**Chapter One**

**Summary**

[George](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38857) and Lennie, two migrant workers during the Great Depression, walk along a trail on the Salinas River just south of Soledad, California. They are on their way to a new ranch, where they hope to be hired to “buck barley,” that is, to haul sacks full of grain. A bus driver recently let them out and told them the ranch was nearby. However, the walk is much longer than they anticipated.

George is a small, quick man with dark, suspicious eyes. [Lennie](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38859) is just the opposite: a naive, unintelligent mountain of a man. As they walk along, Lennie comes upon a pool of water and drinks thirstily; George warns him that the water might be bad as it has been stagnant in the sun, but Lennie pays him no heed. After Lennie drinks his fill, George quizzes him on the upcoming job. Lennie, however, fails to remember even the slightest detail of their current prospect. George reminds him that they have received work cards from Murray and Ready’s.

As George pats his pocket, where the work cards are kept, he notices that Lennie has something in his pocket as well: a dead mouse. Lennie explains that he likes to pet the mouse’s soft fur as he walks. George takes the mouse from Lennie and throws it into the bushes. He then admonishes Lennie for his behavior, warning him not to behave badly, as he has done so often in the past, and ordering him not to say a word when they meet the boss at the new ranch. He reminds Lennie of past misadventures, specifically an episode in the town of Weed in which Lennie assaulted a woman in a red dress because he thought her dress was pretty and wanted to feel it. The woman accused Lennie of attempting to rape her and George and Lennie had to run for their lives out of town. While recounting this incident, George complains that if he didn’t have to take care of Lennie he could live a normal life: “I could live so easy and maybe have a girl” (7).

George tells Lennie that they are going to bivouac a couple of miles away from the ranch so that they won’t have to work the morning shift the next day. They set up camp and George sends Lennie off to look for firewood so that they can heat up some beans. Lennie goes off into the darkness and returns in a moment; George instantly knows from Lennie’s wet feet that he has retrieved the dead mouse. He takes it from Lennie, who begins to whimper. George assures Lennie that he’ll let him pet a “fresh” mouse, just not a rotten one. They recall that Lennie’s [Aunt Clara](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38877), whom Lennie refers to as “a lady,” used to give Lennie mice to play with.

Lennie fetches some wood and George heats up their beans. Lennie complains that they don’t have ketchup, which sets George off on a rant about having to care for Lennie. After this outburst, George feels ashamed. Lennie apologizes and George admits that he’s “been mean” (14). Lennie passive-aggressively offers to go away and live in a cave so that George can have fun. George resolves this short argument by agreeing to Lennie’s request to “tell about the rabbits,” which is Lennie’s shorthand for “talk about how things will be for us in the future.” George paints a picture of the future – a picture he has obviously painted countless times before – in which he and Lennie have their own place on their own farm and “live off the fat of the land.” He promises Lennie that they will have rabbit cages and that Lennie will be allowed to tend them. Lennie repeatedly interrupts George as he tells this story, but insists that George finish it to the end.

As they prepare to sleep, George reminds Lennie not to say a word during their interview with the boss the following day. He also tells Lennie that if he runs into trouble, as he has so many times before, he is to return to the place where they've camped, hide in the brush and wait for George.

**Analysis**

[John Steinbeck](http://www.gradesaver.com/author/john-steinbeck/)’s enduring popularity is largely the result of his ability to weave a complicated fictional reality from simple elements – simple language, simple characters, simple techniques. One of the techniques he uses consistently is the juxtaposition of the human and the natural worlds. He often – as in [*The Grapes of Wrath*](http://www.gradesaver.com/the-grapes-of-wrath/) – alternates short natural pieces with the parallel struggles of humankind. [*Of Mice and Men*](http://www.gradesaver.com/of-mice-and-men/), as is clear from the title alone, features this parallelism as well. It is a novel about the natural world – “of mice” – and the social world – “and men.” The relationship between these two worlds is not one of conflict but of comparison; he invites us to witness the similarities between the human and animal worlds.

The title, *Of Mice and Men*, comes from an eighteenth-century poem by Robert Burns entitled “To a Mouse.” This poem features a couplet that has become widely known and quoted: “The best laid schemes of mice and men / Gang oft aglay.” That last phrase, written in Scottish dialect, translates as “often go wrong.” As will become clear, the quotation relates directly to our two protagonists, who do indeed have a “scheme” to get out of the cycle of poverty and alienation that is the migrant worker’s lot: they plan to purchase a farm of their own and work on it themselves. Lennie visualizes this future possibility as near to heaven – he can imagine nothing better than life with “the rabbits.” Their action in the novel is largely motivated by a desire to achieve the independence of this farm life.

Poverty, in Burns’ work as well as Steinbeck, draws the human and the natural worlds closer together. During the Great Depression, in which the novel is set, workers were thrust from relative comfort to fend for themselves in a cruel and uncaring world. They face the original challenges of nature – to feed themselves, to fight for their stake. Poverty has reduced them to animals – Lennie a ponderous, powerful, imbecilic bear; George a quiet, scheming, scrappy rodent of a man. Notice how frequently the two men, particularly Lennie, are described in animal similes: Lennie drags his feet “the way a bear drags his paws” (2) and drinks from the pool “like a horse” (3). Lennie even fantasizes about living in a cave like a bear.

Of course, Lennie’s vision of nature is hardly realistic; he thinks of nature as full of fluffy and cute playthings. He has no notion of the darkness in the natural world, the competition and the cruelty. He wouldn’t have the faintest notion how to feed himself without George. In this too the men balance each other: George sees the world through suspicious eyes. He sees only the darkness where Lennie sees only the light. George may complain about how difficult it is to care for Lennie, but this complaint seems to ring hollow: in truth, George needs Lennie’s innocence as much as Lennie needs George’s experience. They complement each other, complete each other. Together, they are more than the solitary and miserable nobodies making their migrant wages during the Depression. Together, they have hope and solidarity.

