection. However, her actions and appearance come off as lascivious and adulterous to many of the characters. George comments that Curley’s wife is “poison” for flirting with so many of the men on the ranch, and he warns Lennie to steer clear of her. However, impressed by Lennie’s strength and ability to best her husband in a fight, Curley’s wife approaches Lennie. He becomes enamored with her soft velvet dress and hair, and when Curley’s wife tries to wriggle away, Lennie accidentally kills her. The death of this unnamed character dashes George and Lennie’s desires; when she dies, Lennie must die as well, and George is left to survive the harsh migratory worker’s life alone.

Candy

Candy is a one-handed, “stoop-shouldered” elderly ranch hand. His offers to contribute his life savings of $350 to Lennie and George in order to help them achieve their dream of living on their own plot of land. This offer makes their dream seem more realistic, at least at first. Like Candy, his dog is old and disabled. Carlson kills Candy’s dog to put him out of his misery, a moment that mirrors how George eventually kills Lennie in
order to save him from Curley’s lynch mob.

**Carlson**

Carlson is a mechanic on the ranch. His inability to feel empathy for others exemplifies the general hostility and indifference experienced by migrant laborers. He volunteers to shoot Candy’s dog, using the same gun George later steals in order to kill Lennie. Carlson is unfeeling and callous. After George shoots Lennie, and he and Slim walk away, Carlson wonders, “Now what the hell ya suppose is eatin’ them two guys?”

**Crooks**

The only black stable hand, Crooks is generally ostracized from the other migrant laborers. He lives alone, and only speaks to Lennie and Candy once, telling them that their dream of having their own plot of land is unrealistic. He has a crooked back as a result of being kicked in the back by a horse.

**Slim**

Slim, a skilled jerkline skinner, or mule driver, is respected as an authority figure on the ranch. Slim is a tall man with “hands, large and lean... as delicate in their action as those of a temple dancer.” He moves “with a majesty achieved only by royalty and master craftsmen,” and he has a “gravity in his manner and a quiet so profound that all talk stopped when he spoke.” He has “God-like” eyes that seem to “fasten” on George when he speaks. He demonstrates more perception and understanding than any of the other characters. He is the only character, besides George, who understands that Lennie isn’t cruel or threatening. When George kills Lennie, Slim consoles him, the only character to show such compassion. A quiet and perceptive man, Slim serves as one of the most empathetic characters of the novella.

**The Boss**

Like his son, Curley, the unnamed boss is hot-tempered and vain. He frequently abuses Crooks, the black stable hand. He wears high-heeled boots to demonstrate that he is not a worker. When George and Lennie arrive at the ranch, the boss is suspicious of the pair. Although he hires them, he questions why George doesn’t let Lennie speak.

**Whit**

A friendly young laborer on the ranch, Whit enjoys playing cards and talking with the other workers.

**Characters: George Milton**

**Extended Character Analysis**

One of the protagonists of *Of Mice and Men*, George Milton is a shrewd migrant worker “with restless eyes and sharp, strong features.” In many ways, he resembles a mouse: “Every part of him was defined: small, strong hands, slender arms, a thin and bony nose.” He travels with Lennie Small, whom he promised Lennie’s Aunt Clara he would protect. Although most migrant workers travel alone, George finds comfort in traveling with his companion. Through this relationship, George demonstrates his compassion and kindheartedness.

When he was younger, George treated Lennie heartlessly, going so far as to dare Lennie to jump into the Sacramento River even though he couldn’t swim. When Lennie jumped and nearly drowned, George vowed
to never hurt Lennie again and to always protect him. Although Lennie often causes trouble, George sticks by him, often serving as his voice, guardian, and mentor. When the two move to a new job site, George fears Lennie will lose them the job if he speaks. As a result, George speaks on both of their behalves—a practice which often gets the two men in trouble.

Although George is a migrant worker, he has a vivid imagination and ambitious dreams. Throughout Of Mice and Men, George frequently expresses his desire to be his own boss instead of someone else’s lowly worker who “got no fambly… [and] don’t belong no place.” To soothe both himself and Lennie, George repeats the aspirational refrain of “living offa the fatta the lan’.” He imagines a future for him and Lennie, although he knows that it may never come true. He indulges Lennie’s imagination as well, envisioning a future in which they own their own land, “a little house and a couple of acres.”

George demonstrates his devotion and loyalty throughout the story, even when he complains about or yells at Lennie. Even in the final tragic moments of the story, he remains dedicated to his friend. As he points the gun at Lennie’s head, George tells Lennie that he’s never been mad at him and he continues indulging Lennie’s imagination by envisioning “a little place… [living] on the fatta the lan’” where Lennie can “tend the rabbits.” By killing Lennie himself, George spares Lennie from suffering at the hands of Curley’s lynch mob. Among all the harsh and unforgiving characters in this Californian migratory society, George is the one character who understands Lennie and his weaknesses. However, despite his tender nature and best efforts, George cannot escape the migratory life. His dreams of owning his own plot of land with Lennie vanish the moment Lennie accidentally kills Curley’s wife. His character demonstrates the cruel realities of living a migratory laborer’s life and the inescapability of moving from the lower to the middle class. Both he and Lennie dream of a new life; however, by the end of the story, George cannot escape and he must continue migrating from one job site to the next.

George Milton: What Is the Nature of George’s Relationship with Lennie?

The heart of Of Mice and Men is George’s commitment to Lennie. While George’s character is revealed through how he interacts with Lennie, their relationship accomplishes another purpose. It underscores several themes in the novel, primarily the destructive effects of loneliness on the human spirit that manifest in Candy, Crooks, and Curley’s wife.

Although George tells Slim that he “ain’t got no people,” with Lennie as his friend and traveling companion, George feels the emotional security of having family. Lennie’s presence helps George know that he is not completely adrift in the world. George stays with Lennie, despite the difficulty of taking care of him, because leaving Lennie behind would mean being alone.

George’s relationship with Lennie also develops themes of human compassion and of the intrinsic worth of those viewed by society as possessing no value at all. Readers learn that George’s compassion for Lennie was ignited when Lennie almost drowned after following George’s cruel, careless instruction to jump into the Sacramento River; Lennie jumped, even though he couldn’t swim. The incident made George aware of the power he exercised over Lennie and of Lennie’s helplessness and eagerness to please him. George felt ashamed of himself and his actions, and he suddenly felt truly responsible for Lennie. George’s deeply-felt sympathy for Lennie, who is terrified of being abandoned, is evident as he comforts Lennie on the riverbank moments before he must shoot him. Giving Lennie a peaceful, painless death is the ultimate act of compassion and sacrifice in the novel.

George feels more than compassion for Lennie, however. Unlike those who ignore or reject Lennie as an individual, seeing in him only odd behavior, George understands Lennie’s character. There is no meanness in
Lennie, no motivation or desire to cause harm; he is innocent. George also recognizes and respects Lennie’s work ethic and perseverance. Slim, wise and observant, recognizes the quality of Lennie’s character, too, confirming George’s judgment. While others have no use for Lennie Small, George’s relationship with him reveals Lennie to be a human of great value, far superior in many ways to others on the ranch.

**Characters: Lennie Small**

**Extended Character Analysis**

Lennie Small, George’s companion and fellow migrant laborer, is not “small” at all. Lennie’s ironic last name highlights how the two main protagonists, Lennie and George, represent a study in contrasts. While George is small and shrewd, Lennie is a “huge man, shapeless of face, with large, pale eyes, and wide, sloping shoulders.” He resembles a “bear” who “drags his paws” and “his feet a little.” George and the other laborers frequently remark on Lennie’s formidable strength. Many compare him to a bull, and Slim states that he has “never seen such a worker… such a strong guy.” He remarks, “ain’t nobody can keep up with him.”

Although Lennie may be the strongest man on the farm, he “ain’t no fighter,” as George states. Lennie is stronger and more powerful than even he realizes, and he often accidently kills the rabbits and mice whose soft fur he likes to pet. Although never explicitly mentioned, readers may infer that Lennie has an intellectual handicap. He is often described as childlike, and he requires George’s assistance to obtain jobs. Lennie also values George’s companionship because George shares his dream of living “on the fatta the lan’” with his beloved rabbits.

