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# INTRODUCTION

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The title of *Of Mice and Men* stresses how difficult it can be sometimes for even the simplest of dreams to come true and that plans can go so wrong they result in disaster instead of happiness. It also indicates how helpless people can be in certain circumstances, when Fate turns against them and everything goes wrong.

The book is about two companions, George and Lennie, who are migrant ranch workers. Lennie is backward and George finds himself constantly having to protect him. They have travelled to Salinas to work on a ranch and the story follows the two men in the pursuit of a dream, owning their own piece of land.

The book was written in the 1930s, a period known as The Depression, a time of high unemployment throughout America and many other countries. Industry was hard hit, but rural areas suffered as much as the urban, possibly more in that farmers had to contend with terrible droughts which reduced what were once productive lands to huge dust bowls. Successive harvests proved so poor that farmers were often unable to support themselves with the sales of their crops, let alone raise money to pay off the loans necessary to buy the land. If this led to eviction, or even desertion, they would migrate to the western states in the wide-spread belief that here was prosperity for all.

The work on the larger ranches would be carried out by migrants, men like George and Lennie, and it would be seasonal. People were lucky to get a job at all. Even if they didn't like the work or the pay was bad or conditions were poor, it was difficult for them to complain when so many would be grateful for the work. However, when the job was done, they had no choice but to move on. Unemployment ultimately led to poverty and hunger, and people losing their self respect and their homes.

During this time racism was also very common. If black people wanted to move into so called white areas, they could live only in the poorer parts. The role of Crooks helps to show the relationship between whites and blacks, especially racism, since the men habitually call him 'the nigger'. It is a constant reminder that this is the kind of behaviour black people have had to endure.

Similarly, there was a great deal of sexism. Women were expected to cook and clean and behave with decorum whereas the men would go out and work, spend their leisure in any way they chose and were always in charge. Curley's wife shows how badly some women were treated. At heart, she may have had good intentions but all the men regard her as a tramp.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Other books by John Steinbeck :-

The Pearl

The Red Pony

The Moon is Down

Tortilla Flat

The Grapes of Wrath

# MAIN CHARACTERS

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## 2

### GEORGE

We are not told a lot about George's physical appearance other than that he is small, short and quick, 'dark of face' with restless eyes. His features are also described as sharp and strong, with body parts that are small and strong. He has slender arms and his nose is thin and bony. Both George and Lennie wear the same clothes: shapeless black hats, denim trousers and coats. They carry blanket rolls over their shoulders.

George could be considered the hero of the story and he is certainly not lacking in courage. Having come to a decision about Lennie's fate at the end of the book, terrible though it is, he does carry it out. Thus he spares his friend from the punishment Society would decree, either execution or being locked up in a mental institution.

The poignance of the book lies in the sheer impossibility of their dream because it seems so little to ask for. If it were not for economic reasons, it seems possible that in time, George might have succeeded in making some sort of life for himself - if it were not for looking after Lennie. George is intelligent, a thinker, and he is also sensible, used to taking charge. He is fastidious, which indicates that he has enough pride not to let his standards slip: he warns Lennie to be careful about drinking from the pond and is wary of the bedding in the bunk-house in case of lice.

Lennie is a burden, a charge George took on when requested by Lennie's Aunt Clara, yet without him, George would be even lonelier. They have a kind of father-son relationship. He feels very strongly about the other man because he could easily have left him on his own but instead has loyally stuck by him. It is possible that, because of his loneliness, having somebody who depends on him makes George feel better about himself; the responsibility makes him more important. Furthermore, it is unusual for two migrant workers to travel around together and this in itself makes them stand out, as Slim remarks. Even Lennie seems aware that their friendship makes them a bit different, almost special. Nevertheless, George yearns for independence and to be his own boss.

