



# Of Mice and Men

Study Guide by  Course Hero

## What's Inside

👁 Book Basics .....	1
🕒 In Context .....	1
👤 Author Biography .....	2
👥 Characters .....	3
📖 Plot Summary .....	6
🔍 Chapter Summaries .....	10
“” Quotes .....	17
🐭 Symbols .....	18
📖 Themes .....	19

## 👁 Book Basics

### AUTHOR

John Steinbeck

### YEAR PUBLISHED

1937

### GENRE

Drama, Fiction

### PERSPECTIVE AND NARRATOR

*Of Mice and Men* is written from an omniscient, objective third-person point of view.

### TENSE

*Of Mice and Men* is told in the past tense.

### ABOUT THE TITLE

The title *Of Mice and Men* comes from Robert Burns's poem "To a Mouse."

## 🕒 In Context

### Agriculture and Migrant Workers

During Steinbeck's childhood, an agricultural shift was taking place in California. In the 1800s, large ranches and grain farms dominated the state's economy. More specialty farms later developed that cultivated fruit crops such as oranges and grapes. This shift was enabled by the increased use of irrigation, which transformed many desert areas into productive cropland. By 1929 irrigated land made up about 16 percent of the farmland in California. Irrigation provided the water fruit farms required. From 1879 to 1928, the value of fruit farm production rose from 4 percent of the total agricultural output to about 80 percent.

Besides needing a lot of water, fruit farms required more laborers than California could provide through its native-born residents. To solve this problem, landowners hired immigrants from Mexico and Asia and migrants from other states. As the fruit farms increased in size and number, the demand for these workers increased. Thus, when Steinbeck was attending college during the early 1920s, he was able to easily drop out and get work as a bindlestiff. These migrants worked on both fruit farms and grain ranches, such as the one depicted in *Of Mice and Men*. They usually completed the grain harvest by early July and did not start the grape harvest until September.

While doing this work, Steinbeck came into contact with many of society's outsiders, including Mexicans, African Americans,

and the physically and mentally disabled. Talking about *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck stated, "I worked in the same country. ... The characters are composites. ... [Lennie](#) was a real person."

When the Great Depression hit in 1929, millions of Americans found themselves out of work, a problem that was compounded by the Dust Bowl. This 10-year drought struck lands already harmed by bad farming practices, devastating large areas of Oklahoma, New Mexico, and a number of other states. As a result, thousands of tenant farmers were forced off their land. To find work, many of them migrated to California to work on fruit farms and ranches. As Steinbeck was writing *Of Mice and Men* in the mid-1930s, California was being overrun with migrant workers. Most of them faced harsh working conditions, which is suggested in *Of Mice and Men* and more fully developed in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

## Literary Connections

Steinbeck was partially motivated to write *Of Mice and Men* because of the success of his novel *Tortilla Flat*. Before the publication of this novel, Steinbeck and his wife, Carol, lived in obscurity in poor conditions in a cottage. Although he published several works before *Tortilla Flat*, none of them achieved any popularity. This lack of success had a benefit for the author. Because he didn't have much money, Steinbeck acted and dressed as other poverty-stricken people did, which gave him a connection and insight into the lives of the poor. With the success of *Tortilla Flat*, however, Steinbeck began to earn much more money, a development that allowed him to improve his and Carol's living conditions. Although the extra income was welcome, Steinbeck feared he might lose touch with the poor workers he depicted in his novels.

*Tortilla Flat* garnered Steinbeck widespread critical praise for his writing. The author worried this praise would alter his perspective. He feared that he might start to write in a way that was "important," rather than truthful. To counteract this tendency, Steinbeck decided to write a humble children's story. "I want to re-create a child's world," he said, planning to feature sensations, such as colors and tastes, that are more clear to children than they are to adults. The result was *Of Mice and Men*, the title of which comes from the 18th-century Scottish poet Robert Burns's poem "To a Mouse." Although this work developed into an adult novel instead of a children's story, it still retains some of Steinbeck's original intentions. His description of the pond, for example, is vivid and sensual: "A stilted heron labored up into the air and pounded down river." *Of Mice and Men*, therefore, was an attempt by Steinbeck to

remain humble.

## From Page to Stage to Film

Steinbeck's attempt to preserve his attitude as an obscure writer resulted in the author being thrust even further into the public eye. Because of the popularity of *Of Mice and Men*, [John Steinbeck](#) became a household name.

Soon the playwright-director [George](#) Kaufman wanted to adapt *Of Mice and Men* into a theatrical play, which would differ greatly from the staged production Steinbeck supported in San Francisco. The latter production was almost identical to the novel, using exactly the same dialogue. Kaufman, however, wanted to shape the story into a Broadway production, which would involve changing dialogue and actions as needed. Eventually Steinbeck agreed and worked with Kaufman to adapt the novel. Steinbeck soon felt out of his element and allowed Kaufman to take more control of the project. The play *Of Mice and Men* opened to rave reviews on Broadway in 1937 and won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for best play for 1937–1938. As a result, Steinbeck became an even more popular author.

Hollywood soon made a strong push for a film adaptation of the work. The producer-director Lewis Milestone bought the film rights and gained creative control of the movie. The result was a highly regarded film starring Burgess Meredith as George and Lon Chaney Jr. as Lennie. The film adaptation, also titled *Of Mice and Men*, opened in theaters in 1939 and received four Oscar nominations.

## Author Biography

John Ernst Steinbeck Jr. was born in Salinas, California, on February 27, 1902, to parents John Ernst Steinbeck and Olive Hamilton Steinbeck. Steinbeck's father worked at a variety of jobs, including as manager of a flour plant and owner of a grain store. He never achieved financial success and, as a result, young Steinbeck grew up in modest circumstances. Early on, the son formed a strong bond with the land. One of Steinbeck's early ambitions as a writer was to depict the farms and ranches in the Salinas Valley.

In 1919 Steinbeck began attending Stanford University. Although intent on improving his creative writing skills at the university, his general interest in college studies proved to be

lukewarm. Because of this, Steinbeck dropped in and out of school. During his time away from college, he often adopted the lifestyle of a bindlestiff, a term used for migrant workers who carried bundles containing bedding and other gear. These people often took odd jobs, including work on ranches. This experience later influenced *Of Mice and Men*.

During Steinbeck's university years, he formed a strong friendship with Edward Flanders Ricketts, a marine biologist. Steinbeck admired how Ricketts could accept life as he found it, without placing judgments on it.

In 1925 Steinbeck left Stanford without graduating. After attempting several jobs, he married Carol Henning in 1930. She was an ardent supporter of his writing. They moved into a rent-free cottage belonging to the Steinbeck family in Pacific Grove, California, and she worked at various jobs as he continued to write.

Steinbeck's first literary achievement came with publication of the novel *Tortilla Flat* (1935). Set in Monterey, California, it features a group of ne'er-do-wells (known as *paisanos*, or "countrymen") who live an often lawless life while remaining tirelessly devoted to their deep friendships. During these early years as a writer, Steinbeck developed an interest in the plight of laborers and their struggle against oppressive working conditions. His next work, *In Dubious Battle* (1936), was an expansive novel that depicts a strike at a California apple orchard. Following this work, Steinbeck wanted to explore the subject of common laborers in a more focused manner, and he began working on *Of Mice and Men* in 1936.

*Of Mice and Men* portrays the strong friendship between two bindlestiffs—the smart and loyal George, and his hulking, mentally challenged friend Lennie. For this work, Steinbeck drew on his firsthand knowledge of the difficulties faced by common workers. He and his wife had just taken a trip to Mexico, where they witnessed the struggles of landless, poverty-stricken workers. Steinbeck was also familiar with living in extremely modest circumstances. He and his wife struggled for years to make ends meet as he attempted to become a successful writer. All of these elements played a role in shaping *Of Mice and Men*.

Influenced by his friend Edward Ricketts, Steinbeck wanted to use an objective tone for *Of Mice and Men*. He wanted at first to name the novel *Something That Happened* as a way to emphasize an event without moral judgment. The author was fascinated with the idea of creating a new form of literature, which he called the play-novelle. This form could be read either as a novella or as a script for a play. After publishing the

novel, Steinbeck allowed it to be used as the basis for a staged presentation in San Francisco.