Lennie gets into trouble when others perceive his huge stature as menacing. Lennie may be large and physically intimidating, but he is kind and innocent by nature. He never means to hurt animals or anyone, but his incredible strength and mental limitations often unintentionally result in violence. At George and Lennie’s previous job in Weed, which they had to flee from, Lennie was accused of raping a woman after he forcibly rubbed her dress. At their current job in the Salinas Valley, Lennie’s innocent actions result in violence and death. When Curley instigates a fight, Lennie refrains from fighting back until George orders him to retaliate; when Lennie becomes enamored with Curley’s wife’s soft hair, he loses control of his faculties and accidently kills her.

Although to many characters Lennie comes across as mentally impaired, the more perceptive and empathetic characters, like George and Slim, recognize that Lennie is simply incapable of expressing himself in conventional ways. He may not speak in the most eloquent manner, but he is still capable of thinking and dreaming. In the final moments of the story, when Lennie flees the ranch, Lennie has a series of visions of his Aunt Clara and a speaking rabbit. Through these visions, Lennie is finally capable of expression: he communicates his desires to live on his own plot of land and he conveys that he feels unworthy of George’s unwavering companionship. As Steinbeck once wrote, Lennie demonstrates the inability to articulate the “powerful yearning of all men.” He fails to express his dreams partly because he is never taken seriously by the other men in the story. He simply does not fit into this society—his brute strength and mental limitations come across as threatening, and his unintentional violence results in several deaths, including his own.
Analysis

Analysis

As a teenager, Steinbeck worked alongside migrant workers on a sugar beet farm in Salinas, California, shaping his desire to write for the worker, for the everyday person. Steinbeck gave a voice to the oppressed laborer, exploring the difficulties that migrant workers faced during the Great Depression, when *Of Mice and Men* was published in 1937. In *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck seeks to humanize the plight of American workers through Steinbeck’s narrative style, the novella's historical context, and the portrayal of the American dream.

Narrative Style

Steinbeck’s narrative style focuses on character interactions within limited stretches of space and time to amplify the scarcity and oppression of the Great Depression, the time period in which *Of Mice and Men* is set. The novella takes place over the course of three days and has four total settings: the riverbank of the Salinas River, the bunkhouse on the ranch, the barn on the ranch, and Crooks’s bunk room. Compared to the opening scene, which spans an entire day, the rest of the novella covers four days in six scenes. Time seems to only grow more still the longer George and Lennie live on the ranch, until it stops altogether with Lennie’s death.

The novella cycles through the same four places, mirroring the cyclical life on the ranch the workers experience. Steinbeck takes little time for description of setting, and his imagery is sparse. The limited number of scenes highlights how trapped the characters are within their individual places in society, as if both the reader and characters are confined to only these four spaces. Though the characters discuss their dreams of escaping the ranch and starting anew, the tightly controlled lens of the story reveals how futile this attempt is.

Due to the short length of the novella, there are less opportunities for extensive character development. In the space allotted, the characters’ dialogue and interaction create a field in which readers can decide which characters they sympathize with. As a result, Steinbeck's characters lend themselves towards presenting as sympathetic or unsympathetic.

Characters such as Curley and his wife have dialogue that is either aggressive or wheedling, which may leave an unsavory impression on readers. Curley’s wife’s dialogue reveal her reprehensibility, causing many to feel no sympathy for her. As a result, her death at the end of the novella is less jarring than Lennie’s fate.

Other characters, such as Crooks and Candy, are characters who come across as inherently good. Their dialogue and interactions revolve around their loneliness and wish for a better life, which readers can easily relate to and affirm. Last, George and Slim are painted as authority figures, and their actions through dialogue seem confident and endearing.

Historical Context

With the invention of farming machinery in the mid 1930s, fewer migrant laborers were needed, deepening their already difficult struggle to find steady work. During this time, farms in California were large and industrious and often functioned as corporations, paying their workers very little and only employing them for short periods a year. Most only made 300 to 400 dollars a year, and this quickly ran dry when harvest season ended.

Many of Steinbeck's other fiction works, such as *In Dubious Battle* (1936) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939),
are also set in California. Both of those novels cover the struggle of itinerant workers affected by factors out of their control, such as the dust bowl and the actions of wealthy landowners. Similarly, *Of Mice and Men* tells of the futile efforts of George and Lennie to fulfill their dream of owning land. George and Lennie, like many itinerant workers, struggle to make a living. Steinbeck aptly captures the Great Depression with *Of Mice and Men*.

**Symbols**

Throughout the novella, Steinbeck uses several symbols to strengthen and provide additional meaning to the story.

One symbol is the white rabbit, which represents Lennie’s personal dream and his insecurities. Although George and Lennie share the dream of owning land and having a farm, for Lennie the largest part of the dream is the rabbits. Lennie mentions his hope of having rabbits on the farm several times. Lennie sees having the rabbits as his version of paradise where he can touch soft things. The rabbit highlights the innocence of Lennie’s main goal. While he does not wish for money, land, or power, the rabbit reveals how childlike and simple Lennie is. He often assumes the role of a child who asks his parent for permission or is unable to care for himself without the help of George. As much as the rabbit represents Lennie’s ultimate dreams, it represents his fears of abandonment and loneliness. After killing Curley’s wife, Lennie returns to the riverbank and hallucinates that he sees a giant white rabbit waiting for him. The rabbit berates him, telling him that George will beat him and then leave him. Thus, the rabbit embodies his main insecurity that his actions will cause him to lose George’s care and friendship.

Another important symbol in *Of Mice and Men* is the setting of the Salinas riverbank. It is where the story begins and ends. The river, ever flowing forward, frames the opening of the story, embodying the fluidity of time and change. Lennie and George leave the river with hope and return to the river very changed. The riverbank may also represent security and refuge. It is a safe place to camp and take shelter in case events go awry. When the events of the novella eventually get out of hand, Lennie returns to the riverbank where he is able to see his flaws and fears. The riverbank allows Lennie to think clearly, offering him reprieve from his actions for a short time. After George arrives, the riverbank becomes a place of comfort for Lennie, as George describes their dream to him to calm him down. Lennie’s death at the riverbank highlights the inevitability of death and change, despite the river’s role as a haven for the two men.

Steinbeck’s novella depicts mice as expendable creatures that are at the will of Lennie’s indomitable strength. Though Lennie is only doing what he considers to be “loving” the mice, he kills them. This is an early sign of Lennie’s lack of physical and mental control that will lead to severe consequences. The mouse, powerless against Lennie’s strength, represents the lack of control one has over life’s circumstances. Steinbeck named the novella *Of Mice and Men* in reference to a poem by Robert Burns called “To a Mouse.” The poem depicts the destruction of the eponymous mouse’s life and home at the hands of a farmer, which underscores the mouse’s lack of control over the destruction caused by outside forces. The lines Steinbeck gained inspiration from—“The best laid schemes o’ mice an’ men / Gang aft agley”—suggest that plans often go astray, despite our best efforts.

**Analysis**

*Of Mice and Men* is one of the most widely assigned modern novels in high schools because of both its form and the issues that it raises. John Steinbeck’s reliance on dialogue, as opposed to contextual description, makes the work accessible to young readers, as does his use of foreshadowing and recurrent images. Equally important is the way in which he intertwines the themes of loneliness and friendship and gives dignity to those characters, especially Lennie and Crooks, who are clearly different from their peers. By focusing on a group
of lonely drifters, Steinbeck highlights the perceived isolation and sense of “otherness” that can seem so
overwhelming when one is growing up.

*Of Mice and Men* is also important because it explores the way in which events can conspire against the
realization of one’s dreams. It pits a group of flawed individuals against a set of circumstances that they are
unable to master or, in the case of Lennie, even to comprehend. This is a theme that Steinbeck also explores in
his classic novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939).

When Steinbeck began *Of Mice and Men*, he was planning to write a children’s book called *Something That
Happened*. His intent was to demonstrate that events often have a momentum of their own and need not
reflect the existence of a higher power that is exacting punishment. Perhaps it was for this reason that he
decided to retitle the book, drawing from Robert Burns’s oft-quoted poem “To a Mouse,” which contains the
line “The best-laid schemes o’ mice an’ men gang aft a-gley.”