He is kind-hearted and compassionate, although he can be sharp-tongued on occasion but this is the result of frustration, not bad temper. He is cautious of everyone he meets until he knows them well enough and they have gained his trust. George has to be a good judge of character and to be careful to steer clear of trouble, especially where Lennie is concerned. This is illustrated by the way that he is suddenly on guard when he thinks Candy has been listening to their conversation. He loathes Curley and stands up to him, recognising that he is just a bully, but he can't afford to fall out with him and risk his job; he warns Lennie to keep away from him all together.

However, he does urge Lennie to defend himself against Curley. Furthermore, though he doesn't give Lennie any credit, it is possible that the other man's strength is one reason they are able to get jobs. When Slim comments on how strange it is that he has stuck with Lennie throughout, George goes on to confide in him, explaining why they had to leave Weed. He soon settles in at the ranch and would probably become an 'insider'. The only thing holding him back is Lennie.

# MAIN CHARACTERS

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## 3

### LENNIE

A huge man who walks heavily and has a shapeless face and large, pale eyes. His movements appear ponderous: he walks heavily, dragging his feet a little and his arms swing only because his hands act as a pendulum. The description emphasises the slowness of his mind and, like an animal, he has strong instincts: he is unhappy about staying at the ranch (which anticipates the tragedy) and begs George to let them leave. He also displays a kind of animal cunning and can sometimes succeed in using it to get round George. In the first section, when George loses his temper, Lennie's response is to try and rouse his sympathy (although it virtually amounts to emotional blackmail, which seems a bit of a subtle ploy for somebody like Lennie) by making him feel guilty when he threatens to go off and live by himself in the hills..

Lennie's animal-like qualities: elephant (size, slow-moving), monkey (gait), dog (loyalty) all emphasise his innocence and thus engage our sympathy. If this were not the case, it would diminish the ending by making his death less tragic. However, his similarity to animals also indicates his brute strength and the latent danger - he is incapable of reasoning like a normal human being.

He looks up to George and often copies his actions, like a child does his father. Being backward, he is unaware that he is a victim of social prejudice but cannot relate to many people, which tends to make his behaviour child-like and anti-social. He prefers the company of animals. Nevertheless, he is shown as likeable: Candy takes to him and even the wary Crooks is disarmed by him.

Lennie cannot appreciate the need to be careful with anything fragile nor does he learn from his mistakes. He is very child-like in the way he reacts when he panics - hanging on for grim death and completely unreasonable, just how a child would behave in a similar situation. Lennie's downfall is because he doesn't know his own strength.

If Lennie could understand what loneliness felt like, he, too, would be lonely, but because of his backwardness he has no conception of this type of emotion. Yet he knows what it is to have something to look forward to. The dream is very important to Lennie, so much so he nearly knows it himself off by heart. He loves to have George tell him about it over and over again, like a child listening to a fairy story.

At the end of the story, Lennie has two hallucinations; first picturing his Aunt Clara, and then a gigantic rabbit. Both of them launch into a tirade, which gives some idea of the abuse Lennie has been subjected to throughout his life. It could also be a manifestation of his conscience: Lennie knows he has done wrong, even if he is incapable of understanding how it was wrong. He knows also that when you do wrong, you have to be punished. Nevertheless, this device seems rather far-fetched, even if it does give some idea of his misery and terror.

# SECONDARY CHARACTERS

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### SLIM

One character whose nickname is complimentary, he is a tall man who wears blue jeans and a short denim jacket like everyone else. However, this uniform set of clothes, worn for its usefulness, which may make all the hands look the same at first, does not mean they are all equal or treated as such. This particular man stands out because of his intelligence, skill and natural authority. He is friendly, open, honest, trustworthy, reliable, treats people fairly and is very easy to get on with. In fact, he is described as 'the prince of the ranch', not just idealised but an almost incongruous figure in such a setting.

He is, by far, the most heroic character, revered by everybody and as such, he provides a contrast to the other hands, in particular the sadistic Curley, the pathetic Candy and the cynical Crooks. He is the only one of the men to be at ease with Curley's wife, whom he addresses as "Good-lookin'" but from the description of the man, it is clear that he is just teasing her, rather than flirting. The only time he is seen to lose his temper is when Curley keeps pestering him about his wife's whereabouts.

