Of Mice and Men

**Year 11**



By John Steinbeck

Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

We have a dream. Someday, we'll have a little house and a couple of acres. A place to call home.

**Key Facts**

**full title**  ·  *Of Mice and Men*

Meaning of Title:

The full saying is, "the best laid plans of mice and men often go array" It mean no one can plan for everything, no person, no animal, no one. So live and do the best that you can, but remember that things aren't always going to go your way.

One of the overriding themes is that of the oppression of the weak by the strong. Men of course, the strong, Mice the small and weak. Even the kindest men kill Mice.

**type of work**  · Novel

**genre**  · Fiction; tragedy

**narrator**  · Third-person omniscient

**protagonists**  · George and Lennie

**antagonists**  · Curley; society; the cruel, destructive nature of human life

**setting (time)**  ·  1930s

**setting (place)**  · South of Soledad, California

The History of Migrant Farmers in California

After World War I, economic and ecological forces brought many rural poor and migrant agricultural workers from the Great Plains states, such as Oklahoma, Texas, and Kansas, to California. Following World War I, a recession led to a drop in the market price of farm crops, which meant that farmers were forced to produce more goods in order to earn the same amount of money. To meet this demand for increased productivity, many farmers bought more land and invested in expensive agricultural equipment, which plunged them into debt. The stock market crash of 1929 only made matters worse. Banks were forced to foreclose on mortgages and collect debts. Unable to pay their creditors, many farmers lost their property and were forced to find other work. But doing so proved very difficult, since the nation’s unemployment rate had skyrocketed, peaking at nearly twenty-five percent in 1933.

The increase in farming activity across the Great Plains states caused the precious soil to erode. This erosion, coupled with a seven-year drought that began in 1931, turned once fertile grasslands into a desert like region known as the Dust Bowl. Hundreds of thousands of farmers packed up their families and few belongings, and headed for California, which, for numerous reasons, seemed like a promised land.

Migrant workers came to be known as Okies, for although they came from many states across the Great Plains, twenty percent of the farmers were originally from Oklahoma. Okies were often met with scorn by California farmers and natives, which only made their dislocation and poverty even more unpleasant.

In *Of Mice and Men,* Steinbeck illustrates how gruelling, challenging, and often unrewarding the life of migrant farmers could be. Just as George and Lennie dream of a better life on their own farm, the Great Plains farmers dreamed of finding a better life in California. The state’s mild climate promised a longer growing season and, with soil favourable to a wider range of crops, it offered more opportunities to harvest. Despite these promises, though, very few found it to be the land of opportunity and plenty of which they dreamed.

**point of view**  · The novel is told from the point of view of a third-person omniscient narrator, who can access the point of view of any character as required by the narrative.

**Analysis of Major Characters**

**Lennie**

Although Lennie is among the principal characters in *Of Mice and Men,* he is perhaps the least dynamic. He undergoes no significant changes, development, or growth throughout the novel and remains exactly as the reader encounters him in the opening pages. Simply put, he loves to pet soft things, is blindly devoted to George and their vision of the farm, and possesses incredible physical strength. Nearly every scene in which Lennie appears confirms these and only these characteristics.

Although Steinbeck’s insistent repetition of these characteristics makes Lennie a rather flat character, Lennie’s simplicity is central to Steinbeck’s conception of the novel. *Of Mice and Men* is a very short work that manages to build up an extremely powerful impact. Since the tragedy depends upon the outcome seeming to be inevitable, the reader must know from the start that Lennie is doomed, and must be sympathetic to him. Steinbeck achieves these two feats by creating a protagonist who earns the reader’s sympathy because of his utter helplessness in the face of the events that unfold. Lennie is totally defenseless. He cannot avoid the dangers presented by Curley, Curley’s wife, or the world at large. His innocence raises him to a standard of pure goodness that is more poetic and literary than realistic. His enthusiasm for the vision of their future farm proves contagious as he convinces George, Candy, Crooks, and the reader that such a paradise might be possible. But he is a character whom Steinbeck sets up for disaster, a character whose innocence only seems to ensure his inevitable destruction.

**George**

Like Lennie, George can be defined by a few distinct characteristics. He is short-tempered but a loving and devoted friend, whose frequent protests against life with Lennie never weaken his commitment to protecting his friend. George’s first words, a stern warning to Lennie not to drink so much lest he get sick, set the tone of their relationship. George may be terse and impatient at times, but he never strays from his primary purpose of protecting Lennie.

Unlike Lennie, however, George does change as the story progresses. The reader learns that he is capable of change and growth during his conversation with Slim, during which he admits that he once abused Lennie for his own amusement. From this incident George learned the moral lesson that it is wrong to take advantage of the weak. *Of Mice and Men* follows him toward a difficult realization that the world is designed to prey on the weak. At the start of the novel, George is something of an idealist. Despite his hardened, sometimes gruff exterior, he believes in the story of their future farm that he tells and retells to Lennie. He longs for the day when he can enjoy the freedom to leave work and see a baseball game. More important than a ball game, however, is the thought of living in safety and comfort with

Lennie, free from people like Curley and Curley’s wife, who seem to exist only to cause trouble for them. Lennie is largely responsible for George’s belief in this safe haven, but eventually the predatory nature of the world asserts itself and George can no longer maintain that belief. By shooting Lennie, George spares his friend the merciless death that would be delivered by Curley’s lynch mob, but he also puts to rest his own dream of a perfect, fraternal world.