George’s complaint – “Life would be so easy without Lennie” – and Lennie’s counter-complaint – “I could just live in a cave and leave George alone” – are not really sincere. They are staged, hollow threats, like the threats of parents and children (“I’ll pull this car over right now, mister!”). Similarly, George’s story about how “things are going to be,” with rabbits and a vegetable garden and the fat of the land, also has a fixed quality, like a child’s bedtime story. Children (like Lennie) love to hear the same tale repeated countless times; even when they have the story memorized, they love to talk along, anticipating the major turns in the story and correcting their parents if they leave out any details. “The rabbits” is Lennie’s bedtime story, and while George isn’t exactly a parent to Lennie, he is nevertheless parental. George is Lennie’s guardian – and in guarding Lennie, George is in effect guarding innocence itself.

Steinbeck's plots are as simple and finely honed as his characters. Each topic discussed - the woman who mistakenly thought that Lennie was trying to rape her, the mice that Lennie crushes with affection, George's order that Lennie return to the campsite if anything goes wrong - will come into play in the chapters to come. Keep these details in mind as we continue.

**Chapter Two**

**Summary**

The following morning, [George](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38857) and [Lennie](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38859) reach the bunk house at the farm. [Candy](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38861), the old man who shows them the bunk house, tells them that his boss was expecting them the night before and was angry when they weren't ready for work in the morning. Near his bed George finds a can of insect poison, which leads him to think that his bunk is infected, but the old man reassures him, telling him that person who had the bed before was a meticulous blacksmith named [Whit](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38873)ey who kept the insect killer around even though there were no insects to kill.

As George prepares to meet the boss, Candy reports that he is a nice enough man although he takes his anger out on the black stable buck, [Crooks](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38867). Soon enough, the boss enters and asks George and Lennie for their work slips. George attempts to speak for both Lennie and himself, but the boss notices Lennie's silence and questions him directly. Lennie attempts to speak for himself, aping phrases that George has spoken, but sounds completely ridiculous. George tells the boss that Lennie isn't bright, but that he's as strong as a bull and an incredibly hard worker.

The boss wonders why George is willing to take care of Lennie; George tells the boss that Lennie is his cousin and that he promised his mother to look after him. When the boss wonders why they left their last job, George tells him that they were digging a cesspool and completed the work. When the boss leaves, George scolds Lennie for failing to keep completely silent. George admits that he lied about Lennie being his cousin.

Candy returns with his old sheepdog, and George snaps at him for eavesdropping. [Curley](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38863), a arrogant young man, enters the bunk looking for the boss, who is his father. He behaves threateningly to Lennie. When he leaves, Candy explains that Curley, who is short, hates big guys like Lennie out of jealousy. George says that however tough Curley may be, he will be sorry if he picks a fight with Lennie, who is incredibly strong. Candy notes that Curley was recently married to a local beauty and that he has become more cocky ever since. Curley wears a left glove full of Vaseline to keep the hand soft for his wife, whom the old man thinks is a tart. George warns Lennie to avoid Curley.

On cue, [Curley's wife](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38865) comes to the bunk house looking for her husband. She is provocatively dressed and quite flirtatious. When she leaves, George remarks that she's a tramp, while Lennie says that she's pretty. George warns him to keep away from her.

Next to enter is [Slim](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38871), the widely respected jerkline skinner. Slim questions George and Lennie about what work they can do. [Carlson](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38869), a large, big-stomached man, also enters the bunk house and asks Slim whether his dog had her litter last night. Slim tells him that she had nine puppies, but that he drowned four immediately since she couldn't feed so many. Carlson complains about the smell of Candy's old sheepdog and tells Slim that Candy should put it out of its misery.

Curley enters again and confronts George, asking if his wife has been around. George admits that she was at the bunk house. Curley seems eager to start a fight with anyone.

**Analysis**

The novel as a whole, and this chapter in particular, shares many elements with stage drama. Steinbeck often uses a single room as a setting for a scene, as the bunk house is used here. This technique allows him to introduce a wide variety of characters quickly without using a narrator - the characters talk about each other, interact, and even describe each other (as when Candy talks about Curley being a "little guy"), all of which facilitates relatively rich characterization in a relatively short number of pages.

This stage technique applies to Steinbeck's descriptions as well as his dialogue. Consider the description of Candy's dog at the close of the chapter: "[The dog] gazed about with mild, half-blind eyes. He sniffed, and then lay down and put his head between his paws [etc.]." Steinbeck's language is completely cut of emotion; he simply describes the animal's actions as a playwright might write stage directions.

This "dramatic" technique gives Steinbeck's story a significant quality (especially with regard to future events). On one level, he is simply describing an evening among traveling workers in a realistic way; on another level, the actions and identities of these workers take on a larger, almost mythic significance. Steinbeck blends the ordinary with the highly formal, bringing out the eternal, symbolic character of everyday life. Thus

Curley comes to represent all petty, embittered men;   
Crooks stands in for the persecution and the suffering of all African Americans;   
George is the eternal cynic (somebody who believes that human actions are insincere and motivated by self-interest) -with-a-heart-of-gold and   
Lennie personifies clumsy innocence.   
  
The characters are types, or even models, as much as they are individuals - a technique more popularly associated with plays and films than with literary fiction.

This stage technique also allows Steinbeck to build tension quickly. The atmosphere of Chapter Two is immediately hostile and uncomfortable:

George suspects that his bed is infested,

the Boss suspects that George and Lennie are trying to pull a fast one,

Candy is miserable and broken-down, (Candy represents what happens to everyone who gets old in American society: They are let go, canned, thrown out, used up. Candy's greatest fear is that once he is no longer able to help with the cleaning he will be "disposed of." Like his old dog, he has lived beyond his usefulness.)