Similarly, because he is such an authoritative figure, his judgement can be relied upon and anything he tells us about the other characters, or the situation, is automatically accepted by the reader. His sympathy for Lennie, for example, increases that of the reader, as it does when he feels sorry for Candy, forced to agree to have his old dog put down. This means he is the natural choice when George needs somebody to confide in, the only one to understand his dilemma. And just as George was there to look after Lennie, so in turn, Slim protects George. His is the voice of reason, in contrast to Curley. And if Steinbeck can be accused of including too many outsiders in this book, Slim does provide a balance. It could be that just as the men have their dreams, Slim is the kind of person they would aspire to be.

### CURLEY

The Boss's son could be called the villain of the piece since it is his attitude and behaviour which triggers the action of the novel. Nobody likes him at all, though he is such a nasty piece of work, it's surprising that Candy doesn't warn George and Lennie about him right from the start, having told them about the Boss's temper. Once Curley's wife is mentioned, he wastes no time in giving his opinion about her, saying she's a tart. He has only been married for a fortnight but already makes his young wife feel so miserable that she cannot stop herself from seeking out the company of other men. She knows she is taking a risk because he is so possessive but it's probably a mixture of getting her own back and loneliness, and adds a bit of excitement to her life.

## SECONDARY CHARACTERS

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# 5

Curley is a small, thin young man with brown eyes and a hair-style which gives him his childish nickname, he is an ex lightweight boxer and very aggressive. Success at boxing has made him obsessive about the sport and due to this and his vicious nature, he is always on the look out for somebody who would make a suitable opponent. He is forever trying to get into fights, especially with ranch members he doesn't like since they're the ones who will get into trouble and risk being sacked, but his job is quite safe. He backs down, however, from both Slim and Carlson and the humiliation makes his attack on Lennie even more vicious. He wears high-heeled boots, like his father, and resents tall men in particular, because of his lack of height.

Hostile, very arrogant and cocky, Curley seems to have got married to prove he is mature, a grown man. George shrewdly comments that his attitude and behaviour may be the result of him showing off in front of his wife. He makes himself a laughing stock because he is forever following her around.

### CURLEY'S WIFE

A character seen as so insignificant, she has not even been given a name. She is nothing more than one of Curley's possessions. When she first appears, she is all dressed up as if ready to go out somewhere rather than just spending her day wandering around the ranch. She has full, rouged lips and is heavily made up with red fingernails and her hair arranged in little curls like sausages. She wears red shoes with red ostrich feathers, the colour associated with danger, wickedness, sexiness - she is regarded as a Scarlet Woman.

She claims to be looking for her husband, but the men know she is making excuses, largely seeking out company because she is so lonely, although they see it as her taking every opportunity to flirt. She is the only woman on the ranch and no one, including her husband, gives her much attention which means that she is very isolated. She may have settled down and have a roof over her head but she is just as rootless and restless as any migrant worker. She doesn't think very highly of her husband which suggests that their marriage was doomed from the beginning; the only sense in which they are a good match is that they are both extremely self-centred and very immature. The hands constantly put her down because she tries to be friendly but she carries on dolling herself up even though their hostility is quite overt. Slim is the only one to show her any compassion. George might have felt sorry for her but he is too concerned about the effect she might have on Lennie, causing him to get into trouble again.

# SECONDARY CHARACTERS

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### CANDY

The first person George and Lennie meet at the ranch is 'the swamper' i.e. the cleaner, the lowliest job on the ranch. Even his name seems to belittle him, the name of a little girl or a doll; there is very little to sweeten his life. A tall, stoop shouldered old man, he has a stump like wrist on his right arm, having lost his hand in an accident. Like Lennie, Candy is a victim of prejudice, in his case, because of his age and disability. He is obsequious towards everyone, so downtrodden that he is uncomfortable with George, until the latter rebukes him for the comment about Curley's glove. This reassures the old man because now he is on familiar ground and knows his place i.e. an inferior. Candy later imitates George's disgust when he sneers at Curley, the only other time he sticks up for himself is when confronting Curley's wife. His dignity shows the kind of man he must once have been.

