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Talk to the Labradoodle... She's in Charge.
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Of Mice and Men
Shmoop Literature Guide

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Of Mice and Men, published by John Steinbeck in 1937, is set in the Salinas Valley of California during the Great Depression. In 1936, Steinbeck took a journalistic assignment for the San Francisco News, investigating the migrant working situation in California. The stories and circumstances he discovered are reflected in Of Mice and Men. The novella’s two main characters, George and Lennie, embody the American struggle to survive the Depression, but the novella is timeless because it captures the personal isolation and suffering present in the land of opportunity.

Of Mice and Men is more than a little book about a certain time and place; it covers friendship and sacrifice, not to mention a healthy dose of the bittersweet futility of holding onto dreams. Even as Steinbeck was reworking the text as a play script, he was developing its broader themes and context for his masterwork Grapes of Wrath. Of Mice and Men can be thought of as a sketch for that great painting, though it still stands alone. For its stark and unflinching observations, this is one of Steinbeck’s best-loved pieces – and a significant contribution to his Nobel Prize in literature.
Why Should I Care

Top Five Reasons You Should Care

1. *Of Mice and Men* is a frequently banned book. Teachers, parents, and school board members have often taken this novella off the required reading list. Why? If you’ve read it, you can guess. There’s a considerable amount of killing and violence. The characters all swear a lot, talk about sex, and go to brothels once a week. Many characters are racist and ageist and sexist. The book’s ending is beyond sad, and might be considered an endorsement of euthanasia. Not to mention, its message isn’t exactly praiseworthy of the American way of life.

2. It asks, and pretty much answers, all the big questions. According to *Of Mice and Men*:
   - Does prejudice suck? Yes.
   - Are we all prejudiced? Yes.
   - Are we each responsible for the welfare of other people? Yes.
   - Is killing someone ever OK? Yes.
   - Is euthanasia preferable to a living Hell? Yes.
   - Are men and women different? Yes, and then again, no.
   - Is sex scary? It can be. Even when it costs $2.50. Especially when it costs $2.50.
   - Is having a dream a bad idea? Maybe yes, if you’re within certain groups of our society.
   - Is this the opposite of the American Dream? Well, now that you mention it…

3. *Of Mice and Men* is risky, controversial, and modern. It says that maybe we’re screwed – and not just from global warming, either. It says that our American notions of happiness are messed up, and if we expect perfection, or even fair play, we’re in for a sad surprise. Even in a country where we pride ourselves our supposed ability to "pull ourselves up by our bootstraps," there frequently aren’t enough bootstraps to go around. And even then, those bootstraps often break.

4. It’s sweet. Bittersweet. It’s about two guys who love each other and struggle against the injustices of the world and their own weak natures.

5. It has Lennie in it. That alone is worth the price of admission.

6. And how could we forget – it has its own SNL skit, with Chris Farley man-handling the rabbits.
7. Did you notice this was more than five reasons? Let this be a lesson to you: *never* trust a strange headline.
Brief Summary

Lennie and George are best friends traveling together in search of work on northern California farms. These two are flat broke – as in, "not even any quarters in the couch" broke. This is not good, as they have a dream of owning their own idyllic farm someday. George is the "brains" behind this operation – a smart guy who does all the talking when it comes to finding and keeping work. Lennie is physically strong, yet mentally slow. While both George and Lennie are good workers, they can’t hold down jobs for long due to Lennie's childlike mentality and odd fetish for petting things, which includes mice, rabbits, puppies, and…women. (This last one, of course, being the biggest issue).

Good fortune (of sorts) smiles upon them briefly when they get work at a ranch near Soledad, California. The night before they begin the new job, they hang out in a grove together where George points out a safe spot where Lennie should go if he ever gets in trouble. George and Lennie meet some of the other co-workers including Candy (an old, one-handed fellow who owns a smelly dog), Crooks (a lonely stable hand), and Curley (an unfaithful man with severe anger management problems). Curley is the ranch boss's son and a hotheaded little guy who used to fight in the featherweights. Curley clearly has something to prove, and seems to want to prove that something to Lennie. George warns Lennie to stay away from Curley, though he says if Curley picks a fight, Lennie should fight back.

We learn that Curley also has a new wife, whom no one is allowed to look at (which is difficult, because she quite likes male attention). Though most of the men know to stay clear of Curley’s wife, Lennie innocently enjoys her flattering attentions. George warns Lennie to steer clear of her.

Back at the ranch, we meet Slim, our local and wise ranch demi-god. We see Carlson, a callous ranch hand, who notes that Slim’s dog has had some new puppies. He suggests Candy adopt one of Slim’s puppies and shoot Candy’s old dog, primarily because it’s smelly.

Then two amazing things happen at once. First, Friday comes around, and Slim earns George’s confidence. George admits that he and Lennie ran away from their last job in Weed, California because Lennie had tried to pet a woman's dress and she accused him of rape. Second, Carlson gets Slim to give up a pup in return for Candy’s dead dog. Candy reluctantly gives in, but cannot bring himself to shoot his beloved dog, so Carlson does it for him.

Slim then goes out to the barn to do some work on a mule. Curley follows, searching for his wife, paranoid that Slim might be with her. Lennie and George are left to discuss their dream farm, and Candy perks up, overhearing. George hesitates a little but then lets Candy in on the
dream. The men agree to go in on the farm together. Meanwhile, Candy says he should’ve shot his dog himself, like a real man.

Curley, cowed, follows Slim into the bunkhouse and, embarrassed, has the feeling of “sorry I thought you were having sex with my wife.” Curley’s itching for a fight to make him feel better, and quickly pounces on Lennie. George insists that he fight back on his own, so Lennie crushes Curley’s hand. As the men minister to Curley, Slim casually suggests to him that if he tries to get Lennie and George fired, he’ll be the laughingstock of the ranch for having lost the fight. So Curley tells everyone he got his hand caught in a machine.

Saturday night, universally the time for drunken visits to the whorehouse, opens with Slim and Lennie alone at the ranch with Crooks, the black stable hand. Lennie shows up in Crooks’s private (that is, segregated) little room. Crooks slowly warms up to Lennie’s company, moved by how dense and earnest the man is. Hearing from Lennie about the dream farm, Crooks takes the opportunity to say that the same foolish goal is on the mind of every ranch hand and no one ever follows up on it.

Candy joins the group and helpfully supports Lennie and his dream farm. Crooks begins to soften to the idea. He timidly suggests that if they got the place, and wanted someone around to help out for nothing but room and board, he’d be OK with joining them. Soon after, Curley’s wife enters. She calls the men weak, as they were left behind while the others went whoring (obviously a manly activity, much like shooting your dog). When Crooks tries to get her to leave his room, she explodes, reminding him that he’s a “nigger” and that she could have him “strung up on a tree so easy it ain’t even funny.” That ends the party.

On Sunday afternoon, Lennie’s in the barn with a dead puppy. He admonishes the puppy for "going and getting killed," which we think is actually not so much the puppy’s fault as it is Lennie’s. As he tries to cover the creature with hay, Curley’s wife walks into the barn. She gets close to Lennie and describes how she should’ve been a movie star in Hollywood. Hearing that Lennie likes to pet soft things, she offers up her hair as a petting object. She worries about him messing it up though, and as she wriggles to avoid a ruined hairdo, Lennie panics and, again accidentally, breaks her neck and kills her.

Lennie recalls what George said about heading to the grove if he ever got into trouble. Lennie heads for his safe spot in the grove.

Candy discovers Curley’s wife’s body and runs out to George, who identifies it is as classic Lennie handiwork. George hopes they’ll lock Lennie away someplace nice, though Candy points out that they’re more likely to go for a shooting or lynching-type punishment. George admits wistfully that he knew they’d never get the farm of which they had dreamed.

George plans to hear the news with all the rest of the guys and pretend he didn’t know. Candy, left alone with Curley’s dead wife, berates her for costing him his dream and is
reduced to lonely tears. By the time Curley finds out, he immediately concludes Lennie was the murderer, and becomes more worked up about shooting Lennie than about having a dead wife.

As Carlson and Curley run off to get their guns, Slim and George have a solemn conference. Slim grimly notes that even if Lennie escapes Curley’s rage, he’s likely to be locked up like an animal in an asylum. Carlson then runs in, announcing his gun is missing. Curley concludes that Lennie, having clearly stolen the gun, is armed and dangerous, which justifies their decision to shoot him. Curley insists that George come with them on the Lennie-hunt.

Meanwhile, Lennie waits at the designated safe spot. He hallucinates about his Aunt Clara and a big scary talking bunny, who insists that Lennie isn’t fit to raise rabbits and that George will soon leave him. Lennie cries out for George, and George appears in the brush. To Lennie’s surprise, George insists he isn’t angry. He says it’s the one thing he wants Lennie to know.

Then, at Lennie’s request, George begins to recount the dream farm story. As George listens to the lynch mob approaching, he instructs Lennie to look away over the river and envision the farm. As Lennie is visualizing the realization of their dream, George shoots Lennie in the back of the head. Lennie goes out without much twitching.

George tosses the gun away and is immediately accosted by the wandering group of vigilantes. He says that, yes, Lennie did have Carlson’s gun until he wrestled it away from him. Slim immediately picks up what happened here, and tries to assure George that he did the honorable thing. As the two men leave, Carlson and Curley are left behind, completely puzzled at why George and Slim seem so bothered.
Chapter 1

• It’s a hot afternoon near Soledad, California, sometime during the 1930s. Everyone (or nearly everyone) is poor and scrambling around desperately for work, food, and money.
• We meet Lennie Small and George Milton: two guys who are among the poor and the scrambling.
• These two are dressed nearly identically, but there the similarities end. George is small and smart, Lennie is huge and mentally slow. Though the narrative doesn’t explicitly say what his disability is, we can tell from his dialogue and actions that he is severely challenged.
• Lennie drops to his knees and drinks from a pool of dirty water, slurping out of it like a horse. George verbally swats him. This is the dynamic of their relationship in a nutshell: Lennie acts like a kid, and George admonishes him like a parent. Make that a parent who swears a lot.
• George has to remind Lennie about where they are going and why: a ranch where they can buck barley for 50 dollars a month.
• George also reminds Lennie about why they lost their last job: something about a girl with a soft, red dress that Lennie liked to pet (the dress, not the girl; although technically, yes, the girl was in the dress at the time).
• This "petting" is a genuine problem for Lennie. Lennie likes to pet things a little too hard and a little too long – an activity that keeps resulting in dead rabbits.
• Lennie and George have an argument over a mouse that Lennie has petted a little too hard and long. Lennie wants to keep the dead mouse in his pocket, but George throws it away.
• Then they argue about other stuff: Lennie wants ketchup with his supper of beans; George says there isn’t any. Lennie threatens to go live by himself in a cave; George says what a great life he could have if Lennie did go off and live in a cave. But this hurts Lennie’s feelings.
• George makes it up to Lennie by repeating their favorite story – the one in which they have their own ranch and Lennie gets to tend (and pet!) rabbits. As long and as hard as he wants.
• George also reminds Lennie to come back to this spot by the river if anything bad happens, which suggests, of course, that something bad most definitely will.
Chapter 2

- George and Lennie arrive at the new ranch. They go into the bunkhouse where they will stay and meet an old guy named Candy. His name seems especially inappropriate since he is missing a hand, has bristly white whiskers, and an ancient dog that stinks.
- Candy gives George the lowdown on the ranch.
- The boss shows up and questions George and Lennie about their work history. George does all the talking, which makes the boss suspicious. He can’t understand why George is looking out for Lennie (we aren’t entirely sure either). George lies and says he and Lennie are cousins, and that they left their last job because it was done. (He leaves out that the job ended when Lennie was accused of rape, though Lennie was not guilty of this — he was just petting.)
- The boss leaves and Candy comes back in with his dog. He talks to George about how the dog used to be a great sheepherder before he got old and stinky.
- The boss’s son comes in. He’s a small-but-cocky tough-guy type and immediately sizes up George and Lennie as potential people he could beat up. He tries to engage Lennie in an argument, but George interferes.
- The boss’s son implies that George and Lennie are gay for hanging out together which, for him, is meant to be an insult. He leaves after firing this parting shot.
- Candy explains that the boss’s son (named Curley because he has curly hair) used to be a lightweight fighter and now picks fights with every big guy he meets.
- Candy claims that Curley has gotten even worse since he married a “tart,” who has “the eye” for every guy on the ranch. Curley has taken to wearing a glove full of Vaseline to “keep his hand soft for his wife.”
- Candy leaves.
- George gives Lennie yet another lecture. He tells Lennie to avoid Curley like the plague. Still, if Curley actually hits Lennie, Lennie should “let him have it.”
- George also reminds Lennie of where he is to go if something bad happens.
- Curley’s wife enters the bunkhouse, claiming to be looking for Curley. Unlike most other characters in the book, Curley’s wife has no name, unless you consider “tramp,” “loo loo,” and “jail-bait” to be names. In that case, this lady’s got lots of names.
- Lennie can’t take his eyes off of Curley’s wife, and she doesn’t make it easy to put his eyes anywhere else, either.
- Slim, the “prince of the ranch” (about whom you will hear more later), walks by and sends Curley’s wife on her way.
- George now gives Lennie a lecture about staying away from this woman.
- Lennie says he doesn’t like the ranch; it isn’t a “good place.”
- George reminds Lennie that they need to work there long enough to be able to buy a ranch of their own.
- Slim now stands in the doorway. Slim is the ideal man in Steinbeck’s world — practical, tough as nails, understanding, highly skilled at his job, yet humble. He is cool and calm.
until he is given a reason to get riled.

- Carlson enters the bunkhouse and asks Slim about his new litter of puppies. He suggests giving one to Candy as a replacement for his ancient dog which Carlson claims reeks so bad it deserves to be shot. (Life’s hard out here for a pup.)
- At the mention of the word "puppy," Lennie starts wriggling with pleasure. Pure petting pleasure. George indicates that he’ll ask for a puppy for Lennie.
- Curley shows up at the door (don’t these people do any work?) looking for – you guessed it – his wife. He and George verbally wrangle, but no one whips out any fighting moves yet.
- The dinner bell rings. Thank goodness.
Chapter 3

- Slim and George enter the bunkhouse together. They have apparently eaten dinner.
- George thanks Slim for Lennie’s new puppy. Slim wants to know why a "cuckoo" like Lennie and a "smart little guy" like George are traveling around together, a question which has crossed more than one reader’s mind.
- Because Slim is a good guy, George tells him everything: that George knew Lennie’s Aunt Clara, that he used to tease Lennie mercilessly until he realized how loyal Lennie was to him, that Lennie isn’t literally crazy, just dumb, that he’s gotten used to Lennie’s annoying ways, and that he’s seen guys that go around by themselves and those guys get lonely and mean. He and Lennie, however, have each other.
- George also tells Slim what happened in Weed with the girl in the red dress – she got frightened of Lennie's petting, cried rape, and he and Lennie had to run for their lives, or at least run and hide in a muddy ditch for a while.
- Slim decides that Lennie "ain’t mean…he’s jes like a kid."
- Yes, if by "kid" you mean a very large and enormously powerful, full-grown man with a tendency to pet things to death.
- Carlson comes in and complains again about the smell emanating from Candy’s dog and offers to shoot the creature with his trusty Luger.
- Candy is miserable. He loves his old companion and can’t bear the thought of killing him. Slim, however, sides with Carlson and claims that he would want to be shot if he were old and crippled.
- Since Slim has handed down his verdict, the dog is as good as dead.
- Candy lies down on his bed and stares up at the ceiling. Carlson takes his gun and the dog outside.
- George pretends to play cards. All is quiet and hideously tense in the bunkhouse.
- Finally a shot is heard in the distance.
- It’s Carlson shooting the dog. Candy turns his face to the wall.
- Crooks pokes his head in the bunkhouse. He is a black man who takes care of all the horses and has to live by himself because he’s black, and black people aren’t allowed to live with white people.
- Crooks tells Slim that Lennie is hanging out in the barn petting the puppies too much. *Uh-oh.* Slim goes to take a look.
- Whit, another ranch hand, engages George in conversation about Curley’s wife, who he says is a "looo low." They agree that Curley has "yella-jackets in his drawers" and his pants "is just crawlin’ with ants," all of which apparently means that Curley’s wife’s crazy sexuality has pumped up Curley’s sexuality.
- George wisely observes that Curley’s wife is "gonna make a mess."
- All this talk about sex leads Whit to invite George along on the Saturday-night-trip to the local whorehouse. George says two dollars and fifty cents is a bit rich for his blood. Whit says that he can get it cheaper at Clara’s whorehouse, but Suzy’s house is cleaner and
Suzy tells better jokes. George is swayed by these selling points.