Throughout John Steinbeck’s career, his affinity and compassion for the average person’s struggle for
autonomy surfaces as a recurrent link among his works. *Of Mice and Men*, set in California’s Salinas Valley,
depicts the world of the migrant worker, a world in which Steinbeck himself had lived, and the workers’
search for independence. Steinbeck was critical of what he perceived as the United States’ materialism, and
his work echoes his convictions about the land and its people. Like the characters in his Pulitzer Prize-winning
novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), *Of Mice and Men*’s George and Lennie dream of a piece of land to call
their own.

Published in 1937, *Of Mice and Men* was Steinbeck’s first major success. Unlike later novels, *Of Mice and
Men* is not a politically motivated protest novel. It does, however, reflect Steinbeck’s belief in the
interdependence of society, a theme he continues to explore in the body of his work. For Steinbeck’s
characters, the dream of land represents independence and dignity: the American Dream. George and Lennie
embody the ordinary person’s struggle to grasp the dream, which consists of “a little bit of land, not much.
Jus’ som’thin that was his.” This is one of the central themes that propels the novel’s characters and their
actions.

As the title suggests, the best laid plans of mice and men can, and do, go awry. They are doomed from the
start because of Lennie’s fatal flaw—he is developmentally disabled and therefore incapable of bringing the
dream to fruition—but his naiveté also allows both him and George to pursue the dream. Lennie’s innocence
permits George to believe that the dream might be attainable: “George said softly, ‘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.’” Lennie is the keeper
of the dream; he does not question its inevitable fulfillment, he simply believes. Without this innocence,
George would be like all the other ranch hands, wasting his money on whiskey and women, drifting aimlessly
from one job to the next.

George and Lennie are juxtaposed against a group of isolated misfits, to show not only that they need each
other but also that humans cannot live in isolation without consequences. Steinbeck uses characters such as
Candy, Crooks, and Curley’s wife to illustrate the isolation of the human condition. Each of these characters is
drawn to George and Lennie and their vision; they, too, want to share in the dream. Their dreams have been
systematically destroyed by the insensitivity of the world; as a result, they must appropriate George and
Lennie’s dream. George, Crooks, Candy, and Curley’s wife all have the mental capacity to attain the dream,
but lack the innocent belief that is needed to make it come true. It is their experience that keeps them from
attaining the dream. In the world, innocence is inevitably shattered—one must wake from the dream.

Because Lennie can never pass from his state of innocence to that of experience, he must be destroyed. Lennie
represents that part in George, possibly in everyone, that remains childlike. It is important that George,
himself, must destroy Lennie and that Lennie literally dies with the dream. Before his death, Lennie repeats
the dream like a catechism and urges George, “Le’s do it now,” after which George pulls the trigger. Lennie dies with the dream.

Lennie becomes a metaphor for the death of innocence within a selfish society that cannot comprehend him or his relationship with George. To illustrate this point, Steinbeck allows the character Carlson the final word, “Now what the hell ya suppose is eatin’ them two guys?” Carlson embodies an apathetic society that cannot understand a relationship based upon trust and love rather than avarice. Carlson insists upon killing Candy’s dog because “He don’t have no fun.” Like the society he epitomizes, all of Carlson’s judgments deal in the superficial. For Steinbeck, that is a world that cannot sustain innocence.

**Analysis: 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).

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.

Analysis: Social Concerns

Although in many ways little more than an extended short story, Of Mice and Men provides a vehicle for Steinbeck to focus on one of the oldest issues in human relationships: a person's responsibility for the welfare of fellow humans. The drifter George travels from job to job with the slow-witted Lennie, who depends on him to serve as both intermediary and protector in almost all social situations. Without stating his theme directly, the novelist presents through his characterization of Lennie a sensitive and revealing portrait of the plight of retarded individuals in a world where a lack of understanding of their special needs causes them to be misunderstood and at times reviled by others. Lennie is fortunate to have George serve as his protector, since most of the people with whom he comes in contact have little patience for his actions or sympathy for his seemingly anti-social actions. Even when his misguided actions lead to the commission of a crime, however, Lennie is treated with great compassion by George, whose views represent those of the novelist.

The story of drifters George and Lennie also highlights the plight of all people who search for a better life. The two have a dream with which many may identify: the wish to own their own land, be their own bosses, and control their own destinies. It is clear from the outset, though, that George and Lennie will never realize their dream; the foreshadowings of impending doom are present in the very first scene. The novel dramatizes the tragedy of frustrated hopes: Fate inexorably crushes the dreams of humankind, no matter how carefully individuals plan to overcome obstacles to happiness.

Of Mice and Men is replete with matters of social concern. Its themes are overtly social, dealing with issues of people's responsibility for others. Steinbeck is intent on getting his readers to see that humans cannot be isolated from others, nor can they ignore the plight of the less fortunate.
The treatment of the two main characters, George and Lennie, evokes an atmosphere of pathos that nudges the reader to judge their behavior sympathetically. Such an attitude, however, can easily lead one to condone certain actions that are questionable at best. One must distinguish carefully between attitudes and actions in this work, for there is an exceptional amount of physical violence presented here, and a suggestion that such violence is part of the way things happen in the world. Several animals meet their deaths either through accident or as a result of the natural struggle for survival; when Lennie kills his puppy, for example, the reader is apt to focus on the protagonist's sorrow and overlook the fact that Lennie is a danger to other creatures—both animals and humans—because his brute strength is not reined in by a competent intellect. Even the accidental death of Curley's wife at Lennie's hands can easily be misread; the reader may become caught up in worrying about how Lennie will escape or what George will do to save him, rather than realize the horror that should be felt in knowing that, through Lennie's actions, a human life has been snuffed out. Steinbeck even challenges the reader to consider the possibility that mercy killing may be acceptable: certainly the final paragraphs of the novel suggest that George may have been right in taking Lennie's life rather than letting him face the wrath of Curley and the gang bent on avenging the death of Curley's wife. The importance, and the inevitability, of violence in people's lives is an issue that cannot be overlooked in any discussion of this work.

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.

Analysis: Setting

The action takes place in the 1930s on a ranch in the Salinas Valley in California. The novel opens with the major characters, George Milton and Lennie Small, camping for the night beside a pool along the banks of the Salinas River. The following morning, the two hike to a nearby ranch, where they take up residence in the bunkhouse. Steinbeck paints a vivid picture of the sparsely equipped facility and of the hot, dusty ranch land on which George and Lennie work. Several key scenes take place in the barn on the ranch; again Steinbeck evokes a feeling of the scene through his detailed description of the stalls, the tack for the horses, and the animals that inhabit the area. The novel closes at the same point at which it opens, in the grove of trees beside the pool.

Analysis: Literary 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.

**Character Development**
As one might expect in such a short work, there is little character development in *Of Mice and Men*. Instead, Steinbeck concentrates on revealing his characters and presenting them either as sympathetic or unsympathetic in order to focus the reader's attention on their plight. The most complex character, George, is forced to choose between protecting Lennie or abandoning him and pursuing a private future; while it is not clear that he could succeed in life if he were rid of Lennie, it is apparent that as long as he befriends Lennie, George will get nowhere. Nevertheless, George remains faithful to his friend, and in that way achieves dignity even when his plans for a future life of happiness are defeated.
Steinbeck highlights the plight of his characters through his skillful use of imagery. The novel is replete with references to traps and entrapment, and the frequent use of animal imagery serves as a point of comparison for understanding the emotional states of the human characters within the work. In that way, the novel remains faithful to the spirit of the literary work from which it takes its title, Robert Burns's poem, "To a Mouse."

**Analysis: Literary Qualities**

Steinbeck highlights the plight of his characters through his skillful use of imagery. The novel is filled with references to traps and entrapment. The frequent use of animal imagery serves as a point of comparison for understanding the emotional states of the characters within the work. The effect of the climax is heightened by Steinbeck's careful use of foreshadowing, especially in repeated scenes in which Lennie unintentionally mishandles various animals. The sense of impending doom for Lennie becomes particularly ominous in the opening paragraphs of the last chapter, when animals act out the savage and seemingly senseless struggle for survival just before George and Lennie meet for the last time by the Salinas River.

George shook himself. He said woodenly, "If I was alone I could live so easy."

Steinbeck also makes effective use of literary allusion. The novel takes its title from Robert Burns's eighteenth-century poem, "To a Mouse," in which the narrator muses that "The best laid plans of mice and men / gang aft aglee"—that is, often go astray. The little tragedy Burns notes in the destruction of a mouse's home by the unwitting act of a farmer ploughing his fields is magnified in Steinbeck's novel: where Burns focuses on the mouse, Steinbeck dramatizes the plight of men whose plans are destroyed by forces beyond their control. Hence, the novel shares several affinities with both classical and modern tragedies. In its cosmic irony it is akin to the works of nineteenth-century American naturalists, such as Frank Norris, and to the novels of British writer Thomas Hardy.