Candy is full of gossip, which could be seen as a form of revenge, making unpleasant comments about people behind their backs, such as Curley and his wife. This is also a useful device since the details he passes on to the newcomers, George and Lennie, informs the reader. His only companion is the old shepherd dog he has had since it was a puppy. Like him, useful in its prime, it is now blind, toothless and limps. The animal is constantly in pain but means a great deal to his master, because he is so lonely.

When he overhears George and Lennie's plan, Candy wants to become part of it and offers them his savings, over half the cost of a farm, and to help out by doing all the work he can. Just the thought of this dream makes the old man happier. As George realises, it means that in only one month, they could have nearly enough to buy the farm and their dream might actually come true.

### CROOKS

The stable buck does not appear until Section 4 and gets his name from the way his body bends to the left because of his deformed spine. His eyes are deep set which seems to make them glitter with intensity and his face is lean and wrinkled. Crooks is probably the person who suffers most from prejudice because he is the only black person on the ranch. He is lonely, bitter and mistrustful of whites. Nevertheless, he is treated reasonably well by the other hands, if with great harshness on occasion; for example when they say he 'stinks'. Candy calls him a 'nice fella', which is what both Slim and Curley's wife say of Lennie. Crooks also has a room to himself probably because none of the others will have him in the bunk-house. A proud man, he is also aloof, and although he hates feeling lonely, he likes his own company. The only person he can talk to is Lennie despite the fact that the latter does not fully understand him. Yet Crooks seems to enjoy tormenting him and says some very cruel things.

He is extremely sceptical when he hears Candy and Lennie talking about their dream and doubts that it can ever be fulfilled, preparing the reader for its eventual failure. He understands that most people have to have a dream to aim for to help ease them through their real life and even gets involved for a while, offering to help out. But later on, just as Candy is about to leave his room, he tells him he was just fooling around.

# MINOR CHARACTERS

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## THE BOSS

The Boss is first mentioned by Candy who, not surprisingly, describes him as a 'pretty nice fella', though he warns George and Lennie about his temper. This is Curley's father - presumably his wife is dead since she is never mentioned and the only woman on the ranch is his daughter-in-law. Stocky and fat legged, he wears a black unbuttoned vest and a black coat. He also wears blue jeans, like everybody else, but has high heeled boots and spurs to prove he is not a labouring man, a badge of authority. But this is artificial authority, compared with Slim who has natural authority and does not need to wear things, or to do things, to prove it.

The Boss is very annoyed at first because the two men are late arriving but soon recovers his temper and seems amused by George doing all the talking: 'The Boss pointed a playful finger'. He then gets suspicious and becomes increasingly irritated because George will not allow Lennie to speak, to try and make sure the other man doesn't say anything he shouldn't. Ironically, his protectiveness makes the Boss think he plans to cheat Lennie out of his wages.

## CARLSON

Introduced to George and Lennie by Slim, he is a large man with a big stomach, he is friendly, if rather hardhearted. He is quite determined to make Candy agree to get rid of his beloved dog, even though he does ask Slim beforehand if the old man can have one of his dog's puppies. He is very inconsiderate: Slim has to remind him to bury the dog and after he has shot it, he thoughtlessly cleans the gun in front of Candy. Later, both he and Whit are eager to see what happens when Slim and Curley fall out; Carlson is openly contemptuous of the latter.

Basically an ordinary hand, accepted as an insider on the ranch, he is not particularly important except as a means of comparison for the heroic Slim, at one extreme, and the weaker characters: Curley, Candy and Crooks at the other. Carlson's role is necessary, however, since he is the one most instrumental in having Candy's dog put down, which is also a parallel with the shooting of Lennie. On both occasions, his gun is used.

## WHIT

A young hand, the only description is of his poor posture; the way he walks suggests he does a lot of heavy work. Like Candy, he is addicted to gossip and would rather talk than play cards and thus we learn more about the other characters, in particular Curley and his wife. We also learn that George has principles, since he is not impressed by Whit's explanation that it is common practice to check out ranches by arriving on a Saturday afternoon, which means free bed and board, without doing any work.