- Lennie comes in.
- Carlson enters and starts cleaning his gun. Tactlessly.
- Curley comes in looking for Mrs. Curley. He hears that Slim is out in the barn and storms off. Whit and Carlson follow, thinking there’s going to be a fight.
- George tells Lennie he’d take a good whorehouse over "jail bait" any day; at least with a whorehouse you know ahead of time what you’re getting and how much it’s going to set you back. An interesting distinction.
- Lennie is bored by this talk and begs to hear the dream-farm story again. George complies.
- Candy overhears this discussion and offers to chip in 300 dollars if they’ll let him live at the farm, too.
- George eventually agrees and the three of them imagine what life will be like once they have a place of their own. George and Candy in particular dream of the freedom of being able to go where they want, when they want, while Lennie seems mostly pleased about the rabbits and other garden bits.
- George reminds them not to tell anyone of their plans and they all say they won’t.
- Candy admits that he should have shot his dog himself.
- All the other guys come back in. Slim is pissed at Curley for bugging him about his wife, Carlson calls Curley a coward, and the testosterone in the bunkhouse reaches critical mass.
- Curley starts punching Lennie, who does nothing until George yells at Lennie to "get 'im." In a move that rivals Bruce Lee, Lennie grabs Curley’s hand as it’s coming toward his face, and essentially crushes it completely.
- Carlson is recruited to take Curley to the doctor. Slim tells Curley to say that he got his hand caught in a machine, and that if he tries to get Lennie fired, Slim will tell everyone what really happened. Curley, moaning and crying, agrees.
- Lennie is scared that – because he has done a "bad thing" – George will no longer let him tend the rabbits. George reassures him that any future rabbits are his to tend, and tells him to go wash the blood off his big mug.
Chapter 4

- Crooks (the stable hand who, because of racial segregation, has to live by himself) is sitting in his room. Lennie comes by because he is lonely. Everyone else has gone off to Suzy’s clean and comedic house of ill repute.
- Lennie (revealing his secret-keeping capabilities) immediately tells Crooks about the dream farm.
- Crooks thinks that Lennie is nuts. Crooks, hostile because of his own loneliness, starts taking out his anger on Lennie by insinuating that George may never come back.
- Lennie freaks out and gets mad. Crooks sees Lennie towering over him and retracts his comment. Lennie calms down. Phew.
- Crooks gives a speech about how every guy needs another guy to talk to.
- Candy comes in. He evidently did not go to Suzy’s.
- Candy, too, talks about the farm they’re supposedly getting, and Crooks hints that he would like to be a part of this plan.
- Curley’s wife appears in the doorway. “They left all the weak ones here,” she says, in a surprising burst of (cruel) insight.
- Curley’s wife reveals she’s lonely and wants someone to talk to, even if it is a “nigger an’ a dum-dum and a lousy ol’ sheep.”
- The "nigger, dum-dum, and sheep" respond by trying to get her to leave; her presence nearly always means trouble.
- Curley’s wife asks Lennie how he got the bruises on his face. Crooks tells her again to leave, and she threatens to have Crooks lynched.
- The men return from Suzy’s whorehouse, poorer, but perhaps wiser in the ways of the world. George enters Crooks’s room.
- Candy admits that they have told Crooks about the farm. George is not happy.
- Crooks claims he was just joking about joining them on their farm. He retreats once again into the sadness and safety of his solitary life.
Chapter 5

- Lennie is alone in the barn, petting a puppy that he has obviously petted a little too long and hard. First, Lennie covers the dead puppy up with hay. Next, he flings the dead puppy across the barn.
- While he oscillates between feelings of sorrow and anger, it doesn’t seem like his greatest woe is the dead puppy. Instead, Lennie is worried that George might not let him tend to the rabbits of the dream farm. Lennie, like a small child, doesn't recognize the seriousness of death.
- Curley’s wife sashays in to the barn. She sees the puppy and tells Lennie not to feel bad because the pup was just a mutt, and mutts are aplenty in the world.
- Curley’s wife confides in Lennie, telling him that she could have been a famous movie star, but the world conspired against her and that’s why she’s ended in a barn with a dum-dum and a dead dog. (Alliterative glory, isn’t it?)
- Lennie explains that he got into this trouble because he likes to pet soft things. Curley’s wife says that her hair is very soft. Oh no...
- Lennie pets Curley’s wife’s hair a little too long and hard.
- In the petting, Lennie breaks her neck and she is dead.
- Now Lennie has something new to cover with hay.
- Lennie knows he has done something bad, but his biggest concern is that now George really might not let him tend the rabbits.
- Then, he remembers George’s instruction about where to go in case things get bad. So he goes. He takes the dead puppy with him, declaring things are bad enough as they are without adding a dead puppy to the mix.
- Candy comes in to the barn and sees Curley’s wife. She looks like she is asleep.
- Candy runs to find George. They discuss the possibilities. They both know that they should turn Lennie in, but that he’ll be locked up and treated miserably if they do. On the other hand, they also know that Curley will torture and kill Lennie if he finds him.
- Candy asks hesitantly if all this hullabaloo means that they can’t have their farm, even without Lennie.
- George’s spirit is deflated. He says he thinks he knew, in the back of his mind all along, that they’d never really get a farm. He admits that he only began to believe they would because of how much Lennie liked to hear about it.
- George, having explicitly given up his dream, decides that now he will now be just like the other ranch hands, spending all his time and money on booze and bad women.
- Candy thoughtfully adds that he didn’t think Lennie could do anything like this, as he seems like such a nice guy.
- George, still staring down at Curley’s dead wife, asserts that Lennie didn’t kill her out of “meanness.” George is sure that, although Lennie’s done a lot of bad things, none of them were ever done out of meanness.
- George then comes back to his senses about the matter at hand. He knows they have to
tell the other guys what’s happened, and that they’ll all want to bring Lennie in once he does.

- For a moment, George worries that they’ll try to hurt Lennie. He comforts himself by assuring that he won’t let them.
- George hatches a plan. He says that if he tells the guys what happened to Curley’s wife, they might suspect he was in on it. Instead, he’ll run off to the bunkhouse, and Candy can come running in a minute later with news of Curley’s dead wife. When Candy comes in, George will be surprised that the woman is dead.
- Candy, left alone with Curley’s dead wife, takes a minute to soundly berate her for being the source of all their troubles.
- As Candy leaves for the bunkhouse to tell the guys what he’s found, he’s teary (not for the dead girl, but the lost dream).
- As the plan stated, Candy tells the other men. They all come into the barn to have a look at the dead woman.
- They all stand around and scuff their boots in the straw. Curley says "the big son-of-a-bitch" has done this and he intends to shoot him right in the guts.
- Curley and Carlson run out of the barn to round up guns and men and go in search of the guts.
- Meanwhile, Slim says quietly to George that, given the way Curley’s wife’s neck is broken, Lennie could well have done it.
- George is quiet, and Slim reminds him vaguely about "the time in Weed" George had described earlier. With his hat pulled down low over his eyes, George says nothing.
- Slim sighs and says he guesses they’ve got to go get Lennie now. (He seems sorry things have to shake out this way.)
- George tells the men that Lennie probably went south. George is being tricky.
- George moves close to Slim and asks if they could bring Lennie back, so he can be locked up (instead of murdered by a two-bit-no-good-son-of-a-ranch-owner). George promises Lennie was "nuts" and didn’t do the murder out of meanness.
- Slim agrees this might be possible, if only they could keep Curley off the warpath. Still, the big guy would likely be locked up and strapped down in a cage. Slim thinks that’s no way for a man to live, either.
- Carlson runs back in and breaks up the powwow by announcing that his Luger has been stolen and that Lennie must have taken it. Curley, however, has a gun, and instructs Carlson to take Crooks’s gun instead. It seems nothing will keep these desperate men from their manhunt! Curley tells Carlson to shoot Lennie in the guts as soon as he sees him.
- Curley then takes over the operation: he tells Whit to go to Soledad and get the deputy sheriff, and demands that George join the search party for Lennie.
- Though George tells Curley "the poor bastard’s nuts" and didn’t mean anything in killing Curley’s wife, Curley won’t hear any of it.
- Slim, looking down at the dead body, suggests perhaps Curley should stay with his dead wife and cool off. Curley’s not having any of it – he’s hell-bent on shooting Lennie himself, even if he’s only got one good hand.
• Again, Curley insists George has to join the hunting party. Curley threatens that if George doesn't, the men might suspect he (George) took part in the murder.
Chapter 6

• Lennie sits by the deep pool near the river, waiting for George. He’s proud of himself for remembering this is the spot where he’s to wait. George is really the only thing on his mind right now.
• Lennie is certain George will now "give him hell," and the big, sad guy remembers that he could run away to a cave and stop bothering George. He says he could get through it, even though there’d be no ketchup.
• Almost as if repeating a spell, Lennie says, "If George don’t want me…I’ll go away. I’ll go away."
• Just then, who should he conjure out of the dark corners of his dull mind, but his dead Aunt Clara. Lennie, hallucinating, has a pleading conversation with his Aunt Clara, who, the narrator notes, speaks in Lennie’s voice.
• Aunt Clara lights into Lennie: she accuses him of never thinking of George, even though George is always so nice to him. "Nice" activities include saving him the bigger piece of pie and giving him all the ketchup, when there is any.
• Aunt Clara gets grumpier, listing off all the boozing and women George could have had without Lennie.
• While Lennie whines that he’s always trying, Aunt Clara announces he never had any intention of leaving George the hell alone. Aunt Clara swears a surprising amount. Her grammar also leaves something to be desired.
• Then, Aunt Clara disappears, only to be replaced by a very large and angry rabbit that (not surprisingly) also has Lennie’s voice.
• If you thought the dead aunt was bad, the scary, mind-reading rabbit reaches into Lennie and hits him where it hurts: it scoffs at Lennie’s hope to tend to rabbits.
• Though Lennie promises he’d never forget to feed them, the rabbit claims that Lennie "ain’t fit to lick the boots of no rabbit." (Lennie, rather than pointing out that rabbits don’t tend to wear boots, lays back for another licking from the imaginary and rather mean bunny.)
• The rabbit suggests that George will beat Lennie with a stick when he finds him. After the beating, the rabbit promises George will go away and leave Lennie, because he got sick of him.
• The rabbit then repeats over and over, "He’s gonna leave you, ya crazy bastard. He’s gonna leave ya all alone."
• As Lennie covers his ears in agony and cries out for George, the rabbit (according to the narrator) scuttles back into Lennie’s brain, and George finally appears from the brush.
• Lennie is thrilled to see George and begs him to give him hell, so that things can get back to normal. George is strangely quiet even when Lennie tells him that he has done yet another bad thing.
• When George refuses to give him hell, Lennie asks George to tell him the dream-farm story again, and about how the two of them are different than other guys.
George takes out Carlson’s Luger and unsnaps the safety. He can hear Curley and the other men approaching. (We, too, feel as though we can hear the men approaching; the rustling in the bushes, the yelling and cursing getting heart-thumpingly closer…closer…closer.)

As George tells the story, Lennie adds his usual eager interruptions and additions about tending rabbits and living off the fat of the land. George tells Lennie to look across the river while he narrates.

Lennie talks about getting the place they’ve always dreamed of, and getting it now. Lennie then tells George he’d worried that George was angry at him. After hearing George promise he’s not mad, and he’s never been mad, Lennie goes back to the dream farm.

As George is readying his courage, Lennie says, “Le’s do it now. Le’s get that place now.”

George agrees they’ve got to do it now, and as Lennie continues to look over the bank, envisioning the farm, George puts a gun to the back of Lennie’s head and pulls the trigger.

Lennie lies still in the sand, without quivering, dead.

The other men hear the shot and come running. They think that Lennie had Carlson’s gun and that George wrestled it away from him. George doesn’t correct them.

Slim sees the situation for what it is. He comes over to George quietly and sits close to him, saying simply, "Never you mind…A guy got to sometimes."

As the other men probe George for the nasty details, Slim intervenes. He tells George the two of them should go for a drink, and as he helps him up adds, "You hadda, George. I swear you hadda. Come on with me." The two leave.

Carlson looks at the others and says, "Now what the hell ya suppose is eatin’ them two guys?"
Dreams, Hopes, and Plans

In *Of Mice and Men*, dreams, hopes, and plans are the very foundation of what makes life worth living, but they are also double-edged. The closer one comes to fulfilling a dream, the closer one comes to potentially being disappointed. In this novella, dreams, hopes, and plans are not about realistic ambitions, but about finding a way to survive the Depression, even if it’s just filling your mind with visions that may not come true. Dreams don’t escape the general unhappy futility that seems to characterize this era of American history.

**Questions About Women and Femininity**

1. Does the dream farm mean the same thing to Lennie as it does to George? What does it mean to each of them?
2. Once Candy announces he has the money for the ranch, the narrator declares, “This thing they had never really believed in was coming true.” Is that a fair declaration? Did the guys never really believe they’d get the ranch?
3. Can dreams become actual plans, or are they aspirations that should remain untouched, so that there’s always something to reach for?
4. Do others on the farm also have dreams? Is it important to share these dreams with others, or is it more important that the dreams be kept secret?

**Chew On This**

In *Of Mice and Men*, all the characters need pipedreams so they don’t give up, yet everyone knows these dreams are futile.

The word "dream" is never used in the book in reference to anything like a hope or aspiration. This is because the characters never regard their hopes and ambitions as impossible things to fulfill – they see them instead as concrete and realistic plans.
Friendship

In this novella, friendship isn’t discussed heavily. George and Lennie don’t talk about how they feel about each other or why they should stay loyal – they just stand by each other, and that’s that. It’s a very gruff, rough and tumble atmosphere, and though feelings aren’t talked about, you get the sense that the men take nothing more seriously than their friendship. For George and Lennie, as they make their way through the Depression, all they have is each other.

Questions About Women and Femininity

1. Friendship generally seems like a good thing, but the ranch life is naturally a solitary one. Are there some circumstances under which it’s simply better to be alone? Does George have to learn this lesson the hard way?
2. Is the friendship between George and Lennie fully reciprocal? Do both members contribute and receive equally from each other?
3. Are there any other sets of friends in the book? Why is friendship so rare?
4. It seems like everyone, from Crooks to Slim, spends an awful lot of time complaining to his friends about how he has no friends. Are these guys really that lonely, or do they simply not recognize they’ve all got one other? Do they all have one other?
5. George says quite a bit about how much better his life would be if he didn’t have to take care of Lennie. If this is true, why does he stay with Lennie?

Chew On This

Friendship is a negative relationship in the novella; every time any character gets close to any other, something goes wrong.

If George had really been Lennie’s friend, he could not have killed him. Lennie understood their friendship unconditionally, but George viewed it practically.
Isolation

*Of Mice and Men* thrives on the notion that everyone is isolated, and everyone seems to get along quite well together by talking about how isolated they are. Isolation in this novella is much more an abstract concept than a reality – the men are constantly together and chatting. It’s the specter of having to move, to hit the open road again, make new friends, new enemies, and keep finding yourself all over again that seems to plague the men. These transitions (and having to go at them alone, by nature of the transient migrant worker lifestyle) are enough to make a guy feel isolated, even when he’s surrounded by people.

Questions About Women and Femininity

1. Why does everyone seem to feel so isolated all the time? Is this a function of the ranch, the era, the world, human nature, or something else?
2. Crooks’s isolation is also his protection, especially witnessed by that awful scene where Curley’s wife threatens him. Is isolation ever worth it?
3. Why is it that those who are isolated "get mean," as George says, though they are surrounded by people all the time?
4. Are George or Lennie ever isolated?

Chew On This

Although they are together, George and Lennie are always isolated from the rest of the world.

Because they are together, George and Lennie are never isolated. This is the knowledge that keeps each of them going.
Innocence

Innocence has many different functions in *Of Mice and Men*. When we first realize Lennie has a mental disability, he can be described as having a childlike innocence. His attitude towards the world and others is tempered with a simplistic, juvenile, and often warm view. Innocence also functions as the opposite of guilt. Lennie, perhaps linked to the first notion of "childlike innocence," is presented as a sympathetic character in spite of his constant failings and murdering tendencies. Innocence is something of a godsend and an excuse for bad behavior. It seems to fit in with Steinbeck’s insistence that characters be treated without judgment.

Questions About Women and Femininity

1. Is Lennie the only innocent character in the novella? Is he the most innocent? Does Lennie’s innocence protect him, or make him dangerous?
2. How is innocence used in this book? (Think of innocent with reference to childhood, lack of exposure to bad things, and not being guilty of crimes.)
3. Though Lennie seems gently dumb, there are times he is full of piss and vinegar, like when he tries to break the future cats’ necks for hurting the future rabbits. Do we just feel that Lennie is innocent because he’s mentally slow, when in actuality we’re excusing a hardened killer?
4. Is Curley’s wife malicious because she’s really an awful person, or is she simply lonely and naïve?

Chew On This

Innocence is a farce in this book. Even Lennie is guilty of crimes and petty cruelty, and no one is above being awful to others.
Freedom and Confinement

In *Of Mice and Men*, freedom isn’t so much a central point as it’s a constant and silent contrast to confinement. Confinement, like isolation, seems to be a state of mind. Though the men on the ranch work outside, socialize with each other, and are free to leave whenever they please, they still feel locked into their lives. There’s something hanging over them that stops them from feeling free. In the case of Lennie and George, they’re tied down by their need for money; Curley’s wife is limited by being a woman; and Crooks by his race. Except when they’re caught up in the intensity of the dream, most characters seem more focused on bemoaning their confinement than planning for or achieving their freedom.

Questions About Women and Femininity

1. Do Lennie and George see the life of traveling and working as freedom? Do they ever consider the question of freedom?
2. Crooks has his own room. Is this space representative of freedom, or of confinement?
3. At the end of the story, does George have to feel constrained by his choices?
4. What does “freedom” mean to Lennie? Is it related to the “fatta the lan”? Does he find it in death?

Chew On This

The feeling of confinement in *Of Mice and Men* is influenced by the "grass is always greener someplace else" phenomenon. George would love to be free to have a settled piece of land, and Whit fantasizes about getting off the ranch, but this is simply the "grass is greener" in action.

Confinement is the defining force in the novella. All the characters are in some way trapped, either by their circumstances or who they are. Their lives are simply processes of becoming comfortable with those traps. The only one who escapes this is Lennie, not only because he is killed, but because he faces his inner demons before he dies.
Justice

Justice in *Of Mice and Men* is a might be considered a "cowboy" concept. The ranch has its own sense of justice, and the book is acutely tuned to the social mores of the ranch, not the larger world. There’s no higher order, and no sense of whether justice is dictated by ethics, legal precedent, pity, or even common sense. Slim, the local ranch man of wisdom, hands down decisions, and the people around him accept his word as what’s best. Justice, in the traditional cowboy sense, is not easily served. Sometimes it means you have to get beat up without recourse because you had it comin’, and sometimes you have to kill your best friend (whether he’s a man or a dog) because it’s the only thing to do. Justice is not a pristine rule of law here, but more a set of social intuitions that just are the way they are.

Questions About Women and Femininity

1. Is it true that the ranch has its own kind of justice? What are the variables that factor into that justice? What’s most influential in deciding justice – ethics, the law, social status, intention, etc.?
2. Is Lennie justified in crushing Curley’s hand? Is Slim justified in threatening Curley about letting anyone know what really what went on?
3. Is it reasonable to let Slim be the arbiter of justice on the ranch?
4. Do you think the decisions Slim makes in that position are good ones?
5. Did Curley’s wife get what she deserved?

Chew On This

Lennie has no grasp of the consequences of his actions, so meting out "justice" to him is absurd.

On the ranch, Lennie is not immune to justice, even if he is mentally disabled and did not understand the consequences of his actions.
Visions of America

*Of Mice and Men* captures the feel of rural America during the Depression. Different outlooks are presented: the never-will-be starlet trying to make it to Hollywood, the isolated black man born and raised in California, a ranch full of men that like to go to whorehouses, play pool, and drink away their earnings, and men that are constantly bouncing from job to job just shy of making ends meet. The America of *Of Mice and Men* is populated with dreamers and strugglers. America is both a place of the outside, where the dreams of the characters could be fulfilled (Hollywood, a quiet ranch, pulp magazine pages) and a confined space of the inside (the ranch, Crooks’s little room, the barn) where dreams often dissipate into impossibilities.

