



OF MICE AND MEN — STUDY GUIDE

1. Introduction

- **Author:** John Steinbeck
 - **Published:** 1937
 - **Genre:** Novella (short novel)
 - **Setting:** California during the Great Depression
 - **Focus:** Two migrant ranch workers dream of owning a small piece of land where they can live freely.
 - **Why it's studied:** Clear themes, strong characters, symbolism, and powerful emotional impact.
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2. Plot Summary

Overview

The novella follows **George Milton** and **Lennie Small**, two itinerant workers who move from job to job. Lennie has a learning disability but enormous strength. George acts as Lennie's protector.

Chapter-by-Chapter Summary

- **Chapter 1** — George and Lennie camp beside the Salinas River before starting a new ranch job. Their dream is introduced: owning a farm and living "off the fatta the lan'."
 - **Chapter 2** — They arrive at the ranch, meeting the Boss, Curley (the boss's aggressive son), Curley's Wife, and the other workers.
 - **Chapter 3** — Lennie and George become accepted on the ranch. Candy offers money to join their dream. Curley attacks Lennie, who crushes his hand.
 - **Chapter 4** — In Crooks' room, Lennie talks about the dream; Crooks expresses loneliness.
 - **Chapter 5** — Lennie accidentally kills his puppy, then accidentally kills Curley's Wife while trying to stop her screaming.
 - **Chapter 6** — George finds Lennie hiding by the river and, to save him from mob violence, shoots him mercifully while comforting him with their dream.
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3. Setting & Context

- **Time:** 1930s America during the Great Depression
- **Place:** California riverbank + ranch buildings

- **Contextual ideas:**
 - Economic hardship
 - Migrant labour
 - Loneliness and social isolation
 - The American Dream
 - Discrimination (racial, gender, disability)
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4. Characters

George Milton

- Small, sharp, quick-witted
- Devoted to protecting Lennie
- Feels burdened yet deeply loyal
- Ultimately forced into a tragic choice

Lennie Small

- Physically powerful, mentally vulnerable
- Childlike and well-meaning
- Loves soft things
- His strength + lack of understanding create danger
- Tragic figure who never fully grasps the world's cruelty

Candy

- Elderly ranch worker
- Fears being "put on the scrapheap"
- Joins George and Lennie's dream
- His dog's shooting foreshadows Lennie's fate

Curley

- Insecure, aggressive, controlling
- Represents toxic masculinity and abuse of power

Curley's Wife

- Lonely and unnamed
- Represents sexism + broken dreams
- Misunderstood and trapped, not malicious

Crooks

- Black stable buck
- Intelligent but isolated
- Symbol of racial discrimination
- Desperate for dignity and companionship

Slim

- Respected, fair, “prince of the ranch”
 - A moral anchor of the book
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5. Themes

Loneliness and Isolation

Nearly every character is lonely: Crooks, Curley’s Wife, Candy, George.
The ranch system prevents lasting relationships.

Dreams & The American Dream

The dream farm symbolises hope and freedom.
Its destruction shows the harsh reality for the poor.

Friendship

George and Lennie’s relationship challenges the idea that ranch hands must travel alone.

Power & Powerlessness

Curley (social power), the Boss (economic power), Slim (moral influence), and Lennie (physical strength) all display different forms of power.

Violence

A world where strength rules — Curley’s attacks, the dog’s shooting, the mob’s hunt.

Prejudice

- Racism (Crooks)
 - Sexism (Curley’s Wife)
 - Ableism (Lennie)
 - Ageism (Candy)
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6. Form, Structure & Language

Form

- Novella with a tight structure
- Circular form: opens and closes at the riverbank
- Small number of locations → sense of confinement

Structure

- 6 chapters, each focusing on one key location
- Foreshadowing throughout (dead mouse, puppy, dog's shooting)

Language

- Simple descriptive style to reflect workers' lives
 - Colloquial dialogue
 - Powerful symbolism (animals, light/dark, the dream farm)
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7. Key Quotations

Friendship

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

Dreams

- "We're gonna have a little house and a couple of acres..."

Loneliness

- Crooks: "A guy gets too lonely an' he gets sick."

Foreshadowing

- "I should of shot that dog myself." (Candy)

Violence

- "Curley's fist was swinging..."

- "Lennie had broken her neck."

