

OF MICE AND MEN

by John Steinbeck



THE AUTHOR

John Steinbeck (1902-1968) was born in Salinas, California, and grew up in the region made so memorable in the greatest of his novels. He entered Stanford University in 1919, but never graduated, supporting himself through the decade of the twenties with odd jobs, including writing for a newspaper. In 1929, he published his first novel, *Cup of Gold*. Two novels about migrant workers in California, *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932) and *To a God Unknown* (1933) followed.

He finally achieved commercial success with the publication in 1935 of *Tortilla Flat*. The late thirties witnessed the release of what many consider his finest fiction, including *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). A ceaseless experimenter with writing techniques and genres, he tried his hand at movie scripts, comedies, plays, travelogues, and a non-fiction work on marine biology. After the Second World War, he returned to long fiction with the semi-autobiographical *East of Eden* (1952). He received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962, despite the scoffing of critics who considered him a populist rather than a serious writer. He died in 1968.

Steinbeck always considered himself a man of the people, and he identified much more readily with the migrants about whom he wrote so frequently than with the intelligentsia who criticized his writings as too elementary in structure and language. He was a convinced supporter of democracy and an enemy of fascism, though conservatives thought him too much of a socialist and leftists argued that he should be more vociferous in his condemnation of the evils of the capitalist system. He did admit that he had probably been insufficiently outspoken during the McCarthy era, but he was never able to satisfy those who wished to force his politics into their mold.

PLOT SUMMARY

George and Lennie are migrant workers in California in the thirties. They arrive at a ranch seeking employment, having been forced to leave their previous job when Lennie, who is mentally handicapped but very big and strong, had tried to touch the pretty dress of a woman on the ranch and had hung on when she started to scream. George, who is small and wiry, has tried to protect Lennie and care for him since the death of his aunt a few years earlier. The early part of the book acquaints the reader with the personalities and relationship of the two main characters. Lennie, for instance,

loves animals, but keeps killing them because he doesn't know his own strength. When George finds a dead mouse in his pocket, he makes Lennie throw it away. He promises that some day, he will get Lennie a puppy to pet. Their dream is to save enough money to get a small farm of their own, where George can work the land and Lennie can raise rabbits, which he can then pet to his heart's content.

When they arrive at the ranch, George tells Lennie not to say anything because he is afraid they won't be hired if the boss hears Lennie talk before he sees him work. They first meet Candy, an old swamper who has lost his hand in an accident, and he shows them around the bunkhouse. After the boss hires them, they meet the boss's son Curley, an arrogant and feisty little man who is a skilled boxer. He is abrasive with everyone, and is especially eager to pick fights with those he considers weaker than himself. George smells trouble, and warns Lennie that if anything should happen, he should go to the riverbank where they had slept the previous night and wait for George to come get him. Soon Curley's wife comes into the bunkhouse. They had only been married two weeks, but she is a "tart" who spends all her time flirting with the men. She is obviously nothing but trouble. They then meet Slim, the jerkline skinner who is the most respected hand on the ranch. He befriends them immediately. As the conversation progresses, George and Lennie discover that Slim has a dog who has just had puppies; Lennie wants one, and George agrees to make the arrangements. Carlson, another farmhand, comes in and begins right away to complain about Candy's old, blind, and incontinent dog, offering to take it out and shoot it if Candy won't do the job himself. As George and Slim talk, George confesses that he used to take advantage of Lennie's simplemindedness to play tricks on him, but eventually grew ashamed of himself and no longer did so.

Lennie quickly becomes obsessed with his new puppy and wants to hold it and sleep with it all the time, but George makes Lennie leave the puppy alone until it is weaned. Meanwhile, Carlson continues to badger Candy about his dog, and the old man finally agrees to let him shoot it, though he regrets it immediately, arguing that he should have had the decency to do it himself. After most of the men leave, George and Lennie start talking about the farm they hope to own someday, and Candy overhears them. He offers to give them his life savings if they let him go in with them. Though George agrees reluctantly, he now can see the possibility of their dream becoming a reality. Soon Curley comes in and picks a fight with Lennie. At first the giant stands there without defending himself, but when George encourages him to fight back, he catches Curley's fist in midair and crushes it, breaking every bone in his hand. By general agreement, the men decide to say that Curley caught his hand in a machine, though no one will believe the story.