Questions About Women and Femininity

1. In this story, is America the land of futility or opportunity?
2. Could this be a story about making it in a tough agricultural migrant town anywhere?
3. Is struggle and overcoming obstacles part of the American story?
4. Is it possible to achieve the American Dream without struggling?

Chew On This

The dream Lennie and George have isn’t about personal happiness – it’s about attaining the American Dream.

This novella argues that there is no single America. Rather, there are many different groups (women, blacks, farm workers, others), each with its own unique struggle.
Violence

Violence in *Of Mice and Men* is an everyday reality. Along with the backbreaking work that comes from being a ranch-man, there’s a significant degree of masculine bravado that allows for fights, threats, and general meanness. Violence in the novella is physical, psychological, and emotional. Characters are so accustomed to suspicion and failure that they treat each other cruelly, willing to abuse the dreams and the bodies of others as though it were more natural to destroy than to cultivate. In some ways, violence is a natural outlet for all of the despair and limited possibilities that define the ranch.

Questions About Women and Femininity

1. How do Lennie’s violent tendencies color our interpretation of his character? Do we ever think of Lennie as violent?
2. Is violence an acceptable part of life on the ranch?
3. Does Lennie know his own strength, and just not think violence is that big a deal? How else can we explain him yelling at the puppy for “getting himself killed”?
4. Is Lennie’s death ultimately a violent act or a loving act by George?

Chew On This

While the violence in this book is more physical than psychological, the latter is more powerful and significant.

While the violence in this book is more physical than psychological, the former is more powerful and significant.

Violence is depicted as a necessary part of justice.
Prejudice

*Of Mice and Men* deals with many of America’s age-old hot-button issues, including but not limited to sexism, racism, ageism, and discrimination against those with disabilities. Most importantly, this prejudice isn’t ever explicitly noted or fought against – those who are discriminated against accept the prejudice against them as a way of life. Of course there’s some grumbling about it, but there’s no sense that Curley’s wife, Crooks, Candy, or Lennie feel a grave and inexcusable injustice is being perpetrated against them. It seems simply that their lot in life is to endure prejudice, and they operate with all the meanness (if not the rebellion) that such a life necessitates. Still, the other men of the ranch still accept Crooks, Candy, and Lennie for their differences; and Curley’s wife, though she’s maligned, is never completely ignored. While prejudice is a force that defines some of the social interaction the ranch, the need to escape isolation and the fact of close proximity means the characters all socialize with each other to some degree, in spite of the prejudices they undoubtedly hold.

Questions About Women and Femininity

1. How can prejudice be maintained in an isolated environment where people interact so constantly?
2. How can we tell the line between being prejudiced and simply being discerning? If the boss had known what happened in Weed and refused to hire Lennie, would that have been discrimination, or sensible and life-saving?

Chew On This

Prejudice is a fact of life on the ranch because it was a fact of life everywhere in America at that time. If anything, there was less prejudice on the ranch than elsewhere during the Depression-era, because people were in such close proximity to each other. This novella argues that when you get different people who are discriminated against together in one boat, they’ll cut each other down rather than band together.
Weakness

Weakness in *Of Mice and Men* is as diverse as all the characters. Lennie is mentally weak, George can’t fight for his dream, and Curley resents being a smallish man. Weakness is a reality for nearly everyone on the ranch, but rather than subdue the characters, it forces them to brush up against each other and accept the fights (often inspired by their weakness) as they come. This might be because of the environment – on a ranch full of strong men and male bravado, weakness (whether it’s present in everyone or not) is frowned upon. Because characters often know their weaknesses, they’re quick to try to cover for them, which spells confrontation. It’s a typical bullying situation: characters’ weaknesses make them insecure, so they fight and judge others to avoid having their flaws exposed or exploited.

Questions About Women and Femininity

1. What are the various weaknesses of the novella’s different characters? Are any more serious than any others?
2. Does the interdependency of George and Lennie’s relationship make either of them weak?
3. Does Lennie think of himself as weak? How do we interpret his mental weakness relative to his physical strength? Which defines his character more?

Chew On This

Steinbeck writes such that those who are weak are pitied, while those who are strong are condemned.

Weakness is equated with goodness in *Of Mice and Men.*
Women and Femininity

*Of Mice and Men* is set in a male environment where there are three types of women: the imagined nice girl for settling down, the prostitutes for a drink and a trick, and Curley’s wife, who is their daily representation of what to expect from the other sex. Women are a kind of absent symbol, only there to highlight the men’s failings: the men of the ranch can’t settle down, so they go to whorehouses. As the "girl next door" type is only a fantasy, the men basically reduce the women around them to sex. As George states, at least with prostitutes, "you pay for what you get." While Curley’s wife is a sexual object, she can’t actually provide any sex (because she’s taken) – all she can really offer is trouble.

Questions About Women and Femininity

1. Is Curley’s wife viewed as an aberration among women, or is she pretty standard as far as the guys are concerned?
2. Do any of the characters have a positive attitude towards any woman in the story? What about Aunt Clara?
3. What do we make of the fact that the only positive (and alive) female character we really get word of is Suzy who runs the whorehouse?
4. Is there a place for women in ranch life? Is ranch life supposed to be the wildness before the stability that comes with settling down and "having a girl"?

Chew On This

Curley’s wife is a caricature of the problems suffered by women in small agricultural communities during the Depression. Though she’s an awful woman, she does suffer from real affliction and prejudice.
Man and the Natural World

The natural world presented in *Of Mice and Men* mirrors the world of the ranch. Like the ranch, the natural world is a dog-eat-dog place, where animal instincts and hunger trump any sense of justice or goodness. The grove is one of the book’s few settings, and while it’s a beautiful refuge from the ranch, there are still birds eating snakes and the like. The natural world is also represented as part of the duality of relationships: Lennie loves animals, but kills them. Candy loves his dog, but can’t stand up for it; and even Crooks tends to the horses that maimed him. While the natural world is romanticized, the relationship of characters to animals is a reminder that love doesn’t mean safety, and cruelty isn’t limited to the world of the ranch: it’s a fact of life. The natural world is without rhyme or reason, and often against our hopes, things die, even if you love them, because nature is as cruel as it is beautiful.

Questions About Women and Femininity

1. Why is Lennie constantly compared to an animal? Is this a fair comparison? Is the author suggesting that not all humans are animals?
2. What separates the rule of civilized law from the rule of the natural world? Does Steinbeck seem to suggest one is better than the other?
3. Lennie doesn’t seem too interested in death, though it’s a major hang up for the "civilized" world. Who’s right on this one?
4. Are the natural world and man’s world presented as parallels to each other or as contrasts to each other?

Chew On This

The novella uses the natural world as a sensible contrast to the madness and overly-bureaucratic justice of the civilized world.

Lennie belongs to the natural world, and George belongs to the world of men. In this way, the novella is about man’s inextricable relationship with the natural world.
Dreams, Hopes, and Plans Quotes

Quote:

"I remember about the rabbits, George."

"The hell with the rabbits. That's all you can ever remember is them rabbits." (1.18-19)

Thought:

This is the first mention we have of the dream. Even from the introduction, it seems Lennie is more excited than George about the prospect. George’s easy dismissal of “them rabbits” makes it seem as though he thinks the whole thing is silly. This will get more complex as we realize that George might be as excited about the dream as Lennie; it seems he is just more cautious about that excitement, given that he’s more world-weary than his companion.

Quote:

"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 play 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’ keep me shovin’ all over the country all the time." (1.89)

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.

Quote:

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. Go on, George! Tell about what we’re gonna have in the garden and about the rabbits in the cages and about the rain in the winter and the stove, and how thick the cream is on the milk like you can hardly cut it. Tell about that George."

"Why’n’t you do it yourself? You know all of it."

"No…you tell it. It ain’t the same if I tell it. Go on…George. How I get to tend the rabbits."

"Well," said George, "we’ll have a big vegetable patch and a rabbit hutch and chickens. And when it rains in the winter, we’ll just say the hell with goin’ to work, and we’ll build up a fire in the stove and set around it an’ listen to the rain comin’ down on the roof—Nuts!" (1.119-123)

Thought:

This kernel is one of the foundational pieces of the whole play, perhaps its most important. There are numerous bits to analyze in this passage, ranging from its reflection of the American Dream during the Depression to the fact that the dream is so repeated among the two men that even dull Lennie has memorized some of it. For our purposes, it’s very important that this talk of the farm oscillates wildly throughout the play – 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.

Quote:

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)

Thought:

The crux of 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).

Quote:
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.

Quote:

They fell into a silence. They looked at one another, amazed. This thing they had never really believed in was coming true. (3.221)

Thought:

On the one hand, this could be awesome. On the other hand, we’re suddenly forced to ask whether the dream isn’t better off as a dream, something they can believe and imagine that’s bigger and better than any reality. One might argue that when Candy gets close to George and Lennie, he spoils the dream of the farm by making it a genuine possibility (and ironically, something that could be a disappointment), rather than an ongoing and eternal hope.

Quote:

[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)

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.

Quote:

Crooks called, "Candy!"

"Huh?"

" 'Member what I said about hoein' and doin' odd jobs?"
"Yeah," said Candy. "I remember."

"Well, jus’ forget it," said Crooks. "I didn’ mean it. Jus’ foolin’. I wouldn’ want to go no place like that."

"Well, O.K., if you feel like that. Goodnight." (4.148-153)

Thought:

Crooks’s hope is broken. He can continue to live on the ranch, seemingly happy to be aloof, but we know from this episode that he stays on the farm because he has no dreams of anything better anymore. He had that dream for a moment again with the other guys, and was quickly pulled back into the vicious world of those with no hope. When you can’t even dream, you really don’t have anything, and it seems Crooks’s lot in life is to be resigned to some pitiful nothingness.

Quote:

George said softly, “—I think I knowed from the very first. I think I knowed we’d never do her. He usta like to hear about it so much I got to thinking maybe we would.” (5.78)

Thought:

Ironically, in the case of the dream farm, it is Lennie who is the main threat to the dream’s success, and it is also Lennie who makes the whole idea worthwhile.

Quote:

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, but within the parameters of George’s concerns (making their dream a reality), what Lennie did or didn’t do doesn’t matter. The dream is over.
Friendship Quotes

Quote:

*They had walked in single file down the path, and even in the open one stayed behind the other. Both were dressed in denim trousers and in denim coats with brass buttons. Both wore black, shapeless hats and both carried tight blanket rolls slung over their shoulders.* (1.4)

Thought:

From the first sight of Lennie and George, a dynamic in their relationship is established. Though the men are outwardly of the same class (wearing identical clothes and carrying identical gear), one still walks behind the other. George is, of course, the leader, but it seems he doesn’t value himself as necessarily superior to Lennie; they’re both in it together.

Quote:

*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.* (1.10)

Thought:

Lennie may need George to be the brains of the operation, but it seems like Lennie’s mimicry isn’t just an attempt to “pass” in the civilized world. 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 dotes on an older brother.

Quote:

*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 beans with it and I wouldn’t touch none of it.”* (1.93-95)

Thought:

After George’s mean outburst about how much better off he’d be without Lennie (sparked by Lennie wanting some ketchup), Lennie is the one who makes the first move to apologize for
being a jerk. Even after this awful fight, the men’s friendship has a simple and remarkable earnestness. 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. Let’s just say they’re each the other’s speed dial #1.

Quote:

GEORGE “Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don’t belong no place. They come to a ranch an’ work up a stake and then they go inta town and blow their stake, and the first thing you know they’re poundin’ their tail on some other ranch. They ain’t got nothing to look ahead to.”

Lennie was delighted. “That’s it—that’s it. Now tell how it is with us.”

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

Lennie broke in. “But not us! An’ why? Because… because I got you to look after me, and you got me to look after you, and that’s why.” He laughed delightedly. “Go on now, George!” (1.113-116)

Thought:

This is a pretty timeless definition of friendship: somebody to listen, somebody to bail you out of jail, and most importantly, somebody that cares and looks out for you. It’s notable, too, that though George is the one who usually gives the speech, he’s clearly worked in the fact that both men rely on and look after each other. Again, George is a friend (and not a father or a master) because he is so willing to admit that he needs Lennie too.

Quote:

"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.

Quote:

"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)

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. Though George doesn’t tell Slim he necessarily sees it that way, George’s speech to Lennie about why they’re different highlights the fact that he realizes what a special relationship they have.

Quote:

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)

Thought:

This entire passage with Candy and his relationship to his dog is incredibly important. 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. When asked to justify their friendships, both men simply say they’ve gotten used to being with their companion.

Quote:

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)

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.
Quote:

CROOKS “…It’s just the talking. It’s just bein’ with another guy. That’s all.” He paused. His voice grew soft and persuasive. “S’pose George don’t come back no more, S’pose he took a powder and just ain’t coming back. What’ll you do then?” (4.39-40)

Thought:

Crooks is accustomed to being alone and without friends, and first admits that it’s generally miserable to have nobody. Still, the corrosive effect of solitude crops up here: if we remember what George said about people who are alone on the ranches all the time getting really mean, we can see it right here in Crooks. Crooks seems to have a need to show that Lennie and George’s friendship can’t be all that real.
Isolation Quotes

Quote:

"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 play 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' keep me shovin' all over the country all the time." (1.89)

Thought:

What George envisions as freedom (freedom from Lennie, to do whatever he wants, to hang out in whorehouses and pool halls) is exactly what some people might describe as utter isolation. It's interesting that even as George is outlining this low-budget "playboy" lifestyle, he's soon to run into guys who live just this way yet find it unfulfilling.

Quote:

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."
(1.103-104)

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.

Quote:

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)

Thought:
The boss immediately suspects George is taking advantage of Lennie. In this transient worker culture, with men wandering around and generally suffering under the Depression, the boss can’t imagine a situation where two guys would stick together, just because. Though it’s a bit preposterous, to the boss it’s more believable that 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, expects isolation as the status quo.

Quote:

OLD MAN [CANDY] "A guy on a ranch don’t never listen nor he don’t ast no questions."
(2.67)

Thought:

It’s interesting to wonder whether this kind of loneliness serves the greater good. Each guy keeps his nose clean, everybody stays out of trouble with each other, and all involved then lead a lonely, miserable life into a lonely, isolated death.

Quote:

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)

Thought:

It’s really interesting that this comment comes from Slim. Of course, it characterizes how all those people drifting in poverty across the country and looking for work are feeling, but Slim’s the ranch’s own local megastar. He, who can do no wrong, intimidate any man, and kill a fly with a bull whip, seems to have the same feelings as everybody else about the whole world. It’s a lonely and scary place.

Quote:

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)

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.

Quote:

"I don’t want no fights," said Lennie. He got up from his bunk and sat down at the table, across from George. Almost automatically George shuffled the cards and laid out his solitaire hand. He used a deliberate, thoughtful, slowness. (3.177)

Thought:

Even though Lennie has sat across the table from George (clearly positioned to play cards), George deals himself another game of solitaire. Lennie, rather than offer to play with George, wonders why both ends of the cards are the same. No matter how close the two men are in friendship, George has a space of isolation for himself. Lennie is limited by his mental disability, so his friendship with George suffers some natural limitations. Maybe this is part of why George can be in the relationship – because he keeps some part of himself reserved for him alone.

Quote:

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 kick off, ‘cause I ain’t got no relatives or nothing…" (3.218-219)

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 (people or no) 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.

Quote:

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)

Thought:
Crooks is so accustomed to his isolation that any attempt to break it is a threat. Interestingly, Crooks is described as "proud and aloof." Thinking about Crooks's isolation then, we might wonder whether it's a self-imposed state; rather than being kept away from the white folks, he chooses not to be near them. This is a cross-section between isolation and prejudice, and there comes a point where we aren't sure whether barriers are there to keep some people out, or to hold some people in.

**Quote:**

"I was born right here in Southern California. My old man had a chicken ranch, ‘bout ten acres. The white kids come to play at our place, an’ sometimes I went to play with them, and some of them was pretty nice. My ‘ol man didn’t like that. I never knew till long later why he didn’t like that. But I know now." He hesitated, and when he spoke again his voice was softer. "There wasn’t another colored family for miles around. And now there ain't a colored man on this ranch an' there’s jus’ one family in Soledad." (4.37)

**Thought:**

When Crooks describes playing with the little white children when he was younger, we realize that prejudice is something that he had to learn about (as did the other children). The isolation of his father and Crooks's own self-imposed isolation come from that notion that you're all alone when there's nobody around that looks like you. Crooks can blame his isolation on race, the ranch guys can blame isolation on suspicion, but whatever it is, it seems everyone is feeling isolated, and they’re all coming up with a million reasons to explain why.
Innocence Quotes

Quote:

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 play. 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.

Quote:

NARRATION. George looked sharply at him. "What’d you take outa that pocket?"

"Ain’t a thing in my pocket," Lennie said cleverly.

"I know there ain’t. You got it in your hand..." (1.25-27)

Thought:

Lennie is like a child in his thinking. The game he plays here with George is the classic "If I have my hand over my eyes, no one can see me," thing. This kind of sleight of hand is the unique stuff of childish thinking.

Quote:

NARRATION. And these shelves were loaded with little articles, soap and talcum powder, razors and those Western magazines ranch men love to read and scoff at and secretly believe. (2.1)

Thought:

Innocence doesn’t only belong to the mentally disabled. There’s some spark of imagination or belief that every person contains, which can illuminate even the most seemingly world-weary.

Quote:
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 tirade 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.

Quote:
Slim sat in silence for a moment. “Didn’t hurt the girl none, huh?” he asked finally.

“Hello no. He just scared her. I’d be scared too, if he grabbed me. But he never hurt her. He jus’ wanted to touch that red dress, like he wants to pet them pups all the time.”

“He ain’t mean,” said Slim. “I can tell a mean guy from a mile off.” (3.28-30)

Thought:
George highlights Lennie’s childlike innocence here – he can’t fathom the consequences of his actions, so he simply pursues what he wants. Fortunately, his desires (petting soft things) are sweet and harmless. Knowing this, Slim seems to come around to George’s opinion that Lennie can’t really be guilty because he never means the harm he inevitably causes. Lennie is simply an innocent caught in a world of complexity that he doesn’t quite understand.

Quote:
Slim had not moved. His calm eyes followed Lennie out of the door. ”Jesus,” he said. ”He’s jes’ like a kid, ain’t he.”