*Of Mice and Men* became an immediate success and continues to be read throughout the world. Even so, the work proved to be very controversial. Many people objected to its offensive language. Others claimed it supported euthanasia. Starting in the 1950s, the novel was banned in various places for these and other reasons. The novella continued to be among the most banned books in the United States into the early 21st century.

Steinbeck followed *Of Mice and Men* with his signature novel, *Grapes of Wrath* (1939), which also deals with migrant workers. Later novels include *East of Eden* (1952) and *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961). In 1962 Steinbeck was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Steinbeck died in New York City on December 20, 1968.

## Characters

### Lennie

Lennie Small is a huge, extremely strong man who is mentally handicapped. He was raised by his Aunt Clara. George was a friend of the family, and after Aunt Clara died, Lennie and George began to work together, and a strong friendship developed between them. Lennie is a gentle, innocent person. He can get angry if sufficiently provoked, but he is not malicious. Lennie realizes he does not understand people and social situations as well as other people do. Because of this, and because he is so strong, he can accidentally get into trouble. Lennie has a great need for companionship and strongly values his relationship with George. He loves petting soft animals, like mice, rabbits, and puppies, but because of his enormous strength, he can accidentally kill these creatures. Lennie is fixated on the dream of obtaining a small farm with George and tending rabbits. Because of his brute strength and clumsiness in social situations, however, Lennie inadvertently contributes to the destruction of his own dream.

### George

George Milton is a small man with a sharp mind who is good at planning and has insight into social dynamics. George was

friends with Aunt Clara and Lennie, so when she died, George and Lennie began to work together. At first, George played jokes on Lennie, but he soon realized that these jokes were cruel and dangerous, so George stopped teasing Lennie and formed a strong friendship with him. Like Lennie, George has a strong need for friendship. He realizes that his friendship with Lennie sets them apart from most other migrant workers. George and Lennie look out for each other, whereas other migrants have no one to care for them. Also like Lennie, George dreams of obtaining a small farm and often tells Lennie about these plans. George can get frustrated and annoyed at Lennie and his obtuseness, but this annoyance always gives way to gentler feelings. George is fully aware of the dynamics that could lead to the ruin of his and Lennie's dream, but even so he cannot prevent them from happening.

## Curley's wife

Curley's wife is a young, attractive woman and the wife of the boss's son. She is flirtatious and constantly tries to get affection from men. She does not like her husband and so does not look to him for the attention and affection she craves. She believes her strongest attribute is her appearance because it has gotten her attention in the past. She feels stuck at the ranch and resents her situation. Because of this, she flirts with and teases the male workers, knowing that it makes them uncomfortable. Her need for affection draws her to gentle, slow-witted Lennie. She has no idea of the danger he represents, which leads to her death.

## Curley

Curley is the son of the boss of the ranch and considers himself an accomplished lightweight boxer. Curley is a small man and feels insecure because of his size. As a result, he constantly tries to prove his manhood by picking fights with larger men. Also because of his insecurity, he suspects men of flirting and sleeping with his wife. This situation is made worse by his wife's blatant flirtations. Curley has a quick temper and can lash out violently. He picks a fight with Lennie and gets his hand crushed as a result. Later, he exacts revenge on Lennie.

## Slim

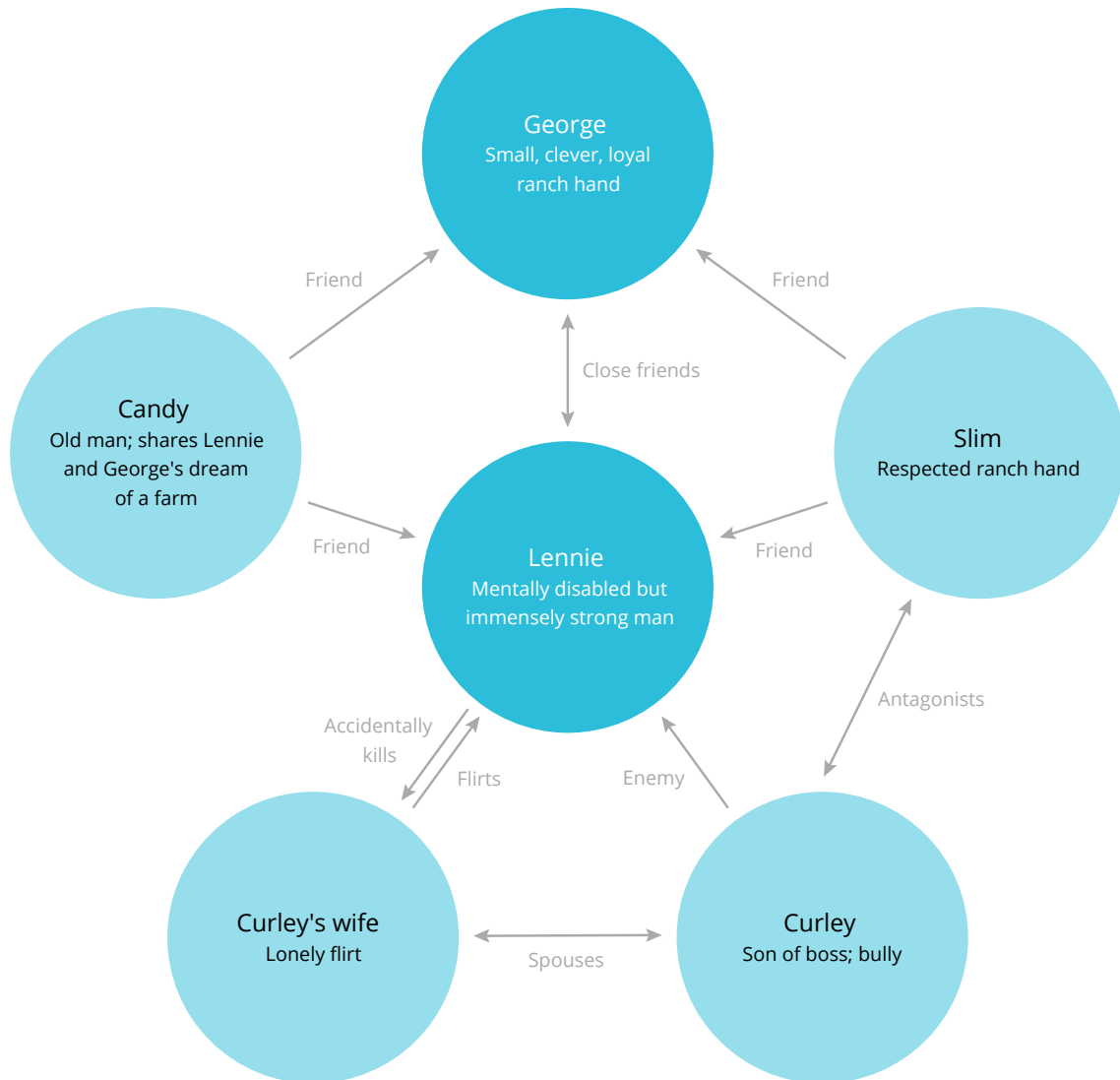
Slim is a skilled ranch hand and perhaps the most respected man on the ranch. He forms a friendship with George and

recognizes Lennie's limitations and good intentions. He steps forward to protect Lennie from Curly after Lennie crushes Curly's hand. At the end, he comforts George for shooting Lennie, telling him it was something he had to do.

## Candy

Candy is an old man who has worked at a ranch near Soledad, California, for many years. His right hand was torn off during an accident. He has an old sheep dog that has been his companion since the dog was a puppy. Candy sweeps out the bunkhouse, about the only job he is fit to do at the ranch. Candy fears being cast out when he can no longer sweep the bunkhouse, leaving him on his own in his old age. When his dog is shot because it is old, useless, and smelly, Candy's fears intensify. Candy has had the foresight to save some money, however, and he offers a partial payment on the small farm that George and Lennie want to buy if he can stay on the farm with them and do odd jobs. Therefore, George and Lennie's dream also becomes Candy's dream. Candy is crushed when this dream falls apart.