One night the men, including George, go into town to visit the local bordello. Lennie goes to the barn to visit his puppy and stops in to see Crooks, the black stable hand. Crooks is standoffish because of the prejudice to which he has so long been exposed, but soon lets Lennie into his room. Lennie inadvertently starts telling him about their dream of a farm of their own, and Crooks wants to know if he, too, can get in on the deal. Curley's wife shows up and starts flirting with Lennie, but Crooks and Candy, who has also come in, chase her away by telling her that Curley has come back home from visiting the prostitutes.

Later, we find Lennie alone in the barn with his dead puppy; he had petted it too roughly, killing it in the process. Soon Curley's wife comes in and starts flirting with Lennie again. Lennie says he's not allowed to talk to her, but she soon convinces him to do so. She pours out her frustrations, her hopes of becoming an actress, her marriage to Curley on the rebound, and her desire to make something of herself. Lennie, of course, understands nothing of what she is saying. He keeps talking about raising rabbits. She asks him why he has a thing for rabbits, and he says he likes

to feel soft things. She offers to let him feel her hair, but when he does, she panics and begins to cry out. When Lennie tries to quiet her, he inadvertently breaks her neck. Lennie runs away, taking a Luger belonging to Carlson with him. Soon Candy comes into the barn and discovers the body. He calls for George, and the two try to decide what to do. At first they hope that Lennie simply will be put into an institution, but they quickly realize that Curley and the other men will kill him if they find him. At the same time, both Candy and George realize that the dream of the farm will never come to pass.

When Curley discovers his wife's body, he immediately organizes the men to find Lennie and gun him down. George and Slim try to convince him otherwise, but are unsuccessful. They send the makeshift posse south, but George circles around to the north where Lennie is waiting obediently. While he waits, Lennie sees a vision of his dead Aunt Clara, who scolds him for doing so many bad things and not listening to George. He then sees a giant rabbit, who pursues the same theme. Lennie cries out for George, who appears out of the brush. Lennie again asks George to describe their dream of a farm of their own. As he does so, the voices of the vigilantes are heard approaching. Before they arrive, George gently and sorrowfully puts a bullet in the back of Lennie's head.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- George Milton - A small, wiry migrant worker who takes care of his mentally-challenged friend Lennie. At the end, he kills Lennie to keep him from being killed by a mob.
- Lennie Small - A mentally-challenged but enormously strong migrant, he accidentally kills Curley's wife, leading to his own death at the hands of George.
- Boss - He hires George and Lennie to help harvest his barley crop.
- Slim - The most-respected hand on the ranch, he is described in terms of near-perfection; he gives Lennie one of his dog's puppies, which Lennie accidentally kills.
- Candy - An old man who lost his right hand in an accident, he is now a swamper; he offers his life savings if George and Lennie will let him join them on the farm they hope to buy.
- Crooks - A black man who works in the stable, he keeps to himself out of necessity, but befriends Lennie in an evening conversation.
- Carlson - A farmhand who talks Candy into letting him shoot his old blind dog.
- Curley - The boss's son, he is arrogant and defensive; a skilled boxer who likes to pick fights with those he perceives as weak, he attacks Lennie, but gets his hand crushed as a result.
- Curley's wife - She is what the farmhands call a "tart," a flirtatious woman who is constantly looking to stir up trouble. When she flirts with Lennie, he tries to touch her, she screams, and he accidentally breaks her neck when he tries to keep her quiet.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“They was so little. 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.” (Lennie, ch.1, p.10)

“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.” (Candy, ch.2, p.29)

“Le’s go, George. Le’s get outta here. It’s mean here.” (Lennie, ch.2, p.36)

“George, how long’s it gonna be till we get that little place an’ live on the fatta the lan - an’ rabbits?” (Lennie, ch.3, p.62)

“I ought to of shot that dog myself, George. I shouldn’t ought to of let no stranger shoot my dog.” (Candy, ch.3, p.67)

“A guy needs somebody - to be near him. A guy goes nuts if he ain’t got nobody. Don’t make no difference who the guy is, long’s he’s with you. I tell ya, I tell ya a guy gets too lonely an’ he gets sick.” (Crooks, ch.4, p.80)

“Why do you got to get killed? You ain’t so little as mice. I didn’t bounce you hard.” (Lennie, ch.5, p.93)

“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.” (George, ch.5, p.103)

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. The title of John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* is taken from a poem by Robert Burns called *To a Mouse* (“The best-laid plans of mice and men gang aft agley”). Read the poem and analyze the thematic similarities between the poem and the novel that might have led Steinbeck to choose the title from the poem.
2. The importance of having a dream and the devastation that occurs when that dream is shattered are central themes in many works of literature. Compare and contrast the treatment of these themes in John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* and Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*. Which is more optimistic about the attainability of dreams? Support your conclusion with specifics from the two works of literature.
3. Many works of literature examine the concept of the American Dream. To some, it is a mirage that is always a little bit beyond the reach of the characters. Analyze the treatment of this idea in John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. Are the two authors pessimistic for the same reasons? Incorporate both the experiences of the authors and the times when the novels were written into your analysis.