The importance of this character is that he is used to pinpoint the single instance in the whole book of somebody having a dream come true. He remembers a former hand, Bill Tenner telling him that he'd written to a magazine and Whit has now discovered that they actually published his letter. This is such a trivial example of celebrity yet he handles the magazine like a relic and won't even let George hold it. Because the published letter is seen as proof that the impossible really can happen, it gives the men false hope and makes their dreams even more poignant.

# STRUCTURE - STYLE AND TECHNIQUE

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## STRUCTURE

The most appropriate label for a story this length is 'novella' i.e. in between a short story and a novel, perhaps a long short story. It is divided into six sections which have a greater resemblance to scenes in a play than they do to chapters in a book. Even the descriptions, whether of setting or a particular character, could be interpreted as stage directions; there is very little authorial comment, something which can rarely be utilised in a play. Given its dramatic style, the degree of conflict and tension and the amount of dialogue, it is not surprising that the book has been successfully adapted for the stage.

One curious similarity is the way Steinbeck tells the reader what is going on, rather than showing what is happening. For example, the sounds which indicate the return of the hands for lunch: the noises of the horses and the carts, somebody calling for the stable buck. Likewise, an actor will make an entrance in order to explain about something which occurs off stage.

The content of the book, as well as the structure is very straightforward, with just two settings (by the pool and at the ranch) and a few characters. They are depicted with a remarkable economy. Events unfold chronologically, something which is rarely a feature of recent novels, which often utilise flashbacks and move back and forth in time. Steinbeck does occasionally use flashback, to increase tension or to add to the atmosphere. The mysterious event at Weed is revealed when George confides in Slim and Lennie's hallucination at the end of the book, when he remembers life with his Aunt Clara which encourages us to feel even greater sympathy for him.

The writer also sticks largely to the conventional structure of a play. In general each of the six scenes builds up to a minor climax: second section - confrontation between Curley and George; third - Lennie crushes Curley's hand; fourth - Crooks debunks the men's plans; five - the men set off in pursuit of Lennie after the death of Curley's wife. These all build up to the major climax which concludes the story.

Its circular form adds to the sense of inevitability: that George and Lennie can make no progress and end up right back where they started, but in an even worse situation. The opening scene is thus slightly different to the rest, since it cannot be said to have much of a cliff ending at its close, other than the men's anticipation of working at a new place. Nevertheless it, too, is in traditional format, setting the scene and introducing the two main characters before moving out into the world of the ranch.

One criticism of the structure is the introduction of the fantasy sequence towards the end since Lennie does not really seem the kind of person to have hallucinations, especially ones so lucid, even if he has found himself in such a stressful situation. This may be simply a device, clumsy perhaps, to paint an even more sympathetic picture by showing Lennie's unhappy upbringing and the utter futility of his dream.

# STRUCTURE - STYLE AND TECHNIQUE

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It has also been suggested that Steinbeck is too fond of dropping clues and the amount of occasionally heavy-handed hints thus give the game away. However, this depends also on the way it is perceived by the reader; while some will spot things immediately, others are prone to ignore the obvious. Possibly, some readers may feel cheated in that it is pretty obvious how the book will end yet it is very unlikely that they will finish the story without feeling pity for George and Lennie and their predicament. Knowing the outcome does not lessen the impact of the tragedy.

## STYLE

One of the most interesting aspects of this book is the satisfactory blend of styles: description can be either lyrical or very down to earth, whilst dialogue is colloquial. This, together with the author's sense of drama, adds to the flow of the story.

## ATMOSPHERE

Both the first and final parts of the novella take place in the same surroundings, by the Salinas River and thus the action comes full circle. However, because they are described so differently, this highlights the changes which have occurred. In the first instance, the words used create a pleasant and relaxed atmosphere: warm, fresh, green, golden, crisp and so on. These all convey hope and optimism, and make the place seem almost idyllic; even the animals mentioned, rabbits and deer, are appealing. There are also auditory images, such as the rustling of the leaves. This seems to be a popular resting place since the lower branch of the sycamore has been worn smooth from the number of people who have sat there.