## Character Map



- Main character
- Other Major Character
- Minor Character

## Full Character List

Character	Description
Lennie	Lennie is the friend of George. He wants to get a small farm and tend rabbits.
George	George is the friend of Lennie. He makes plans about getting a small farm.
Curley's wife	Curley's wife seeks attention and affection from men, leading to her death.
Curley	Curley is the boss's son. He is insecure about being short and constantly picks fights with larger men.
Slim	Slim is the ranch's jerkline skinner. He is understanding and well respected by the workers.
Candy	Candy is an old man who shares Lennie and George's dream of getting a small farm.
Aunt Clara	Aunt Clara raised Lennie.
The boss	The boss is a hard man who is in charge of the ranch.
Carlson	Carlson is a ranch worker who wants to shoot Candy's old dog.
Crooks	Crooks is an African American stable hand who is angry at white people because they treat him as inferior.
Whit	Whit is a ranch worker.

## Plot Summary

*Of Mice and Men* takes place near Soledad, California, in the midst of America's Great Depression during the 1930s. As the book opens, two main characters, [George](#) and [Lennie](#), approach a tranquil pool, which is part of the Salinas River. Lennie is a huge man who is mentally handicapped, whereas George is small in stature but has a keen mind. The two men

are on their way to a ranch where they have work lined up. Lennie pets a dead mouse in his pocket because he likes petting soft things. When George sees the mouse, he throws it away. He then warns Lennie not to do anything bad at the ranch like he did at their last job. George describes their dream of one day buying a small farm "an' live off the fatta the lan'." He has repeated this dream to Lennie many times before, and Lennie never seems to tire of hearing it, especially the part about Lennie taking care of the rabbits on the farm. George tells Lennie to remember this pool and come back to it and hide if he gets in trouble at the ranch.

The next morning at the ranch, an old worker named [Candy](#) brings George and Lennie into the bunkhouse. The boss's son, a short, pugnacious young man named [Curley](#), enters and gets annoyed with Lennie, although Lennie hasn't done or said anything. After Curly leaves, George warns Lennie about Curley wanting to fight with him and tells Lennie not to have anything to do with him. Curley's flirtatious wife then visits the bunkhouse looking for Curley. After she leaves, George declares her a "tramp" and tells Lennie not to pay any attention to her. Lennie says he doesn't like this place, but George insists they have to stay until they earn a stake.

George meets the unofficial head of the ranch workers, [Slim](#). As the jerkline skinner, Slim can easily handle a whole team of mules with just one yank on their reins. He gives Lennie one of his pups. George tells Slim how he and Lennie got together and then confesses that Lennie got in trouble at their previous job when he wanted to feel a dress that a girl was wearing. Curley bursts into the bunkhouse searching for his wife. He then hurries to the barn. Then a worker named Carlson convinces Candy that his old dog needs to be shot because it is useless and stinks. Candy is devastated. George again describes the dream farm to Lennie, and Candy offers to chip in a partial payment if he can live on the farm with George and Lennie. George agrees. Curley returns and picks a fight with Lennie, punching him in the face. When George yells for Lennie to fight back, Lennie grabs Curley's fist and crushes it. To prevent George and Lennie from getting fired, Slim convinces Curley to say his hand got caught in a machine.

Crooks is an African American who lives alone in a harness room in the barn. It is Saturday night, and most of the men are in town. Crooks is angry at white people for treating him as inferior, so he gets back at them by not allowing anyone in his room except for Slim and the boss. He grudgingly allows Lennie to visit his room but scares him by asking what he would do if George never came back from town. When Candy enters and talks about their future farm, Crooks insists the

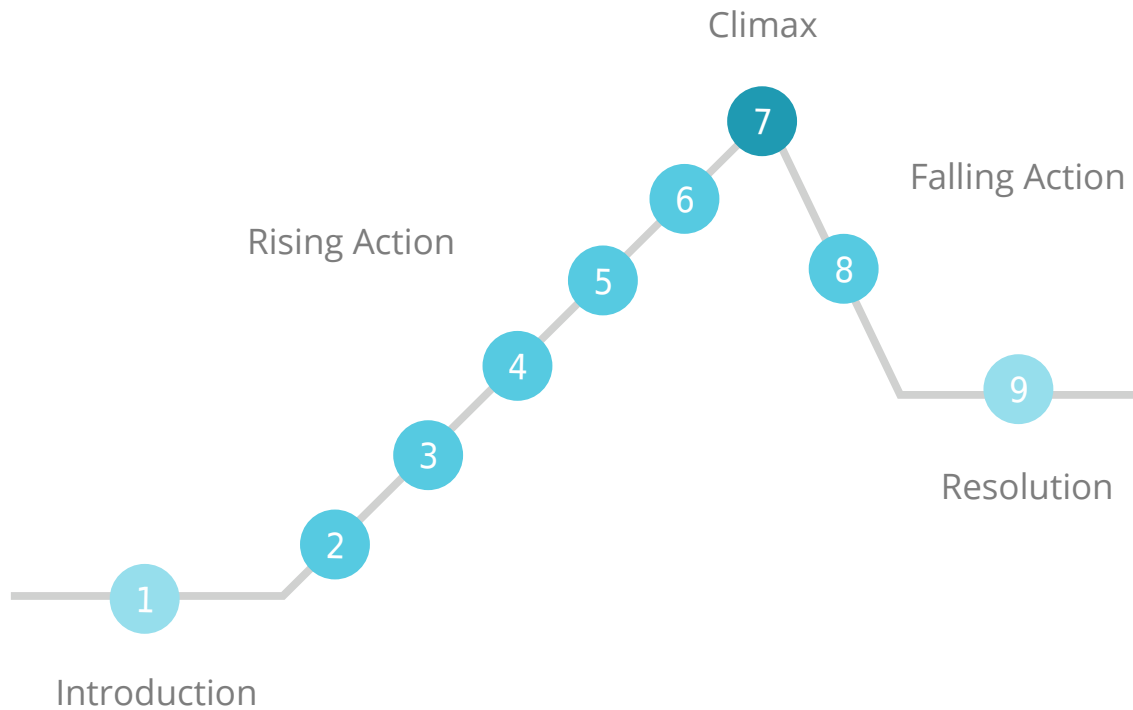
dream won't happen. Workers always waste their money, Crooks says. [Curley's wife](#) enters, looking for Curley. She suspects Lennie busted her husband's hand and then flirts with Lennie. After Curley's wife leaves, George comes in the room and leaves with Lennie and Candy.

Alone in the barn, Lennie looks sadly at his puppy, which he has accidentally killed. Curley's wife enters the barn and talks to Lennie, who is hesitant to talk to her. Curley's wife places Lennie's hand on her hair and asks him to feel how soft it is. When Lennie strokes her hair too hard, she gets upset and jerks her head away. Lennie panics and clutches her hair. As she struggles to get loose, Lennie shakes her, breaking her neck. Lennie knows he's done a bad thing, so he decides to leave and hide by the pool. Candy finds Curley's dead wife and brings in George, who immediately knows it was Lennie who killed her. George then tells a dejected Candy that their dream of getting a small farm will not happen. George leaves, and Candy brings in Curley, Slim, and other workers. George then arrives after them. When Curley realizes Lennie killed his wife, he becomes enraged and goes off to organize a lynch mob. George wonders if they could just lock Lennie up, but Slim replies that even if they could, locking Lennie up would be cruel. Carlson returns and says his gun has been stolen. Curley leads George, Curley, Slim, and the others away to hunt down Lennie.

Lennie arrives at the pool and waits for George. He imagines his Aunt Clara and a huge rabbit are scolding him about doing bad things. When George arrives, Lennie is worried George will scold him too, but he doesn't. With Lennie's prompting, George says he and Lennie are different from other guys because they have each other. Lennie becomes happy. George tells Lennie to turn around and look across the river. The kneeling Lennie obeys. George pulls out the pistol he took from Carlson and begins describing how great their life will be on their small farm. He hears the lynch mob approaching and shoots Lennie in the back of the head. Lennie slumps forward, dead. Curley, Carlson, Slim, and the rest of the mob burst onto the scene. They see that George has shot Lennie. Slim tries to console George, saying he had to do it.



## Plot Diagram



### Introduction

1. Lennie and George dream of buying a small farm.

### Rising Action

2. Curley gets angry at Lennie.
3. Curley's wife flirts with workers.
4. George and Lennie partner with Candy to buy a small farm.
5. Curley picks fight with Lennie, who crushes Curley's hand.
6. Curley's wife flirts with Lennie.