**Analysis: Literary Precedents**

The novel takes its title from Robert Burns's eighteenth-century poem, "To A Mouse": "The best-laid plans of mice and men," Burns's narrator in the poem observes, "gang aft aglee" — that is, often go astray. Hence, the central theme of the work is expressed in the poem to which its title alludes. The novel shares several affinities with both classical and modern tragedies. In its cosmic irony the novel is akin to the works of nineteenth-century American naturalists, and to the novels of British writer Thomas Hardy.

**Analysis: 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.

**Analysis: Related Titles and Media Adaptations**

Steinbeck wrote *Of Mice and Men* with an eye toward the theater, and he produced a script for stage production in 1937. The Broadway play opened that year, and won the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award. In 1939 the novel was adapted into a movie directed by Lewis Milestone and starring Burgess Meredith, Lon Chaney, Jr., and Betty Field. Chaney gave an excellent performance as Lennie. By 1939 standards, the language was racy and the subject matter questionable, and the film did not do well at the box office. It is the most faithful screen adaptation of any of Steinbeck’s novels. A reasonably well done 1981 made-for-television production starred Robert Blake and Randy Quaid.

*Of Mice and Men* is only one of several of Steinbeck’s books set in the Salinas Valley in California and focusing on the plight of the less fortunate in the region. *Tortilla Flat* highlights the Mexican community in the area; *In Dubious Battle* and *The Grapes of Wrath* dramatize the plight of the farmers and migrant workers during the Great Depression.

**Other 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 Milestone. 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.

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For Further Study


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 quotes
quotes: essential quotes 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.

Quotes: Essential Quotes 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 that 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.
Critical Essays

Critical Essays: Form and Content in Of Mice and Men

*Of Mice and Men* recounts the story of two itinerant ranch hands who, despite their apparent differences, are dependent on each other. Lennie Small, by far the better worker of the two, suffers not only from limited intelligence but also from an overwhelming desire to caress soft objects. These traits, combined with his uncontrollable strength, set the stage for disaster.

The fact that a disaster has not already occurred is largely the result of the vigilance of Lennie’s traveling companion, George Milton. Being aware of Lennie’s limitations, George does his best to keep Lennie focused on their mutual dream of owning their own spread, raising rabbits, and being in charge of their own lives. He also ushers Lennie out of town whenever the locals misinterpret his friend’s actions.

When the reader first encounters Lennie and George, they are setting up camp in an idyllic grove near the Gabilan mountains. It is lush and green and inhabited by all varieties of wild creatures. It represents, as the ensuing dialogue makes clear, a safe haven—a place where both humans and beasts can retreat should danger threaten. This setting provides author John Steinbeck with a context against which to portray the ranch to which George and Lennie travel the next day. The ranch, as he describes it, is a world without love and in which friendship is viewed as remarkable.

Steinbeck frames the desolation of ranch life by having George and Lennie comment on how different their lives are and having the other ranch hands comment on how unusual it is for two men to travel together. The hired hands have no personal stake in the ranch’s operation and, for the most part, no stake in one another’s well-being. Although they bunk together and play an occasional game of cards or horseshoes, each is wary of his peers. It is for this reason that Lennie and George’s friendship is questioned by everyone and why their dream of owning their own place is so infectious, especially to men such as Crooks and Candy, both of whom long to escape this loveless, isolated existence. Complementing this theme are the description of Candy and his dog and Crooks’s analysis of what it means to have a friend. Even Curley’s wife is used to reinforce the message. She is a woman who, despite her own dreams of grandeur, finds herself living on a ranch where she is perceived as a threat and an enemy by all the hired hands.

To underscore the situation, Steinbeck adopts restricted third-person narration and employs a tone that can best be described as uninvolved. His technique is an outgrowth of his desire to fuse dramatic and novelistic techniques into a new literary format, which he called the “play-novelette.” Accordingly, he relies on setting and dialogue to convey his message. For this reason, he begins each chapter with a compendium of details that allows readers to envision the scenes much as they might were they watching a staged presentation. Once he has outlined the surroundings, however, he steps away and relies on dialogue to carry the main thread of the story.

Significantly, Steinbeck begins and ends the novel at the campsite. This circular development reinforces the sense of inevitability that informs the entire novel. Just as Lennie is destined to get into trouble and be forced to return to the campsite so, too, will George be forced to abandon the dream of owning his own farm. Instead, he will be reduced to the status of a lonely drifter, seeking earthly pleasures to alleviate the moral isolation and helplessness that Steinbeck suggests is part of the human condition.
Critical Essays: Places in Of Mice and Men

Salinas Valley

Rich agricultural region along north-central California’s Pacific coast in which the novel is set. Steinbeck grew up in the Salinas Valley and set much of his important fiction there and in the surrounding areas. In this short novel, his focus is comparatively narrow: All its action unfolds between the Salinas River, a single ranch, and the nearby town of Soledad. Although the backdrop of the story hints at social discontent—which is manifest in the dream of itinerant farmworkers George Milton and Lennie Small to own their own land—the book’s drama centers on the personal problems of the giant Lennie, who has a history of stumbling into serious trouble wherever he and George go.

Salinas River

Stream next to which the story begins and ends. The novel opens as itinerant farmworkers George and Lennie are hunkering down beside the pleasant river, discussing the new ranch to which they are headed. They also talk about a little ranch they hope to buy for themselves, and the pastoral riverside location evokes Lennie’s wistful yearnings to raise rabbits and live “off the fatta the lan’.”

Fearing that the simple Lennie may get into trouble with their new employers, George makes him promise to return to this same spot by the river if something happens that forces them to flee the ranch. Later, Lennie accidentally kills a woman and comes back to the river, where George finds him before the rest of the ranch hands catch up with him. There, Lennie has a vision and then with George’s help, imagines the little place with rabbits, where there is no trouble. As George instructs him to gaze across the river and see the place with no trouble, he shoots Lennie with a pistol to prevent his being lynched by others.

Ranch

Salinas Valley farm on which George and Lennie take jobs as hands. George hopes only that he and Lennie can keep their jobs long enough to build up a cash stake that will help them buy a small farm for themselves. There is little description of the farm beyond its barn and the bunkhouse in which George and Lennie are quartered. They arrive during what appears to be a barley harvest—work at which the powerful Lennie excels. George and Lennie establish a pleasant camaraderie with some of their bunkmates, so their immediate prospects seem favorable. Such trouble as arises comes from the owner’s family: his belligerent son who unwisely taunts Lennie into a pointless physical confrontation, and the son’s wife, whose coquettish flirtation with the man who humiliates her husband results in both her and Lennie’s deaths. Although George and Lennie’s troubles have little to do with broader labor problems, it is significant that their downfall is brought on by representatives of landowners.

Crooks’s room

Quarters of Crooks, the ranch’s African American cook, who has been living apart from the main bunkhouse through the many years he has worked on the ranch. Although forced to live alone because he is black, he has the ironic privilege of being the only hand on the ranch to enjoy true privacy. He hungers for company other than his books but has never admitted another hand into his room before the night in which Lennie wanders in to pay a friendly call. When another veteran ranch hand, Candy, soon follows, Crooks grudgingly allows the intrusions but secretly relishes having human company, even if it consists only of two fellow pariahs—a dimwit and a crippled amputee. Crooks’s hunger for companionship comes to the surface when he begs to be allowed to join Lennie, Candy, and George’s plan to live on a ranch of their own. In another of the book’s little ironies, its sole African American character also appears to be the ranch’s only hand who was once a
member of a family that owned its own land.

**Weed**

Small Northern California farming town, about 330 miles north of Salinas, from which Lennie and George were run out immediately before the narrative begins. Although George is afraid that he and Lennie will lose their new jobs if anyone at the Salinas ranch finds out why they left Weed, he tells his guilty secret to the skinner Slim. Mentioned several times throughout the novel, Weed is an icon of George and Lennie’s perpetual failure to find stable work and homes, as well as an example of the great distances farm hands must travel to find work.