Curley is looking for a fight,

Curley's wife is vamping around suspiciously.

Lennie, in his instinctive, animalistic way, captures the threatening tone of the Chapter when he bursts out, "I don't like this place, George. This ain't no good place." Right away, there are several points of inevitable conflict, most of them hinging on the character of Curley, who seems to rub everyone the wrong way. The only positive character in the Chapter is Slim, who is also the character described at greatest length; but even Slim comes off as life-hardened - the first fact we learn about him is that he has drowned four out of his nine new puppies. One should immediately recognize how completely out-of-place Lennie is in this hostile, gloomy environment: he is innocent, naive, clumsy and childish in the midst of a bunch of shrewd, ugly, lonely, conniving men.

And Steinbeck's novel certainly features *men* rather than women. The only woman with any important role in the novel (aside from the memory of Lennie's [Aunt Clara](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38877)) is Curley's Wife, a lonely and desperate "tramp," to use Candy's word, who is every bit as meddlesome as Curley fears. Steinbeck's attitude toward her, at least at this stage in the novel, is hardly sympathetic. She doesn't even receive a name, she dresses showily and talks provocatively. There is more than a hint of sexism in her depiction. However, Steinbeck is careful to hint as a possible motive for her behavior even at this early stage. She is, after all, stuck with the most despicable imaginable husband, Curley - who apparently keeps her confined in their house whenever possible, who repulsively brags about their sex life (exemplified by the grotesque image of the Vaseline-filled glove), and who cannot be good company. Curley married her because she was flashy, and now her flashiness causes him nothing but distress. She is stuck in a loveless - and perhaps, despite Curley's bragging to the contrary, a sexless - marriage, and can be sympathized for seeking other company.

Speaking of the Vaseline-filled glove, pay attention to how often and how variedly Steinbeck references hands in this Chapter and throughout the book. On the most basic level, hands are crucial to the work of the farm - these men, after all, live by their labor. They also function metaphorically. Curley, especially, is repeatedly described as "handy," a term that Candy uses to mean "good at fighting." His hands are further connected to his sex life.

**Chapter Three**

**Summary**

Chapter Three opens on the next day. After working hours, as the other men play horseshoes outside, [Slim](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38871) and [George](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38857) return to the bunk house. We learn that Slim has allowed [Lennie](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38859) to have one of his puppies. Slim praises Lennie for his incredible work ethic, which leads George to talk about his past with Lennie. The two grew up as neighbors and George took Lennie as a travel and work companion when Lennie's [Aunt Clara](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38877) died. George says that when he first began traveling with Lennie he found it funny to play pranks on him. One day he ordered Lennie to jump in a river even though he couldn't swim and Lennie unthinkingly obeyed. After George fished him out, Lennie was completely grateful, having forgotten that George had ordered him into the river in the first place. After this episode, George decided against having fun at Lennie's expense.

At Slim's insistence, George tells about the episode in Weed that led them to seek work elsewhere. Lennie saw a woman in a red dress and, overcome by an urge to feel the pretty fabric, he stupidly grabbed the woman. The woman fled and told the men of Weed that Lennie had raped her. George and Lennie were forced to hide from a lynch mob and sneak out of Weed under cover of night.

Lennie appears with his new puppy and George tells him to take the puppy back to its mother for its own safety. After Lennie leaves, the men come in from their horseshoe game, which [Crooks](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38867) has apparently won. [Carlson](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38869) begins complaining again about the smell of [Candy](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38861)'s old dog. He goads Candy to shoot the dog, which Candy refuses to do. Carlson then offers to shoot the dog himself. After Slim speaks up in favor of shooting the dog, Candy reluctantly allows Carlson to take the dog outside with his Luger and a shovel. Candy sinks into a deep melancholy and the men try to lighten the atmosphere with talk of cards and magazine articles. Just as they begin a game of euchre, a shot rings out in the night.

Crooks enters and talks with Slim about fixing a mule's hoof. He also mentions that Lennie is playing with the pups in the barn. Slim leaves for the barn as George and [Whit](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38873) begin a conversation about women. Whit mentions that the men usually go to a whorehouse or two on the weekend and they welcome George to come along. Whit also laughs about [Curley](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38863)'s trouble keeping tabs on his wife, who appears eager to spend time with every man on the ranch aside from her husband. On cue, Curley bursts in to the bunkhouse and demands to know the whereabouts of his wife and Slim. After he learns that Slim is in the barn he leaves. Lennie, at the same time, returns from the barn, having been told to stop playing with the pups for the night.

As they wind down for the evening, Lennie asks George to tell him "about the rabbits," and George launches into his monologue about their proposed self-sustaining farm - complete with rabbits, pigs, cats and a vegetable garden. Candy, who has been listening in, asks how much such a place would cost. George, though put off at first by Candy's nosiness, eventually lets on that he has a lead on a plot of land that could be bought for six hundred dollars. Candy reveals that he has a secret stash of money - three-hundred and fifty dollars - and offers to give it all to George and Lennie if they'll let him live on their farm and work as a housekeeper. After a quick calculation George figures that they could make a down payment on the property after only a month's work. The three men sit, enraptured and astounded that their dream of a self-sufficient farm life might actually become a reality.

Curley returns with Whit, Carlson and Slim. Curley has accused Slim of eying his wife, a charge which Slim and the others laugh off. Lennie, who is still dreaming about the rabbits, also smiles, which leads Curley to confront him aggressively. Curley punches Lennie in the face. Lennie does not immediately fight back, instead crying and calling to George for help. When Curley doesn't back off, George tells Lennie to "get 'em." Lennie catches Curley's next punch in his massive paw and crushes down on his hand. George tells Lennie to let go, but Lennie only grips harder out of fear. Curley flops like a fish. By the time Lennie finally relaxes his grip, Curley's hand has been ruined. Before Curley goes to the hospital, he agrees to pretend that he has caught his hand in a machine. Lennie is afraid that he has done something bad, but George reassures him that he hasn't as the chapter closes.