[GEORGE] “Sure, he’s jes like a kid. There ain’t no more harm in him than a kid neither, except he’s so strong.” (3.44-45)

Thought:
This is particularly poignant: George makes an exception of Lennie’s strength, and Lennie’s strength will be both of their undoing. Intentions don’t matter; Lennie’s innocence won’t be enough to protect him.

Quote:
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 on a fence rail an’ watch ’em—white chickens they was."

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. When the other guys talk about their dream farm, Crooks has difficulty doing anything but beating their hopes back. Likely, the world only seemed good when he was free of understanding prejudice and hardship. After losing that freedom, it’s no surprise Crooks sees things in such a harsh light. Crooks has replaced his dreams for the future with bittersweet memories of the past.

Quote:

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)

Thought:

Lennie is innocent in the sense that he has no concept of levels of right and wrong. His moral rubric seems to be based on whatever he knows will make George mad. 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.

Quote:

And when they were gone, Candy squatted down in the hay and watched the face of Curley’s wife. "Poor bastard," he said softly. (5.112)

Thought:

As much as Curley’s wife was a jerk, this "poor bastard" seems to apply to someone else. In this novella, we’ve heard this phrase before. In 1.66, Lennie has gone off into the brush, searching for the dead mouse to pet and trying to hide his attempts. George knows Lennie will be found out, and he says "Poor bastard." It’s not the most complicated or unusual sentence, but it stands out as something that’s repeated twice, especially in a world that’s an unapologetically cruel and unforgiving place. When people don’t look out or feel compassion
for each other, our ears perk up when we hear a little pity.
Freedom and Confinement Quotes

Quote:

LENNIE “George—why ain’t we goin’ on to the ranch and get some supper? They got supper at the ranch.”

George rolled on his side. “No reason at all for you. I like it here. Tomorra we’re gonna go to work. I seen thrashin’ machines on the way down. That means we’ll be bucking grain bags, bustin’ a gut. Tonight I’m gonna lay right here and look up. I like it.” (1.60-61)

Thought:

George is sure to be a hard worker, but it’s clearly not the thing he enjoys best. For George, as for most people, it’s nicer to enjoy the woods than to be busy “bustin’ a gut” at work. Although George doesn’t have the same simple delight in nature that Lennie does, what he really revels in is the freedom from work, the chance to spend a lazy evening under the stars. It almost seems that there’s a reason George has been a traveling man of the road, rather than getting tied down to any one place. Transient living has its downsides (like poverty and homelessness), but being free is priceless.

Quote:

GEORGE “I wish I could put you in a cage with about a million mice an’ let you have fun.” His anger left him suddenly. He looked across the fire at Lennie’s anguished face, and then he looked ashamedly at the flames. (1.89)

Thought:

George’s outburst concludes with a wish that he could lock Lennie up (presumably trapping him the same way George feels confined by their friendship). Once he’s said this awful thing, he stops himself from ranting and becomes ashamed, especially once he’s seen how he’s hurting his friend. This is an important moment of distinction between confinement that’s forced on you and confinement you choose. Friendship shouldn’t be a kind of prison, but rather a voluntary bond. George knows the difference.

Quote:

When the sound of the footsteps had died away, George turned on Lennie. “So you wasn’t gonna say a word. You was gonna leave your big flapper shut and leave me do the talkin’. Damn near lost us the job.”

Lennie stared helplessly at his hands. “I forgot, George.”
"Yea, you forgot. You always forget, an’ I got to talk you out of it." He sat down heavily on the bunk. "Now he’s got his eye on us. Now we got to be careful and not make no slips. You keep your big flapper shut after this." He fell morosely silent. (2.56-59)

**Thought:**

The relationship between George and Lennie constricts them both in different ways: in this particular situation, George needs Lennie to speak up, but Lennie is under orders from George not to speak up at all. George, because he’s so stern about having Lennie always follow his orders, is now under the watchful gaze of the boss, confining him even further. Throughout the novella, George has the habit of getting backed into a corner of his own design. This idea is especially interesting if we consider George’s final decision in the novella – is it a liberating choice, or just another episode of George being backed into a corner?

**Quote:**

GEORGE "For two bits I’d shove out of here. If we can get jus’ a few dollars in the poke we’ll shove off and go up the American River and pan gold. We can make maybe a couple of dollars a day there, and we might hit a pocket."

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

"We gotta stay," George said shortly. "Shut up now. The guys’ll be comin’ in." (2.166-168)

**Thought:**

George and Lennie agree that the ranch is no good for them, and both would like to leave. Lennie is ready to cut and run, but George is the voice of practicality, and though his intuition says something is wrong, he’s confined by their present needs. No matter how the men feel, they’re limited in what they can do. The need for money is immediate, and the American River plan is just another dream of freedom that’s confined by practicality.

**Quote:**

Whit found the place again, but he did not surrender his hold on it. He pointed out the letter with his forefinger. And then he went to his box shelf and laid the magazine carefully in. "I wonder if Bill seen it," he said. "Bill and me worked in that patch of field peas. Run cultivators, both of us. Bill was a hell of a nice fella." (3.79)

**Thought:**

This little episode with Whit remembering Bill Tenner is an interesting one. It makes sense that
Whit would recall Bill fondly – it seems they struck up a friendship, and Whit reasonably misses the brief break from isolation. There’s something about Bill Tenner though, as the occasion to remember him is his letter being printed in a pulp magazine. For someone like Whit, who’s stayed in the same place long after Bill has gone on, it seems the magazine indicates a life outside of the ranch. Bill isn’t just a friend to be remembered; he’s had the distinction of having his letter put in a magazine. There’s a touch of glamour here that Whit will likely never have, and it seems Whit is excited that someone he knows "matters" in the big world. Perhaps Whit’s confinement on the ranch allows him a romantic view of the outside world, even if it’s just in pulp magazines.

**Quote:**

"And it’d be our own, an’ nobody could can us. If we don’t like a guy we can say, ‘Get the hell out,’ and by God he’s got to do it. An’ if a fren’ come along, why we’d have an extra bunk, an’ we’d say, ‘Why don’t you spen’ the night?’ An’ by God he would." (3.209)

**Thought:**

The men have the physical freedom to move where they please, going from job to job, but freedom is bigger than just being able to wander. George dreams of a world where the men are free to simply stay in place.

**Quote:**

George said wonderingly, "S’pose they was a carnival or a circus come to town, or a ball game, or any damn thing." Old Candy nodded in appreciation of the idea. "We’d just go to her," George said. "We wouldn’t ask nobody if we could. Jus’ say, "We’ll go to her,’ an’ we would. Jus’ milk the cow and sling some grain to the chickens an’ go to her." (3.224)

**Thought:**

George marvels at this idea as though it’s the first time he’s ever really considered this kind of possibility. Again, though migrating workers seem like they’ve got an awful lot of freedom, they’re tied to the need of their jobs. Even if they did run off for wild times at the circus, the crux of the issue is that they’d still know they weren’t their own men. They’d be passing the time until they were hired out, earning their pay from some other guy. The freedom to leave work isn’t just about seeing a ballgame – it’s representative of being your own person (something none of these men have had the chance to be before).

**Quote:**

with shows. Not jus’ one, neither. An’ a guy tol’ me he could put me in pitchers…” She was breathless with indignation. "—Sat’iday night. Ever’body out doin’ som’pin’. Ever’body! An’ what am I doin’? Standin’ here talkin’ to a bunch of bindle stiffs—a nigger an’ a dum-dum and a lousy ol’ sheep—an’ likin’ it because they ain’t nobody else." (4.102-103)

Thought:

So Curley’s wife won’t be up for Mrs. Congeniality at the ranch any time soon, but we do get a sense of where her utter nastiness comes from. Just like everyone else, Curley’s wife is lonely. She’s got the extra problem of never being able to talk to anyone without seeming like a tramp. Still, she especially resents her position, especially because she has notions about where she could have been and what she could have done. Just like the others, she had a dream of freedom (in the form of being a movie star), but rather than work for it, she’ll satisfy herself by degrading everyone else in the meantime. Though she admits that she likes their company, Curley’s wife delivers the back-handed slap that it’s only preferable to no company at all. Hard to feel sorry for her.

Quote:

"Slim nodded. "We might," he said. "If we could keep Curley in, we might, But Curley’s gonna want to shoot ’im. Curley’s still mad about his hand. An’ s’pose they lock him up an’ strap him down and put him in a cage. That ain’t no good, George." (5.97)

Thought:

Slim, as usual, is full of common sense, even if it’s bad news. Here, in talking about Lennie’s literal confinement, Slim puts George in a bind too. George knows he won’t let Curley kill Lennie, but he can’t stand the idea of his friend being locked up like an animal, either. George’s choices are limited, but he must choose.

Quote:

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

"No," said George. "No, Lennie, I ain’t mad. I never been mad, and I ain’ now. That’s a thing I want ya to know." (6.87-88)

Thought:

George doesn’t kill Lennie out of anger, but he doesn’t seem to do it out of justice, either. It seems that George has no choice but to kill Lennie. The same way George has protected and guided Lennie throughout life, he now leads him into death. George is confined by choice, and Lennie is freed by death.
Justice Quotes

Quote:

"O.K.,” said George. "An’ you ain’t gonna do no bad things like you done in Weed, neither."

Lennie looked puzzled. "Like I done in Weed?"

"Oh, so ya forgot that too, did ya? Well, I ain’t gonna remind ya, fear ya do it again."

A light of understanding broke on Lennie’s face.

“They run us outa Weed,” he exploded triumphantly.

"Run us out, hell," said George disgustedly. "We run. They was lookin’ for us, but they didn’t catch us."

Lennie giggled happily. "I didn’t forget that, you bet."

(1.50-55)

Thought:

We don’t quite know what happened in Weed. Did Lennie really do something bad, and are we sympathizing with fugitives from the law here? This is our first brush with the peculiar sense of justice in this book.

Quote:

[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 fresh and I’ll let you keep it a little while.”

(1.76)

Thought:

Even though Lennie is mentally slow, George doesn’t mistreat him. Of course, George is within his rights to think that his friend shouldn’t carry a decaying mouse around in his pocket, but it’s important that George is willing to explain to Lennie why he commits the seemingly unjust act of taking the mouse away. George appears to have a sense of justice, even about little things, and even when dealing with Lennie, who some might think doesn’t deserve an explanation. It’s another bit of evidence that George sees Lennie as deserving of equal treatment, no matter his condition.
Quote:

GEORGE “Lennie—if you jus’ happen to get in trouble like you always done before, I want you to come right here an’ hide in the brush… Hide in the brush till I come for you.” (1.130)

Thought:

George knows even before they go to the new ranch that Lennie is bound to get into some trouble. He even says it's a foregone conclusion, as it's what Lennie has always done before. We get an insight into George's sense of justice here: no matter what Lennie does, George is willing to meet in the brush and presumably run off again with him, just like they left Weed. George seems to think that together, they can keep getting out of whatever scrapes Lennie gets into, rather than stick around and wait for justice to be served. Given what happens at the end of the book, George's statement here makes us wonder whether his views on justice change over the course of the book.

Quote:

“Well, Curley's pretty handy,” the swamper said skeptically. “Never did seem right to me. S'pose Curley jumps a big guy an' licks him. Ever'body says what a game guy Curley is. And s'pose he does the same thing and gets licked. Then ever'body says the big guy oughtta pick on somebody his own size, and maybe they gang up on the big guy. Never did seem right to me. Seem like Curley ain't givin' nobody a chance.” (2.93)

Thought:

Candy is spot on here – but we learn that ranch justice is nuanced. Eventually, when Curley does go after Lennie, Lennie wins fairly, and nobody would fault him for it. Still, Curley is ultimately the one who seeks to neutralize Lennie, and in some strange way, Candy's words are almost prophetic. Once Curley lays eyes on Lennie, the big guy doesn’t stand a chance.

Quote:

GEORGE “Don’t let him pull you in—but—if the son-of-a-bitch socks you—let ‘im have it.” (2.131)

Thought:

George has already noted that if Lennie fights with Curley, both George and Lennie will lose their jobs. Still, in spite of this practical reality, George has a sense of honor and justice that is worth more than the job. If Curley hits Lennie, there’d be more to lose by backing down than what would be lost by winning the fight – or so George's sense of justice tells him.
Quote:

His [Slim’s] ear heard more than was said to him, and his slow speech had overtones not of thought, but of understanding beyond thought. His hands, large and lean, were as delicate in their action as those of a temple dancer. (2.170)

Thought:

Slim’s presentation until now has catered to the cowboy aspects of his character. With this line, the narrator lets us in on the fact that besides being the coolest rancher in town, Slim has an air of righteousness about him. This glowing report (unusual for the narration in this text) is a hint that Slim stands in for justice in an otherwise cruel world. It’s no surprise that he’s often sought for the last word, and that he’s the one who can declare what must be done and whether it’s justified (like the killing of Candy’s dog, and ultimately, of Lennie as well).

Quote:

Slim sat in silence for a moment. “Didn’t hurt the girl none, huh?” he asked finally.

“HeLL no. He just scared her. I’d be scared too, if he grabbed me. But he never hurt her. He jus’ wanted to touch that red dress, like he wants to pet them pups all the time.”

“He ain’t mean,” said Slim. “I can tell a mean guy from a mile off.” (3.28-30)

Thought:

Slim’s sense of justice is keen – he won’t say whether Lennie and George have done a bad thing running away from Weed until he hears that the girl was alright.

Quote:

CANDY “I ought to of shot that dog myself, George. I shouldn’t ought to of let no stranger shoot my dog.” (3.234)

Thought:

Sometimes the right thing to do is the most difficult thing to do.

Quote:

George said, “Slim, will we get canned now? We need the stake. Will Curley’s old man can us now?”
Slim smiled wryly. He knelt down beside Curley. "You got your senses in hand enough to listen?" he asked. Curley nodded. "Well then listen," Slim went on. "I think you got your hand caught in a machine. If you don’t tell nobody what happened, we ain’t going to. But you jus’ tell an’ try to get this guy canned and we’ll tell ever’body, an’ then will you get the laugh. (3.259-260)

Thought:

There’s some strange justice afoot here. Clearly, Curley got what was coming to him, and if Slim says Lennie’s all right, then Lennie’s all right. Still, it’s noteworthy that Slim doesn’t outright admonish Curley for doing a bad thing. Instead, Slim threatens to “tell ever’body” something such that Curley will be made a mockery. Perhaps for his losing the fight with Curley, or the looseness of his woman, Curley knows he’s in no position to argue. Justice has been served, but it seems no lesson has been learned.

Quote:

Slim sighed. "Well, I guess we got to get him…” (5.93)

Thought:

Slim, however grudgingly, knows he must see to it that justice is meted out. Slim understands Lennie killed Curley’s wife accidentally and without malice, but justice makes no exceptions. At the end of the day, the world is still a place where law and order trumps sense or feeling.

Quote:

Slim came directly to George and sat down beside him, sat very close to him. "Never you mind," said Slim. "A guy got to sometimes." (6.96)

Thought:

Slim, trying to comfort George about shooting his best friend in the back of the head, basically says "Sometimes, you gotta do what you gotta do."
Visions of America Quotes

Quote:

*There is a path through the willows and among the sycamores, a path beaten hard by boys coming down from the ranches to swim in the deep pool, and beaten hard by tramps who come wearily down from the highway in the evening to jungle-up near water.* (1.2)

Thought:

The divide we see here is between working ranch boys and “tramps.” Though tramps (traveling workers) are ostensibly coming along to get work, there’s still a gap in the social status between these two kinds of men: the working and the non-working. The difference is important in the America of the Depression, where money could make (and more often break) a man.

Quote:

*GEORGE “Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don’t belong no place. They come to a ranch an’ work up a stake and then they go inta town and blow their stake, and the first thing you know they’re poundin’ their tail on some other ranch. They ain’t got nothing to look ahead to.”* (1.113)

Thought:

This sounds like the America Steinbeck discovered in his travels around the working camps of northern California. The men he met were Depression-era archetypes, working hard to make a living and having little to call their own.

Quote:

*GEORGE “For two bits I’d shove out of here. If we can get jus’ a few dollars in the poke we’ll shove off and go up the American River and pan gold. We can make maybe a couple of dollars a day there, and we might hit a pocket.”* (2.166)

Thought:

George seems particularly prone to that American “get up and go.” To him, it seems there are opportunities everywhere (to get a new job, to get a little piece of land). But there are practical limitations on his possibilities (and his dreams) that are uniquely American too, such as the Great Depression. It’s another problem of living as a transient in a land supposedly full of opportunity.
…he moved with a majesty only achieved by royalty and master craftsman. He was a jerkline skinner, the prince of the ranch, capable of driving ten, sixteen, even twenty mules with a single line to the leaders. He was capable of killing a fly on the wheeler’s butt with a bull whip without touching the mule. There was a gravity in his manner and a quiet so profound that all talk stopped when he spoke. His authority was so great that his word was taken on any subject, be it politics or love. This was Slim, the jerkline skinner. (2.170)

Thought:

Slim is the literary version of the quintessential masculine American hero. He’s tall, handsome, talented, stealthy, judicious, and smart.

Quote:

GEORGE “…If I was bright, if I was even a little bit smart, I’d have my own little place, an’ I’d be bringin’ in my own crops, ‘stead of doin’ all the work and not getting what comes up outa the ground.” (3.11)

Thought:

George’s point here undercuts the notion of America as a land of milk and honey for all. For the poor ranch hand, even his dreams are limited by the reality of his station in life. America is depicted here not as a land of infinite opportunity, but more tempered by the harsh practicalities of where you come from and who you are.