**Imaginary farm**

Ten-acre plot of farmland that George hopes to buy for himself and Lennie from an elderly couple whom he knows. Though a real place, the farm is appropriately at an unspecified remote location—a place “you couldn’t find in hundred years.” The chances of George and Lennie ever actually owning the place are so slim that it may as well be the farm existing in Lennie’s simple imagination: an idyllic place with abundant crops, rabbits, and other animals that Lennie will tend, and no trouble.

So as not to jeopardize their employment on the Salinas ranch, George repeatedly instructs Lennie not to mention the farm to anyone else. However, Lennie can not stay silent, and each ranch hand whom he tells about the farm wants to be a part of it. George and Lennie’s quest to live on a place of their own is the dominant motif through the novel, so it is fitting that Lennie is imagining life on the farm at the moment George shoots him, thereby ending that dream for everyone.

**Critical Essays: Lennie and the Concept of Morality**

The original manuscript of *Of Mice and Men* suffered a fate that gives writers nightmares: When Steinbeck and his wife were out one night, their dog, Toby, tore the first half of the finished manuscript to shreds. It was Steinbeck’s only copy, so he had to rewrite half of the book. Steinbeck gave the dog meager punishment and said that he had a certain respect for the beast’s literary judgment.

The book is one of Steinbeck’s warmest. Lennie, a migrant ranch hand, is mentally retarded. George, also a migrant ranch hand, travels with him and looks after him. The story opens and ends on a riverbank off the main road, separated from the world of machines and impersonal technology. It is to this place that George tells Lennie to return in case of trouble. As in many of Steinbeck’s novels, this riverbank, and the cave in which Lennie suggests that he and George might live away from the world, is a back-to-the-womb motif.

Lennie is large and strong. He likes soft, furry things. He likes them so much that he sometimes crushes the life out of them accidentally in showing his affection. He keeps mice in his pocket, but they do not survive his attention. Lennie lives on dreams. He longs for the day that he and George will own a little land and a house, a place where they can hide from a world that Lennie does not understand and that George does not trust.

George and Lennie are different from the other ranch hands because they have each other. They conceive of a future and harbor dreams because they think that they will always be together. Their symbiotic relationship humanizes some of the other ranch hands with whom they work.

The ranch owner’s son, Curley, however, is not among those humanized by George and Lennie’s presence. Curley has his own problems. He is a lightweight fighter, a combative sort who resents being small but resents even more people who are larger than he. Lennie is a perfect target for his aggressions. He provokes Lennie into a fight in which he bloodies Lennie’s nose, but Lennie crushes Curley’s hand.
Curley’s other major problem is his wife, who remains unnamed in the story. Her fidelity to Curley is questionable, and she is called a “tart” by the ranch hands. While the men are elsewhere, Curley’s wife finds Lennie in the barn and coaxes him to pet her hair. Lennie’s fondness for soft, furry things makes him vulnerable. He strokes her hair to the point that she becomes alarmed and panics. When she does, Lennie breaks her neck.

Doing as he has been told, Lennie returns to the safety of the riverbank. He asks George to recite for him the details of how they will stay together, buy a small spread, and live out their lives happily. George, realizing that Curley will capture Lennie and make him die painfully for what he has done, puts a bullet through Lennie’s head as Lennie looks out into the distance, where he envisions the future George is reciting to him.

The novel was unique in that it consisted largely of dialogue and was written so that it could also, with almost no adjustments, be acted on stage. Its popularity, particularly its acceptance as a Book-of-the-Month Club selection, surprised Steinbeck, who did not look upon the book as very significant. The original title, *Something That Happened*, reflects Steinbeck’s objectivity in presenting his story; he makes no moral judgments about George and Lennie nor about the other ranch hands.

**Critical Essays: Of Mice and Men Book Review**

Brusque, friendless George Milton has been taking care of big, strong, slow-witted Lenny Small for so long that each has become as brother to the other. Lenny’s great physical strength, coupled with his childlike innocence, has gotten him into trouble in the past. George has always been quick to save him, later threatening to deprive him of his share of their longed-for land, their own little place where they will be beholden to no one.

George’s threats to Lenny’s (and his own) vision of a better life are cathartic, curative, and loving. George needs Lenny as friend, family, and devoted partner. Each is fighting his own type of loneliness: Lenny, the loneliness of brutish incomprehension in a hard world; George, the loneliness of the essential solitary.

When they begin a new job on a ranch, other human conflicts begin to destroy their relationship. Curley, a little man and a bully, takes an immediate dislike to Lenny.

One day, Curley’s wife, bored and lonely, flirts with Lenny in the quiet of the barn, and Lenny, in his innocent strength, accidentally kills her and flees. Curley forms a posse, but George, knowing where Lenny is hiding in the woods, borrows a gun and goes to him. In a final, loving rebuke, George recites for Lenny their vision of a better life and shoots him, saving him once and for all from the punishment of the world’s cruel justice.

OF MICE AND MEN typifies Steinbeck’s ability to tell a simple tale invested with elements of myth and symbol. The opening scene in the woods, for example, in which Lenny reveals his innocence, is mirrored at the end when, innocence threatened, Lenny is killed in the same wood, the Edenic garden lost to him—and to George—forever.

**Bibliography:**


French, Warren. *John Steinbeck*. Boston: Twayne, 1975. Calls *Of Mice and Men* a naturalistic fable resulting from Steinbeck’s fascination with Ed Ricketts’ nonteleological belief “that what things are matters less than the fact that they are.” Discusses Steinbeck’s deliberate writing of a fiction work that could be easily revised into a play.


Owens, Louis. *John Steinbeck’s Re-Vision of America*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985. Discusses the importance of setting to the Eden myth in terms of Lennie’s dream of living “off the fatta the lan’.” The novel seems pessimistic because Eden cannot be achieved, but commitment between people allows for hope.

**Critical Essays: 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 that 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 probably 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.

Critical Essays: George and Lennie's Relationship

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 characters 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 knewed 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.

Critical Essays: How Did Critics React to Of Mice and Men?

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."

Critical Essays: 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 Norns.

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 rootlessness 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 inta 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

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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.

**Critical Essays: 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 acrost 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.


**Critical Essays: 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 came 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 Bums 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.


**Critical Essays: 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
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
Teaching Guide

Teaching Guide: Introduction

So you’re going to teach John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*. Whether it’s your first or hundredth time, *Of Mice and Men* has been a mainstay of English classrooms for generations. While it has its challenging spots—racism, sexism, and classism abound—teaching this text to your class will be rewarding for you and your students. Studying *Of Mice and Men* will give them unique insight into the Great Depression, John Steinbeck’s writing style, and important themes surrounding prejudice, loneliness, and the American experience. This guide highlights some of the most salient aspects of the text before you begin teaching.

Note: This content is available to Teacher Subscribers in a convenient, formatted pdf.

Facts at a Glance

- **Publication Date:** February 6, 1937
- **Recommended Grade Levels:** 8th and up
- **Approximate Word Count:** 29,160
- **Author:** John Steinbeck
- **Country of Origin:** United States
- **Genre:** Novella, Realism
- **Literary Period:** Modern
- **Conflict:** Person vs. Person, Person vs. Society, Person vs. Self
- **Narration:** Third-Person Omniscient
- **Setting:** Soledad, California, the mid 1930s
- **Dominant Literary Devices:** Prose, Colloquial Dialogue
- **Tone:** Honest, Sympathetic, Objective

Texts that Go Well with *Of Mice and Men*

*Das Kapital*, by Karl Marx, and *The Communist Manifesto*, by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, describe and critique the capitalist economic system that resulted in the premier economic calamity of the 20th century, the Great Depression. *The Communist Manifesto* acts as a call to arms, inviting workers of the world to unite against the powerful few who control resources in a capitalist economic structure.

*The Grapes of Wrath*, by John Steinbeck, is the epic incarnation of the setting, ideas, and themes that exist so succinctly in *Of Mice and Men*. The novel was published in 1939, and went on to win the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. The text was also singled out as exceptional by the Nobel Prize committee that awarded Steinbeck in 1962. The novel details the experiences of the Joad family as they travel from Oklahoma to California looking for work during the 1930s.