### Climax

7. Lennie accidentally kills Curley's wife.

### Falling Action

8. George abandons dream of buying a small farm.

### Resolution

9. George mercy kills Lennie.



## Timeline of Events

### Friday

Lennie and George arrive at ranch, have conflict with Curley, and meet Curley's wife.

### Saturday evening

Lennie and Candy visit Crooks in his room; Curley's wife joins them, flirts with Lennie.

### Later Sunday

George shoots and kills Lennie in an act of mercy; lynch mob arrives.

### Thursday afternoon

Lennie and George arrive at tranquil pool, talk about their dream of buying a farm.

### Friday evening

George and Lennie partner with Candy; Curley picks a fight with Lennie, who crushes Curley's hand.

### Sunday

Lennie accidentally kills Curley's wife; Curley heads lynch mob to hunt down Lennie.

# Chapter Summaries

## Chapter 1

### Summary

*Of Mice and Men* is told from a third-person, objective point of view. It takes place near Soledad, California, and begins at a spot where the Salinas River forms a tranquil pool. Abundant willows line the river, and wildlife, including rabbits and lizards, live here. A beaten path, an ash pile, and a sycamore limb, "worn smooth by men who have sat on it," show that people often visit this pool. Two men walk down the path to the pool. One of the men is small, with "restless eyes, and sharp, strong features." The other man is huge and "shapeless of face." The larger man has sloping shoulders, drags his feet slightly, and lets his arms hang loosely by his sides.

The huge man, Lennie, gulps down water from the pool like a thirsty horse. The small man, George, drinks water from his cupped hand. He sits by the pool, embracing his drawn-up knees. Lennie imitates him exactly. Lennie has forgotten where they are going, and George, frustrated by his companion's poor memory, reminds him they are going to a ranch to get work. George then accuses Lennie of hiding something in his hand, an accusation that Lennie at first denies. Lennie then contritely admits his secret, opening his hand to reveal a dead mouse, which he has been keeping in his pocket and petting. When George orders him to give it up, Lennie hands it to George, who throws it away. George tells Lennie not to say anything when they talk to the boss at the ranch and to let him do the talking. Lennie tries to remember, repeating, "I ain't gonna say nothin'." George also tells Lennie that at their new job, Lennie must avoid any behavior of the sort he exhibited at their previous job, which was near the town of Weed.

George decides they are going to camp by the pool and head to the ranch in the morning, and he sends Lennie off to gather wood for a campfire. When Lennie returns, George knows that he has retrieved the dead mouse. He demands that Lennie hand it over again, and George then throws the mouse as far as he can into the brush. George explains that he doesn't want Lennie to pet the dead mouse, because it isn't fresh. George reminds Lennie how Lennie's Aunt Clara used to give him live mice to pet and how she stopped because Lennie always

accidentally killed them. They get a campfire burning and warm up cans of beans. George complains about all the things he could do if he wasn't tied down taking care of Lennie. "I could eat any place I want, hotel or any place," he says. Lennie feels guilty and offers to go off into the hills and live in a cave. George feels bad about his complaints and tells Lennie he doesn't want him to leave.

Lennie then asks George to tell about the rabbits, and even though George has told this story many times before, he talks again about the farm he and Lennie dream of having. Lennie listens intently. George says they have a future because they have each other. Eventually they are going to get a place of their own, with a garden and rabbits in cages. They start to eat their beans. George tells Lennie that if he gets into trouble at the ranch, to come to this pool and hide. Lennie says he'll remember.

### Analysis

In Chapter 1, Steinbeck introduces the two main characters, George and Lennie, who are bindlestiffs—migrant workers who move from ranch to ranch harvesting crops. They make an odd couple but are close friends.

The chapter also introduces one of the main themes of the book, that of loneliness and friendship. From the start of the chapter, George and Lennie obviously have a strong bond. George is concerned about Lennie and often acts like a frustrated parent teaching and sometimes scolding a child. He tells Lennie not to drink water that isn't moving and not to hold a dead mouse. Sometimes the frustration boils over, as when Lennie says he wants to keep the dead mouse and George responds, "You gonna give me that mouse or do I have to sock you?" George also complains at length about how Lennie is tying him down. This contentious relationship makes the reader wonder why George puts up with Lennie at all. Steinbeck soon provides the answer. George explains to Lennie that most migrant workers don't have anybody else. "Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world," he says. But George and Lennie are different because they have each other: "We got a future. We got somebody ... that gives a damn about us." So the friendship forged between George and Lennie provides them with hope that they can attain their dream of a better life.

A second theme introduced is that of the dream. George and Lennie's dream is to get a small farm with a house, a garden, and rabbits and chickens. George has recited his description of

their dream to Lennie again and again, using almost identical wording. In fact, Lennie knows what George is going to say about their imagined home before he says it. This dream therefore has become a type of prayer George recites to provide them with hope and faith in their future. The dream also resembles the goals a young family might talk about. In this way, George and Lennie's dream reflects the close bond between them.

Steinbeck uses foreshadowing to convey a sense that something ominous is going to happen. The first hint is when George relates how Lennie often accidentally kills the mice he pets. Even though he is a gentle soul, Lennie can inadvertently do harm because he doesn't know his own strength. George then mentions the trouble he and Lennie got into at their last job, hinting that Lennie did something bad. George is obviously concerned that Lennie might have trouble at the ranch. He tells his friend to remember the pond and to come back to it and hide if he gets in trouble. George strongly foreshadows that something bad is going to happen to him and his companion.

## Chapter 2

### Summary

The bunkhouse at the ranch contains eight bunks, with an apple box above each bunk to hold the worker's paraphernalia. There is a cast-iron stove and a large table in the center of the room. An old worker named Candy, accompanied by his ancient sheepdog, leads George and Lennie into the room. Candy is missing his right hand. The boss arrives and asks George's and Lennie's names. The boss wonders why Lennie doesn't talk. George explains that his friend isn't smart but that he's "a good worker. Strong as a bull." Lennie repeats, "Strong as a bull." The boss suspects George is taking advantage of Lennie by stealing some of his pay. George vehemently denies it. Still suspicious, the boss leaves.

George reprimands Lennie for talking to the boss and then catches Candy listening at the door. Candy denies eavesdropping. The boss's son, a short, pugnacious young man named Curley, enters and asks where his father is. He then tries to talk to Lennie, who doesn't respond. George answers for Lennie, which annoys Curley. After Curley leaves, George wonders why he has a chip on his shoulder. Candy

says that Curley is a skilled lightweight boxer who likes to pick fights with bigger guys. He then discloses that Curley is married to an attractive, flirtatious woman—a "tart." He adds that Curley wears a glove on his left hand filled with Vaseline to keep his hand soft for his wife. George is disgusted. Candy leaves, and George warns Lennie about Curley. "He was kinda feelin' you out. ... He's gonna take a sock at you the first chance he gets." Lennie says he doesn't want any trouble. George reminds him to hide by the pool if he gets in trouble, and Lennie says he'll remember.

While George and Lennie are talking, Curley's wife appears in the bunkhouse door. She is heavily made up and has hair "hung in little rolled clusters." She claims to be looking for Curley and positions her figure to show it off. Lennie notices her body. George brusquely replies that Curley isn't here. She answers in a playful manner and leaves. Lennie admits that she is pretty. George vehemently tells Lennie not to "even take a look at that bitch" because she's nothing but "jail bait." Lennie is shaken and says he doesn't like this place and wants to leave, but George insists they have to stay until they earn a stake.

Slim, the ranch's jerkline skinner (lead mule-team driver), arrives. He seems like a confident, understanding man who is respected by all the workers. After greeting George, Slim says his dog had pups. Another worker, Carlson, suggests that Slim tell Candy to shoot his old sheepdog because it's old and "stinks like hell, too." Then Slim can give Candy one of the pups. The workers head to dinner, leaving George and Lennie alone in the bunkhouse. Lennie is excited about the pups, and George agrees to ask Slim if Lennie can have one. As they leave for dinner, George admits he hates Curley and might "tangle with that bastard myself."

### Analysis

Steinbeck continues to develop the character of George by showing that George has an edgy attitude toward authority. When he and Lennie arrive at the bunkhouse, George notices a can of insect repellent by his bunk and immediately suspects that his mattress is infested with bugs. He then says to Candy, "What the hell kind of bed you giving us, anyways." Candy assures George that the can was there because the prior occupant was a cleanliness fanatic who wanted to be absolutely sure his mattress was not infested. George's suspicions, though, show he probably has had problems with other ranchers trying to take advantage of him and isn't going to let it happen again.