**Analysis (Chapter 3)**

Once again, every visible action in this chapter takes place in the bunk house as characters make their exits and entrances. Steinbeck carefully controls the events, weaving even the smallest detail into a rich whole. The atmosphere remains gloomy as the action progresses from the account of Lennie and George's near-lynching, to the shooting of Candy's dog, to the fight between Curley and Lennie - with one exceptional spot of light, George's monologue "about the rabbits" and Candy's offer to finance their dream.

To take these events as they occur, the near-lynching in Weed provides another instance of the danger of women. Again, Steinbeck gives voice to attitudes that are sexist at best. He already showed [Curley's wife](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38865) acting just as desperately vampy as her reputation; here he piles on examples of the danger and misunderstanding that comes from sex. The woman in the red dress in Weed (whose pretty dress "provokes" Lennie into action) clearly resembles Curley's garishly attired wife. And George tells of another man, [Andy Cushman](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38881), who landed in the San Quention penitentiary after succumbing to "a tart" (62). Women equal danger in Steinbeck's masculine dramatic world.

The only good women, George suggests (61), are those whose sexual motives one knows - either because they are totally desexualized, like Lennie's Aunt Clara, or completely sexualized, like the whores at Susy's and Clara's. Indeed, Steinbeck's double use of the name "Clara" (which means "clear," suggesting that the social and sexual roles of these two women are transparent) links the one model of womanhood - motherliness - with its opposite - whoredom. Figures like the woman in the red dress, or Curley's wife, who seem to exist between these two extremes, at once off-limits and up-for-grabs, are presented as dangerous, especially for a man as sexually innocent yet powerful as Lennie. He is as dangerous to them as they are to him - they are like the pet mice and rabbits that Lennie loves literally to death, soft and easily crushed. (Steinbeck heightens the association between the women and the small cuddly creatures at several points, for instance when he writes that the woman in the red dress "rabbit[ed]" to the lawmen with her accusation of Lennie (46).) Readers can certainly take issue with Steinbeck's depiction of women, but their role in the work as kindling for trouble seems quite clear.

The shooting of Candy's dog draws a parallel between the old swamper and George and Lennie. Indeed, Candy and his dog come off as an "old timer" version of the younger duo. Just as Lennie is an incredible worker, so too Candy's dog was once "the best damn sheep dog I ever saw" (49). And just as the other men cannot understand the bond that keeps an apparently hale and clever man like George yoked to the burdensome, infantile Lennie, so too the men cannot understand Candy's sentimental companionship with his now-decrepit and stinking dog. Steinbeck strengthens their parallel bonds of companionship with continued associations of Lennie and dogs - he is absolutely attached to his puppy; he obeys George's commands unthinkingly, as a dog obeys an owner; and George's commands often directly resemble commands one gives a dog, such as when he sics George on Curley.

Candy thus emerges as the only character in the bunk house who has something approaching George and Lennie's preference for social (and perhaps socialist) companionship over isolated individualism. Their thematic link makes his eagerness to join George and Lennie in their farm life natural and understandable. Candy, unlike the others, displays an interest in others and hope for the future. His sympathetic nature comes through even in his decision to allow his dog's death. Candy only relents to their request to put the dog out of its misery when they frame the argument in terms of the dog's suffering, and even this request is not granted easily.

Yet Candy does finally relent to the men, for despite his similarities to George and Lennie, Candy is an inherently passive character. He relents to others' decisions easily, incapable of fully standing up for his own beliefs. He allows another man to shoot his dog, despite his repeated insistence that he wants to keep the old hound. (The shooting of the dog in the back of the head, a supposedly painless maneuver, foreshadows later events in the story.)

The tragic fate of Candy's dog reminds us that the rest of the bunk house society - including even Slim - cannot understand or tolerate sentimental attachment to a weak creature. This is no world for Candy's dog, and it appears to be no world for Lennie either. Steinbeck even subtly suggests that their now-realistic dream of co-owning a plot of land might also be too dreamy for the hard truths of the world. When Candy decides to collaborate with them and the idea of owning a farm becomes tangible, none of the men know how to respond. For George and Lennie their dream serves as a diversion from the struggles of everyday life and not as a realistic goal.

To turn to the final episode in the chapter, the fight between Lennie and Curley, we see first-hand that there is a deep and ruthless capacity for violence in the generally docile Lennie. This violence is sometimes casual and unintentional - as in his accidental killing of the mice in his pockets - and sometimes an explosion of directed rage, as when he crushes Curley's hand. Lennie seems willing to kill to protect the things he loves, whether George or the rabbits or what have you. His violence is child-like - or dog-like: the sudden ferocity of an otherwise affectionate pet. His casual declaration that he will snap the necks of any cats who attempt to kill the rabbits on his fantasy farm is shocking - we know that he means exactly what he says.

When George gives him permission to fight back against Curley, Lennie cannot control his capacity for violence. He only stops crushing Curley's hand when George issues a direct order - leading one to wonder how he would behave in a similar situation if George were not there to control him. The fight between Curley and Lennie fulfills the foreshadowed confrontation between the two characters, but it does not resolve the situation. We know Curley well enough to sense that his spoken resolution to pretend the incident didn't happen - to pretend he caught his hand in "a machine" - rings hollow.