Quote:

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)

Thought:

The story of the house and the little farm mean very different things to George and Lennie. Still, both men dream of an America where it is possible to live off the fat of the land – it’s something akin to the folk song that was well known during the Depression-era, called "Big Rock Candy Mountain." The lyrics are below, but you can also hear the song in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*
"One evening as the sun went down and the jungle fire was burning
Down the track came a hobo hiking and he said boys I'm not turning
I'm headin' for a land that's far away beside the crystal fountains
So come with me we'll go and see the Big Rock Candy Mountains

In the Big Rock Candy Mountains there's a land that's fair and bright
Where the handouts grow on bushes and you sleep out every night
Where the boxcars are all empty and the sun shines every day
On the birds and the bees and the cigarette trees
Where the lemonade springs where the bluebird sings
In the Big Rock Candy Mountains

In the Big Rock Candy Mountains all the cops have wooden legs
And the bulldogs all have rubber teeth and the hens lay soft boiled eggs
The farmer's trees are full of fruit and the barns are full of hay
Oh, I'm bound to go where there ain't no snow
Where the rain don't fall and the wind don't blow
In the Big Rock Candy Mountains

In the Big Rock Candy Mountains you never change your socks
And the little streams of alcohol come a-trickling down the rocks
The brakemen have to tip their hats and the railroad bulls are blind
There's a lake of stew and of whiskey too
You can paddle all around 'em in a big canoe
In the Big Rock Candy Mountains

In the Big Rock Candy Mountains the jails are made of tin
And you can walk right out again as soon as you are in
There ain't no short handled shovels, no axes saws or picks
I'm goin' to stay where you sleep all day
Where they hung the jerk that invented work
In the Big Rock Candy Mountains

I'll see you all this coming fall in the Big Rock Candy Mountains"

Thus "the fat of the land" means different things to different people. Unlike some regular traveling workers, the American Dream that George and Lennie envision for themselves is an honest day's work directed by themselves, and a place they can call their own at the end of that day. This is a very particular vision of America from this era, and it shows a certain nobility in both men.

Quote:
“You’re nuts.” Crooks was scornful. “I seen hunderds of men come by on the road an’ on the ranches, with their bindles on their back an’ that same damn thing in their heads. Hunderds of them. They come, an’ they quit an’ go on; an’ every damn one of ’em’s got a little piece of land in his head/ An’ never a God damn one of ’em ever gets it. Just like heaven. Ever’body wants a little piece of lan’. I read plenty of books out here. Nobody never gets to heaven, and nobody gets no land. It’s just in their head. They’re all the time talkin’ about it, but it’s jus’ in their head.” (4.64)

Thought:
This is easily one of the more powerful passages in the novella. It manages to say that all this time, Lennie and George thought they were alone, but actually, they were never alone. In fact, nobody that’s tramping on the road is alone, because every one of them has a dream of land in their minds, and every single one of them will end up like every other, as they’re all destined to fail. It’s a brotherhood of desperation and disappointment.

Quote:
Candy said, “That bitch didn’t ought to of said that to you.”

“It wasn’t nothing,” Crooks said dully. “You guys comin’ in an’ settin’ made me forget. What she says is true.” (4.136-137)

Thought:
For a moment, as they all sat talking together about a shared dream, it seemed like everybody – Candy, Lennie, and Crooks – were coming from the same place, and could belong together in the same place. Curley’s wife reminds the group that they’ve forgotten themselves. No matter how comfortable Crooks felt just sitting around and having hope with the guys, in this America (the America of Curley’s wife), Crooks will never achieve the "American Dream."

Quote:
"I tell you I ain’t used to livin’ like this. I coulda made somethin’ of myself." She said darkly, "Maybe I will yet." And then her words tumbled out in a passion of communication, as though she hurried before her listener could be taken away. "I lived right in Salinas,” she said. “Come there when I was a kid. Well, a show come through, an’ I met one of the actors. He says I could go with that show. But my ol’ lady wouldn’ let me. She says because I was on’fifteen. But the guy says I coulda. If I’d went, I wouldn’t be livin’ like this, you bet." (5.34)

Thought:
Curley’s wife is lost in the glamorous America, one where every good looking kid ought to be in pictures and no men that roll through town at night have any reason to mislead to the village girls. Curley’s wife, like everyone around her, is convinced that a bigger, better America is out there for her to seize, though she’s bitter that her chance to seize it has passed.

Quote:

"Then—it’s all off?” Candy asked sulkily. George didn’t answer his question. George said, "I’ll work my month an’ I’ll take my fifty bucks an’ I’ll stay all night in some lousy cat house. Or I’ll set in some poolroom til everbody goes home. An’ then I’ll come back an’ work another month an’ I’ll have fifty bucks more." (5.79-80)

Thought:

George has talked before about the wandering guys who spend their lives this way, but always with a grain of salt. He accepts that they are lonely and their way of life no good. When George says that he’ll accept this kind of life, we know he has resigned his dream and will no longer fight to be different. It’s over; George has given up, turning himself over to futile amusements and lonely misery.
Violence Quotes

Quote:

LENNIE "Where we goin', George?"

The little man jerked down the brim of his hat and scowled over at Lennie. "So you forgot that awready, did you? I gotta tell you again, do I? Jesus Christ, you're a crazy bastard!"

"I forgot," Lennie said softly. (1.14-16)

Thought:

Though George and Lennie are friends through thick and thin, George is not above being gruff or angry in their relationship. While George clearly cares about his companion, there's a certain amount of violence in the way that he treats him, possibly linked to the fact that he gets frustrated at how dense Lennie can be sometimes. Lennie's softness (in spite of his big size) sets off George's sharpness considerably. The violence here seems to be more emotional (and less severe) than physical violence.

Quote:

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)

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.

Quote:

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)

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 playful roughness becomes dangerous violence.

Quote:

LENNIE “I wasn’t kicked in the head with no horse, was I, George?”

"Be a damn good thing if you was," George said viciously. "Save ever’body a hell of a lot of trouble."

"You said I was your cousin, George."

"Well, that was a lie. An’ I’m damn glad it was. If I was a relative of yours I’d shoot myself." (2.61-64)

Thought:

Though George covered for Lennie in front of the boss, instead of just taking it in stride, he takes it out on his friend. George seems to need to be especially mean to Lennie after George done something nice for his friend, maybe to maintain a balance of feelings. Still, the violent attitude we see in George here is remarkably vicious.

Quote:

"I’ll try to catch him," said Curley. His eyes passed over the new men and he stopped. He glanced coldly at George and then at Lennie. His arms gradually bent at the elbows and his hands closed into fists. He stiffened and went into a slight crouch. His glance was at once calculating and pugnacious. Lennie squirmed under the look and shifted his feet nervously. Curley stepped gingerly close to him. "You the new guys the old man was waitin’ for?” (2.74)

Thought:

Literally from the moment Curley first lays eyes on the guys, he’s itching for a fight. The violence practically seethes out of him, and it seems a foregone conclusion almost from this point that Curley means to make trouble for Lennie, and big trouble at that.

Quote:

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)

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.

Quote:

Lennie smiled with this bruised mouth. “I didn’t want no trouble,” he said. He walked toward the door, but just before he came to it, he turned back. "George?"

“What you want?”

“I can still tend the rabbits, George?”

“Sure. You ain’t done nothing wrong."

"I di’n’t mean no harm, George." (3.268-272)

Thought:

Lennie knows that with all the violence afoot, something is definitely not good. Still, rather than be concerned about his sorry and bleeding self or the newly disabled Curley, all Lennie can really think of is the rabbits. He is simply unable to see the consequences of his actions, except in relation to the dream that he hangs on to doggedly.

Quote:

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)

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.

**Quote:**

"He was so little," said Lennie. "I was jus playin’ with him… an’ he made like he’s gonna bite me… an’ I made like I was gonna smack him … an’… an’ I done it. An’ then he was dead. She consoled him. "Don’t you worry none. He was jus’ a mutt. You can get another one easy. The whole country is fulla mutts." (5.25-26)

**Thought:**

This scene features some irony – Curley’s wife is not at all moved by the violence of Lennie’s action. Instead, she sees the pup as a replaceable object that shouldn’t be the cause of too much fretting. What she doesn’t see is that actually both she and the pup are objectified. The way she talks about the pup – violence against it is unimportant because *the pup* is considered unimportant – seems to be a bit of foreshadowing. When she is accidentally killed by Lennie’s violence, no one seems particularly sad that she’s gone; instead, they focus on Lennie.
Prejudice Quotes

Quote:

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)

Thought:

George is sure that if the boss realizes Lennie is mentally disabled, they’ll be discriminated against and not hired. To George, Lennie’s mental disability is something that isn’t really that important – as long as he plays it down to others, it shouldn’t hinder them too much.

Quote:

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)

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.

Quote:

OLD MAN [CANDY] "Yes sir. Jesus, we had fun. They let the nigger come in that night. Little skinner name of Smitty took after the nigger. Done pretty good, too. The guys wouldn’t let him use his feet, so the nigger got him. If he coulda used his feet, Smitty says he woulda killed the nigger. The guys said on account of the nigger’s got a crooked back, Smitty can’t use his
feet." He paused in relish of the memory. (2.22)

Thought:

Candy is recounting a Christmas night where the boss brought in a gallon of whiskey to the bunkhouse. The black stable buck was let into the festivities, but it seems he was still the center of some degradation, getting dragged into a fighting match with one of the ranch men. There’s a strange code that seems to exist around the ranch’s prejudice. We see an odd give-and-take that seems to exist as the men realize, despite their prejudice, that this man is very much a real person.

Quote:

"...You go on get outta my room. I ain't wanted in the bunk house, and you ain't wanted in my room."

"Why ain't you wanted?" Lennie asked.

"'Cause I'm black..." (4.10-11)

Thought:

Lennie can’t fathom racial prejudice. We’ve already seen he doesn’t have a lot of the societal niceties down (like when to pet girls and when not to pet girls), but it’s actually pretty interesting that 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.

Quote:

Candy leaned against the wall beside the broken collar while he scratched his wrist stump. "I been here a long time," he said. "An' Crooks been here a long time. This's the first time I ever been in his room."

Crooks said darkly, "Guys don't come into a colored man's room very much." (4.76-77)

Thought:

Even when prejudice is admitted, and it’s clear there’s a bit of sheepish apology, it’s still hard to excuse. Prejudice is one of those corrosive things, full of rancor, and while the men have always neatly kept their distance from Crooks’s life, now that they’re in it, we can’t be sure if they previously stayed away out of respect or scorn. Until Lennie breaks that wall between the men, this question has never been asked – and it won’t easily be answered.
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)

Curley’s wife rankles at being asked to leave Crooks’s room. Her prejudice is a last resort of sorts – she knows it’s the only weapon she has to assert 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

Quote:

[Lennie] said gently, "George… I ain’t got mine. I musta lost it." He looked down at the ground in despair.

"You never had none, you crazy bastard. I got both of ‘em here. Think I’d let you carry your own work card?"

Lennie grinned with relief. (1.22-24)

Thought:

Lennie doesn’t seem to regard his mental weakness as a point of despair. Instead, he seems relieved that George is there to have his back. Lennie’s weakness might be responsible for the strength of his bond with George.

Quote:

[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 fresh and I’ll let you keep it a little while." (1.76)

Thought:

Lennie’s condition, or maybe his sentimentiality, 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.

Quote:

The boss pointed a playful 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)

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.

Quote:

The swamper considered… "Well . . . tell you what. Curley’s like a lot of little guys. He hates big guys. He’s alla time picking scraps with big guys. Kind of like he’s mad at ‘em because he ain’t a big guy. You seen little guys like that, ain’t you? Always scrappy?" (2.91)

Thought:

Curley’s greatest weakness is his obsession with his own limitations. This is ironic – and fatal for our heroes.

Quote:

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)

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.

Quote:

Candy looked a long time at Slim to try to find some reversal. And Slim gave him none. At last Candy said softly and hopelessly, "Awright—take ‘im."
He did not look down at the dog at all. He lay back on his bunk and crossed his arms behind his head and stared at the ceiling. (3.85)

Thought:
Candy is too weak to defend his dog, even though he clearly wants to do so. Slim won’t give him any support, and Candy isn’t strong enough to just tell Carlson to get lost. The dog is old and weak, and though Candy initially seemed like its protector, we find here that he may not be so different from his pet after all. This is especially interesting when we consider, again, the parallels between Candy’s friendship with the dog and George’s friendship with Lennie.

Quote:

[Candy] said miserably, "You seen what they done to my dog tonight? They says he wasn’t no good to himself nor nobody else. When they can me here I wisht somebody’d shoot me. But they won’t do nothing like that. I won’t have no place to go, an’ I can’t get no more jobs."
(3.222)

Thought:

Candy’s power comes in the form of the $300 he received as compensation for the accident he suffered on the ranch. His weakness is that, regardless of the money, he is now missing a hand, which keeps him from being able to work well. Candy understands that he’ll soon be useless to himself and others.

Quote:

Carlson laughed. "You God damn punk," he said. You tried to throw a scare into Slim, an’ you couldn’t make it stick. Slim throwed a scare inta you. You’re yella as a frog belly. I don’t care if you’re the best welter in the country. You come for me, an’ I’ll kick your God damn head off."

Candy joined the attack with joy, "Glove fulla vaseline," he said disgustedly. Curley flared at him. His eyes slipped on past and lighted on Lennie; and Lennie was still smiling with delight at the memory of the ranch. (3.241-242)

Thought:

Curley is getting his due from Slim, Carlson, and Candy. Outnumbered and knowing he is in the wrong, he immediately sets out to find someone in the room who is weaker than he. Curley is a bully and the worst kind of weak person.

Quote:

Crooks “This is just a nigger talkin’, an’ a busted-back nigger. So it don’t mean nothing, see?” (4.39)

Thought:
Crooks lashes out here, and his self-description shows his own weakness. Perhaps after all these years of being victimized by others, he’s come around to victimizing himself. He has accepted his status as a weak man.

**Quote:**

*CURLY’S WIFE “They left all the weak ones here,” she said finally. (4.92)*

**Thought:**

This is an awful thing to say, obviously, but Curley’s wife lashes out to make up for the fact that no one is interested in her. It’s similar to the reason Curley attacked Lennie. She is weak and resents it, so she takes it out on those who are in no position to defend themselves.

**Quote:**

*She stood in front of Lennie and put her hands on her hips, and she frowned disapprovingly at him.*

*And when she spoke, it was in Lennie’s voice. “I tol’ you an tol’ you,” she said. “I tol you, ‘Min’ George because he’s such a nice fella an’ good to you.’ But you don’t never take no care. You do bad things.” (6.10)*

**Thought:**

Lennie’s hallucinations seem to fully reflect Lennie’s real weaknesses and fears. Aunt Clara talks about how Lennie would never run away because he’s dependent on George. The big scary rabbit preys on Lennie’s fear Crooks brought up -- that George might outgrow Lennie and leave him. It makes the audience wonder whether Lennie has, stored away in his consciousness, knowledge of what he’s done wrong and deeper knowledge of himself. Perhaps he just lacked the good sense to access it, and now that he has, something irreparable has happened. Lennie as we know him – slow, but mostly sane – might have lost some of his sanity after he killed Curley’s wife. Of course, there is no way to know for sure.
Women and Femininity Quotes

Quote:

"God, you’re a lot of trouble," said George. "I could get along so easy and so nice if I didn’t have you on my tail. I could live so easy and maybe have a girl."

For a moment Lennie lay quiet, and then he said hopefully, "We gonna work on a ranch, George." (1.56-57)

Thought:

At this point, it seems George grasps that he’s more in Lennie’s boat now: he can’t have the kind of stability represented by having a girl, but the next best thing is having a job.

Quote:

"Seems like Curley is cockier’n ever since he got married."

George grunted. "Maybe he’s showin’ off for his wife." (2.97-98)

Thought:

From this tidbit, it seems that Curley’s performance around the ranch is to impress his wife. Perhaps she’s more than an object, and really means something to him.

Quote:

OLD MAN [CANDY] "Well, that glove’s fulla Vaseline."

GEORGE "Vaseline? What the hell for?"

OLD MAN [CANDY] "Well, I will tell ya what—Curley says he’s keepin’ that hand soft for his wife." (2.99-101)

Thought:

It’s pretty clear here that Curley’s marriage, in his mind, is a performance to impress the other guys at the ranch. Curley isn’t trying to impress his wife; he’s trying to use her (and his supposed relations with her) as a tool to prove how very manly he is. Nobody who respected his wife and felt secure in his relationship would need to spread talk like that around to the guys.
Quote:

OLD MAN [CANDY] "Well—she got the eye."

GEORGE "Yeah? Married two weeks and got the eye? Maybe that's why Curley's pants is full of ants." (2.109-110)

Thought:

This is an interesting turn of events — Curley meant to use his wife to prove how masculine he was. Instead, now that she’s looking around the ranch, he seems to be more laughable than ever, as the guys assume he can’t handle business at home. The woman has some power in this situation — though she’s called a tart, she’s turned her husband’s attempt to control her on its head.

Quote:

"Oh!" She put her hands behind her back and leaned against the door frame so that her body was thrown forward. "You're the new fellas that just come, ain't ya?"

"Yeah."

Lennie's eyes moved down over her body, and though she didn't seem to be looking at Lennie she bridled a little. She looked at her fingers. "Sometimes Curley's in here," she explained. George said brusquely, "Well he ain’t now."

"If he ain’t, I guess I better look someplace else," she said playfully.

Lennie watched her, fascinated. George said, "If I see him, I'll pass the word you was looking for him."

She smiled archly and twitched her body. "Nobody can't blame a person for lookin'," she said. There were footsteps behind her, going by. She turned her head. "Hi, Slim," she said. (2.145-150)

Thought:

So Curley’s clearly a jerk, and you want to side with his wife for hitting him where it hurts. Yet, we must admit, she is a bit flirtatious, given the circumstances.

Quote:

George said, "She's gonna make a mess. They's gonna be a bad mess about her. She's a
jail bait all set on the trigger. That Curley got his work cut out for him. Ranch with a bunch of
guys on it ain’t no place for a girl, specially like her.” (3.135)

Thought:

Is it true that ranches are no place for women? As George earlier compared stability to having
"a girl" and presumably raising a family, it seems that if women can’t be part of ranch life, ranch life can’t really ever be stable and happy. Thinking on this leads us to wonder whether there’s no notion of a loving, down-to-earth, farm-wife type of gal that could make these men happy. Are all women trouble, as far as the ranch men see them?

Quote:

"Yeah," said Whit. "We don’t never go there. Clara gets three bucks a crack and thirty-five
cents a shot, and she don’t crack no jokes. But Susy’s place is clean and she got nice
chairs." (3.144)

Thought:

Whit is talking about a whorehouse, where the women are no more important than how nice
the chairs are. It seems on the ranch, women aren’t women, they’re sex.

Quote:

George signed. "You give me a good whore house every time," he said. "A guy can go in an’
get drunk and get ever’thing outa his system all at once, an’ no messes. And he knows how
much it’s gonna set him back. These here jail baits is just set on the trigger of the hoosegow."
(3.185)

Thought:

George ruminates on women as he worries Slim is going after that one particular bundle of
issues, Curley’s wife. On the ranch, women appear to mean nothing but sex, and sex has
nothing to do with love. We’ve got to ask, given how dark George’s outlook is on the ladies,
whether he could ever really love a woman. Still, he has spoken abstractly about "having a
girl."