Candy claims that the boss was expecting George and Lennie last night and was upset when they didn't arrive, but George doesn't seem bothered. The reader knows from the previous chapter that George and Lennie could have walked to the ranch the previous evening but that George didn't want to. He liked camping by the tranquil pool. George is a person who values his independence and does not mind annoying authority figures. George's hatred of Curley, the boss's son, confirms his strong dislike of people in authority trying to push others around.

Steinbeck develops the theme of entrapment by continuing to use strong foreshadowing. By introducing the supporting characters of Curley and Curley's wife, the author creates a situation with volatile dynamics. Curley is a bully who feels threatened by bigger guys and constantly wants to prove his manhood by fighting them. Lennie is a huge man who could prove to be an easy target for Curley. In addition, Curley's wife enjoys flirting blatantly with men, and Lennie thinks she's pretty. If Curley's wife flirts with Lennie, it might be all the inducement Curley needs to become enraged and fight Lennie. George tells Lennie to stay out of Curley's way but to fight back if Curley punches him. By using these dynamics, Steinbeck foreshadows a conflict that could entrap George and Lennie. George is aware of this threat. He even calls Curley's wife a "rattap." George, however, feels compelled to stay at the ranch so he and Lennie can earn a stake: "We can't help it, Lennie. We'll get out jus' as soon as we can."

Readers may also notice the development of several symbols that will appear throughout the book. The first of these is the pool. For George and Lennie, the pool represents a safe haven, a place to seek out to protect themselves from the dangers of the world. When George fears that trouble might develop, he tells Lennie to "hide in the brush by the river." Vulnerable animals, like bunnies and puppies, are another symbol explored in Chapter 2. They represent the vulnerable creatures that Lennie loves but can also accidentally harm. Steinbeck also introduces Candy's dog as a symbol that will be developed further in the novel. Toothless, almost blind, and smelly, the dog is no longer useful, but Candy loves him dearly. The idea that the dog should be spared any more suffering, rather than kept alive just so Candy has a companion, will become relevant to George's heartbreaking decision to kill Lennie.

## Chapter 3

### Summary

In the bunkhouse, George thanks Slim for giving Lennie one of his pups. George then explains to Slim that a woman named Aunt Clara used to care for Lennie. After she died, George and Lennie began to work together. Eventually a friendship developed. George then confesses that Lennie got in trouble at their previous job when he wanted to feel a dress that a girl was wearing. The girl panicked and claimed that Lennie tried to rape her. George and Lennie escaped when a lynch party came after Lennie. Slim seems understanding and says that Lennie "ain't mean."

Lennie comes in hiding a puppy under his coat. George orders him to return the puppy to the litter in the barn, and Lennie reluctantly obeys. Candy enters accompanied by his old dog. Carlson soon follows and again complains that the dog isn't useful and has a stink that "hangs around even after he's gone." He tries to convince Candy to shoot it. When Candy says he can't, Carlson offers to shoot the dog himself. Slim agrees with Carlson, and Candy sadly gives in. Carlson gets his Luger pistol and leads the dog out of the bunkhouse. George, Slim, and the other men in the bunkhouse anxiously wait in silence until, finally, they hear the shot. Crooks, an African American stable hand with a crooked back, informs Slim that Lennie is petting the pups in the barn. Slim says that Lennie isn't doing any harm and heads with Crooks to the barn to tar a mule's foot.

Lennie enters and sits on his bunk. Curley bursts into the bunkhouse searching for his wife. He wonders where Slim is. When he's told that Slim is in the barn, Curley rushes out. Whit and Carlson follow him to watch a possible fight between Curley and Slim. George stays back in the bunkhouse, saying, "I don't want to get mixed up in nothing." With Lennie's prompting, George again describes their dream house and farm. Candy gets interested and asks if this farm is a real place. George says it is, and it costs 600 dollars. Candy asks if he might live there with George and Lennie and offers to chip in a partial payment of 350 dollars, along with whatever money George and Lennie can supply. George agrees. Suddenly, George and Lennie realize their dream could become a reality.

Slim comes into the bunkhouse, followed by Curley, Carlson, and Whit. Curley is apologizing to Slim, saying he was just

wondering where his wife was. Slim is angry because Curley suspected him of being with his wife. Carlson tells Curley to keep track of his wife and tell her to stop hanging around the bunkhouse. Curley turns on Carlson, but Carlson will have none of his threats. Curley then notices Lennie, who is still smiling as he thinks about getting a farm with rabbits. Curley thinks Lennie is laughing at him, so he begins to punch Lennie in the face. Confused and horrified, Lennie backs against the wall and looks to George for help. George yells for Lennie to fight back. Lennie then seizes Curley's fist, and "the next minute Curley was flopping like a fish on a line." George orders Lennie to let go, and he eventually does. Curley is in extreme pain, and his hand has been crushed. Slim orders the wagon to be hitched up to take Curley into town to the doctor. Lennie is worried that he did something wrong, but George assures him that he didn't.

## Analysis

Steinbeck returns to the theme of loneliness and friendship in Chapter 3. In the first two chapters, George is depicted as a tight-lipped man who doesn't like to talk much about Lennie and himself. In fact, when the boss asks about their relationship, George lies and says Lennie is his cousin. In Chapter 3, however, George opens up to Slim and readily explains how Lennie became his friend. George is comfortable around Slim and feels he can trust him, undoubtedly because of Slim's calm and understanding attitude. George obviously values and is moved by friendship. This trait is reinforced when George tells Slim that he used to tease Lennie, making him do silly things. Despite this, Lennie never became angry. In fact, when George told Lennie to jump in a river, Lennie obeyed and almost drowned. Instead of being angry, Lennie was grateful to George for pulling him out. Lennie's friendliness disarmed George. Soon, George realized he had something of extreme value with Lennie. George had seen migrant workers living alone for a long time. "That ain't no good ... after a long time they get mean," he says. From George's discussion with Slim, the reader comes to understand that George believes his friendship with Lennie will prevent him from getting mean and bitter.

Steinbeck also shows how the fear of loneliness haunts Candy. Candy realizes that when he can't sweep the bunkhouse anymore, the boss will fire him. "I won't have no place to go," Candy says. His sense of loneliness and uselessness makes him "wisht somebody'd shoot me" like Carlson shot his dog. But when Candy is able to share Lennie and George's dream of

getting a small farm, Candy gets a sense of belonging and being valued as a friend. The author also uses strong foreshadowing through the killing of Candy's dog. Because the dog can no longer do its job and annoys workers at the ranch with its stink, it is shot. The decision spares the old dog from suffering any further pain, but the workers' motives for killing it may have less to do with kindness than with the harshness of the world in which they live. The same rationale will apply to Lennie later in the novel.

In Chapter 3, the theme of entrapment is developed like a gradually tightening noose. Once again, George realizes the conflict with Curley and his wife is dangerous. George refers to the wife as "jail bait all set on the trigger." If George and Lennie get sucked into this conflict, they could easily get arrested, and their dream would be destroyed. The noose begins to tighten when Curley frantically searches for his wife and jealously suspects her of being with Slim. Curley's suspicions end up making him look like a fool in the eyes of Slim and the other workers. Unable to accept this humiliation, Curley looks for a scapegoat and picks on Lennie. As Curley punches Lennie, George adds fuel to the flames by telling Lennie to fight back. The result is that Lennie crushes Curley's hand. The noose has tightened around George and Lennie. Lennie could easily get fired or arrested. Slim, though, gets Lennie and George out of the trap. He tells Curley that if he tries to get Lennie fired, he will tell everyone about what happened and "then will you get the laugh." Curley agrees to say he got his hand caught in a machine.

Steinbeck uses situational irony when Lennie and George describe their dream of getting a small farm. Irony occurs when a situation is strange or surprising because things happen in a way that is the opposite of what is expected. The dream of getting the small farm provides Lennie and George with the hope of freedom. The desire to achieve this dream, however, keeps them working at the ranch to earn a stake, thereby exposing them to a dangerous situation that could get them arrested and limit their freedom.