By the way, Lennie's crushing of Curley's hand - an unusual form of fighting, to say the least - is highly significant. We've already seen how Curley's hand is associated with his sexuality - he keeps one hand soft for his wife. Thus the injury he sustains echoes his (already uneasy) sense of sexual prowess. Lennie has, metaphorically at least, crushed more than the man's hand - he has also crushed his very manhood. Lennie cannot understand the significance of this gesture, but the others - or, at least, the reader - can. Lennie has unwittingly unmanned his rival and indirectly revealed his superior physical (and sexual) prowess. Thus Steinbeck lays the foundation for a conflict that directly links Lennie, Curley, and Curley's sexual object, his wife.

**Chapter Four**

**Summary**

This chapter takes place the next night, while all of the men are off at the whorehouse spending their weeks' pay except for the feeble threesome of [Crooks](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38867), [Candy](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38861) and Lennie. The setting is the "little shed that leaned off the wall of the barn" (73) that makes up Crooks' quarters. Steinbeck gives us a glimpse at the quiet, neat, lonesome life of the black stable buck. While Crooks is belittled and ordered around in the ranch at large, in his bunk he is sovereign; none of the other workers impede upon his living space.

Lennie, however, doesn't understand the unwritten code of racial segregation. He appears in Crooks' doorway while checking on his pup in the barn. Crooks tells [Lennie](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38859) to go away, but the simple big man cannot understand that he isn't wanted. Crooks at last relents and allows Lennie to sit with him and talk. Lennie tells Crooks "about the rabbits" and Crooks vents about his mistreatment as an African-American. Their conversation takes an unsettling turn as Crooks teases Lennie about his lack of self-reliance; he tauntingly asks Lennie what he would do if [George](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38857) were injured. Unable to think hypothetically, Lennie thinks that George is actually under threat. With some difficulty, Crooks calms Lennie down and takes on a kindlier demeanor. His sour attitude remains, however, as he tells Lennie that his dreams of owning a farm with rabbits is unlikely to amount to anything tangible.

Candy comes by looking for Lennie and Crooks is secretly pleased that after so many years of solitude he is finally part of a sort of social gathering. They continue to discuss their plan to buy a farm and Crooks begins to warm to the scheme, even offering his own money and services if they'll take him on as well.

Just as they reach the height of enthusiasm for the plan, [Curley](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38863)'s wife enters, ostensibly looking for Curley. She insults the men, noting their feebleness. This offends the two mentally sound farmhands but Lennie finds her fascinating. She voices her frustration at having no one to talk to and launches into a speech about how she could have been a movie star if she hadn't met Curley. She clearly dislikes Curley and tells the men that she knows he was beaten in a fight - that his injured hand did not result from a machine accident. Lennie eagerly tells her "about the rabbits" and she dismisses their plan as a pipe-dream. As he talks, though, she notices the bruises on his face and deduces his role in Curley's injury. She flirtatiously congratulates Lennie on bringing Curley down a notch and Lennie grows increasingly enamored with her beauty.

Crooks sharply tells her to leave and [Curley's wife](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38865) turns on him viciously, reminding him that at any time she could accuse him of raping her, which would lead to his death. Crooks and Candy silently tolerate her superiority until Candy hears the sound of the men returning, which leads Curley's wife to slip away back to her house. Soon George arrives looking for Lennie; he admonishes Candy for talking about the plan to buy the farm. Crooks assures them, however, that he doesn't really want to be a part of their plan after all.

**Analysis**

Steinbeck has already implicitly contrasted the lonesome, individualistic existence of most of the farmhands with the more collective, communal attitude of George, Lennie and Candy. In Chapter Four, this contrast becomes still more marked. Indeed, as Crooks, Candy and Lennie - the three mentally or physically impaired "outcasts" of the farm - discuss their dream of living "of the fat of the land" one can sense a strong whiff of socialism. For a moment, they imagine a life of freedom from prejudice and racism, in which each man works for "just his keep" regardless of color or disability (84).

It's fitting that the three virtual servants of the farm - the black man, the swamper, and the mentally disabled workhorse - collaborate in this dream. They are, metaphorically, the proletariat - the downtrodden workers of society - linking to form a socialist utopia. Or, at least, fantasizing about such a link. It's possible to go quite far with this socialist reading the more one knows about Marxist theory. One might look at Crooks' description of his past - when he had a farm of his own (81) - as a socialist "utopian past" from which the inequalities of capitalism have torn the worker. One might even consider George a kind of middle-class revolutionary leading the proletariat from their downtrodden position to a reunion with the natural cycles of labor. Of course, one ought to keep in mind that their revolution remains very small-scale - they desire merely to alter their own lives, not the lives of humanity at large - and nebulous. By the chapter's end, Crooks has utterly abandoned his dream of farm life.

It's also necessary to note that this fantasy farm does not seem to include women. Indeed, Curley's wife emerges in this chapter as both more complex and more loathsome than before. She is, on the one hand, much more than a one-dimensional harlot; at the same time, though, she represents a clear interruption of the socialist fantasy that the three men entertain. Indeed, she literally interrupts them at the height of their fantasizing. She is the snake - or, more to the point, the Eve - in the garden, the fact of life that makes a peaceful farm life so difficult, if not impossible, to obtain.

At the same time, at least she knows herself. We are allowed a glimpse into Curley's wife's discontent, and her frustration with life in some ways mirrors that of the three enfeebled men who have been left behind. She is especially comparable to Crooks; both are obviously intelligent and perceptive of themselves as well as others, and both contain a deep bitterness stemming from their mistreatment. The one is mistreated because he is black, the other because she is a woman. Both have a bleak and accurate insight into the fundamental nastiness of people. Curley's wife understands the deep-laden competitive urge for possessing women which tears men apart, and she knows that she is cast as the villain in this eternal game of one-upmanship.