**Candy**

One of the book’s major themes and several of its dominant symbols revolve around Candy. The old handyman, aging and left with only one hand as the result of an accident, worries that the boss will soon declare him useless and demand that he leave the ranch. Of course, life on the ranch—especially Candy’s dog, once an impressive sheep herder but now toothless, foul-smelling, and brittle with age—supports Candy’s fears. Past accomplishments and current emotional ties matter little, as Carson makes clear when he insists that Candy let him put the dog out of its misery. In such a world, Candy’s dog serves as a harsh reminder of the fate that awaits anyone who outlives his usefulness.

For a brief time, however, the dream of living out his days with George and Lennie on their dream farm distracts Candy from this harsh reality. He deems the few acres of land they describe worthy of his hard-earned life’s savings, which testifies to his desperate need to believe in a world kinder than the one in which he lives. Like George, Candy clings to the

idea of having the freedom to take up or set aside work as he chooses. So strong is his devotion to this idea that, even after he discovers that Lennie has killed Curley’s wife, he pleads for himself and George to go ahead and buy the farm as planned.

**Curley’s wife**



*Of Mice and Men* is not kind in its portrayal of women. In fact, women are treated with contempt throughout the course of the novel. Steinbeck generally depicts women as troublemakers who bring ruin on men and drive them mad. Curley’s wife, who walks the ranch as a temptress, seems to be a prime example of this destructive tendency—Curley’s already bad temper has only worsened since their wedding. Aside from wearisome wives, *Of Mice and Men* offers limited, rather misogynistic, descriptions of women who are either dead maternal figures or prostitutes.

Despite Steinbeck’s rendering, Curley’s wife emerges as a relatively complex and interesting character. Although her purpose is rather simple in the novel’s opening pages—she is the “tramp,” “tart,” and “bitch” that threatens to destroy male happiness and longevity—her appearances later in the novel become more complex. When she confronts Lennie, Candy, and Crooks in the stable, she admits to feeling a kind of shameless dissatisfaction with her life. Her vulnerability at this moment and later—when she admits to Lennie her dream of becoming a movie star—makes her utterly human and much more interesting than the stereotypical vixen in fancy red shoes. However, it also reinforces the novel’s grim worldview. In her moment of greatest vulnerability, Curley’s wife seeks out even greater weaknesses in others, preying upon Lennie’s mental handicap, Candy’s debilitating age, and the color of Crooks’s skin in order to steel herself against harm.

**Crooks**

Crooks is a lively, sharp-witted, black stable-hand, who takes his name from his crooked back. Like most of the characters in the novel, he admits that he is extremely lonely. When Lennie visits him in his room, his reaction reveals this fact. At first, he turns Lennie away, hoping to prove a point that if he, as a black man, is not allowed in white men’s houses, then whites are not allowed in his, but his desire for company ultimately wins out and he invites Lennie to sit with him. Like Curley’s wife, Crooks is a disempowered character who turns his vulnerability into a weapon to attack those who are even weaker. He plays a cruel game with Lennie, suggesting to him that George is gone for good. Only when Lennie threatens him with physical violence does he relent. Crooks exhibits the corrosive effects that loneliness can have on a person; his character evokes sympathy as the origins of his cruel behavior are made evident. Perhaps what Crooks wants more than anything else is a sense of belonging—to enjoy simple pleasures such as the right to enter the bunkhouse or to play cards with the other men. This desire would explain why, even though he has reason to doubt George and Lennie’s talk about the farm that they want to own, Crooks cannot help but ask if there might be room for him to come along and hoe in the garden.

**Symbols**

*Symbols are objects, characters, figures, and colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.*

**George and Lennie’s Farm**

The farm that George constantly describes to Lennie—those few acres of land on which they will grow their own food and tend their own livestock—is one of the most powerful symbols in the book. It seduces not only the other characters but also the reader, who, like the men, wants to believe in the possibility of the free, idyllic life it promises. Candy is immediately drawn in by the dream, and even the cynical Crooks hopes that Lennie and George will let him live there too. A paradise for men who want to be masters of their own lives, the farm represents the possibility of freedom, self-reliance, and protection from the cruelties of the world.

**Lennie’s Puppy**

Lennie’s puppy is one of several symbols that represent the victory of the strong over the weak. Lennie kills the puppy accidentally, as he has killed many mice before, by virtue of his failure to recognize his own strength. Although no other character can match Lennie’s physical strength, the huge Lennie will soon meet a fate similar to that of his small puppy. Like an innocent animal, Lennie is unaware of the vicious, predatory powers that surround him.