Final moment

- "George raised the gun and steadied it..."
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8. Symbolism & Motifs

- **Lennie's Puppy:** innocence destroyed
 - **Candy's Dog:** mercy vs cruelty; foreshadowing
 - **The Dream Farm:** hope, freedom, possibility
 - **Curley's Glove of Vaseline:** toxic masculinity
 - **The Riverbank:** safety, peace, inevitability (cyclical structure)
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9. Important Scenes

- Opening at the river
- Curley's fight
- Dog shooting
- Crooks' room
- Lennie's encounter with Curley's Wife
- Final riverbank scene

Each scene advances themes of loneliness, power, and dreams.

10. Writer's Purpose

Steinbeck exposes:

- the harsh realities of Depression-era life
 - the impossibility of the American Dream for marginalised people
 - the human need for connection
 - the cruelty of systems built on power and prejudice
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11. Sample Essay Questions

- **Theme:** Show how Steinbeck presents the theme of loneliness.
 - **Character:** Discuss how Lennie is portrayed as both innocent and dangerous.
 - **Setting:** How does Steinbeck use setting to reinforce the novella's themes?
 - **Turning Point:** Explain the significance of the scene in Crooks' room.
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12. Model PEA Paragraph

Point: Steinbeck uses Crooks to show the damaging effects of isolation.

Evidence: Crooks tells Lennie, "A guy gets too lonely an' he gets sick."

Analysis: His words highlight the psychological harm caused by racism and exclusion. The informal, spoken tone emphasises how accepted and normalised this suffering has become in ranch life.

13. Quick-Revision Checklist

- **Themes:** loneliness, dreams, friendship, prejudice
- **Key characters:** Lennie, George, Curley's Wife, Crooks
- **5 essential quotes:**
 - "I got you..."
 - "We're gonna have..."
 - "A guy gets too lonely..."
 - "I should of shot..."
 - "George raised the gun..."
- **Symbolism:** dream farm, Candy's dog, animals
- **Structure:** circular; heavy foreshadowing

MINI-ESSAYS

Theme: Dreams and Powerlessness

Steinbeck uses the failed dreams of ranch workers to expose the structural powerlessness imposed by the Great Depression. George and Lennie's dream of a "little place" is deliberately modest: security, land, and self-determination. Yet even this small hope becomes a radical act in a world built on exploitation. The repetition of "live off the fatta the lan'" functions as a prayer—comforting, communal, yet fragile. Crooks' response to the dream encapsulates the wider tragedy: he has "seen hundreds of men" with the same hope, and all failed. His harsh realism reveals a system designed to break aspiration before it can take root. Curley's Wife represents another crushed dream—Hollywood fantasies destroyed by gender and economic limits. Her confessed loneliness—"I never get to talk to nobody"—exposes how powerlessness affects even those who appear privileged. Lennie's final killing is the brutal moment where dreams collide with reality: in trying to hold beauty, he destroys it. George's mercy killing denies both of them the future they imagined but preserves dignity in the only way left. Steinbeck's novella insists that dreams matter because they humanise—but it also shows that under capitalism, hope is systematically starved. The tragedy lies not in the dream itself, but in a society where such simple aspirations cannot live.

Turning Point

A. Turning Point: The Barn (Curley's Wife's death)

The novel's pivotal moment occurs when Lennie accidentally kills Curley's Wife in the barn. Up to this point, the dream of "a little place" has functioned as moral oxygen for George, Lennie and, briefly, Candy; the barn scene withdraws that oxygen. Steinbeck carefully foreshadows the catastrophe through repeated warnings (the dead mouse, the puppy, Slim's insight into Lennie's strength), so when Curley's Wife invites touch, the reader recognises that desire and danger are about to collide. The instant Lennie shakes her "like a fish" and her body goes still, the narrative flips from **possibility** to **inevitability**. George's subsequent decision to shoot Lennie is not just mercy; it seals the death of their shared ideal. The barn therefore converts dream-language into elegy: the "fatta the lan'" becomes an ethical test George passes (protecting dignity) and a social indictment Steinbeck levels (a world so harsh even modest dreams cannot live).

B. Symbolism: The Dream Farm, The Rabbits, Candy's Dog

- **Dream farm:** modest self-sufficiency; its fragility exposes structural economic cruelty.
- **Rabbits:** Lennie's tender fantasy of care colliding with his fatal strength (the paradox of love that harms).
- **Candy's dog:** utilitarian ethics of the ranch; foreshadows how the "useless" are culled (and Lennie's end).

C. Setting Analysis

The itinerant ranch economy of Depression-era California creates loneliness as a social condition. The bunkhouse's harsh communal space forces proximity without intimacy; Crooks' segregated room embodies racial exclusion; the **Salinas riverbank** frames the story in pastoral calm that cannot withstand economic reality. Place dictates values: men are worth what they can lift, not what they hope.