However, she is also quick to act the villainous part. She knows how to use the unfairness of life to her advantage, which becomes disturbingly clear when she dangles the threat of crying rape in front of Crooks. She knows that as a black man he would be lynched if she told the others that he'd even tried to rape her, and she wields this power to her advantage. Ultimately, though, she is revealed as frightened of her husband as she sneaks off to her house. Curley's wife has been trapped by life, and however brazen and manipulative she may be, she is ultimately one of the comparatively powerless figures in the novel. She is therefore, perhaps, an object of the reader's sympathy.

As we near the climax of the novel, note how carefully Steinbeck has continued to develop the most conflict-laden thematic threads in the action. Curley's wife - the source of so much tension on the farm - and Lennie - who is capable of unthinking and brutal (if innocent) violence - have finally come into contact. Again, their relationship is subtly sexual. Curley's wife flirtatiously refers to Lennie as "Machine" (88) - revealing that she knows how her husband's hand was crushed and hinting that she "likes machines." Lennie is utterly incapable of dealing with this sort of flirtation. He is presented as a mere animal, drawn to Curley's wife by dumb instinct. Her effect on the horses as she exits clearly resonates with her effect on Lennie: "[W]hile she went through the barn, the halter chains rattled, and some horses snorted and some stamped their feet" (90). Lennie, who is both gentle and terribly dangerous, is at her mercy - which means, ultimately, that she is at his, though she doesn't know it yet.

**Chapter Five**

**Summary**

The scene shifts to Sunday afternoon as [Lennie](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38859) sits in the barn, contemplating a dead puppy. He has killed his pup by petting it too hard. Lennie is gripped by a growing panic that [George](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38857) will find the dead puppy and that now he "won't get to tend the rabbits" (93).

[Curley](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38863)'s wife enters in a dress decorated with red ostrich feathers. Lennie, who has been warned to have nothing to do with her, briefly tries to resist being drawn into conversation, but she prevails, telling him that the other men are too busy with their horseshoe tournament to care whether he talks to her or not. She sees the dead puppy and consoles him, saying that no one will care about the loss of a mere mutt.

She is clearly starved for conversation and launches into a reprise of her discontented story of what might have been. She insists that she could have been an actress. Lennie fails to understand her at all, however, as he continues to return to the dilemma of the dead puppy and his anxiety over being denied the right to tend the rabbits. [Curley's wife](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38865) angrily asks him why he is so obsessed with rabbits, and Lennie thoughtfully replies that he likes to pet nice things.

Curley's wife observes that Lennie is "[j]us' like a big baby" (99) and invites him to stroke her soft hair. Lennie begins to feel her hair and likes it very much indeed, which leads him to pet it too hard. Curley's wife begins to struggle, which sends Lennie into a panic. He grabs a hold of her hair and muffles her screams. When she continues to struggle, Lennie grows angry. He shakes her violently, telling her to keep quiet so that George doesn't hear her. Before he knows it, he has broken her neck. She lies dead on the hay. Lennie observes that he has "done a bad thing" (100) and covers her body with hay. He then disappears from the barn with the dead puppy in hand.

[Candy](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38861) comes looking for Lennie in the barn and discovers the body of Curley's wife. He fetches George, who knows exactly what has happened when he sees the body. Candy warns that Curley will lynch Lennie if they don't let him get away. After a sombre exchange in which Candy and George acknowledge that their dream of a farm can't amount to reality anymore, George decides the best course of action. He tells Candy to spread the news of the death to the rest of the men and to pretend that he (George) was never present in the barn. When George leaves, Candy scolds the corpse for being a "God damn tramp" (104).

Candy fetches the men and Curley immediately connects the killing to Lennie. He and [Carlson](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38869) run off to fetch guns. Meanwhile, George and [Slim](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38871) hypothesize that Lennie must have accidentally killed her, in the same way he got in trouble in Weed. George asks Slim whether Lennie might just be locked up and Slim replies that Curley will want to shoot him. Carlson returns and announces that his Luger has been stolen. He blames Lennie for the theft.

Curley returns with a shotgun. He tells [Whit](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38873) to fetch the Soledad deputy sherrif, Al Whits, and organizes a posse from the rest of the men. George asks Curley not to shoot Lennie, but Curley refuses to listen, saying that Lennie is armed with the Luger. George deliberately misleads the posse, saying that Lennie would have headed south (rather than north, the direction from which they approached the farm). Curley warns George to join the hunt for Lennie "so we don't think you had nothin' to do with this" (108).

**Analysis**

This chapter contains what might be analyzed as the climactic action of the novel - the event after which there is no turning back. Once again, as in the previous chapters, the action centers around a single location - very much like a stage play. It's quite a fitting structure for the death of a would-be actress.

After he finds the body of Curley's wife, George notes that though Lennie does many "bad things," he never acts out of "meanness," only out of an inability to understand the world or control himself. George's choice of words is apt. Not only does "meanness" suggest "cruelty" - as in the childhood use of the word in the common phrase, "You're mean." "Meanness" also suggests small-mindedness or pettiness. Many of the characters in the novel act out of self-interested malice. Lennie never does. He acts with the best intentions at almost every turn; indeed (and despite his name) he has a simplicity of soul that contrasts starkly with the "smallness" of others. The word also suggests another variation - "meaning." Lennie doesn't mean to do bad things - they simply happen to him. He acts badly without intending to act at all.

Indeed, Lennie's crime is a fundamental inability to understand the frailty of others. He literally loves things to death. His puppy is soft, so he pets it to death. Only George understands him fully, knows his childish mixture of innocence and dangerousness. Others, including Curley's wife, treat him as a sort of sounding board for their own complaints and fantasies. Their failure to understand the danger that goes along with Lennie's obvious innocence results in the "bad things" that Lennie does. [Crooks](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38867) is just barely able to defuse Lennie's capacity for violent rage in the preceding chapter. Curley's wife, in this chapter, is not so lucky.