**Candy’s Dog**

In the world *Of Mice and Men* describes, Candy’s dog represents the fate awaiting anyone who has outlived his or her purpose. Once a fine sheepdog, useful on the ranch, Candy’s mutt is now debilitated by age. Candy’s sentimental attachment to the animal—his plea that Carlson let the dog live for no other reason than that Candy raised it from a puppy—means nothing at all on the ranch. Although Carlson promises to kill the dog painlessly, his insistence that the old animal must die supports a cruel natural law that the strong will dispose of the weak. Candy internalizes this lesson, for he fears that he himself is nearing an age when he will no longer be useful at the ranch, and therefore no longer welcome.

**Plot Overview**

T wo migrant workers, George and Lennie, have been let off a bus miles away from the California farm where they are due to start work. George is a small, dark man with “sharp, strong features.” Lennie, his companion, is his opposite, a giant of a man with a “shapeless” face. Overcome with thirst, the two stop in a clearing by a pool and decide to camp for the night. As the two converse, it becomes clear that Lennie has a mild mental disability, and is deeply devoted to George and dependent upon him for protection and guidance. George finds that Lennie, who loves petting soft things but often accidentally kills them, has been carrying and stroking a dead mouse. George angrily throws it away, fearing that Lennie might catch a disease from the dead animal. George complains loudly that his life would be easier without having to care for Lennie, but the reader senses that their friendship and devotion is mutual. He and Lennie share a dream of buying their own piece of land, farming it, and, much to Lennie’s delight, keeping rabbits. George ends the night by treating Lennie to the story he often tells him about what life will be like in such an idyllic place.

The next day, the men report to the nearby ranch. George, fearing how the boss will react to Lennie, insists that he’ll do all the talking. He lies, explaining that they travel together because they are cousins and that a horse kicked Lennie in the head when he was a child. They are hired. They meet Candy, an old “swamper,” or handyman, with a missing hand and an ancient dog, and Curley, the boss’s mean-spirited son. Curley is newly married, possessive of his flirtatious wife, and full of jealous suspicion. Once George and Lennie are alone in the bunkhouse, Curley’s wife appears and flirts with them. Lennie thinks she is “purty,” but George, sensing the trouble that could come from tangling with this woman and her husband, warns Lennie to stay away from her. Soon, the ranch-hands return from the fields for lunch, and George and Lennie meet Slim, the skilled mule driver who wields great authority on the ranch. Slim comments on the rarity of friendship like that between George and Lennie. Carlson, another ranch-hand, suggests that since Slim’s dog has just given birth, they should offer a puppy to Candy and shoot Candy’s old, good-for-nothing dog.

The next day, George confides in Slim that he and Lennie are not cousins, but have been friends since childhood. He tells how Lennie has often gotten them into trouble. For instance, they were forced to flee their last job because Lennie tried to touch a woman’s dress and was accused of rape. Slim agrees to give Lennie one of his puppies, and Carlson continues to badger Candy to kill his old dog. When Slim agrees with Carlson, saying that death would be a welcome relief to the suffering animal, Candy gives in. Carlson, before leading the dog outside, promises to do the job painlessly.

Slim goes to the barn to do some work, and Curley, who is maniacally searching for his wife, heads to the barn to accost Slim. Candy overhears George and Lennie discussing their plans to buy land, and offers his life’s savings if they will let him live there too. The three make a pact to let no one else know of their plan. Slim returns to the bunkhouse, berating Curley for his suspicions. Curley, searching for an easy target for his anger, finds Lennie and picks a fight with him. Lennie crushes Curley’s hand in the altercation. Slim warns Curley that if he tries to get George and Lennie fired, he will be the laughingstock of the farm.

The next night, most of the men go to the local brothel. Lennie is left with Crooks, the lonely, black stable-hand, and Candy. Curley’s wife flirts with them, refusing to leave until the other men come home. She notices the cuts on Lennie’s face and suspects that he, and not a piece of machinery as Curley claimed, is responsible for hurting her husband. This thought amuses her. The next day, Lennie accidentally kills his puppy in the barn. Curley’s wife enters and consoles him. She admits that life with Curley is a disappointment, and wishes that she had followed her dream of becoming a movie star. Lennie tells her that he loves petting soft things, and she offers to let him feel her hair. When he grabs too tightly, she cries out. In his attempt to silence her, he accidentally breaks her neck.

Lennie flees back to a pool of the Salinas River that George had designated as a meeting place should either of them get into trouble. As the men back at the ranch discover what has happened and gather together a lynch party, George joins Lennie. Much to Lennie’s surprise, George is not mad at him for doing “a bad thing.” George begins to tell Lennie the story of the farm they will have together. As he describes the rabbits that Lennie will tend, the sound of the approaching lynch party grows louder. George shoots his friend in the back of the head.

When the other men arrive, George lets them believe that Lennie had the gun, and George wrestled it away from him and shot him. Only Slim understands what has really happened, that George has killed his friend out of mercy. Slim consolingly leads him away, and the other men, completely puzzled, watch them leave.

**OF MICE AND MEN – IMPORTANT THEMES AND QUOTES**

**DREAMS, HOPES AND PLANS**

Dreams are one of the ways in which the characters combat the loneliness and hopelessness of their existence.

The most obvious example is the dream farm, a dream shared at first only by George and Lennie, but which later spreads to include Candy and Crooks.

Crooks reveals that it is the favourite dream of the itinerant ranch hands:

'Seems like ever' guy got land in his head.'