“Rehabilitation of the Mentally and Physically Handicapped” is a 1929 speech given by Franklin D. Roosevelt when he was the governor of New York. Though most of the voting public of the era was unaware, Roosevelt struggled with disabilities associated with childhood polio over the course of his life. In this speech, Roosevelt describes the challenges facing the handicapped at the time and puts forward his vision of a social policy that addresses these issues.
The Sound and the Fury, by William Faulkner, is a modernist novel that addresses similar themes as the works of John Steinbeck. The novel captures the experiences of the Compson brothers as their sister, Caddy, becomes estranged from the family. Considering themes surrounding the social decay occurring in the American South, as well as the inability of language to convey the human experience, The Sound and the Fury was one of many novels that earned Faulkner a Nobel Prize in 1949. Like Of Mice and Men, The Sound and the Fury features a protagonist with mental disabilities.

“To a Mouse,” by Robert Burns, is the poem from which Of Mice and Men takes its title. Originally published in 1785 in Scots dialect, the speaker describes working with a plow and accidentally disturbing a mouse’s nest. The speaker uses the occasion to comment on how easy it is for one’s planning and hard work to be destroyed: “the best laid schemes of Mice and Men / go oft awry.”

Teaching Guide: Key Plot Points

George and Lennie Stop at the River (Chapter 1): En route to a new job as ranch hands during the Great Depression, George Milton and Lennie Smalls rest beside a stream in California’s Salinas Valley. Due to Lennie’s mental disability, George carries both their work cards. They strategize for their first day at the ranch: George will get them settled, Lennie will say nothing. They make an emergency plan—meet in the brush by the river if anything goes wrong—before reciting their shared dream for the future: a farm of their own, with no one to tell them when to work or what to do, where Lennie can tend the rabbits.

Curley is Threatened by Lennie’s Size (Chapter 2): George and Lennie arrive at the ranch. Candy, the elderly swamper responsible for cleaning the bunk, orients George and Lennie in the bunkhouse. The boss enters, gathers George and Lennie’s work slips, and asks why they are late. George tells the boss that the bus they took dropped them off ten miles away from the ranch, and that they had to walk the rest of the way. The boss is instantly suspicious of Lennie and George, particularly as George does almost all the talking. George and Lennie discuss their situation after the boss leaves, thinking they are alone in the bunkhouse. George realizes Candy is listening in, and calls him out on it. Curley, the boss’s son, bursts into the bunkhouse, looking for his father. Curley acts aggressively and is equally suspicious of George and Lennie, as once again George tries to protect Lennie by talking for him. After Curley leaves, Candy explains that Curley is a boxer and is insecure about his size. When Curley sees a large man like Lennie, he often instigates a fight. Candy also explains that Curley’s wife has “got the eye,” meaning that she is flirtatious with other men, adding to Curley’s insecurities. After George warns Lennie to stay away from Curley, Curley’s wife enters the bunkhouse, presumably looking for Curley. When she can’t find Curley, she lingers and tries to flirt with George, who is curt with her. Lennie takes a liking to her, and after she leaves, George roughly admonishes Lennie, telling him not to touch Curley’s wife. George and Lennie then meet Carlson and Slim before heading to dinner.

Lennie Crushes Curley’s Hand (Chapter 3): Slim and George sit together in the bunkhouse, and George tells Slim about Lennie and why he takes care of Lennie. Slim’s dog has just had puppies, and Lennie, obsessed with soft things, is in the barn petting them. Lennie returns to the bunkhouse with a puppy, and tries to hide it from George, but George notices and tells him to take the puppy back to its mother. Lennie returns to the barn, and George assumes Lennie will want to sleep there with the dogs. Candy, Carlson, and Whit join Slim and George in the bunkhouse. Crooks, the stable buck, comes to the bunkhouse and tells Slim the tar is ready for his horse’s hooves. Slim joins Crooks in the barn, leaving George, Candy, and Whit in the bunkhouse. Curley stops by in a state of agitation and asks them if they have seen his wife. They answer no, and then Curley asks where Slim is. The men in the bunkhouse assume that Curley is jealous of Slim, as Curley thinks his wife is going around with Slim. Lennie returns to the bunkhouse, and he and George start talking about their dream to buy and run a farm. Candy overhears and offers to make their dream a reality by funding the venture with his savings if George and Lennie will accept him as a partner. They agree and decide
to keep their idea a secret. Curley returns with Slim, Carlson, and Whit. Slim is angry with Curley, because Curley has accused Slim of going around with his wife. The tension in the bunkhouse escalates. Curley notices Lennie, who is still smiling happily and thinking about owning his own farm with George and Candy. Curley attacks Lennie, and at first Lennie doesn’t want to fight. George doesn’t let the other men interfere, and instead encourages Lennie to fight back. Lennie ends up grabbing Curley’s hand and crushing it. Lennie is upset about hurting Curley, but George assures him that Lennie did nothing wrong.

**Lennie Interacts with Crooks (Chapter 4):** George and the other men leave the ranch to go into town. Only Lennie, Candy, Crooks, and Curley’s wife are left. Lennie is unsure what to do without George and finds Crooks in his room. Lennie, not realizing that he’s bothering Crooks, lingers in Crook’s doorway until Crooks invites him in. Lennie talks about the rabbits he will own, and Crooks realizes that Lennie won’t understand most of what Crooks says. Crooks talks about loneliness and the discrimination he has experienced his entire life as an African American. Crooks scares and angers Lennie by talking about the possibility of George leaving Lennie. Candy finds the two, and he also talks about the dream of owning a farm. Crooks is skeptical, but then offers to work for them if he can live on the farm as well. Curley’s wife comes in. Candy and Crooks are suspicious of her and don’t want to get into trouble with Curley. Crooks tells her to leave, and Curley’s wife threatens him with lynching. Curley’s wife leaves right before George and the men return. Candy and Lennie start to leave Crook’s room, but not before Crooks takes back what he said about working with George, Lennie, and Candy on their own farm. Crooks returns to his state of loneliness after they leave.

**Lennie Kills Curley’s Wife (Chapter 5):** Lennie sits in the barn, distraught over having accidentally killed his puppy. Lennie is afraid that George won’t let him tend to the rabbits on their farm now that he has killed his puppy. Curley’s wife approaches Lennie. At first, Lennie rejects her efforts at conversation, telling her that she would only get Lennie and George into trouble. Curley’s wife becomes angry at Lennie’s refusal and expresses her frustration with the limits she faces as Curley’s wife. Lennie discusses rabbits and his proclivity to “pet nice things.” Curley’s wife feels that she understands and invites Lennie to stroke her hair. When he gets too rough, she panics, and Lennie accidentally breaks her neck in an attempt to quiet her. Lennie realizes the gravity of what he has done and remembers the emergency plan he and George made before coming to the ranch. Lennie tries to cover Curley’s wife with hay and then flees to the brush where he believes George will meet him. Candy finds Curley’s wife’s body first and then calls George. George knows immediately that it was Lennie. Curley falls into a cold rage and vows to shoot Lennie. Slim, George, Carlson, and Curley embark to find Lennie, but George is hesitant and apprehensive.

**George Ends Lennie’s Life (Chapter 6):** After Lennie flees, George finds him sitting near the river where they rested before going to the ranch for the first time. George asks Lennie to recite their shared dream for the last time. As he hears Curley and the lynch mob approaching, George Shoots Lennie.

**Teaching Guide: History of the Text**

**Reception and Publication History:** Since its publication, *Of Mice and Men* has been both celebrated and censored. Due to Steinbeck’s growing popularity after the 1935 publication of his first novel, *Tortilla Flat*, book-of-the-month clubs started publicizing *Of Mice and Men* before its publication. As a result, the book was an immediate critical and commercial success. Steinbeck then adapted the text into a three-act play in 1937, which was recognized with the 1938 New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award. The story was adapted into a 1939 film that won five Academy Awards and a 1992 film that was critically acclaimed. However, due to its controversial themes and profane language, the text is one of the most frequently banned books of recent decades. Critics claim that the book is unsuitable for young readers, and others contend that the text argues in favor of euthanasia, a politically and morally controversial subject.
An Artifact of the Great Depression: Looming large in the setting of Of Mice and Men is the Great Depression. The great international economic calamity of the 20th century, the Great Depression, began on Tuesday, October 29, 1929, when the stock market collapsed beneath the excesses of the 1920s. The inflated state of the economy prior to the crash was caused by a variety of factors, all stemming from the ease with which individuals and investors could access credit. Homeowners could access lines of credit for home electronics they couldn’t afford; farmers could purchase equipment with loans for crops they hadn’t yet grown; Wall Street financiers could speculate and invest in dividends they hadn’t yet earned. This ability to buy beyond one’s means made for a turbulent but ultimately prosperous economy in the 1920s. August of 1929 was marked by a surge in financial speculation, though unemployment in the US was already growing and production already declining. In October, fear that the stock market would collapse began, and on the 29th traders dumped over 16 million shares, which amounted to billions of dollars lost. Despite President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s legislative efforts to reignite the economy through the New Deal, the economy didn’t fully recover from the Great Depression until the United States entered World War II.