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5. When John Steinbeck received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962, he said that "the writer is delegated to declare and celebrate man's proven capacity for greatness of heart and spirit - for gallantry in defeat - for courage, compassion, and love." How do the two protagonists in *Of Mice and Men* demonstrate these qualities?
6. When John Steinbeck received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962, he said that "the writer is delegated to declare and celebrate man's proven capacity for greatness of heart and spirit - for gallantry in defeat - for courage, compassion, and love." To what extent does Steinbeck's novel *Of Mice and Men* succeed in declaring and celebrating these virtues? Be sure you look at all the characters in the story, not just the protagonists, as you seek to answer the question.
7. When John Steinbeck received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962, he said, "I hold that a writer who does not passionately believe in the perfectibility of man has no dedication nor any membership in literature." Evaluate the extent to which John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* supports the author's view of human nature. Choose three characters from the novel to illustrate your conclusions and assess Steinbeck's viewpoint from a biblical perspective.
8. Discuss the theme of loneliness as it is developed in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. To what extent does loneliness control the actions of important characters and help shape the direction of the plot? How does Steinbeck believe that loneliness affects a person's life? To what extent is his treatment of the subject in accord with what the Bible has to say about the nature and purpose of man?
9. Discuss the theme of loneliness as it is developed in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. To what extent does loneliness control the actions of important characters and help shape the direction of the plot? Choose three characters other than the protagonists and discuss how each is both shaped and victimized by loneliness, and how the experiences of these characters help to communicate the author's ideas on the subject.
10. Describe and evaluate the relationship between the two protagonists in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. What are the chief qualities of their friendship? Does their relationship display biblical love? Why or why not?
11. Discuss the use of foreshadowing in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. Choose three prominent examples of the technique in the novel and consider the functions they play. Why does the author choose to drop hints about how the story will end in this way instead of allowing the reader to be completely surprised?

12. To what extent does John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* function as social criticism? What about American society in the waning years of the Great Depression does the author most desire to bring to light? How does he seek to make an emotional appeal, convincing the reader to agree with and act against the societal flaws that he highlights?
13. Many writers make use of characters who play the role of the "wise fool," speaking wisdom while pretending to be foolish (e.g., the Fool and Poor Tom in Shakespeare's *King Lear*). Consider whether or not Lennie plays such a role in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. Certainly he is not pretending, but are his words sometimes sources of wisdom, even though he has no such intention? Support your argument using specific quotations from the novel.
14. In John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, Lennie dislikes the ranch almost from the moment he and George arrive there, saying, "Le's go, George. Le's get outta here. It's mean here." Is this the only place in the novel where the mentally-challenged Lennie shows more intuitive insight than the clever George, or does this happen on other occasions? If so, what might the author be saying through these unexpected incidents?
15. In John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, the author clearly indicates that Lennie needs George in order to survive, but to what extent does George need Lennie? Would he, as he claims, be better off without him? Why or why not? Support your answer with details from the novel.
16. John Steinbeck once said that the ranch in *Of Mice and Men* was intended to be a microcosm of society, with each character serving as a stereotype for some segment of the American population in the Thirties. Do the characters in the novel strike you this way? Are they sufficiently individual to make you care about them as people? Does this add to or detract from their power as vehicles of social criticism?
17. In John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, to what extent does George serve as a father-figure to Lennie? What characteristics of fatherhood does he display in his interaction with his handicapped friend? Is he a good parent? Why or why not? Support your answer with details and quotations from the novel.
18. One of the traits of a good novel is the extent to which it shows growth and change in its central characters. John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* is a short novel, but it is also a remarkably complete one. Discuss the extent to which the main characters in the novel change in the brief span of a little more than a hundred pages.
19. In John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, Curley's wife is the only character who is not referred to by name. What is the significance of this? Consider both who she is and the major themes of the story in answering the question.
20. The first and last chapters of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* occur in the same location, but the scenes are very different. Discuss the symbolism of the descriptions of the riverbank found in the two chapters. How do the altered details help to create the very different moods found at the beginning and the end of the book?