It is a powerful dream, however, and even the cynical Crooks falls under its spell for a short time.

To Lennie, the dream is an antidote to disappointment and loneliness, and he often asks George to recite the description of the farm to him.

Curley's wife is another who has dreams, her fantasies of a part in the movies and a life of luxury. Part of her dissatisfaction with her life is that it can never measure up to her dreams.

Significantly, none of the characters ever achieve their dreams.

**QUOTES AND INTERPRETATIONS**

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| ***"Well, we ain’t got any," George exploded. "Whatever we ain’t ... got, that’s what you want. God a’mighty, if I was alone I could live so easy. I could go get a job an’ work, an’ no trouble. No mess at all, and when the end of the month come I could take my fifty bucks and go into town and get whatever I want. Why, I could stay in a cathouse all night. I could eat any place I want, hotel or any place, and order any damn thing I could think of. An’ I could do all that every damn month. Get a gallon of whisky, or set in a pool room and novel cards or shoot pool." Lennie knelt and looked over the fire at the angry George. And Lennie’s face was drawn in with terror. "An’ whatta I got," George went on furiously. "I got you! You can’t keep a job and you lose me ever’ job I get. Jus’ keepme shovin’ all over the country all the time." (1.89)*** | ***http://www.shmoop.com/media/common/white-expand.gif*** |  |
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Thought: George explodes at Lennie and rattles off what he imagines to be the dream-life of a traveling worker without any burdens (like Lennie). George envisions a carefree life and is careful to emphasize that Lennie is the roadblock. What George outlines for himself here is strangely prophetic, given what will come to him later in the story.

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| ***GEORGE "O.K. Someday—we’re gonna get the jack together and we’re ... gonna have a little house and a couple of acres an’ a cow and some pigs and—""An’ live off the fatta the lan’," Lennie shouted. "An’ have rabbits.***  | ***http://www.shmoop.com/media/common/white-expand.gif*** |  |
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Thought: This talk of the farm is found throughout the novel – it seems like the farm is a dream to George, a hope for Lennie, and (eventually) even a plan for Candy. It’s especially interesting that sometimes it seems the farm is the dream that keeps them going, and sometimes it is just a reminder of the futility of dreaming. This dream is repeated between the two men so often that even the the dull Lennie has memorized some of it himself.

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| ***Lennie watched him with wide eyes, and old Candy watched ... him too. Lennie said softly, "We could live offa the fatta the lan’.""Sure," said George. "All kin’s a vegetables in the garden, and if we want a little whisky we can sell a few eggs or something, or some milk. We’d jus’ live there. We’d belong there. There wouldn’t be no more runnin’ round the country and gettin’ fed by a Jap cook. No, sir, we’d have our own place where we belonged and not sleep in no bunk house." (3.202-203)*** | ***http://www.shmoop.com/media/common/white-expand.gif*** |  |
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Thought: The dream for George is not the absence of work, or the easy living, or even having a lot of money. It is simply grounded in having some place to belong (and implicitly, people with whom to belong).

***When Candy spoke they both jumped as though they had been caught doing something reprehensible. (3.212)***

Thought: Dreams are delicate things in the real world, and George and Lennie have always carefully kept their plan a secret. Faced with the gaze of someone from the outside world, the men seem ashamed. The real world they live in would never allow or look kindly upon such a trifle as their dream, precious as it is to them.

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|  ***[Crooks] hesitated. "… If you … guys would want a ... hand to work for nothing—just his keep, why I’d come an’ lend a hand. I ain’t so crippled I can’t work like a son-of-a-bitch if I want to." (4.88)*** | ***http://www.shmoop.com/media/common/white-expand.gif*** |  |
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Thought: Dreams are almost infectious. Even Crooks, whom we’ve only come to know for his nay-saying up to now, seems ready to believe. It’s at this point we feel like this thing is really going to happen – or that it might just be too good to be true.

***[Curley’s Wife] He says he was gonna put me in the movies. Says I was a natural. Soon’s he got back to Hollywood he was gonna write to me about it.”***

Thought: Even Curley’s wife has dreams of going off to Hollywood and being a famous actress. She also tries to impress people (in this case Lennie) with these stories of her past.

***Lennie said, "George."

"Yeah?"***

***"I done another bad thing."

"It don’t make no difference," George said, and he fell silent again. (6.34-37)***

Thought: It seems now that George has given up on the dream, nothing much matters. Lennie’s "bad thing" obviously makes a huge difference. The dream is over.

**FRIENDSHIP: QUOTES**

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| ***Lennie, who had been watching, imitated George exactly. He pushed ... himself back, drew up his knees, embraced them, looked over to George to see whether he had it just right. He pulled his hat down a little more over his eyes, the way George’s hat was.***  | ***http://www.shmoop.com/media/common/white-expand.gif*** |  |
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Thought: Lennie needs George to be the brains of the operation. The innocence of Lennie’s action, which is done with no one around but George and himself, indicates that Lennie simply admires his friend. He looks up to George (and what George does) the way a little kid looks up to an older brother.