But then, the events of the chapter ought to surprise no one, really. They certainly don't surprise George or Slim, who are instantly able to determine from a look at Curley's wife that Lennie is the culprit and that he acted out of confused panic, just as he did at Weed. Lennie, like an animal, doesn't understand his actions as morally wrong. Rather, he thinks of them simply in terms of George's approval. Like a dog who feels a mixture of fear and love for his master, Lennie is both fiercely loyal to George and terrified of upsetting his friend. He knows instinctively that he has done something wrong both in killing the puppy and in killing Curley's wife. For Lennie, however, the two actions are roughly equivalent - in both cases, he simply feels that he risks losing George's permission to tend the rabbits. The question of the intrinsic value of human life never enters his thinking.

Curley's wife, as Steinbeck depicts her, does not share Lennie's innocence. Steinbeck rests a measure of blame for the killing on the victim herself. Again and again, Lennie's intrusion in the affairs of Curley and Curley's wife have been tinged with sex, and her offer to let Lennie touch her hair may be construed as a sexual advance. She even prefaces the offer by complaining of loneliness and dissatisfaction in her marriage. However sincere and pitiable these complaints may be, she is ultimately a self-absorbed, manipulative figure in the scene. She fails to understand the danger of Lennie - despite the evidence of his violent power in her husband's mutilated hand - and instead interprets his conflict with her husband and his fear of encountering her through a prism of vanity. She assumes that Lennie is her husband's babyish rival - a harmless admirer. Thus she "leads him on," to use the age-old misogynistic excuse for rape.

The full extent of the misogyny latent in the portrayal of Curley's wife comes following her death. Steinbeck describes her as having more life and vitality as a dead than a living character. The trope of finding beauty in a young woman's corpse is a very old one in Western literature - it can be found in countless texts, such as the dead Ophelia in *Hamlet*, or the dead maidens of Edgar Allen Poe's lyric poems. The basic idea in Steinbeck's description of Curley's wife's corpse is that in death her beauty can finally be appreciated apart from her conniving, duplicitous personality. It is as though he casts her sentience itself as her worst characteristic. In this way, she is completely objectified - reduced, in death, to the grotesque ideal of the silent and docile woman she never was in life. A modern reader has every reason to find this depiction objectionable.

Indeed, to pile indignity upon indignity, the final time we encounter her corpse occurs when Candy curses at it, calling her a tramp and a tart. Even in death she is nothing more than a scapegoat; and even her own husband fails to mourn her. Perhaps unintentionally, Steinbeck thus illustrates perfectly the horrible atmosphere of neglect and abuse that perhaps led her to act out in the first place. She was never considered as a person, only as Curley's problematic trophy.

We have seen so many threads of the story come together already, and the final plot movement of the story has a similarly inevitable trajectory. Steinbeck invites the reader to recall several additional associations in order to piece together the tragic resolution to come. We recall George's order from the beginning of the book - that if any trouble goes down, Lennie is to hide in the bushes near their original campsite. Thus we know that George has deliberately misled the posse by claiming that Lennie is likely headed south. Moreover, Carlton's missing Luger is highly significant. That was, after all, the gun that was used to shoot Candy's old sheep dog. The men assume that Lennie has stolen the weapon for his own protection - again revealing how little they understand Lennie, who is absolutely incapable of such calculation. The reader knows better, however.

**Chapter Six**

**Summary**

The final chapter opens as [Lennie](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38859) waits in the bushes near the Salinas River, just as [George](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38857) told him to do in Chapter One. He nervously talks to himself, airing his worry that George won't let him tend the rabbits because of the bad things he did back at the ranch.

Lennie then hallucinates. He imagines the figure of his [Aunt Clara](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38877) - a plump, aproned woman with thick glasses - who scolds him for getting George into so much trouble. Lennie cries, begging Aunt Clara for forgiveness, and says that he will go off in the hills, where he can't bother George. Lennie then imagines a gigantic rabbit that mocks him for ever believing that he could tend the rabbits. The imaginary rabbit says that George will beat him with a stick when he arrives.

As Lennie sobs, George emerges from the brush. Lennie admits that he did a bad thing, but George appears not to care. Still upset, Lennie goads George into participating in their ritual routine of chastisement and forgiveness - he feeds George his lines about how much fun he would have if he didn't have to look after Lennie, and Lennie offers to go live in the hills and leave George alone. Lennie then requests the coup-de-grace: the story of how they're different from other workers and of how they'll have a farm together. George repeats these monologues woodenly.

He then tells Lennie to take off his hat as he continues to recount "how it will be" for them. He orders Lennie to kneel and pulls out [Carlson](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38869)'s Luger. As the voices of the other men in the search party near their location, George tells Lennie one more time "about the rabbits," tells Lennie that they're going to get the farm right away, and shoots his companion in the back of the head.

[Slim](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38871), [Curley](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38863) and Carlson arrive immediately after the shot is fired. Slim immediately interprets the scene accurately. Carlton and Curley, however, assume that George wrestled the Luger away from Lennie before shooting him. George, speaking in a whisper, affirms their false version of the events. The novel closes as Slim reassures George that he "had to do it," while Carlson and Curley look on in confusion, wondering why they are so upset.

**Analysis**

Steinbeck's careful control of setting in the novel is especially clear in this chapter, which finds us back at the beginning - at the brush near the Salinas River. As he did in the opening chapter, Steinbeck begins with a description of nature. Once again, this nature vignette resonates with the themes of the novel. We see the casual violence of nature - the stork devouring the water snake - and we see Lennie's nonchalant integration into this atmosphere as he stoops and drinks with his lips like a thirsty dog.

The content of Lennie's thoughts, and of Lennie and George's eventual conversation, also mirrors the opening. Lennie repeats the child-like, ritualistic cycle of separation and reconciliation that has seemingly marked his relationship with George for years. Once again he hears George complain that he could live it up if not for Lennie; once again he offers to leave George and live in the hills; once again he gets George to tell him about their rabbit utopia.