21. The protagonists in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* are the only characters whose last names are given by the author. Discuss the symbolic significance of those names, remembering that John Milton, the author of *Paradise Lost*, was one of Steinbeck's favorite writers.
22. One of John Steinbeck's favorite works of literature was John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. In his *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck provides a meditation on the consequences of "doing a bad thing." Evaluate his treatment of the subject of sin and its consequences in the light of its relationship to the story of the Fall of Man, considering his views of human nature, innocence, and evil.
23. One of John Steinbeck's favorite works of literature was John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. In his *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck gives his protagonists a dream of a paradise to which they are constantly drawn - a sort of Eden that is far distant from the drudgery of itinerant farmhands. What is the significance of the failure of George and Lennie to achieve their dream of Eden? What is Steinbeck saying about mankind in general through the failure of their dream?
24. In John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, consider the role played by Curley's wife. Is she a symbolic Eve or a symbolic serpent in her relationship to the failure of the protagonists to attain Paradise? Support your answer with specifics from the novel.
25. John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* has only one female character, Curley's wife, but other women are mentioned in the course of the narrative. Evaluate the role of women in the story. Is Steinbeck a misogynist, believing, as did some of the ancient monks, that women exist only to set a destructive snare for men? Support your assessment of the author's view of women with details from the novel.
26. Within a few years of the publication of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, the author turned his novel into a script for theatrical production. What characteristics of the novel make it particularly suitable for such treatment? Discuss specific aspects of the novel such as structural elements, settings, characters, and the use of dialogue and description that make such a transition relatively simple. Is the same thing true with regard to attempts to adapt the novel for the cinema?
27. At the end of *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy learns a very important lesson - "There's no place like home." To what extent is this same truth present in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*? Use details from the novel to illuminate Steinbeck's emphasis on the importance of roots.
28. When Cain kills his brother Abel in Genesis 4 and God asks him where Abel is, Cain replies, "Am I my brother's keeper?" This question expresses one of the central ideas in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. How do Steinbeck's characters answer Cain's question? How does Steinbeck himself answer it? Are the answers that are given biblical ones? Be sure you go deeper than simply enunciating positive and negative answers; consider also motives and resultant actions.

29. John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* has three basic settings - the riverbank, the bunkhouse, and the barn. Discuss the symbolism of these three locales, noting how they contribute to the major themes of the novel. Be sure to use specifics and appropriate quotations.
30. Discuss the role played by the concept of the survival of the fittest in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. To what extent do the strong survive and the weak perish in the world of the novel? Support your conclusions with specific incidents and quotations from the book.
31. Discuss the use of animals and animal symbolism in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. Consider how animals are used to characterize Lennie, how they serve to foreshadow later plot elements, and how they convey important themes of the novel.
32. Discuss the use of foils in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. Choose one pair of characters - George and Lennie, or Slim and Curley, for example - and explain how each serves to bring out the salient traits of the other and together develop the key themes of the novel.
33. Evaluate the morality of the incident with which John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* ends. Was George right to do what he did? Be sure to consider the question both within the moral universe of the novel and in the context of biblical teaching.
34. Discuss the development of the theme of courage versus cowardice in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. How does the author define courage, and who displays it? What are the traits of a coward, and who possesses them? Be sure to support your discussion of these issues with specifics from the novel.
35. Assess the extent to which Lennie is responsible for his actions in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. How does his guilt or innocence affect the basic themes communicated in the novel? How would you evaluate his guilt or innocence biblically?
36. When John Steinbeck wrote *Of Mice and Men*, he originally intended to title it *Something That Happened*. Evaluate this title. To what extent is it appropriate? Which title do you like better, and why? Support your arguments with details from the book.
37. Discuss the concepts of fate and free will in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. To what extent does the author believe that people control their own lives, and to what extent are they victimized by events beyond their control? Consider Steinbeck's use of foreshadowing, and incorporate other details and quotations in support of your conclusion.
38. Francis Schaeffer, in his book *Genesis in Space and Time*, argues that the Fall of Man produced alienation in four areas - the separation of man from God, from himself, from other people, and from nature. How are these four forms of alienation evident in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*? Use specifics from the novel to build your arguments.

39. In two of John Steinbeck's short novels, *The Pearl* and *Of Mice and Men*, a central character is destroyed in one way or another because he is naive about the ways of men and society. Compare and contrast the ways in which Kino and Lennie are brought low because of their naivete. What is the nature of the social criticism in which the author engages through these two characters?