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| ***LENNIE "I was only foolin’, George. I don’t want no ... ketchup. I wouldn’t eat no ketchup if it was right here beside me."GEORGE "If it was here, you could have some."LENNIE "But I wouldn’t eat none, George. I’d leave it all for you. You could cover your beanswith it and I wouldn’t touch none of it." (1.93-95)*** | ***http://www.shmoop.com/media/common/white-expand.gif*** |  |
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Thought: Lennie is the one who makes the first move to apologize for being a jerk in wanting some ketchup. Even after this awful fight, the men’s friendship has a simple and remarkable sincerity. George grudgingly knows he’s wrong and in fact really loves his friend, and even though Lennie can’t express it in a terribly complex way, he loves George back.

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| ***GEORGE "Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the ... loneliest guys in the world. They got no family...Lennie broke in. "But not us! An’ why? Because… because I got you to look after me, and you got me to look after you, and that’s why." He laughed delightedly. "Go on now, George!" (1.113-116)*** | ***http://www.shmoop.com/media/common/white-expand.gif*** |  |
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Thought: The two men have somebody to listen to, somebody to bail you out of jail, and most importantly, somebody that cares and looks out for you. Both men rely on and look after each other. George is a friend (and not a father or a master) because he is willing to admit that he needs Lennie too.

***"We travel together," said George coldly.

[CURLEY] "Oh, so it’s that way."***

***George was tense and motionless. "Yea, it’s that way." (2.80-82)***

Thought: Curley, using scorn, makes the suggestion that George and Lennie are gay. George, fully understanding this innuendo, stands firm in his description of his close friendship and bond to Lennie.

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| ***"It ain’t so funny, him an’ me goin’ aroun’ together," ... George said at last. "Him and me was both born in Auburn. I knowed his Aunt Clara. She took him when he was a baby and raised him up. When his Aunt Clara died, Lennie just come along with me out workin’. Got kinda used to each other after a little while." (3.12)*** | ***http://www.shmoop.com/media/common/white-expand.gif*** |  |
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Thought: George describes his friendship with Lennie in no abstract terms and with no justifications. To George, he and Lennie just got used to each other, naturally, but it’s pretty remarkable that two guys are so close in a world full of guys that don’t get close to anybody.

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| ***The old man [Candy] squirmed uncomfortably. "Well-hell! I had him ... so long. Had him since he was a pup. I herded sheep with him." He said proudly, "You wouldn’t think it to look at him now, but he was the best damn sheep dog I ever seen." (3.56)*** | ***http://www.shmoop.com/media/common/white-expand.gif*** |  |
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Thought: Candy has the same feelings toward his dog that George has toward Lennie. (This isn’t to degrade Lennie or elevate the dog, but it’s a comment on the nature of friendship and

the love that comes with it.) Candy loves the dog though he smells, George loves Lennie though he’s not too bright and accidentally kills things.

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| ***Crooks scowled, but Lennie’s disarming smile defeated him. "Come on ... in and set a while," Crooks said. "’Long as you won’t get out and leave me alone, you might as well set down." His tone was a little more friendly. (4.22)*** | ***http://www.shmoop.com/media/common/white-expand.gif*** |  |
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Thought: Lennie has gotten Crooks to soften up a little. Likely, Crooks is cracked a bit by Lennie’s innocence, but no matter the reason, it’s always a little flattering to have someone try and be your friend. Lennie seems to be refreshingly open.

**ISOLATION / LONELINESS**

Loneliness affects many of the characters, and Steinbeck seems to show that it is a natural and inevitable result of the kind of life they are forced to lead.

The travelling workers are caught in a trap of loneliness - they never stay in one place long enough to form permanent relationships. Even if such relationships existed, they would probably be destroyed by the demands of the itinerant life.

Let's examine the lonely situation of some of the characters, see how they try to deal with it, and the result.

Candy is lonely because he is old, and is different from the other hands. His only comfort is his old dog, which keeps him company and reminds him of days when he was young and whole.

He has no relatives, and once his dog is killed is totally alone. He eagerly clutches at the idea of buying a farm with George and Lennie, but of course this all comes to nothing.

Candy's disappointment is expressed in the bitter words he utters to the body of Curley's wife, whom he blames for spoiling his dream.

George is also caught in the trap of loneliness. Just as Candy has his dog for company, George has Lennie (who is often described in animal-like terms). Continuing the parallel, George too is left completely alone when Lennie is killed.

The dream farm is his idea, and he says 'We'd belong there ... no more runnin' around the country...'.

Another lonely character is Curley's wife. Newly married and in a strange place, she is forbidden by Curley to talk to anyone but him. To counter this, she constantly approaches the ranch hands on the excuse of looking for Curley. The only result is that the men regard her as a slut, and Curley becomes even more intensely jealous. Finally, her loneliness leads to her death as she makes the ' serious error of trying to overcome it by playing the tease with Lennie.

Curley himself is lonely. His new wife hates him as do all the ranch hands who despise him for his cowardice.

He has married in an attempt to overcome his loneliness, but has blindly chosen a wife totally inappropriate for the kind of life he leads.

His feelings are all channelled into aggressive behaviour which further isolates his wife and leads to the incident with Lennie where his hand is crushed.