• The Great Depression hit the rural, agricultural economy particularly hard, as the 1930s coincided with the Dust Bowl—a period of heavy droughts resulting in dust storms throughout the central United States. Not only did the Dust Bowl affect those in the Midwest, but it also led to an oversupply of laborers throughout the nation. This effect was particularly noticeable in California, famed for its natural abundance, where workers flooded in from states such as Oklahoma and Arkansas. The resulting oversupply in labor caused wages to drop, resulting in an atmosphere of scarcity, competition, and rivalry. Characters such as George, Lennie, Candy, Carlson, and Slim face these very conditions in Of Mice and Men.

John Steinbeck as a Journalist: A native of the small farming town of Salinas, California, Steinbeck was born in 1902 to a moderately successful businessman and a former schoolteacher. Always a passionate writer, Steinbeck enrolled in Stanford as a young man, leaving in 1925 without a degree. Steinbeck was both a migrant worker and a prolific journalist for The San Francisco News during the Great Depression. The sparse, clear, and concrete prose found in Of Mice and Men reflects his background in newspaper writing, where economy of language is paramount. His inclination to use individual characters to represent large demographic groups reflects how journalists often use the experiences of individuals to illustrate larger social patterns. By his death in 1968, Steinbeck had won a National Book Award, a Pulitzer Prize, and a Nobel Prize for his contributions to literature.

• Lennie and Mental Disabilities: During the 1930s, there were scant resources available for individuals with mental disabilities. If such individuals weren’t cared for by their families, they were placed in either private or state institutions and separated from society. The quality of these institutions varied widely. Though the Progressive Era had brought some humane reforms to the worst institutional practices of the 1800s, the Great Depression occurred during the height of the eugenics movement. This movement was defined by the irresponsible exploration of genetic science. Doctors subjected patients with mental and physical disabilities and illnesses to involuntary sterilization and other pseudoscientific experiments.

• Curley’s Wife and White Women: During the Great Depression, most jobs were allotted according to gender. Generally, men worked as laborers, while women worked in the service industry. Since the economic crisis affected the labor sector more than the service sector, working-class women’s employment actually rose during the Great Depression. However, their white-collar counterparts didn’t fare as well. White women who entered the professional class during World War I and the Roaring Twenties were pressured to leave their positions in favor of male workers during the Great Depression. Nevertheless, women saw an overall increase in employment over the course of the 1930s. While 13 million women earned wages outside the home in 1930, that number rose to 14 million by 1940. Despite this trend in data, women who worked faced social scrutiny. Working women were criticized for robbing men of jobs, and colleges implored female graduates to avoid
entering the workforce. Government recovery efforts during the Great Depression were also sexist in
text nature: some only allowed male applicants, and others allowed only one adult applicant per
household.

- **Crooks and Black Americans:** Scholars hold that no American demographic was affected by the
  Great Depression as dramatically as black Americans. At its highest, the unemployment rate in US
  population as a whole hit 24.9%; for black Americans, the unemployment rate approached 50%.
  Many white Americans demanded that black Americans be fired from jobs as long as there were
  unemployed white Americans. Violence against black Americans also rose, evidenced by the increase
  in the number of lynchings of black Americans from eight in 1932 to twenty-eight in 1933.

### Teaching Guide: Teaching Approaches

**The American Dream In Stark Reality:** *Of Mice and Men* explores the extent to which individuals can
achieve their dreams when forced to survive challenging circumstances. For the working men on the farm,
George and Lennie’s dream echoes the popular “American Dream” of the 20th century: to own one’s own
land, to be the keeper of one’s own time, and to be free from the uncertainty of a transient lifestyle.
Meanwhile, Curley, the boss’s son, feels insecure and wants to assert himself over all others. His unnamed
wife wants only to be seen, heard, and understood. Crooks, the stable buck who is ostracized, abused, and
maligned because of his race, wants the same. *Of Mice and Men* paints a complicated portrait of the American
experience, offering a grim answer to the popular rhetoric touting the United States as a land of exceptional
opportunity where hard work unilaterally yields success. Instead, Steinbeck suggests that Americans are, like
all other humans, as likely to harm each other in their own self-interest as they are to band together in times of
need.

- **For discussion:** Compare and contrast each character’s goals in the text. What do they want? What
  stands in their way? How do they either help or hinder their cause?
- **For discussion:** What does Lennie and George’s dream reveal about their characters? How does it
develop their characters? Does it symbolize the same thing for both of them? Or does it have a unique
meaning for each character?
- **For discussion:** Does anyone in the novella achieve their dreams? Who? How so?
- **For discussion:** Are the themes in *Of Mice and Men* particular to California during the Great
  Depression? To what extent are the relationships in the text applicable across space and time?

**Life During the Great Depression:** *Of Mice and Men* is an example of realism, a literary genre that seeks to
elevate the plight of the everyday person, as opposed to focusing on the extraordinary experience of an
exceptional individual. Moreover, some place the novella within a particular type of realism known as
naturalism, a literary mode that considers the behavior of characters through a removed, scientific, critical
lens. As a journalist, Steinbeck produced writing that exists as an artifact and attests to life in California
during the Great Depression. The characters in the text are constructed so that they embody the challenges
faced by different demographic groups in California during the 1930s. As it develops themes, the novella
illustrates the social barriers that prevent cooperation, revealing how willing the disempowered can be to
weaponize the weaknesses of others for their own gain.

- **For discussion:** Which privileges or prejudices empower or disempower characters in the text? Is
  there anything the characters could have done to change their social standing?
- **For discussion:** Compare and contrast Lennie and George’s interactions when they are near the river
  and when they are in the bunkhouse with the other men. How does the presence of others affect their
  behavior?
- **For discussion:** Read chapter 4 together as a class. How is each participant in the scene
disenfranchised? How do they empower themselves? To what extent to they ultimately hold authority
over others in the scene?

**For discussion:** When do marginalized characters cooperate, and when do they work against each other? In the context of the story, is it better to work with others or to be independent?

**Considering Euthanasia in Tragic Circumstances:** As the novella reaches its climax, Lennie’s defining characteristics—his naïveté and his love of soft textures—bring about his downfall. Considering the brutal consequences Lennie will suffer at the hands of both Curley and a social system insensitive to the mentally disabled, George makes the difficult choice to end Lennie’s life himself. A parallel structure can be seen in Candy’s relationship with his old herding dog. Candy considers his dog a central and constant part of his life, much like how George has almost always had Lennie to care for. Others convince Candy that it’s right to kill his old dog, because the dog can barely walk, eat, or see. Aside from Candy, the decision to shoot the dog is unanimous among the men, showing that euthanizing animals was considered normal and humane.

**For discussion:** What does Candy’s dog symbolize in the text? To what extent is the relationship between Candy and his dog analogous to George’s relationship to Lennie? How does this use of foreshadowing affect readers’ understanding of George’s actions in the final scene?

**For discussion:** Is Lennie to blame for Curley’s wife’s death? Based on evidence in the text, does Lennie understand that his strength causes him to kill?

**For discussion:** Was George justified in ending Lennie’s life? What other options did he have, and what moral compromises were involved in each?

**Of Mice and Men as an Artifact of the Great Depression:** Some instructors may prefer to approach *Of Mice and Men* as an artifact of history as opposed to a work of literary art. Engage students in a rhetorical analysis of the text, exploring how Steinbeck’s portrayal of George and Lennie’s experience builds an argument in favor of a more compassionate, open-minded American culture and against the racism, sexism, ageism, and ableism it tragically conveys. For example, characters such as Crooks, Curley’s wife, and Candy all reflect some marginalized part of society: Crooks represents the effects of overt racism; Curley’s wife represents the power struggle of sexism; and Candy represents the problems with ageism. Lennie, arguably the most prominent character, acts as a stand in for the effects of ableism; the maltreatment and scorn Lennie encounters, as well as the decision to kill him, all reflect Lennie’s lack of control and the ostracism he faces in society.