However, these similarities - the setting and the content - only ultimately emphasize how much has changed since the novel's opening. Where George was once full of life - angry and forgiving - now he is a husk of himself, bereft of emotion as he goes through his monologues. What was once a plausible - if far-fetched - fantasy has disintegrated into delusion. He knows what must happen, even as Lennie goes on believing in the rabbits. Whereas in Chapter One we see George and Lennie's "best laid plans," here in Chapter Six we have irrefutable evidence that, just as Robert Burns' poem predicts, these plans have gone awry.

Emphasizing the delusional nature of Lennie's point-of-view, Steinbeck adapts his one experimental narrative gesture in the novel, choosing to depict two hallucinations - first Aunt Clara, and then (more ludicrous still) a giant sardonic rabbit. It is unclear whether we are supposed to understand these hallucinations to be one-time phenomena or regularly recurring. (By the way, the reader may find it a bit unbelievable that this gentle giant, who everywhere else proves incapable of understanding figurative language, is able to imaginatively generate such colorful self-chastisements as "you ain't worth a greased jack-pin to ram you into hell" (112).)

Either way, Chapter Six represents our closest approach to Lennie's experience - his simultaneous fear and love of authority figures, his relentless obsession with the rabbits, and his constant (if confused) regret that he never fails to act in a confused and problematic way. Lennie, social pack animal that he is, has a deep-seated need for discipline and forgiveness. His self-chastisement is quite moving, both because it reveals a degree of self-understanding in Lennie and because it suggests that he is regularly and brutally upset with himself. His remorse hardly counts as a conscience - at no point does he register that he has committed murder, only that he has done yet another inscrutable "bad thing" - but it makes a claim on the reader's sympathy nevertheless.

George's mercy killing of Lennie neatly parallels the events of Chapter Three, when [Candy](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38861) allowed Carlson to shoot his malodorous old dog. Steinbeck is even careful to involve the same Luger in each killing. Whereas the meek and passive Candy proved unable to do the job himself, George shows no such weakness. As has been proven beyond a reasonable doubt at this point, Lennie's lethal innocence is not compatible with the world. He cannot learn to change his ways - he cannot even understand why the "bad things" he has done are bad. The fate he would meet at Curley's (mutilated) hands - likely a drawn-out, vengeful lynching - is enough to convince George that his only real option is to make Lennie's death as quick and painless as possible.

At the novel's end, a few haunting questions remain. Why, after all, is George so attached to Lennie? What did he gain from the infantile and troublesome giant's companionship? Many theories have emerged over the years, as readers and critics have speculated that George is somehow specifically in Aunt Clara's debt, that George and Lennie are actually related after all, or even that George and Lennie are in love - romantically, not merely as friends. However, before (or at least alongside) such speculation, it's important to note that Steinbeck deliberately chooses to leave this central question murky. In a novel so carefully wrought in all other respects, this central motivational ambiguity stands as a deliberate and unsolvable mystery.

The simple answer may be that in the callous world of the itinerant laborer, the constant loyalty and companionship of a man like Lennie acts as an antidote to alienation. Lennie, paradoxically, represents the instinctual innocence in life. Writers as diverse as William Blake in his *Songs of Innocence* or Mark Twain in *The Mysterious Stranger* have explored the interesting ways in which innocence is not, in fact, altogether innocent. Divorced from a sense of good and evil, the truly innocent are capable of performing acts of apparent cruelty without remorse. Lennie is just such an innocent. He tempers George's worldly weariness with the constant presence of discovery and hope even as he plagues George's life with the threat of misunderstanding and ignorant folly. In many ways, Lennie completes George. And as his hollow despair at the close of the novel suggests, George ultimately needs Lennie's innocence just as much as Lennie depends on George's experience.

**Glossary of Terms**

**"An' I bet he's eatin' raw eggs and writin' to the patent medicine houses" (36)**

A reference to common aphrodisiacs of the time; George sarcastically expresses his disgust at Curley's ostentatious sex life.

**"S'pose he took a powder" (78)**

"Suppose he got fed up and left"

**"two shots of corn" (87)**

two glasses of corn whiskey

**"You're yella as a frog belly" (68)**

"You're a coward."

**alfalfa**

a wheat-like plant used for animal feed

**bindle**

a load carried on one's back, a bundle

**candy wagon**

a bus or truck

**cuckoo**

insane person

**dugs**

teats or udders, used in reference to animals

**euchre**

a card game

**flop**

sexual intercourse

**gingham**

a durable cotton material used for aprons

**Golden Gloves**

boxing tournament

**goo-goo**

a derogatory term for a reformer, short for "good government" clubbers

**graybacks**

lice

**hame**

a sidepiece of a horse's harness

**handy**

good with the hands, specifically with reference to fighting

**hoosegow**

prison

**jack-pin**

a metal pin used to tie down ropes on ships

**jackson fork**

a mechanical hay fork

**jail baits**

underage women

**jungle-up**

to camp outside

**kewpie doll lamp**

a lamp with a base made from a children's toy

**liniment**

a soothing or pain-killing liquid used on sore body parts

**looloo**

an attractive woman

**Luger**

A pistol popularly associated with use by German forces in the first and second World Wars.

**pitchers**

"pictures," or movies

**rassel**

"wrestle," or haul

**ringer**

in horseshoes, a throw that "rings" (or encircles) the target

**San Quentin**

a state prison located north of San Francisco

**skinner, or muleskinner**

a worker who drives mules with a whip

**slang**

gave birth to

**slough**

to skin

**snooker**

a type of billiards

**swamper**

a helper, so named because he mops the floors

**twict**

a jab

**welter**

welterweight, a boxing category