Crooks is another who is isolated because he is different. He copes with it by keeping a distance between himself and the other hands. When he does allow himself to be drawn into the dream of working on George and Lennie's dream farm, he is immediately shut out by George's anger.

**ISOLATION / LONELINESS: QUOTES AND INTERPRETATIONS**

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| ***LENNIE "If you don’ want me I can g off ... in the hills an’ find a cave. I can go away any time."GEORGE "No—look! I was jus’ foolin’, Lennie. ’Cause I want you to stay with me."***  | ***http://www.shmoop.com/media/common/white-expand.gif*** |  |
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Thought: Once Lennie seems ready to leave George alone (whether he actually is or not), George finally comes around to admitting that he needs Lennie. It seems he has realized that isolation simply isn’t worth it.

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| ***BOSS "I said what stake you got in this guy? ... You takin’ his pay away from him?"GEORGE "No, ‘course I ain’t. Why you think I’m sellin’ him out?"BOSS "Well, I never seen one guy take so much trouble for another guy. I just like to know what your interest is." (2.45-47)*** | ***http://www.shmoop.com/media/common/white-expand.gif*** |  |

Thought: The boss immediately suspects George is taking advantage of Lennie. At the time, men wandering around looking for work were generally suffering under the [Depression](http://www.shmoop.com/intro/history/us/the-great-depression.html). The boss can’t imagine a situation where two guys would stick together. He thinks this tiny guy would be taking advantage of this much bigger guy than that the two could really just look out for each other. The boss, like any one else familiar with ranch work during the [Depression](http://www.shmoop.com/intro/history/us/the-great-depression.html), expects men to go around in isolation.

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| ***Slim looked through George and beyond him. "Ain’t many guys ... travel around together," he mused. "I don’t know why. Maybe ever’body in the whole damn world is scared of each other." (2.179)*** | ***http://www.shmoop.com/media/common/white-expand.gif*** |  |
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Thought: This quote characterizes how all those people drifting in poverty across the country and looking for work are feeling. Slim seems to have the same feelings as everybody else about the whole world. It’s a lonely and scary place.

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| ***GEORGE "I seen the guys that go around on the ... ranches alone. That ain’t no good. They don’t have no fun. After a long time they get mean. They get wantin’ to fight all the time." (3.17)*** | ***http://www.shmoop.com/media/common/white-expand.gif*** |  |
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Thought: Isolation seems to make men return to their basest instincts – fighting to survive. It seems companionship is the only thing that can keep men civilized, and ranches full of lonely guys tend not to be that civilized.

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| ***George half-closed his eyes. "I gotta think about that. We ... was always gonna do it by ourselves."Candy interrupted him, "I’d make a will an’ leave my share to you guys in case I kickoff, ‘cause I ain’t got no relatives or nothing…" (3.218-219)*** | ***http://www.shmoop.com/media/common/white-expand.gif*** |  |
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Thought: This is an interesting turn of events – George and Lennie escape isolation by having each other, but they’re happy to be isolated from the world so long as they stay together. Candy’s interest in the dream farm complicates things. He too had escaped isolation by having his dog. Now that he’s lost his dog, he needs some new thing to stand up with against the rest of the world. He’s even careful to tell the guys they’d be in his will, as he’s got nobody else. Candy views the farm (and Lennie and George) as his new chance at not being entirely alone, or at least at being alone together.

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| ***Lennie smiled helplessly in an attempt to make friends.Crooks said ... sharply, "You got no right to come in my room. This here’s my room. Nobody got any right in here but me." (4.7-8)*** | ***http://www.shmoop.com/media/common/white-expand.gif*** |  |
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Thought: Crooks is so accustomed to his isolation that any attempt to break it is a threat.

**INNOCENCE QUOTES**

***LENNIE "Tha’s good," he said. "You drink some, George. You take a good big drink." He smiled happily. (1.7)***

Thought: These are Lennie’s first words in the novel. He’s just submerged his whole head, hat and all, in a pool for a drink. He takes pure pleasure in the drink, and wants to share that pleasure with his friend George. There’s something simple and sweet about the episode. Lennie couldn’t care less about hygiene or etiquette. Like an innocent child unschooled in the manners of civilization, he’s just had a delight, and his first, simple thought, is to share it with his friend. This innocence will not only characterize Lennie’s actions, but it’s also an insight into the way Lennie thinks of his friendship with George – simple and pure.

***Lennie cried out suddenly—"I don’ like this place, George. This ain’t no good place. I wanna get outa here." (2.165)***

Thought: Lennie’s outburst is in response to George’s outburst that Curley’s wife is a no-good tramp. After Lennie observed and declared "She’s purty," George has called her a "rat trap," "jail bait," and a "bitch," and all but promises Lennie she’ll be their downfall if he doesn’t stay away from her. At this moment, Lennie is the picture of innocence before temptation, and odds are stacked against him.

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| ***The stable buck went on dreamily, "I remember when I ... was little kid on my old man’s chicken ranch. Had two brothers. They was always near me, always there. Used to sleep right in the same room, right in the same bed—all three. Had a strawberry patch. Had an alfalfa patch. Used to turn the chickens out in the alfalfa on a sunny morning. My brothers’d set ona fence rail an’ watch ‘em—white chickens they was." (4.58)*** | ***http://www.shmoop.com/media/common/white-expand.gif*** |  |
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Thought: Crooks goes back to a place of innocence in order to find his sense of belonging. The way that others have hopes and dreams of a future, life has dealt Crooks a raw enough hand that his only way to have happy thoughts is to recede back into this memory.