**For discussion:** Use the story as an opportunity to research the Great Depression. Divide students into groups and ask them to evaluate Steinbeck’s portrayal of life in the 1930s. What was life like for African American migrant workers during the Great Depression? What was life like for white American migrant workers during the Great Depression? How about life for women, the mentally disabled, the physically disabled, the elderly, and the elite?

**For discussion:** To what extent do the disenfranchised characters exemplify, or contradict, the historical reality of their representative demographic groups?

**For discussion:** What is the value of historical fiction? How does the setting produce meaning in the novella? If students could alter the text, where else in time and place would they choose to set the story?

**Loneliness as a Universal Human Experience:** Though the text illustrates a variety of life experiences, the cast of characters are united by one universal experience: loneliness. George and Lennie initially share a comforting camaraderie, but George’s tragic choice places them on opposite sides of a mortal divide. Candy loses his dog. Crooks lives in isolation. Curley’s wife is sexualized, demonized, and dehumanized to the point of not meriting a name. This epidemic isolation results in cruelty and behavior that illustrates the willingness of individuals to destroy others to empower themselves in times of desperation.
For discussion: In what way does each character in the text experience loneliness? How do they express their loneliness, and how does it affect them? What does each character do to remedy their loneliness?

For discussion: Does George and Lennie’s relationship give them an advantage or a disadvantage? What do each of them gain or lose by being together?

For discussion: Loneliness is caused by isolation. In what ways does isolation affect characters in the text?

Tricky Issues to Address While Teaching

Of Mice and Men Is Rife with Prejudice: Much of the text’s realism is captured through its colloquial dialogue. As a result, the dialogue is loaded with offensive epithets that disparage and dehumanize the characters. Further, the novella suggests that characters’ inherent traits, such as their gender and race, define their value in the eyes of American society.

What to do: Remind students that Steinbeck’s depictions of prejudice serve his artistic aims. His novella intends to depict the reality of Depression-era California. Because prejudice is part of that reality, Steinbeck strives to present it accurately, even if the resulting material is unpleasant or upsetting. To assume that Steinbeck holds the same prejudices as his characters is to make a critical error.

What to do: Provide instruction on how to appropriately discuss offensive language in the text. Point out that its use isn’t haphazard; characters use violent language to disempower those around them, thereby asserting their social dominance within the group. Ask students to consider the ways in which this behavior pattern is still visible today.

What to do: Discuss with students the ways in which different demographics have different access to power and resources within America. Further, social hierarchies exist in some form in cultures around the world. Emphasize that every individual has personal value.

Of Mice and Men Depicts a Grim View of the American Experience: There is no argument that Of Mice and Men is a tragedy. No character, not even Curley, gets the ending they dream of. Though George kills Lennie out of compassion, the event remains horrifying, and many are prone to remember the text for the trauma of its ending alone.

What to do: Remind students that, though the novella is structured to amplify its tragic themes, the prejudice and suffering illustrated therein are true to lived human experience. By studying literature, readers are better equipped to handle life’s challenges with grace and compassion.

What to do: American culture isn’t perfect—many of the social problems in the text remain extant—but there has been measurable progress since the 1930s. Ask students to consider how the story would be different, and similar, if it were set today.

The Colloquialisms Can Be Difficult to Follow: The colloquial dialogue presents students with vernacular language that strays from standard spelling and syntactic norms. Particularly for students who speak English as a second language, this style can pose a boundary to student comprehension.

What to do: Review dialogue-heavy portions of the text together as a class. In discussion, paraphrase confusing portions into contemporary English.

What to do: Ask students to convey the meaning of challenging scenes through a silent tableau exercise, where students depict a scene by posing silently and statically to convey its meaning.
Alternative Approaches to Teaching *Of Mice and Men*

While the main ideas, character development, and discussion questions preceding are typically the focal points of units involving this text, the following suggestions represent alternative readings that may enrich your students’ experience and understanding of the novella.

**Focus on Slim.** What role does Slim play in the social structure on the ranch? Does he, too, have an archetypal resonance? Does he represent a specific demographic during the Great Depression? Does he experience loneliness? How does he develop the plot of *Of Mice and Men?*

**Focus on Curley and Curley’s wife.** What is the relationship like between Curley and Curley’s wife? What brought them together? What are their frustrations? What advice would students give to Curley and his wife?

**Focus on the human inclination toward violence.** Characters inflict verbal, psychological, and physical violence on each other consistently in the book. Why? How does it help or hinder the violent individual? How does it shape the victim?

**Focus on the rabbits as a symbol in the text.** Rabbits and other furry animals are a prominent motif in the text. What do they symbolize? How does that meaning shift as Lennie’s character develops?

**Focus on the value of hope.** Every character in the novella is hoping for something, be it a farm of their own or a reputation as a dangerous fighter. How does hope affect the characters in *Of Mice and Men?* Is hope a benefit or a distraction?

**Teaching Guide: Ideas for Group Discussions**

Steinbeck’s brief, ironic idyll of the American dream gone awry contains considerable food for thought. The grandeur of the West and the aspirations of everyday people evoke strong feelings of sympathy for the novel's protagonists; it should not be surprising if readers react strongly to Steinbeck’s bleak portrait of their failure. Readers may be torn between sympathy for Lennie and the legitimate need of authorities to take steps to punish him in some way for his crime; they may also have mixed reactions to George's behavior in protecting his friend and partner when he knows that, at some point, Lennie will need help which George cannot provide.

1. Like many novelists, Steinbeck chooses for his title a phrase from another literary work, in this case the Scottish poet Robert Burns's "To a Mouse." How does this allusion help add depth to the author’s portrait of his Western drifters?

2. Throughout *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck weaves a pattern of animal imagery into his descriptions of characters. Why does he do so? What does this technique reveal about character and theme?

3. Steinbeck presents Curley's wife as a vixen and a temptress, the stereotypical *femme fatale*. Is this portrait convincing? Does the novelist depend too much on readers' blind acceptance of her shallow motivations and her blatant display of sexuality?

4. Some critics have suggested that, in his depiction of George and Lennie's friendship, Steinbeck is presenting an acceptable portrait of love between two men. Do you agree? Is their relationship a healthy one?
5. One of the most poignant scenes in the novel is the murder of Candy's dog by Carlson. Why does Steinbeck include this scene in the novel?

6. Though George wants to keep his plans about owning a ranch secret, both Crooks and Candy learn of the scheme, and both want to become part of it. Why? What does this tell you about the significance of George's plan?

7. Compare the characters Slim and Curley. In what ways are they similar? How does Steinbeck use them to suggest opposing forces in human nature?

8. In a brief novel such as this one, economy of detail is important: the author must make good use of everything he includes in the story. Select several passages in which Steinbeck demonstrates his ability to say a great deal about his characters or to foreshadow events to come. Discuss ways such details enrich your understanding of the story.

9. What role does Crooks play in the novel? What is the significance of his being black?

10. The first four paragraphs of chapter 6 describe a heron fishing in a pool in the Salinas River. Why do you think Steinbeck includes this scene? Why does he place it at the beginning of the final chapter?

**Teaching Guide: Ideas for Reports and Papers**

1. Writers often use patterns of imagery (repeated descriptions of places, objects, or activities) to add subtle emphasis to their themes. How does Steinbeck use patterns of imagery (e.g., animal imagery) in this novel?

2. In chapter 3, Carlson takes Candy's dog away and shoots it. What is the significance of this incident in the novel?

3. In chapter 4, Crooks tells Lennie: "Books ain't no good. A guy needs somebody— to be near him." What do you think Crooks means? What is Steinbeck trying to suggest by this comment?

4. Why does George travel with Lennie, tying himself down in this way? How do his actions illustrate one of Steinbeck's major concerns in the novel?

5. Read Robert Burns's poem "To a Mouse," which treats the same theme as this novel: the inevitability of fate upsetting man's careful planning. In what ways are Steinbeck's and Burns's treatments of the theme similar? In what ways do they differ?

**Teaching Guide: 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?

Teaching Guide: 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.
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
Short-Answer Quizzes: 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.
Short-Answer Quizzes: 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.
Short-Answer Quizzes: 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.

**Short-Answer Quizzes: 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.

**Short-Answer Quizzes: 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.