## Chapter 4

### Summary

Crooks lives alone in a harness room in the barn. The room is filled with tools and with Crooks's personal possessions, including books. Crooks is a "proud, aloof man" with a lean



face and a crooked spine. It is Saturday night, and most of the men are in town. Crooks is rubbing liniment on his back when Lennie quietly appears in the doorway. Crooks tries to chase him away, saying that Lennie has no right to be in this room. Lennie says he just wants to look at his puppy. Crooks softens somewhat and lets Lennie sit on a keg in the room. Crooks asks Lennie what he would do if George never came back from town. This idea scares Lennie, and he gets mad at Crooks for supposing George might get hurt. Crooks says he didn't mean to scare Lennie and claims he was talking about himself. Lennie settles down and reasserts that he and George are going to get a farm and raise rabbits. Crooks claims that most migrant workers have the dream of getting some land but never do.

Candy approaches the doorway and says he's looking for Lennie. Crooks invites him in. Candy says he's been figuring on how to get money by raising rabbits. Lennie becomes excited, but Crooks insists their dream won't happen. He has seen guys who were crazy for their own land but "ever' time a whore house or a blackjack game took what it takes." Candy argues that things will be different this time. He, George, and Lennie already have a lot of money saved in a bank. Crooks is surprised they have some money and asks if he might help out doing odd jobs at their farm.

Curley's wife enters looking for Curley. Candy and Crooks try to get her to leave, but she wants to talk to people. She then complains about her husband and wonders what happened to his hand. Candy says that Curley got his hand caught in a machine. She doesn't believe it. Then Curley's wife becomes indignant and complains about not having anything better to do on a Saturday night than talking to "a bunch of bindle stiffs." Lennie seems fascinated by her, but Candy gets angry at Curley's wife, telling her that he and his friends are going to get a place of their own. She says they'll waste their money. Curley's wife then asks Lennie how he got the bruises on his face. Lennie doesn't know how to respond. He talks about tending rabbits. She flirts with Lennie, replying, "I might get a couple rabbits myself." Crooks angrily tells her she has no right being in a black man's room. She gets furious at Crooks, causing him to back down. Candy says he can hear the men coming back from town. Curley's wife tells Lennie that she's glad he broke her husband's hand. She then leaves. George comes in, wonders what Lennie is doing in Crooks's room, and scolds Candy for blabbing about their plan to get a farm. Crooks tells Candy to forget about his request to work for them on their future farm. Lennie, Candy, and George leave Crooks alone in the room.

## Analysis

In Chapter 4, Steinbeck explores the theme of loneliness and friendship through the depiction of four outcasts: Crooks, Candy, Lennie, and Curley's wife. Being black makes Crooks an outsider in society. He has contact with others mainly when his job requires it. He spends most of his free time alone in his room, reading books. He is not welcome in the bunkhouse. Crooks accepts this rejection with a bitter pride. He does not allow any white people in his room, except for Slim and the boss. If white people refuse to treat him respectfully, then he will act the same way toward them. When he was growing up, Crooks had more contact with white people. "White kids ... play at our place, an' sometimes I went to play with them," he relates. As an adult, Crooks has faced the full brunt of racial prejudice, making him angry and resentful. His need for friendship allows him to overcome these feelings, however, and leads him to ask if he can work on Lennie and Candy's future farm.

In previous chapters, the reader learns that Candy is old and crippled, having lost his hand in a farm accident. As soon as he proves unable to sweep the bunkhouse, Candy expects to be kicked out. Candy, therefore, is an outsider because he has little usefulness. Lennie is an outsider because he is mentally disabled. As a result, he doesn't talk much and doesn't understand malicious motives. Curley gets angry at Lennie for not answering his questions like other workers do. Later, when Curley apologizes to Slim, Curley catches Lennie smiling. He assumes Lennie is mocking him, but Lennie is just thinking about his rabbits. He is unaware of any malicious reason to mock Curley. This is evidence of Lennie's mental handicap and social naivety, two of the traits that keep Lennie from fitting in with society. Curley's wife is an outsider because she's a woman. The ranch is a world dominated by men. She needs friendliness and affection and isn't getting it. She receives positive reinforcement because of her physical appearance, saying things like, "An' a guy tol' me he could put me in pitchers." She uses her looks to attract attention, but this approach only goes so far. When she is alone with a man, he's friendly, but "just let two of the guys get together," she says, and neither will speak to her. Curley's wife, therefore, is treated by men as a sex object. She is not even given a name and is referred to only as Curley's wife.

Steinbeck returns to the theme of entrapment by adding social and psychological elements. The ranch can be seen as a microcosm of society in general. This society is ruled by powerful men who use other people to achieve their goals. As

soon as the subordinate people are no longer useful, they are cast out. If people want to break out of this system, as do George and Lennie, they will face many obstacles, such as low pay, difficult bosses, and a lack of sympathy and understanding from others. The author also shows how many of the workers self-destruct. As Crooks mentions, most of them have dreams of obtaining their own land but never get it. Instead, they spend their money on prostitutes and drink: "They're all the time talkin' about it, but it's jus' in their head."

## Chapter 5

### Summary

Alone in the barn, Lennie looks sadly at a dead puppy lying before him. Lennie has accidentally killed the puppy and fears George will find out and not let him tend rabbits. He covers the puppy with hay in an attempt to hide it. Then he unburies the animal and strokes it. "I di'n't know you'd get killed so easy," he says. Curley's wife enters the barn. She wears heavy makeup and has styled her hair into "little sausage curls." Curley's wife is startled when she sees the dead puppy. Lennie admits he accidentally killed the animal, and she tells him not to worry about it. But when she tries to talk to Lennie, he rebuffs her, saying, "If George sees me talkin' to you he'll give me hell." Curley's wife gets angry because nobody wants to talk to her. She tells Lennie that she once had opportunities to join a traveling theater group and go to Hollywood. She doesn't like her husband, because "he ain't a nice fella." Lennie listens and then talks more about tending rabbits.

Curley's wife asks Lennie why he's so "nuts" about looking after rabbits. After pondering the question, Lennie admits he likes to touch soft things. She says most people do. She then places Lennie's hand on her hair and says, "Feel right aroun' there an' see how soft it is." Lennie strokes her hair and says that it feels nice. Curley's wife tells Lennie not to mess up her hair. When he keeps stroking it, she gets angry and jerks her head. Lennie panics and clutches her hair. As she struggles to get loose, Lennie places his hand over her mouth and begs her not to scream. She continues to struggle violently. Lennie pleads, "Please don't do none of that," as he is worried that George won't let him tend rabbits. When she tries to yell, Lennie gets angry and shakes her, breaking her neck. She is still, and Lennie realizes he has accidentally killed her. Lennie knows he's "done a real bad thing" and decides to run off and hide by the pool.

Candy comes in, sees Curley's wife, and realizes she's dead. Stunned, he leaves and returns with George, who immediately knows that Lennie killed her. Candy claims that Curley will want to lynch Lennie. George thinks for a while and then agrees. Candy asks if their dream of getting a small farm has been destroyed, and George replies that it has. Afraid of being suspected as an accomplice in the killing, George leaves, and Candy remains with the body. After a few minutes, Candy brings Curley, Slim, and other workers into the barn. George arrives last. When Curley realizes Lennie killed his wife, he becomes enraged and says, "I'll kill the big son-of-a-bitch myself." He goes off with some of the men to organize a lynch mob, leaving Slim and George in the barn. George wonders if they could just lock Lennie up and not kill him. Slim is doubtful of this and says that even if they "lock him up an' strap him down ... that ain't no good, George." George agrees. Carlson comes back and claims his gun has been stolen. Curley hurries in and suspiciously asks George if he is coming with the lynch mob. George replies that he is. George, Curley, Slim, and the others leave the barn. Candy remains with Curley's dead wife.

### Analysis

In Chapter 5, Steinbeck brings the theme of entrapment to a climax through the interaction between Lennie and Curley's wife and the symbol of the vulnerable soft animal. Lennie and Curley's wife are brought together in the barn because of their loneliness and need for friendship and affection. In an example of situational irony, the result of pursuing these needs is death. Lennie accidentally kills a puppy because he likes the feeling of petting it. When the puppy nips at him, he cuffs the animal and, because of his strength, kills it. Therefore, Lennie's need for affection results in death, which foreshadows what is about to happen with Curley's wife. Lennie most likely feels lonely without the connection of touching a soft animal. For example, when Lennie first gets a puppy, George predicts Lennie will sleep next to the animal in the barn for companionship. Curley's wife wants to talk to Lennie because she's also lonely and desires friendship and affection. She even invites him to touch her hair. Lennie strokes her hair and gets a pleasant sensation of affection. Not realizing the danger that lurks with Lennie, Curley's wife gets upset when he strokes her hair too hard and tries to break loose of his grasp. He scolds her and shakes her, just as he cuffed the puppy earlier. In this case, the result is the death of Curley's wife.