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| ***Lennie went back and looked at the dead girl. The ... puppy lay close to her. Lennie picked it up. "I’ll throw him away," he said. "It’s bad enough like it is." (5.59)*** | ***http://www.shmoop.com/media/common/white-expand.gif*** |  |
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Thought: Lennie is innocent in the sense that he has no concept of levels of right and wrong. The dead puppy and the dead girl are bound to both make George mad, therefore they are bad. Lennie doesn’t have the ability to recognize that one of these things is not like the other, and that hiding the puppy won’t do much good after killing a young woman. This scene is a reminder of how out of touch Lennie actually is, and does wonders to make us sympathetic to a killer.

**VIOLENCE**

The novel has many examples of a kind of needless violence. For example, Candy relates how the boss gave them whisky and allowed a fight to take place in the bunkhouse.

Curley is the most obviously violent character, however, and whenever he appears there is a feeling of tension.

He is described as pugnacious when we first meet him, and causes George to remark

'...what the hell's he got on his shoulder.'

Candy explains that Curley often picks on big guys ( a sure sign of trouble for Lennie). We are prepared for Curley's later anger, which culminates at the end in his wish to'... shoot him in the guts.'

Carlson is another character associated with violence. He is unconcerned about killing Candy's dog (and in fact callously cleans the gun in Candy's presence).

He goes to watch the fun when Curley thinks Slim may be with his wife, and later goads Curley more, threatening to

'... kick your head off.'

Later he is very keen to get his gun to join in the hunt for Lennie. The last words in the book belong to Carlson, and it is little surprise that they reveal his complete inability to understand George's feelings about the death of Lennie.

Compared to the other characters, Lennie reveals an unintentional violence. He does not even think to fight back when Curley attacks him, but when he does, it is with immense and uncontrollable force. He has so little control over his own strength that he accidentally kills his puppy, and then minutes later snuffs out the life of Curley's wife.

His actions on these occasions are compared to those of an animal, powerful but thoughtless. Ironically, Curley's wife is attracted to him because of the violence he had shown in crushing her husband's hand.

It is the threat of violence to be used against Lennie that causes George to take the final step of killing his friend.

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| ***Lennie hesitated, backed away, looked wildly at the brush line ... as though he contemplated running for his freedom. George said coldly, "You gonna give me that mouse or do I have to sock you?" (1.70)*** | ***http://www.shmoop.com/media/common/white-expand.gif*** |  |
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Thought: Even when George threatens Lennie with physical violence, it’s much more in the vein of a parent threatening a child with spanking (albeit a gruff parent) than of serious adult violence. We don’t get the sense that George would ever do any actual physical harm to Lennie – at least not out of malice.

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| ***Lennie looked sadly up at him. "They was so little," ... he said apologetically. "I’d pet ‘em, and pretty soon they bit my fingers and I pinched their heads a little and then they was dead—because they was so little. I wish’t we’d get the rabbits pretty soon, George. They ain’t so little." (1.79)*** | ***http://www.shmoop.com/media/common/white-expand.gif*** |  |
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Thought: Lennie has kind of a man-child’s violence about him. From this episode, it’s clear he knows the result of his being too rough is that things die. Still, rather than adjust his roughness, Lennie just hopes to find bigger animals. Again, it’s unclear whether Lennie grasps the danger and risk of violence. Though he’s as big as he is, he’s like a child in being unable to figure out when novelful roughness becomes dangerous violence.

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| ***A shot sounded in the distance. The men looked quickly ... at the old man. Every head turned toward him. For a moment he continued to stare at the ceiling. Then he rolled slowly over and faced the wall and lay silent. (3.103)*** | ***http://www.shmoop.com/media/common/white-expand.gif*** |  |
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Thought: There’s obvious violence against Candy’s dog, but the men in the bunkroom silently watch Candy because they know this violence is also directed against him. Given how brutish and brusque they seem, their silent discomfort is an interesting reminder that they’re capable of sensitivity, even if they don’t show it with overt sympathy or empathy.

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| ***CURLEY’S WIFE "Well, you keep your place then, Nigger. I ... could get you strung up on a tree so easy it ain’t even funny." Crooks had reduced himself to nothing. There was no personality, no ego—nothing to arouse either like or dislike. He said, "Yes, ma’am," and his voice was toneless. (4.120-121)*** | ***http://www.shmoop.com/media/common/white-expand.gif*** |  |
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Thought: Curley’s wife threatens to have Crooks lynched. Regardless of whether the woman would ever carry through with this threat, what she’s really guilty of is psychological terror. She taps into a long history of mental violence Crooks has surely endured for most of his life to "put him in his place." You can fight back in physical violence, but when someone preys on your worst fears and all your insecurities – when someone commits violence against the mind – there is little to be done in response.