Quote:

Candy’s face had grown redder and redder, but before she was done speaking, he had control
of himself. He was the master of the situation. "I might of knew," he said gently. "Maybe you
just better go along an’ roll your hoop. We ain’t got nothing to say to you at all. We know what
we got, and we don’t care whether you know it or not." (4.105)
Thought:

Curley’s wife has spent a while berating Candy, Lennie, and Crooks. She’s put each of them into a nasty category, calling them collectively, "a nigger an’ a dum-dum and a lousy ol’ sheep," so Candy returns the favor by reminding her of her niche, too. Candy can’t yell at Curley’s wife (she is the boss’s daughter-in-law) so instead, he gently patronizes her. Hoop-rolling was a pastime for little girls, which puts Curley’s wife nicely in her place.
Man and the Natural World Quotes

Quote:

[He] walked heavily, dragging his feet a little, way a bear drags his paws. His arms did not swing at his sides, but hung loosely. (1.4)

Thought:

In our introduction to the larger of the two men, we realize that the bigger one is depicted as more of a beast than the other man. The words that Steinbeck uses here evoke a picture of a burly, dull, beast—like a bear, or an ape who lopes along. This will be the first of many comparisons of Lennie to a beast. It’s a hint that perhaps it will be easier to understand Lennie’s behavior if we link him to the natural world, instead of man’s "civilized" world.

Quote:

Lennie dabbled his big paw in the water and wiggled his fingers so the water arose in little splashes; rings widened across the pool o the other side and came back again. Lennie watched them go. "Look, George. Look what I done." (1.9)

Thought:

For all Lennie’s juvenile behavior and thinking, this simple act embodies the possibility that there might be a place for him after all. Lennie is comfortable in the natural world, and unlike other fully-grown adults, he uniquely appreciates the delights nature has to offer. There’s a suggestion here that the elements of the natural world are not necessarily inferior to civilization; a man might get along fine in the natural world because he has a refined and simple sense of beauty—something definitely required to appreciate what’s going on in the great outdoors.

Quote:

GEORGE "What you want of a dead mouse, anyways?"

"I could pet it with my thumb while we walked along," said Lennie. (1.36-37)

Thought:

It’s clear from this moment that Lennie connects to soft things, but that he doesn’t have the complexity to feel revulsion at something being dead. This is our first indication that Lennie doesn’t have a real sense of the severity (or grotesqueness) that humans associate with death. It seems Lennie has a primitive view of death, one where it’s just another part of the
natural process – nothing to fear, shun, or revere either.

Quote:

*The old man came slowly into the room. He had his broom in his hand. And at his heels there walked a dragfooted sheep dog, gray of muzzle, and with pale, blind old eyes. The dog struggled lamely to the side of the room and lay down, grunting softly to himself and licking his grizzled, moth-eaten coat. The swamper watched him until he was settled. "I wasn’t listenin’. I was jus’ standin’ in he shad a minute scratchin’ my dog."* (2.65)

Thought:

Steinbeck doesn’t really pull any punches with this one. The old man and the old dog belong together; they are both scraggly, gray, physically disabled creatures. With no one else to appreciate them, they appreciate each other, bridging the separate worlds of man and animal, maybe because the ranch is no place for man-to-man friendships.

Quote:

"*She slang her pups last night," said Slim. "Nine of ‘em. I drowned four of ‘em right off. She couldn’t feed that many."* (2.186)

Thought:

Slim act of drowning the puppies seems cruel initially. But Slim’s actually got a keen sense of justice – it’s just that he goes by the justice of the natural world. His dog couldn’t feed all of her puppies, so some had to die. They would die in the natural world from starvation anyway, so he’s just speeding up the process. The order, even on the ranch in the human world, mirrors the cruel realities of the natural world.

Quote:

*[Candy] said miserably, "You seen what they done to my dog tonight? They says he wasn’t no good to himself nor nobody else. When they can me here I wisht somebody’d shoot me. But they won’t do nothing like that. I won’t have no place to go, an’ I can’t get no more jobs."* (3.222)

Thought:

Candy compares himself to his dog. Again, we see the strange connection forged between the natural world and the world of man. In Candy’s eyes, there’s no hierarchy, and when he’s weak, the ranch men won’t treat him any better than they treated his dog. We’ve also got to wonder whether Candy feels empathy or sympathy for his dog, knowing he’ll share the same
Quote:

Lennie covered his face with huge paws and bleated with terror. He cried, "Make ‘um stop, George." (3.248)

Thought:

Lennie is once again compared to an animal, but this time a curious one. He has huge paws, but he’s like a baby bear outside of its mother’s protection. The word “bleat” here is poignant and powerful, as we imagine Lennie as a little lost lamb, stunned and battered by something mean. Still, just as in the animal kingdom, Lennie eventually will have to fight back to protect himself, and it won’t bode well for Curley, little lamb or no.
Character Roles (Protagonist, Antagonist...)

Protagonist

George

George is the character with whom we most identify. He’s the guy that is most like us. Lennie is too simple-minded, Slim too wonderful, Curley too mean, Candy too washed-up to perform much action, and Crooks too isolated to be a key player in the drama. That leaves George. He is the guy we see first, and the guy we see last. The story is his. George is the protagonist.

Also, the protagonist is traditionally the character who undergoes a change or transition during the course of the story. George changes from being a person who believes in the dream farm to a person who has killed his best friend and no longer believes in the possibility of the ideal. Everyone else in the novella remains unchanged from beginning to end.

Antagonist

Curley

Curley’s the antagonist – because he’s the bad guy and the villain. Curley puts roadblocks in the way of the protagonist, a.k.a. George. Whenever George gets even slightly comfortable about the job situation on the ranch, Curley shows up and antagonizes Lennie and George. When Curley punches Lennie and Lennie crushes Curley’s hand, George knows that Curley can get the two of them fired. Curley’s wife is also trouble for George and Lennie, but mainly because of her husband’s attitude. If Curley were calm and not an angry man, his wife’s talking to the men would be no big deal. And when Lennie accidentally kills Curley’s wife, it is Curley’s attitude that brings disaster – he is much more interested in killing Lennie than in mourning his wife. He is angry, vindictive, and violent.

Guide/Mentor

Slim

Slim is god-like and all-wise. Because he’s so smart, Slim is the only person on the ranch who isn’t jealous of or threatened by anyone else. He sees things for what they are, knows what’s supposedly right and wrong, and stands up for George and Lennie when no one else will. He listens to George talk about Lennie and asks him important questions that reinforce George’s feelings of responsibility and friendship. He analyzes Lennie and decides that Lennie is not inherently mean, just childish – an important moral distinction. He decides that it was right for
Carlson to shoot Candy’s dog – a judgment call that leads George toward his own future decision about mercy killing. Slim interferes when Curley hits Lennie, when Curley is in the position to get George and Lennie fired, and when Curley wants to shoot Lennie. Most importantly, he reassures and comforts George in the final scene, telling him that he had to kill Lennie – it was the only thing a guy in his position could do.

**Foil**

**Lennie**

Steinbeck goes out of his way to have Lennie be George’s opposite in size, mental ability, and temperament; therefore allowing us to see how childish and spontaneous Lennie is – and how parental and practical George is.

The "straight man" in a comedy duo is sometimes known as the comic foil. The humor in these partnerships derives from the uneven relation between the characters, who usually share many traits but have drastically different personalities. While the straight man portrays a reasonable and serious character, the other portrays a funny, dumb, or simply unorthodox one. Abbott and Costello, Lucy and Ricky, Wile E. Coyote and the Roadrunner, Chris Farley and David Spade, Lennie and George. All the best relationships in the world – as well as the worst. Notice how one of the pair nearly always wants to kill the other.
Tools of Characterization

Names

George’s last name probably refers to John Milton and his poem *Paradise Lost*, which includes the Biblical stories of Adam, Eve, Cain, and Abel. Everything comes full circle when you realize these Biblical stories are reflected in *Of Mice and Men*. Critics have pointed out that George and Lennie’s loss of the mythical dream farm can be paralleled to Adam and Eve’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden, while George and Lennie’s relationship asks the question “Am I my brother’s keeper?” a central question for Cain and Abel. (Cain and Abel were the sons of Adam and Eve. It’s a long story, but in short, Cain kills his brother.)

George and Lennie are like brothers who are responsible for each other, and the Cain and Abel parable adds a different lens to interpret Lennie’s murder. Is George’s killing of Lennie like Cain’s wrongful murder of Abel, or is it the best way for George to take care of Lennie?

After all this talk touching on the complexity of George’s character, it’s only fitting that Lennie Small’s name is symbolic too. Lennie is obviously not “small” physically, and his name is something of a joke to the people that first meet him. Still, he is actually quite “small” of mind, which people wouldn’t know if they didn’t talk to him. Lennie Small’s name highlights the contradictory stuff of his character – because he’s big, he seems threatening, but he’s actually quite tender. Though he never means any harm, he always seems to end up hurting something.

Believe it or not, Curley’s wife not having a name can be seen as symbolic as well. Her missing a name emphasizes her second-class citizenship. The woman has no name because she is just an object, the "property" of someone else. Curley’s wife can only be seen in reference to her husband, who (supposedly) owns and controls her body, and by extension, her. If Curley’s wife had a name, the men would relate to her as a person, but there’s no need for that kind of social nicety. Like the unnamed "boss" character, Curley’s wife is only important to note for the limited role she plays as Curley’s wife.

Speech and Dialogue

Colloquialism

The language of the characters is fairly simple, and meant to represent the way normal, working class ranch people of Depression era America would speak. Most vocabulary is of an everyday kind, except for words particular to farm equipment and jobs (like skinners, swampers, and buckers). In the dialogue, Steinbeck uses slang, vulgarities, and non-standard terms ("ain’t," "would of," "brang," and so on) to convey an authentic sense of the characters. These aren’t highfalutin’ people by any means, and they speak straight and often dirty. The idiosyncratic speech patterns, obscenities, and casual lingo ("she’s a loo loo," “Curley’s got
ants in his pants”) help recreate a particular time, place, and social strata that make the book sound real.

It’s interesting to note that everyone in the book seems to use rather similar language. The boss doesn’t speak with any more refinement than the ranch guys. Lennie, though he’s slow, isn’t less able to communicate with words than others. Even Crooks, who is constantly made separate because he’s black, speaks just the same as anybody else. It’s almost as if Steinbeck puts language to work as an equalizing force; no matter what’s said about any man, so long as he can speak for himself, his story is as important as any other.

**Call and response, used by George and Lennie**

While a lot of the talking is loose and fast, part of Steinbeck’s genius is being able to communicate sophisticated ideas and feelings through simple and unassuming language. Even though George and Lennie aren’t full of lofty words to discuss their dream, there’s something endearing and earnest about the way the two of them discuss it together. It’s as if both men can be dreamers because they have each other. It’s really important that Lennie remembers few things, but knows this story of the ranch almost by heart. Lennie is promised a part to play, and George is made a bit more important by being put in charge of telling the dream. The dream, and the way it’s told as a back-and-forth between the two men, gives both Lennie and George something to hold on to, as well as the promise that they’re part of something bigger.
George Milton

George is a good guy with a good heart, but he has developed a hard edge, likely due to tough times. He is occasionally mean to Lennie, complaining about everything he misses out on by having to travel with this guy as baggage. Still, it’s clear he enjoys Lennie’s company, as he’s quick to comfort and assure him. He even shares this great big dream of the two of them having a ranch together.

Although George is all mother hen around Lennie, he can be rather gruff with outsiders. He’s suspicious of nearly everyone, except Slim, and seems to take his time warming up to people. This general distrust puts George’s relationship with Lennie in even greater contrast – it’s pretty extraordinary that George has opened up, and though he doesn’t run around declaring that he’s BFF with Lennie, it’s pretty clear that his gruff affection is more than anyone else will ever get.

George doesn’t exactly spend the whole book declaring much of anything about himself. But his final act in the novella reveals that he has a clear sense of right and wrong – and that he truly loves Lennie. Unfortunately, that love requires the execution-style murder of his friend.

George’s murder of Lennie is in some ways a renunciation of George’s own happiness. We know from George’s own admission that Lennie gives him hope. With the dream farm, but even just within their friendship, Lennie gives George a place to belong and a reason to belong there. George chooses to take Lennie’s life in order to protect him from an awful fate, but in killing him, George also sacrifices his own dreams and happiness for the sake of his friend’s comfort. Thus George is a special kind of character – a hard-talking, straight-shooting guy with a heart of gold. And a need for friendship.

George Milton Timeline

- George and Lennie spend the night by the Salinas River in northern California. They argue over Lennie’s mouse and obsession with soft things, and discuss their dreams of a farm they can own.
- George reminds Lennie to come back to this exact spot if he does something “bad.”
- George takes Lennie to the new ranch near Soledad, California after they flee their last job in Weed, where Lennie caused his usual type of trouble – that is, petting.
- George warns Lennie not to talk to Curley, Curley’s wife, or the boss. In other words, Lennie is to keep his big mouth shut around everyone.
- George gets one of Slim’s puppies for Lennie.
- George tells Slim about the girl in Weed.
• He recounts the farm-dream story to Lennie.
• George agrees that Candy can join them in their future ranch endeavor if he contributes three hundred dollars.
• George tells Lennie to fight back when Curley attacks him.
• George goes to the (cheap and clean-ish) local whorehouse.
• George comes back and discovers that Crooks now knows about the dream farm.
• George plays horseshoes with all the other men except for Lennie, who’s in the barn petting and eventually killing Curley’s wife.
• George finds out from Candy what Lennie has done.
• George is conflicted about what to do with Lennie (who has run off to their hiding spot by the river). He doesn’t want to have Lennie locked up like "an animal," but he doesn’t want Curley to shoot Lennie in the guts, either.
• George and Candy realize that the dream of the farm is over.
• George secretly steals Carlson’s gun and tells the men that Lennie has gone south.
• George goes north to the river and finds Lennie.
• George tells Lennie the story of the dream farm again.
• While George is narrating, he shoots Lennie in the back of the head.
• When the other men arrive, George pretends that Lennie had Carlson’s gun.
• George goes off for a (very stiff) drink with Slim.

**Lennie Small**

From the moment we learn why Lennie and George are on the road (Lennie’s dress-petting incident in Weed), we realize that Lennie’s combination of small thinking and big body is bad news. Lennie doesn’t know his own strength, but he’s also unable to gauge other people’s (or animals’) weaknesses. Lennie is best described as childlike; he embodies the best characteristics of a childish mentality – innocence, exuberance, and earnest love and trust – but he also embodies the worst – unchecked anger, irresponsibility, and an inability to connect his actions to their consequences.

Throughout the text, our feelings for Lennie vacillate almost as wildly as his actions. He inspires our sympathy when we learn how simply and earnestly he wants to take care of the rabbits. But, when he’s out of control, Lennie can be scary. (Think about when he menacingly threatens Crooks.) Because Lennie is so quick to get emotional, so unable to be rational, and so physically large, his feelings and lack of thought are bound to get him into trouble. Still, his innocence and helplessness (set off by his large physical stature) make him a particularly endearing character. Lennie’s clearly a champ at winning hearts (he won over Candy and Crook), but it’s unclear whether their friendship means very much to Lennie. The big guy seems mostly obsessed with George. And the dream farm.

Lennie’s character also raises myriad questions, like how he conceives of his relationship with
George, and whether the dream farm is a real life goal for Lennie or simply an opportunity to have rabbits all his own. Further, Lennie’s comfort with (or obliviousness to) death is odd, as introduced by the first scene with the dead mouse in pocket. That’s a hint that we should be curious about Lennie’s relationship with death – it’s unclear whether “life” in the abstract sense is really that important to Lennie, or if friendship, comfort, and things to pet trump more life-and-death considerations. (Would Lennie find a life without those things satisfying at all?) That brings us to Lennie’s way of loving, which is a little too hard and a little too long for anyone to handle. And, as a result, several mice, a puppy, and one woman pay the price.

**Lennie Small Timeline**

- Lennie spends the night by the Salinas River with George.
- Lennie tries to hide the mouse he has petted (to death).
- When George throws Lennie’s mouse away, Lennie tells George he’s going to go live in a cave.
- Lennie begs George to tell the farm story.
- Lennie says a little too much when he is introduced to the boss at the new ranch.
- Lennie gets scared when Curley tries to pick a fight with him.
- Lennie sees Curley’s wife and thinks she is “purty.”
- Lennie discovers that Slim’s dog has had puppies. Needless to say, he wants one desperately.
- Lennie gets his puppy! And he spends a considerable amount of time trying to sneak it into the bunkhouse so he can pet it. And pet it. And PET IT.
- Lennie is attacked by Curley. He does nothing to defend himself until George tells him to, at which point he pulverizes Curley’s hand.
- Lennie is worried that George won’t let him tend their future dream farm because he destroyed Curley’s hand.
- When the other men head to Suzy’s, Lennie gets lonely and goes to see Crooks. He happily speaks to him about the dream farm.
- When Crooks tries to tell Lennie that George isn’t coming back, Lennie gets scared and angry.
- Lennie gets to see Curley’s wife again. Hubba hubba.
- Lennie is incredibly happy when George returns.
- Lennie chills in the barn with his (dead) puppy. He is alternately mad and sad.
- Lennie is afraid when Curley’s wife enters the barn, but she’s not freaked out about the dead puppy.
- Lennie details his interest in petting soft things.
- Curley’s wife offers her hair to be petted.
- Lennie obliges. He obliges so thoroughly that he accidentally breaks Curley’s wife’s neck.
Lennie tries to bury Curley’s wife under the hay, but then he decides to leave and head for the safe place George told him about, dead puppy in tow.

Lennie waits for George to show up and worries about how mad he will be.

Lennie hallucinates about his Aunt Clara and a HUGE, evil rabbit. Clearly, Lennie is extremely stressed.

Lennie is thrilled when George shows up. He wants George to "give him hell," and then to tell him the dream-farm story.

Lennie looks happily toward the river as George shoots him in the back of the head.

**Candy**

Candy is an old ranch worker ("swamper") who has lost one of his hands in a farm accident. Candy and his relationship with his ancient, reeking dog are important in the book as markers for exactly who you don’t want to be. Candy has spent the best years of his life working on someone else’s ranch, only to lose his hand and have little money.