Later in the chapter, the entrapment of Lennie and George is



sealed. Curley is still angry at Lennie for crushing his hand. When he finds out that Lennie killed his wife, he predictably becomes enraged and plans to "shoot the guts outa that big bastard." Because of this, the likelihood of Lennie being arrested is slim. Even if Lennie is arrested, society's treatment of the mentally handicapped at that time ensures that Lennie will be dealt with severely. The authorities will "put him in a cage." George understands that such a fate for Lennie would be worse than death.

If Lennie is killed or imprisoned, George could theoretically continue to work and save money and buy the small farm with Candy. Here is where the psychological dynamics come into play. After George realizes what Lennie has done, Candy asks George if they will still buy a small farm. George replies that he will fall back into the behavior of most migrant workers—that is, earning 50 dollars and then spending it on prostitutes or playing pool. As a result, he will be unable to save the money to buy their farm. For George, his friendship with Lennie provided motivation to break with the system and obtain land. When Lennie is gone, George's motivation disappears, and so too does his dream.

## Chapter 6

### Summary

Lennie arrives at the tranquil pool, drinks water from it, and sits and waits for George. He imagines Aunt Clara scolding him about doing bad things and not appreciating what George does for him. Lennie cries that he tries to do what is right. Then Lennie imagines a huge rabbit, which claims that Lennie cannot take good care of rabbits. The rabbit says that George is going to get sick of Lennie and leave him. Lennie cries out that George would never do this and repeats George's name. George silently appears and asks what Lennie is yelling about. When Lennie asks if George is going to leave him, George says no, reassuring Lennie.

Lennie is surprised that George is not scolding him. George repeats the words he usually says when he scolds Lennie, but without any feeling behind them. Lennie asks George to tell him how they are different from other guys. George says they're different because they have each other. Lennie cries triumphantly, "We got each other, that's what." George tells Lennie to take off his hat and look across the river. Lennie obeys. George removes Carlson's Luger from his side pocket.

He looks at the back of Lennie's head and begins to describe how great their life will be on their small farm. He hears the lynch mob approaching, and when Lennie asks him to go on with his description, George says, "Ever'body gonna be nice to you. Ain't gonna be no more trouble." The voices of the mob are close. George points the gun at the back of Lennie's head. George's hand shakes violently, but he manages to fire, and Lennie jars and slumps forward on the sand.

Curley, Carlson, Slim, and other members of the mob burst onto the scene and see that George has shot and killed Lennie. Carlson assumes George took the gun away from Lennie and shot him. George agrees. Slim tries to console George, saying, "You hadda, George. I swear you hadda." Slim and George head up a trail toward the highway. Curley and Carlson look after them. Carlson says, "Now what the hell ya suppose is eatin' them two guys?"

### Analysis

In Chapter 6, Steinbeck completes his development of the themes of entrapment, loneliness and friendship, and the dream. Lennie hides out at the tranquil pool, just as George told him to. When George arrives, Lennie is surprised that his friend is not following his usual behavior by scolding him. In fact, Lennie has to prompt George to repeat his scolding speech. George does so, but without any emotion. George knows he and Lennie are caught in the trap and that there is no way out. George is faced with limited options: let the lynch mob kill Lennie, convince the mob to arrest Lennie, or kill Lennie himself. George decides on the latter option because he is Lennie's close friend. George feels that killing Lennie himself quickly and without Lennie's knowledge is more humane than submitting Lennie to the horrors and taunts of mob violence and possible long-term incarceration in a mental hospital.

To make what he is about to do as painless for Lennie as possible, George has Lennie look across the river, and he calms him by describing their dream. As George describes the dream, it comes to resemble a vision of heaven where nothing can harm a person. As George tells Lennie, "Nobody gonna hurt nobody nor steal from 'em."

George's killing of Lennie by the tranquil pool creates situational irony. As the reader has seen, the pool is a symbol that represents a safe haven for George and Lennie. However, it is in this "safe" place that George chooses to kill Lennie. In this life, there is no place of safety that is truly free from

troubles and abuse.

## “ Quotes

*"He repeated his words  
rhythmically as though he had  
said them many times before."*

— Narrator, Chapter 1

The narrator stresses how the dream is something George and Lennie treasure and talk about over and over.

*"I got you to look after me, and  
you got me to look after you."*

— Lennie, Chapter 1

Through Lennie the narrator shows why Lennie and George value their friendship so much.

*"Curley's like a lot of little guys.  
He hates big guys."*

— Candy, Chapter 2

Through Candy the narrator calls attention to an aspect of Curley's personality that will lead to trouble. Curley tends to dislike men bigger than himself before getting to know them. He puffs himself up around big guys, being combative before having reason to be, as a way of dealing with his own insecurity about his small size.

*"I don't know why. Maybe  
ever'body ... is scared of each  
other."*

— Slim, Chapter 2

Steinbeck contrasts the unique relationship between George and Lennie with the lonely lives of the other workers. Here Slim considers one reason why the workers choose isolation over companionship.

*"We could live offa the fatta the  
lan'."*

— Lennie, Chapter 3

This quotation stresses the value of owning land. If Lennie and George owned a farm, the land would provide for their needs, thereby giving them a degree of freedom and self-sufficiency.

*"I tell ya a guy gets too lonely an'  
he gets sick."*

— Crooks, Chapter 4

Loneliness and friendship is a major theme of the book. Here Crooks conveys how loneliness can be destructive. Despite their awareness Crooks and most of the other workers continue on their lonely paths.

*"Guys nearly crazy with loneliness  
for land, but ... a blackjack game  
took what it takes."*

— Crooks, Chapter 4

Every bindlestiff wants land and the security it brings, but migrant workers are their own worst enemies when it comes to securing this dream.

*"And then she was still, for Lennie  
had broken her neck."*

— Narrator, Chapter 5

The narrator describes the climax of the story, an event that

seemed fated from the very beginning of the novel. George's warning to Lennie to hide at the tranquil pool in Chapter 1 and the story in Chapter 3 of how the two had to run from Weed after Lennie touched the girl wearing the red dress both foreshadowed this development.

*"As happens sometimes, a moment settled ... hovered and remained for much more than a moment."*

— Narrator, Chapter 5

The narrator conveys the heaviness and stillness of the moment after the death of Curley's wife. It is a dreadful and fateful moment, and the narrator wants readers to consider what led up to it and how it will determine events to come.

*"Ain't gonna be no more trouble. Nobody gonna hurt nobody nor steal from 'em."*

— George, Chapter 6

George retells the dream of the farm once more. Although he uses these words to describe the peaceful and safe haven it will be for them, he could as easily be describing the place he is preparing to send Lennie when he pulls the trigger and kills him. Is he describing this calm place to give Lennie one more happy moment or to reassure himself before he does what is necessary?

## Symbols

### The Pool

Situated in a tranquil area of the Salinas River, the pool represents a safe haven for [George](#) and [Lennie](#). In [Chapter 1](#), they camp at the pool. George tells Lennie to come there if he gets in trouble. He tells Lennie, "I want you to come right here

an' hide in the brush." For George and Lennie, the pool is a place that they hope will protect them from the troubles of reality. The pool, however, ends up being the place where Lennie is killed by his close friend. Even so, the pool does provide a peaceful atmosphere for Lennie when he is killed, and compared to the cruel alternative awaiting him at the hands of a lynch mob, Lennie does find some sort of peace. George's instructions to Lennie to use the pool as a hideaway if needed foreshadow the trouble that will happen later in the novel.

## Vulnerable Soft Animals

[Steinbeck](#) uses vulnerable soft animals, including mice, rabbits, and puppies, to illustrate the dramatic irony (where the audience is aware of something that the character is not) that loving, gentle [Lennie](#) is capable of brute force even while remaining oblivious to the fact that he is causing harm. Lennie is a person who does not know his own strength. When he accidentally kills a puppy in [Chapter 5](#), Lennie is truly surprised and upset. He says to the dead puppy, "You ain't so little as mice. I didn't bounce you hard." For Lennie, there is a fine line between affection and death. He could be gently playing with an animal one moment and inadvertently kill it the next. Additionally, Steinbeck uses the killing of these animals by Lennie to foreshadow the death of [Curley's wife](#) later in that same chapter.