**PREJUDICE QUOTES**

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| ***GEORGE "That ranch we’re goin’ to is right down there ... about a quarter mile. We’re gonna go in an’ see the boss. Now, look—I’ll give him the work tickets, but you ain’t gonna say a word. You jus’ stand there and don’t say nothing. If he finds out what a crazy bastard you are, we won’t get no job, but if he sees ya work before he hears ya talk, we’re set." (1.44)*** | ***http://www.shmoop.com/media/common/white-expand.gif*** |  |
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Thought: George is sure that if the boss realizes Lennie is mentally disabled, they’ll be discriminated against and not hired.

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| ***George patted a wrinkle out of his bed, and sat ... down. "[The boss gave] the stable buck hell?" he asked. "Sure. Ya see the stable buck’s a nigger.""Nigger, huh?""Yeah. Nice fella too. Got a crooked back where a horse kicked him. The boss gives him hell when he’s mad. But the stable buck don’t give a damn about that. He reads a lot. Got books in his room." (2.15-17)*** | ***http://www.shmoop.com/media/common/white-expand.gif*** |  |
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Thought: This is an interesting insight into how race is treated on the ranch. The old man showing George and Lennie around takes it for granted that the stable buck should be treated badly because he’s black, but the old man is also full of compliments for the man. He’s a class apart because he’s black, but he also reads, which seems to distinguish him in a positive sense from his fellow ranchers. It seems to suggest that, at least on the ranch, the stable buck’s race is a separate issue (though still a big one) from his actual character.

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| ***"…You go on get outta my room. I ain’t wanted ... in the bunk house, and you ain’t wanted inmy room.""Why ain’t you wanted?" Lennie asked.******"’Cause I’m black…" (4.10-11)*** | ***http://www.shmoop.com/media/common/white-expand.gif*** |  |
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Thought: Lennie can’t understand racial prejudice. Lennie doesn’t think of Crooks as being different from himself. Remember, Lennie is more in touch with the natural side of things than the "civilized" side of things, so he doesn’t accept the "institution" of racism.

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| ***She turned on him in scorn. "Listen, Nigger," she said. ... "You know what I can do to you if you open your trap?" Crooks stared hopelessly at her, and then he sat down on his bunk and drew into himself. (4.116-117)*** | ***http://www.shmoop.com/media/common/white-expand.gif*** |  |
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Thought: Curley’s wife is upset at being asked to leave Crooks’s room. Her prejudice is a last resort – she knows it’s the only weapon she has to state that she’s worth something. Prejudice is just another tool she has to cut others down, which is the only way she can feel like she isn’t just a trampy would-be "pitchers" star.

**WEAKNESS QUOTES**

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|  ***[George] heard Lennie’s whimpering cry and wheeled about. "Blubberin’ like ... a baby! Jesus Christ! A big guy like you!" Lennie’s lip quivered and tears started in his eyes. "Aw, Lennie!" George put his hand on Lennie’s shoulder.*** ***"I ain’t takin’ it away jus’ for meanness. That mouse ain’t fresh, Lennie; and besides, you’ve broke it pettin’ it. You get another mouse that’s freshand I’ll let you keep it a little while." (1.76)*** | ***http://www.shmoop.com/media/common/white-expand.gif*** |  |
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Thought: Lennie’s condition, or maybe his sentimentality, allow him to cry over his lost mouse. This might be mental weakness, but what’s particularly odd about it is seeing a grown man cry. Regardless, what’s most interesting about this bit is how George is considerably softened up by Lennie’s tears. He’s quick to point out he didn’t mean any harm – George has a weak spot for Lennie’s tears. If George seemed tough a minute ago, he makes it clear here that he’s actually a guy with a heart of gold.

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| ***The boss pointed a novelful finger at Lennie. "He ain’t ... much of a talker, is he?""No, he ain’t, but he’s sure a hell of a good worker. Strong as a bull."Lennie smiled to himself. "Strong as a bull," he repeated.******George scowled at him, and Lennie dropped his head in shame at having forgotten. (2.35-38)*** | ***http://www.shmoop.com/media/common/white-expand.gif*** |  |
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Thought: This scene is an interesting example of where Lennie’s strength doesn’t shine, but actually only emphasizes his weakness. The boss is interested in hearing what Lennie can do, because he looks so big, but Lennie is afraid to communicate it, especially because George has forbidden him to speak. This episode also highlights how Lennie is weaker than George. Though he’s physically bigger, he is limited by his mental ability and by his utter subjugation to George. Though George presumably takes up Lennie to protect him, we have to wonder whether Lennie needs to be kept weaker than George in George’s eyes.

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| ***CARLSON "Whyn’t you get Candy to shoot his old dog ... and give him one of the pups to raise*** ***up? I can smell that dog a mile away. Got no teeth, damn near blind, can’t eat.Candy feeds him milk. He can’t chew nothing else." (2.193)*** | ***http://www.shmoop.com/media/common/white-expand.gif*** |  |
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Thought: Weakness is as good as a death sentence on the ranch. Carlson’s pretty callous here, and he doesn’t seem to consider whether Candy loves the dog or if the creature is suffering. Instead, Carlson’s rationale is that since the dog isn’t good for anything, it might as well die.