Given these circumstances, Candy’s dog parallels Candy’s plight. Though the pet was once a great sheepherder, it was put out to pasture once it stopped being productive. Candy realizes that his fate is to be put on the roadside as soon as he’s no longer useful; on the ranch, he won’t be treated any differently than his dog. Worse than the dog parallel, though, is that Candy (unlike his dog) is emotionally broken by this whole affair. He can’t bring himself to shoot his pet himself, and we suspect this is going to be the same fear and reticence that keep him from making anything more of his life. Candy can’t stand up for his pet because Candy can’t stand up for himself.

It’s no wonder, then, that Candy takes such a shine to George and Lennie and their dream. Seeking some way out of his inevitable uselessness, Candy works to change "George and Lennie’s dream" into "George, Lennie, and Candy’s plan." Still, it seems as though Candy has a bad case of futility. As he tries to help the men attain their dream, he also reminds them of the possibility (and indeed, likelihood) that it’s going to fail. Once it does indeed fail, it’s Candy more than anyone else who feels the loss. While George mourns what he must do to his friend, and Lennie worries for the future rabbits, Candy is left to embody the despair one finds at the end of a long, hard-working life when you’re done with your career and no closer to the American dream. And also, your best friend (even if it is a dog), is dead.

**Candy Timeline**
• Candy meets George and Lennie.
• Candy tells George all about the people that work on the ranch: who's who and what's what and who's what.
• Candy is hurt and scared when Carlson suggests shooting his dog, but he has to give in because Slim agrees with this idea.
• Candy lies on his bunk and Carlson goes outside and shoots Candy’s old, much-loved, and smelly dog.
• Candy overhears George relating the dream farm story and asks if he can be a part of it. He offers George 300 dollars, which was a lot of cash in those days.
• Candy goes to Crooks’s room and finds him talking to Lennie.
• Candy thinks Curley’s wife’s death is her own fault.
• Candy tells the other men about Curley’s wife.
• Candy is left in the barn, weeping bitterly and alone as the other men go off to find Lennie.

Curley’s wife

Curley’s wife has no name and is initially seen as the possession of her husband. She is also a good-looking lady who wears quite a bit of makeup, form-fitting dresses, and ostrich feathered-high heels. As the only woman on the ranch, Curley’s wife is lonely and sad – something her marriage to Curley only makes worse. She reveals throughout the course of the story that she is unhappy in her marriage because her husband seems to care little for her, and is really more interested in talking about himself than anything else. Further, she laments her lost potential; she details twice that she could’ve been a Hollywood movie star, though the chance was taken from her by her mother, who worried she was too young.

But Curley’s wife has another side that is petty, cruel, and almost as self-obsessed as her husband. She flirts deliberately with the ranch hands and causes them to suffer Curley’s hot-headed, glove-wearing wrath. Further, she does little to hide these flirtations from her husband, though they’re likely to infuriate him and make him feel even smaller. Come to think of it, this is probably why she does it at all.

You’re likely to lose all sympathy for this woman as a desperate captive of ranch-living the moment she barges in on Lennie, Crooks, and Candy in Chapter Four. She singles the men out, calling them the weaklings of the pack, left behind for a reason. In her conversation with the men, she reveals her strange dilemma – while she scorns and mocks these ranch men,
they’re the only ones she has to talk to, and talk she will, whether they’ll listen or no. Still, in order to make herself feel bigger (especially relative to those who won’t give her the time of day), she has to seek out those who are smaller. She cruelly cuts down Candy for his old age and meekness, Lennie for being “a dum dum,” and most harshly, she threatens Crooks with a lynching.

Finally, Curley’s wife, like Lennie, has no ability to self-evaluate. Unlike Lennie, she doesn’t have the excuse of being mentally slow.

She’s just self-obsessed, and unable to judge herself and her position honestly. It seems at every chance she gets, Curley’s wife likes to talk about her lost opportunities. She speaks of a traveling actor who told her she could join their show, without gathering that this is a pretty standard pick-up line. Same with the offer to go to Hollywood: Curley’s wife has convinced herself that her mother stole the letter, rather than realize the men weren’t really interested in her for any actual talent. Curley’s wife’s obsession with herself ultimately leads to her death.

She knows Lennie is supposed to stay away from her, but thrives on his attention and wants his praise for her soft hair. It is not coincidental that she ends up losing her life because she didn’t want Lennie to mess up her hair. This final event sums up Curley’s wife’s role fairly neatly.

Curley’s wife Timeline

- Curley’s wife comes by the bunkhouse and does a bit of flirting with George, Lennie, and any other males within viewing range.
- Curley’s wife comes into Crooks’s room because she’s lonely.
- She tries talking to Lennie, Crooks, and Candy, but they want her to leave.
- Curley’s wife gets insulted and calls the men mean names.
- Curley’s wife finds Lennie in the barn and tries to engage him in conversation.
- Curley’s wife offers to let Lennie pet her hair.
- Curley’s wife regrets this decision.
- She gets her neck broken by Lennie as she struggles to stop her hair from getting messy.

Slim

Slim is the “prince of the ranch.” He’s the consummate Western male: masterful, strong, fair-minded, practical, non-talkative, and exceptionally good at what he does. He is a god
among men, and his word on any subject is law. He decides who is wrong and right, who’s been naughty, and who’s been nice. The other men recognize his superiority and never question his actions or decisions. Slim is also sensitive, but not overly so. He is the only one who understands George’s affinity for Lennie, and also the only one to comprehend the gravity of George’s final act for Lennie.

As a ranch-man archetype, Slim represents the cool justice of the ranch world. While life isn’t always going to be pleasant, men like Slim can assure it will be fair, even if that means hurting some people. Slim’s keen sense of how things should be done isn’t too caught up in ethics, nor is it too sentimental. He just understands what should be and what shouldn’t be, and he seems to dictate according to the natural order, which is comforting to the men when so much of the world seems order-less, without rhyme or reason.

**Slim Timeline**

- Slim comes into the bunkhouse and meets George and Lennie.
- Slim has given one of his pups to Lennie, unfortunately signing that puppy’s death warrant.
- Slim talks to George about why he is with Lennie. He recognizes that Lennie is just like a kid and not mean-intentioned at all.
- Slim says that Carlson should be allowed to shoot Candy’s dog. He (sensitively) reminds Carlson to take a shovel and bury the thing.
- Slim goes out to the barn.
- Slim comes back to the bunkhouse. Curley has been accusing Slim of messing around with his wife, so Slim is not too happy.
- He takes control of the situation once Lennie crushes Curley’s hand, and decides what should be done.
- It is not explicitly stated whether or not Slim goes to the whorehouse, but we assume that he does.
- Slim plays horseshoes with the guys.
- Slim sees Curley’s wife dead in the barn.
- Slim suggests that Curley stay with his wife instead of going on a manhunt. Curley is too filled with self-righteous anger to pay any attention to this wise suggestion.
- Slim tells George that it would be bad if Lennie got locked up like an animal.
- Slim takes care of George after the shooting, and reassures him that he did the right and necessary thing.
- Slim takes George to get a drink.
Crooks

Crooks (named for his crooked back) is the stable hand who works with the ranch horses. He lives by himself because he is the only black man on the ranch. Crooks is bookish and likes to keep his room neat, but he has been so beaten down by loneliness and prejudicial treatment of that he is now suspicious of any kindness he receives.

Lennie’s brief interaction with Crooks reveals the complexity of racial prejudice in the northern California ranch life. Though Crooks was born in California (not like many Southern blacks who had migrated, he implies), he is still always made to feel like an outsider, even in his home state. Crooks is painfully aware that his skin color is all that keeps him separate in this culture. This outsider status causes him to lament his loneliness, but he also delights in seeing the loneliness of others, perhaps because misery loves company. When Crooks begins to pick on Lennie, suggesting George won’t come home, we discover the slight mean streak that undoubtedly develops after being alone for so long. Lennie unwittingly soothes Crooks into feeling at ease, and Candy even gets the man excited about the dream farm, to the point where Crooks could fancy himself worthy and equal enough to be in on the plan with the guys.

Crooks’s little dream of the farm is shattered by Curley’s wife’s nasty comments, slotting the black man right back into his “place” as inferior to a white woman. Jolted into that era’s reality by Curley’s wife harsh treatment, Crooks refuses to say the woman is wrong. Instead, he accepts the fact that he lives with ever-present racial discrimination. He dismisses the other men, saying he had “forgotten himself” because they’d treated him so well. It seems Crooks defines his own notion of himself not based on what he believes he’s worth, but on knowing that no matter how he feels, others around him will always value him as less. As quickly as he got excited about the dream, he abandons it, telling Candy he was “Jus foolin” about being interested in his own freedom and happiness.

Crooks Timeline

- Crooks comes by the bunkhouse to tell Slim that Lennie is petting the puppies too much.
- Crooks is in his room rubbing ointment on his injured back when Lennie comes in.
- Crooks tries to tell Lennie that he shouldn’t be in his room, but Lennie doesn’t understand.
- When Lennie tries to hang out with Crooks, Crooks thinks about how nice is it to talk to someone, but he also remembers how mistreated he’s been and takes this out on Lennie, an easy target.
- Crooks cruelly tells Lennie that George might not come back from town.
- Crooks tries to take this statement back when he sees how big and scary Lennie actually
Crooks is secretly pleased by Candy’s appearance in his room.
• Crooks shyly suggests that he would like to live on the dream farm.
• Crooks is not pleased (secretly or otherwise) by Curley’s wife’s presence in his room.
• Crooks tells Curley’s wife that she should leave.
• Crooks retreats when she threatens to have him lynched.
• Crooks retreats even further when George appears, unhappy about Crooks’s knowledge of the dream farm.

Curley

Curley is the son of the ranch boss. He is a small, semi-privileged man with a very short temper and something of an inferiority complex. He used to be a lightweight fighter, and it seems he’s always itching for a scuffle, as though it were his opportunity to prove himself on the ranch among other bigger, better men.

One of Curley’s defining characteristics is that he’s married to a woman he wants to control and can’t. Curley’s wife’s running around is a source of constant concern for him, and he forever seems to be flitting around the ranch trying to track her down. While he boasts about his sexual prowess to the others, Curley’s constant concern over his wife (and his wife’s constant absence) indicate that for Curley, sexual power is a way to show masculinity, especially if he feels his small size compromises his manliness. Sadly, it’s clear that Curley lacks sexual power, and will seek some other way to show his strength, which mostly entails picking on the mentally slow Lennie.

Curley doesn’t develop much (or at all, actually) over the course of the book, but he stands out as a character with whom the author simply does not sympathize. While everyone else is struggling, Curley’s busy picking fights and trying to throw his weight around his dad’s ranch. He seems outside of the economic struggle and even the personal struggle of the Depression. Curley’s the kind of jerk you need in contrast to the other characters. Also, we need someone to be the source of trouble among these men who mostly want to get along.

Curley Timeline

• Curley comes to the bunkhouse looking for his wife.
• Curley tries to pick a fight with Lennie.
• Curley comes to the bunkhouse looking for his wife. Again.
• Curley goes to the barn to find Slim, who he suspects is… with his wife.
• Curley comes back to the bunkhouse (yet again).
• Curley gets mad when Carlson calls him a coward. He sees Lennie smiling and starts punching the big guy (big mistake).
• Curley gets his hand thoroughly messed up by Lennie Small.
• Curley promises not to tell what really happened to his hand.
• He gets taken to the doctor.
• Despite the fact that he is married, Curley goes to Suzy’s bordello.
• He plays horseshoes until Candy tells him about his wife’s death.
• Curley looks at his dead wife and says he will shoot Lennie – preferably in the guts.
• Curley leads the band of men in the search for Lennie.
• He is the first to discover George with Lennie’s dead body.
• Curley, ever observant, notes that George shot Lennie right in the back of the head.
• Curley looks on with Carlson in puzzlement at Slim and George’s sadness.
Plot Analysis

Initial Situation

**George and Lennie are two traveling men on their way to a ranch in the Salinas Valley.**

We are introduced to the unique relationship between Lennie and George. We learn George is the brains of the operation, and Lennie is simple-minded but earnest. We also get good amount of foreshadowing: we learn that the men have left Weed because of the strange incident of Lennie touching a girl's dress. Before they've even gotten to the ranch, George warns Lennie that if anything bad happens, they're to meet in this grove. (We have no reason to believe anything will go wrong until we’re practically told something will.) Perhaps the most important function of this "initial situation" is to explain that the men are in search of money for one big reason; they've got a dream of owning a little place of their own. As George tells Lennie the well-worn story of the place they'll have, we realize this relationship goes both ways. From George, Lennie gets protection and guidance, but George needs Lennie, too. Lennie believes in George, and George can use all the faith he can get. This gruffly loving arrangement has cemented their bond as friends.

Conflict

**Curley, the ranch boss’s son, has it out for Lennie; Curley’s wife might have it out for Lennie too, but in a different way.**

From the first chapter, we know that Lennie’s mental deficiency and physical strength are not a good combination, as they get Lennie into trouble easily. We already know that Lennie’s shenanigans cost the men their last job, and George’s hope is to keep Lennie quiet and out of trouble on this one. The entrance of Curley and Curley’s wife into the story ensures that George will have no such luck. Curley is immediately interested in Lennie because he’s big and dumb, and thus an ideal candidate for Curley to abuse. Curley’s wife also seems to take note of Lennie because he isn’t as scornful as the others. Curley seems to be itching for a fight, and his wife is lonely. All told, it is bad news for Lennie.

Complication

**Lennie crushes Curley’s hand.**

Once Curley lights into Lennie and George encourages him to fight back, the seal has been
broken – any chance Lennie had to just mind his own business is over. The good news is that Slim gets Curley to agree on a cover story (that he got his hand caught in a machine). Curley can’t do anything about Lennie and George right now, but we can be certain he’s really got it in for the big guy. Curley’s just going to wait for Lennie to slip up before raining down his angry wrath.

Climax

Lennie kills Curley’s wife.

Things are going too well on the farm. Since it’s the Depression, something’s bound to go wrong. We meet Lennie in the barn with a dead puppy, and are reminded that his own deficiency means things can never go right for him in the long-run. The other shoe drops when Curley’s wife gets added to the victims of Lennie’s pet of death. At this moment, it’s clear that Lennie’s deficiency isn’t just harmless; it’s going to be his death sentence.

Suspense

George tries to get to Lennie before Curley can find him.

Curley is gunning (literally) for Lennie, and George realizes he’s got to do something. George seems stunned – not by what’s happened, but by what must happen next. He discusses options with Slim: he knows he can’t let Curley shoot Lennie in the guts, but he can’t handle the idea of having his friend locked up in a cage like an animal, either. What will George do?

Denouement

George shoots Lennie.

This was really all George could do to save Lennie from a hellish life in an asylum, or death at Curley’s hands.

Conclusion

George continues on without Lennie or the dream farm.

George has done what seems to be the best option in the worst situation. We can be pretty sure a little piece of him has died with Lennie. Their friendship is over, and Lennie’s death also brings the death of any faith that George had in the dream of a better life.

Booker’s Seven Basic Plots Analysis: Tragedy
Anticipation Stage

Lennie and George want to work on the ranch in the hopes of making enough money to buy their own farm, where they can be independent and in charge of their own destiny (and rabbits).

With the certainty of payment, it seems the pair will get what they’ve hoped for all along. While this is definitely the anticipation stage, it has a bit of a twist, hinted at by the way George tells Lennie (and the reader) of their dream. The story of the little farm, with the rabbits and vegetable patch and so on, is less like a plan and more like a fairy tale. The dream-like (read: unreal) quality of their dream doesn’t bode well for the hope that it will ever come true.

Dream Stage

Lennie and George learn that Candy would like to live on the farm, too; he can even offer three hundred dollars toward its purchase. Everyone is very excited at the possibility of the dream actually coming true.

With the entrance of Candy’s money into the story, it seems like the dream could come true after all. Candy has three hundred dollars to contribute, and George even knows the couple he’d buy the land from. Things seem to be on the up and up.

Frustration Stage

Lennie gets into a fight with Curley.

As Lennie smiles to himself about the possibility of the ranch, Curley is on the prowl for his wife and a fight. He thinks Lennie is laughing at him (or maybe wants to think that) and begins to punch the big guy. Lennie is stunned and does nothing until George urges him to fight back. Lennie promptly reduces Curley to a crying little man with a mangled hand. Slim makes sure Lennie and George are protected from getting in trouble, but it’s clear that working on the ranch will be a lot more complicated from now on.

Nightmare Stage

Lennie accidentally kills his own puppy, and then accidentally kills Curley’s wife.

If Curley was waiting for Lennie to slip-up, he need wait no longer. Though Lennie doesn’t at all mean to kill Curley’s wife, this act pretty much decides his fate. Any promise of safety or happiness he had on the dream farm is over. Now we’re certain Lennie will have to pay for what he’s done, one way or another.
Destruction or Death Wish Stage

George is forced to kill Lennie.

George realizes that if Lennie is to go with any dignity or comfort, it’s up to George to take his friend out himself. Although this means the literal destruction of Lennie, in killing his friend, George gives Lennie the happiest ending he could have.

You might think the only destruction is of Lennie’s actual life, but there are some less literal (and perhaps more significant) matters destroyed by Lennie’s death. With Lennie gone, George has to face the corrosive loneliness of the open road. George describes to Candy the life he’ll have without Lennie: it’s a future made of whorehouses and pool halls – places where lonely men stay lonely. Worse than just losing a friend by accident, George’s act seems to kill any last hope that the loneliness of the open road could ever be beaten. Without Lennie, George has nothing that makes him different from the other sad wanderers. He’s lost his best friend, and along with losing Lennie, George has also lost his dreams.

Three Act Plot Analysis

Act I

Lennie and George plan to get a job on a ranch near Soledad, California where they can earn some money. Alone together under the stars, the men talk of their shared dream to own their own little place, where George can have freedom and Lennie can have rabbits. This job seems a step in the direction of earning their way to their dream, and the possibilities are endless.

Act II

George and Lennie are on the ranch for only three days and already get a taste of its petty cruelty, competition, and general malaise. There’s a moment of hope, though, when Candy offers to pitch in some money, getting them closer to really buying their own little piece of land. Hope is shattered when Lennie is found to have accidentally killed Curley’s wife and left her body in the barn. Lennie has run away, but Curley is out for blood, and even Slim admits there’s got to be some consequences.