## Death of Candy's Dog

[Steinbeck](#) uses the death of [Candy's](#) dog in [Chapter 3](#) to foreshadow and symbolically represent [Lennie's](#) death. Candy's dog has been a faithful companion for Candy for many years. So, too, has Lennie been a companion for [George](#). Candy's dog is an innocent creature that does not intend harm but nonetheless disrupts life at the ranch. The same is true for Lennie. Candy's dog is killed, supposedly for the animal's own benefit. Carlson states that the dog has "got no teeth. ... He's all stiff with rheumatism." Similarly, George kills Lennie for Lennie's benefit. If Lennie were to be caught by the lynch mob, then [Curley](#) would probably taunt and torture Lennie before killing him. Because of this, [Slim](#) says to George, "You hadda,

George. I swear you hadda."

The death of the dog also symbolizes the fate of all the wandering bindlestiffs—most immediately, Candy. They all fill a useful purpose in the life of the ranch, until they get old or are injured and can no longer work. They may not be shot like Candy's dog, but they are discarded and put on "the county" to survive the best they can.

## Themes

### The Dream

[Steinbeck](#) conveys the theme of the dream through [Lennie](#) and [George](#)'s dream of owning a small farm. This theme develops as the story progresses. In [Chapter 1](#), George describes to Lennie their dream of having a "little house and a couple of acres an' a cow and some pigs." George has repeated this reverie to Lennie many times before. Lennie never tires of hearing it, especially the part about his tending rabbits. George, though, realizes that buying this small farm is really a pipe dream that probably will never happen. In [Chapter 3](#), after [Candy](#) offers a partial payment on the small farm, the narrator states, "This thing they had never really believed in was coming true." Before Candy's offer, the dream was just something George and Lennie used as a way to keep their spirits up as they faced daily hardships.

The dream is based on the friendship between George and Lennie. As Lennie states, "I got you to look after me ... you got me to look after you." In order to spend more time enjoying their friendship and less time just trying to survive, they want stability. Having a small farm would offer this stability.

With Candy's offer, the dream changes from an improbable fantasy to a possible reality. George, Lennie, and Candy sit in silent wonder when they realize they could soon buy a farm. George says thoughtfully, "I bet we could swing her." However, this development raises the stakes. Now George and Lennie definitely have to stay and work at the ranch for a month to earn enough for the farm payment. Even though George is fully aware of the dangerous dynamics with [Curley](#) and his wife, he is determined to remain at the ranch, which plays into his and Lennie's entrapment.

At the end of the novel, the dream shifts to a vision of the afterlife, where there "ain't gonna be no more trouble." As George prepares to shoot an unknowing Lennie, he describes this vision to his friend. Lennie thinks George is just repeating their pipe dream. In reality, George is depicting his view of heaven, where he hopes Lennie will go after he dies. In this life, George and Lennie face too many obstacles to make their dream a reality. George realizes that only in the afterlife can this dream ever be achieved.

### Loneliness and Friendship

The theme of loneliness and friendship consists of a duality, in which one idea or attitude is contrasted with its opposite. So throughout the novel, [Steinbeck](#) contrasts loneliness and friendship. The author often conveys loneliness through the plight of the migrant workers. The vast majority of these workers live alone and without permanent ties to anyone. [George](#) states to [Lennie](#), "Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world." To avoid this fate, George and Lennie have forged a friendship that runs contrary to the behavior of most migrants. [Slim](#) states, "Ain't many guys travel around together. ... I don't know why." As a result, most migrant workers constantly deal with the consequences of loneliness. George states, "They ain't got nothing to look ahead to."

Workers often face loneliness because of harsh social conditions. On ranches, workers are kept around if they can do useful work. When they can't, these people are discarded, no matter how long they may have worked for a ranch. Because of this, [Candy](#) fears being left destitute and alone after he can't sweep the bunkhouse anymore. He is an old man who has worked on the ranch for many years. Even though he was physically maimed by an accident that happened on the ranch, Candy has little security in his later years. When George describes his dream farm, Candy jumps at the chance of joining him and Lennie. Doing this gives Candy friends he can rely on and eases his fear of being left alone in his old age.

Loneliness is also brought on by racial and gender prejudice. Crooks is an isolated man embittered by years of racial abuse. As a black man, Crooks is not allowed to socialize with other workers, except for an occasional game of horseshoes. White society has rejected him and, in turn, he rejects this society as

much as he can while still earning a living. He forbids white people to enter his room, except for Slim and the boss. He makes an exception for Lennie, Candy, and, to a certain extent, [Curley's wife](#), who are all in their own ways social outcasts who deal with loneliness. Despite his bitterness, Crooks demonstrates a need for friendship. When Candy mentions he has some money saved to buy a small farm, Crooks asks, "If you ... want a hand to work for nothing ... why I'd come ... lend a hand." [Curley's wife](#) faces loneliness because she's usually the only female around. She's a young woman who is valued by the male-dominated society because of her physical appearance. However, she yearns for a friendly relationship. She asks Lennie, "Ain't I got a right to talk to nobody? Whatta they think I am, anyways?"

For many of the characters in *Of Mice and Men*, loneliness and friendship form an interconnected dynamic. Characters experience loneliness and desire friendship as a relief. Friendship remains elusive, however, except for George and Lennie, who have broken the mold.

## Entrapment

[Steinbeck](#) gradually develops the theme of entrapment as the story progresses. Personal dynamics, social conditions, and psychological elements all work together to ensnare [Lennie](#) and [George](#). The volatile dynamics between [Curley](#), [Curley's wife](#), and Lennie contribute to the trap. Curley feels threatened by large men and therefore hates Lennie. Curley's wife needs affection and therefore turns to gentle Lennie. Innocent, slow-witted Lennie lacks the social sophistication to deal with Curley and his wife. As a result, he injures Curley and accidentally kills Curley's wife. Curley seeks vengeance, a move that leads to Lennie's death.

Social conditions contribute to the entrapment of Lennie and George. In the 1930s, migrant workers had no job security. They earned just enough to stay alive and have a little social life. To counteract this insecurity, Lennie and George are driven to save enough money to buy a farm. This drive for security keeps them at the ranch despite the dangerous dynamics, thereby leading to their entrapment. Psychological factors also contribute to the trap. Because of the harshness of their lives, migrant workers have a strong tendency to spend whatever money they earn on amusement, such as prostitutes and gambling. As a result, migrants are unable to

save enough money to improve their social conditions. George's friendship with Lennie helps him avoid this vicious cycle. George has someone he cares about and feels responsible for. But after Lennie kills Curley's wife, George knows he will lose his friend and will fall back into the lonely, shallow life that entraps migrants. "I'll take my fifty bucks and I'll stay all night in some lousy cat house," he says.

Steinbeck uses foreshadowing to convey an increasingly ominous mood in the story. This mood suggests that Lennie and George are trapped by fate. The foreshadowing consists of various hints, such as learning that Lennie got in trouble in his previous job in [Chapter 1](#), Curley picking on Lennie in [Chapter 2](#), the flirtations of Curley's wife's in Chapter 2 and [Chapter 4](#), Candy's dog being shot in [Chapter 3](#), and Lennie killing a puppy in [Chapter 5](#).

## Suggested Reading

Benson, Jackson J., ed. *The Short Novels of John Steinbeck: Critical Essays with a Checklist to Steinbeck Criticism*. Durham: Duke UP, 1990. Print.

Crayola, Robert. *'Of Mice and Men': A Reader's Guide to the John Steinbeck Novel*. Lanham: Scarecrow, 2009. Print.

Meyer, Michael J. *The Essential Criticism of John Steinbeck's 'Of Mice and Men.'* Lanham: Scarecrow, 2009. Print.

Steinbeck, John. *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters*. Ed. Elaine A. Steinbeck and Robert Wallsten. New York: Penguin, 1976. Print.

Steinbeck, John. *Of Mice and Men: A Play in Three Acts*. New York: Penguin, 2009. Print.