Act III

George, feeling he’s out of options to protect Lennie, misdirects the men and buys himself some time to get to Lennie first. He lulls Lennie into a comfortable, happy place talking of the dream farm, then quickly and mercifully shoots his friend in the back of the head. George’s friendship is destroyed, as is George and Lennie’s dream.
1. *Of Mice and Men* has an allegorical quality, with each character possessing a specific trait that represents something or some group in society. Interpreted closely, the book could read as a heavy-handed treatise about people’s chief wrongs against each other, including ageism, racism, sexism, and discrimination against those with disabilities. Are all of these wrongs treated as equally evil? Does the author mean to create a laundry list of mankind’s bad habits? Do we then believe in the characters as real, individual people, or are they merely types/symbols?

2. The setting here is very specific. Do the events of the story only apply to this particular place and time, or can the novella be thought of as universally applying to humans everywhere?

3. Why does George have to give up the idea of the dream farm once Lennie kills Curley’s wife? Was the farm ever a real possibility?

4. How are the deaths of Candy’s dog and Lennie related? Why do the two have to die? Is it fair to draw a comparison between these two events? Are Candy’s dog’s death and Lennie’s death just different degrees of the same kind of thing?

5. Is there any character who is not the victim of prejudice? Is there any character who is not prejudiced? Given everyone’s interaction with each other, how does prejudice actually operate in the novella? Is prejudice just a codeword covering for some larger human failing and tendency towards suspicion and isolation?

6. Does George have the right to kill Lennie? Legally? Ethically? How does Steinbeck’s treatment of Lennie’s murder color the way the reader interprets the event? What does George’s action suggest about justice – within the play and in the world as a whole?

7. Why does the story begin and end in the same place? The natural world is often described as beautiful and peaceful in the book, though it’s tempered with all sorts of awful occurrences. What role does the natural world actually play in the novella?

8. How are the notions of power and shifts in power important here? Who has power and why? Are there different types of power?

9. What is Steinbeck saying about dreams? Is the book’s take-home message an inherently pessimistic one?
Characters as archetypes

While *Of Mice and Men* occurs in a very specific time and place, each of the characters can be thought of as symbolizing broader populations. Though the book is not an allegory, and each character can stand alone as simply a character, there’s still something to be gained by looking at each character as representative of their larger group. Here we go.

Lennie is symbolic of the archetypal "wise fool," who is mentally inferior but able to reveal the best and the worst of others. Lennie’s foolishness often allows him to speak honestly where others won’t, and he sometimes taps into things that "normal" people can’t (like the fact that the ranch isn’t a good place for him and George to be hanging out). Lennie is also symbolic of people who are mistreated and discriminated against because of their mental handicaps.

Curley’s wife is symbolic of Eve – the female character who, in the Biblical story, brings sin and death to the world. She is also symbolic of women everywhere who are repressed by male-centered societies.

Curley is symbolic of "small" people who may feel inferior and overcompensate by inflating or flaunting their power and status.

Crooks is symbolic of people who are discriminated against because of their race.

Candy is symbolic of people who are undervalued and discriminated against because of their age.

Carlson is symbolic of people who are oblivious to the feelings of others, and who can only be concerned about something if it affects them personally.

Slim is symbolic of the archetype of the hero, king, or leader. He represents those few who, in their wisdom and strength, seem larger than life.

George is symbolic of "the everyman" – the type of normal, average person who is found everywhere and whose feelings and actions are neither exceptional nor terrible. He is the character with whom most readers will identify, as he symbolizes the difficulty of trudging through the everyday world (and extraordinary situations) when you’re just an ordinary guy.

Settings as symbols
The pool by the river is the place where Lennie and George’s story begins and ends. It is a safe sanctuary to meet and a place free from society, where Lennie and George can be themselves. What happens in the grove stays in the grove. This is where the story is born and where the dream farm and Lennie meet their end.

The bunkhouse represents the spot where conflict is most evident. Cruelty, violence, jealousy, and suspicion all arise here.

Crooks’s room represents the retreat (and the jail cell) of the repressed. Here we see the most obvious manifestations of discrimination: name calling, isolation, fear, and the threat of death.

The barn is representative of a supposedly safe place where animals can find shelter and warmth. It is a man-made place where humans take care of animals, which is symbolically ironic because it is where Lennie kills his puppy and Curley’s wife.

The dream farm is symbolic of Lennie and George’s friendship. It is the thing that ties them together and keeps them working, even when times are hard. It is also their personal form of religion, with the re-telling of the dream serving as a form of litany or catechism. It is, ultimately, their version of heaven, so that when Lennie kills a human being, their chances of going there are forever ruined.

Rabbits

Rabbits represent Lennie’s dreams and the impossibility of their fulfillment. Rabbits are a simple summation of everything Lennie hopes for, revealing his very simple thinking. Even when George first tells the story of the dream farm, it’s at Lennie’s prompting to tell him about the rabbits. For George, the farm is all sorts of freedom and happiness, but for Lennie, it is simply access to soft things. Given the evidence, the audience knows these rabbits will likely be added to Lennie’s telltale trail of small and dead animals, symbolizing Lennie’s inability to see patterns in his life and to recognize that failure is imminent.

The rabbits are emblematic of a simple and idyllic life, but rabbits are a fraught symbol: we know Lennie is excited about them because they’ll be furry and lovely to pet, but we also know that Lennie tends to hurt whatever he pets. This doesn’t bode well for him and he knows it, hence the large, scary, vitriolic rabbit at the end of the story. That rabbit announces that Lennie isn’t fit to lick the boots of a rabbit, but that the bunny comes from Lennie’s own mind suggests that he knows deep down he’ll never have his dream. The fact that rabbits never actually appear in the book (though they figure so heavily) highlights the unfortunate reality that Lennie’s dreams can never materialize.

Mice

Mice represent the false hope of a safe space for Lennie. The title is a good hint that mice are
important here, but the first mouse we encounter is a dead one. Actually, it’s a dead one that Lennie keeps in his pocket to pet. This is a huge clue: Lennie doesn’t care much about death, and he’s more concerned with comfort – remembering this makes Lennie’s death a bit more palatable. He’ll be more comfortable if dead by his friend’s gentle hand than with a violent end from Curley or the cage of an asylum.

Mice are a source of comfort for Lennie, as he links them to his nice Aunt Clara. In fact they’re all he really remembers of her. But in addition to this warm reminder, mice also make it clear that Lennie suffers from the problem of hurting what he loves. He likes to pet soft things, which leads him to kill mice, his puppy, and Curley’s wife; thus Lennie’s happiness tends to end in some form of suffering. Like Lennie, mice suffer because they’re small: a mouse’s physical smallness leaves it vulnerable, while Lennie’s mental smallness is his undoing.

Finally, coming back to the title, mice, like men, suffer from the randomness of destiny. As the Burns poem goes, both mice and men are victim to their best laid plans going awry. From the largest to the smallest creature, the most important to the least important man, destiny doesn’t discriminate in laying out cruel fates. So at the end of the day, Lennie is in his own way much like a mouse – killed because of his vulnerability, and in spite of his innocence.

**Setting**

A small working ranch in the Salinas Valley of northern California, sometime during the 1930s.

The action occurs over a period of three days and in four specific locations: a wooded area next to the Salinas River, a bunkhouse on the ranch, the stable hand’s room on the ranch, and the main barn on the ranch. The tight structure of setting, revolving around single locations and continuous timing, make the novella seem almost as if it were set as a play.

On a broader scale, it’s important that the action takes place during the Great Depression. Accordingly, the people that populate this novella are mostly all poor and desperate for work. Because of the poverty and general tough times caused by the Depression, the characters have good reason to be suspicious and distrusting of each other, feeling that there isn’t enough food, money, and work to go around.

If you wanted to think creatively, this air of distrust and isolation is central to the American Depression and seems to be a set piece in this work. The friendship between Lennie and George seems all the more remarkable set against this backdrop, and the end of the friendship means that distrust and isolation will be certain to crush whatever happiness either of them might have had.
Narrator Point of View

Third Person (Limited Omniscient)

Interestingly, although this narrator could tell us everything that everyone is thinking, feeling and imagining, the storyteller chooses not to. We are given a peek into only one character's consciousness, and even then only once, when Lennie is in hiding by the river and imagines his Aunt Clara and a large, hallucinatory rabbit. This deliberate withholding of insider information was probably a result of Steinbeck’s intention to have the story be more of a play than a novella. In plays, the audience can only know what the actors are saying and doing – they cannot have access to their thoughts. This means the narrator of this novella is omniscient, but to a rather limited degree.

Still, there might be more to Steinbeck’s choice of a "limited omniscient" narrator. The limited omniscient third person narrator almost seems to mirror the characters of the play; in this hard-hitting, straight-shooting story, it simply wouldn’t be fitting to have a narrator gushing about how everyone feels all the time. The characters of the novella tend to speak volumes with their silences (like when Candy can’t defend his dog, or Crooks can’t defend his status against Curley’s wife, or Lennie clams up around Curley). The ranch isn’t full of guys who like to wax philosophic. Without personal commentary or a narrator’s insight, the characters’ actions and speech alone do the most honest job of getting at who they really are.

Genre

Realism, Tragedy

Tragedy is characterized by seriousness, and usually features some main character who experiences a reversal of fortune from good to bad. This reversal is always brought about by an innate flaw of the character, or by a mistake that he or she makes. In this case, George’s flaw is his trust in Lennie – a mistake that even he realizes by the end of the book. In the final section, George stands over Curley’s wife’s body and says, "I should of knew…I guess way back in my head I did."

_Of Mice and Men_ is a typical tragedy with an atypical main character. Tragedies traditionally center on main characters who are big-shot-important-leader types, whose falls from grace are steep drops from great heights. George doesn’t fit this description, which makes this book rare and intriguing. In endearing us to George, Steinbeck shows that all men matter, and that no one’s story is more or less important than anyone else’s. Common men can also be the heroes of their own lives – or the victims of great tragedy.

_Of Mice and Men_ employs a very particular type of realism called "naturalism," which is a
literary and philosophical movement that seeks to apply the scientific principles of objectivity and detachment to its study of human beings. Naturalist novels often explore the world as a place where you have to fight to survive in a universe that has no morality and doesn’t care about you. It’s not unusual for naturalist novels to end in degradation and despair.

Given Steinbeck’s interest in the plight of America’s poor, it makes sense to use the gritty, straightforward style of this genre: it conveys the stories of "real" Americans, without making them seem pathetic or victimized. The strength of realism is that you don’t need to be sold with emotional bells and whistles – the lives of people alone are enough to move you.

**Tone**

**Sympathetic, Realistic, Honest**

Steinbeck’s attitude toward the subject of his novella is one of great sympathy tempered by realism. Steinbeck contrasts the real world of poverty, limited resources, limiting social roles, human intolerance, and violence with the dream world of freedom, autonomy, wealth, friendship, and loyalty. This stark and unflinching juxtaposition seems an honest attempt to reveal that for some, the American Dream was simply that – a hopeless dream.

It’s not surprising that Steinbeck’s tone is so terribly dismal, given Steinbeck’s attachment to “naturalism.” For naturalist writers, characters are essentially “human beasts.” They are influenced by (and should be studied through) their relationships to their surroundings. The naturalist writer analyzes his characters as though they are conditioned and controlled by environment, heredity, instinct, or chance. Because of this objective outlook, the author portrays his characters impartially, without moralizing about their "good" or "evil" natures.

Lennie’s character is a great example of Steinbeck’s naturalist approach: Lennie has some kind of mental disability, and this circumstance of his life influences his actions. Though Lennie inarguably commits a terrible crime, the way Steinbeck portrays him makes us hesitant to pass judgment. Steinbeck presents the characters to us just as they are, never insisting that we think this or that about them. Instead, his approach makes us feel for them as fellow human beasts, caught in the inevitable suffering of existence.

**Writing Style**

**Straightforward, Colloquial, Unpretentious, Earnest**

Steinbeck’s writing style mirrors his characters. Of course the author writes as the men would literally speak, but on a deeper level, the language of the book is simple but compelling – just
like the characters. Because the language is easy to understand, it’s even more extraordinary
that it can carry such lofty themes, feelings, and ideas.

Though the characters never gush about each other, it’s clear that they feel deeply. Steinbeck
achieves this by using simple language to build characters who are more than what they say.
For example, while George says he and Lennie just got used to each other, what he’s really
feeling is that their friendship is the only thing he’s ever really had to hold on to. The language,
like the men on the ranch, seems simple enough, but it’s more "still waters run deep" than
"OMG you’re my BFFL."

Again, Steinbeck uses his writing style as another means to suggest that every story is
important, no matter whose story it is. Though these characters are working class people who
don’t have access to big vocabularies or grand philosophies, they can still communicate about
the things that really matter.

This all comes through in the dialogue that dominates the book, and is only occasionally
augmented by the narration. The narrative style can differ slightly from the simplicity of the
dialogue (like when the narrator is so effusive in describing Slim), but usually even the
narration tells the most gripping stuff in a straightforward manner. When George kills Lennie,
Steinbeck lets the language be as stark and straightforward as the act, making it all the more
shocking. Part of Steinbeck’s brilliance is this subtle usage of language: when he needs to
make words sing, he can, but usually he’s good enough that the action doesn’t seem like it’s
clouded over with poetry. Instead, it just reads like real life.

What’s Up With the Title?

John Steinbeck takes the title of this novella from the poem "To a Mouse [on turning her up in
her nest with the plough]," written by Scottish poet Robert Burns in 1785. In the poem, the
speaker has accidentally turned up a mouse’s nest with his plough, and takes the opportunity
to wonder at man’s separation from the world of animals. Still, the speaker thinks both mice
and men suffer from being mortal, so no matter how different "thinking men" and "unthinking
animals" seem, they really aren’t that different after all – everybody suffers in the end. This
thought isn’t too far off from what ends up happening to our "thinking man" (George) and his
"unthinking friend" (Lennie).

Most critics talking about Steinbeck point you to the seventh verse of the poem:

But, Mousie, thou art no thy lane [alone]
In proving foresight may be vain:
The best-laid schemes o' mice an' men
Gang aft agley, [often go awry]
An' lea'e us nought [leave us nothing] but grief an' pain,
The seventh stanza is relevant, but you’ve got to read the whole poem to understand why it relates to Steinbeck’s novella. Actually, the last stanza of Burns’s poem is probably the most relevant to Steinbeck’s novella:

Still thou art blest, compar’d wi’ me!
The present only toucheth thee:
But, och! I backward cast my e’e [eye]
On prospects drear! [dreary]
An’ forward, tho’ I canna [cannot] see
I guess an’ fear!

In the above stanza, the speaker realizes the poor little animal is only touched by the present, as she can’t think about the past or the future. It’s the thinking man, who can look backwards and forwards, that suffers the most from the awful things he’s done. This last verse is a nice way to think of Lennie and George’s respective fate. Whatever happens to Lennie is done, but George is left to spend the rest of his future thinking of his past deeds.
Warner Brothers did a take on *Of Mice and Men* in 1961, flipping the script with their famous rabbit. Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck accidentally find "Hugo the Abominable Snowman" who takes a shine to our heroes, saying, "I will name him George and I will hug him and squeeze him and pat him and pet him and rub him and caress him." The big fellow is a slow, kindhearted, and fumbling guy that's actually a take-off on Lennie. This cartoon is also the source of the pop culture phrase "Which way did he go, George? Which way did he go?" (Source)

Steinbeck called the book "a kind of playable novel, written in novel form but so scened and set that it can be played as it stands." It's no surprise then that Steinbeck collaborated with George Kaufman, a playwright and director, to bring Of Mice and Men to the stage in November of 1937, just nine months after the novella was published. (Source)

Steinbeck defended his close friend, the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Arthur Miller, before the House Unamerican Activities Commission. (Source)

The Steinbeck Center’s reception room is Steinbeck’s birthplace and first home. It is also the only museum in the U.S. dedicated to a single author. (Source)

Steinbeck reported on the Vietnam War from Vietnam for *Newsday* magazine. His support of the war severely damaged his credibility in the American politically left-leaning (liberal) community. (Source)

Steinbeck’s working title for Of Mice and Men was "Something That Happened," which is close to the title of Joseph Heller’s second novel, *Something Happened*. Heller is best known for his first novel, *Catch-22*, which, like *Of Mice and Men*, portrays the strange everyday lives of Americans on the fringe during hard times. (Source)

Steinbeck attended Stanford University before leaving, without a degree, in 1925. He moved to New York, and, unable to find a publisher, worked various odd jobs, including construction on New York’s Madison Square Garden, before publishing his first novel in 1929. (Source)
Of Mice and Men presents a frightening picture of sexuality, and one in direct contrast to the modern notions of love. The characters in the novella have attitudes toward sex that are much closer to those of animals than those of thinking and caring individuals. The men on the ranch need female companionship, but are forced to get it in the form of weekly visits to a whorehouse, rather than from girlfriends or wives.

Whether this is a complete social necessity (because these men are essentially living in isolation) or whether it is a deliberate choice is difficult to gauge. George says that he prefers whorehouses to women like Curley’s wife because with a whorehouse you know what you are getting up front and exactly how much it will cost you. So for George, at least, sexuality is not a form of companionship; it’s a business transaction. Whit ranks the two local whorehouses based on their cleanliness and cheapness – two very practical and non-romantic considerations. Sex on the ranch is perfunctory and necessary, much like it is for dogs and other animals. It is probably no accident that Slim’s "bitch" has just given birth, and that Slim has no idea which of many dogs is the puppies’ father.

Curley’s wife is portrayed as the most dangerous person on the ranch. The only names she has are ones that refer to her sexuality in a decidedly unflattering way. She is the recipient of this name-calling merely because she gives the men on the ranch "the eye." The men are apparently attracted to and repelled by her in equal measure. This notion of sex as deadly is an old idea, and one that makes sense here considering the possible repercussions of having sex with either Curley’s wife (blackmail, jail time, death), or with a prostitute (disease, loss of money).
Curley’s wife is also seen as threatening in her supposedly insatiable appetite for sex, as represented by Curley’s glove wearing and by her own flirtatious attitude. Women and sex are seen as the causes of fighting, violence, disease, and loss of that most valuable and scarce commodity: money.

Lennie’s interaction with Curley’s wife takes place because he is ignorant of the threat she presents. He thinks it is safe to pet her hair, but though this gesture is not literally sexual, it is as close as Lennie gets to any woman – and it results in both of their deaths. The "sex equals death" equation is as old as the Garden of Eden, and it has nearly as many repercussions here.