The end of the book is in great contrast. Although both scenes take place in the early evening, in the first instance, the two men are looking forward to the dawn of a new day, at the end, night is about to fall. Now, the words used are disquieting: fallen, twisting, motionless, silent etc. They make the atmosphere tense and unsettled, preparation for the tragic act about to unfold. Even the animals have changed, for example, the symbolism of the sight of a heron eating a water snake

Steinbeck sets the scene each time with a description of the surroundings before introducing speech. This is always colloquial, relevant to the 1930s, the time in which the novel is set. Although authentic, with a realistic liveliness and a fair amount of humour, it is inclined to be technical when dealing with life on a ranch, and therefore a little difficult to follow at times.

The conversation about Bill Tenner's letter adds to the tension of Section 3, interrupting Carlson's coercion of Candy, when he forces him to agree to have his dog put down. For a moment, life seems more hopeful because the former hand has achieved his dream of having his letter published but this is illusory and rapidly succeeded by grim reality. Similarly, the uncanny peacefulness following the death of Curley's wife is in great contrast to the succeeding action.

# STRUCTURE - STYLE AND TECHNIQUE

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## SYMBOLISM

One of the best examples is the comparison between Candy and his dog, and George and Lennie. Both the dog and Lennie end up being put down, spared any more misery. Similarly, Lennie is often described using animal imagery such as a horse and a terrier, especially when he first makes his appearance. This helps to arouse sympathy for him and thus the ending has greater significance to the reader. Similarly, his child-like behaviour when he soaks both his head and his hat in the pool and plays with the water, splashing it about. When he first appears, he is literally following in George's footsteps - and bumps into him when his friend suddenly stops.

These particular images are reinforced by Lennie's own fondness for animals and stress his fatal flaw, his inability to comprehend his own brute strength. Likewise his inability to remember things - the one thing he never forgets, as George points out, is the rabbits. Similarly, it underlines the inevitable, the progression from the mice, which die as a result of being smothered with love, then his puppy and finally, Curley's wife.

One particularly striking image is that of the water-snake with its 'periscope' head. Ironically, it is Lennie's sudden appearance which startles the heron, thus saving the life of the second snake.

Light is constantly referred to, and as a symbol of hope, can be seen to stand for The American Dream. When Curley's wife first appears, she is in the doorway, blotting out the light, just as she, unwittingly, means the ruin of the men's dreams. Conversely, there is a wry humour in Slim's claiming to be dazzled by the sunshine, since he is the one with the greatest insight and sees things far more clearly than anyone else. 'It's brighter'n a bitch outside' are his opening words and the humour is intensified by Steinbeck's use of anti-climax.

## THE AMERICAN DREAM

All this seems a cliché: new hope and a chance of a new life in the New World. But this does not alter the important role of dreams in the book. Nearly all the characters suffer great hardship in their daily lives and their dreams are very important to them, giving them something to aim for. It makes their problems a little more bearable, by providing a means of escapism, particularly from prejudice, loneliness or general unhappiness.

The dreams come in different forms. George's plan was to have his own piece of land, where he and Lennie would live. He could be his own boss and there'd be no need to worry about the other man getting into trouble all the time. To Lennie, the main advantage was that he would have his own rabbits to look after. Once Candy hears about it, he is remarkably keen on being involved, offering all his savings, and to help out. He appears to have real faith that it would go ahead, whereas Crooks backs out at the last minute. His private dream is based on childhood memories when he felt secure and surrounded by family and friends, people who cared about him.

George and Lennie's dream was a common one among ranch hands, most of whom were migrants. Without a permanent home, they were rootless and forever travelling, always to be under someone else's control. They dreamed of independence, security and being their own boss.

Curley seems to have realised his ambitions since he has been successful at boxing and has now acquired a wife, something for which he believes other men will envy him. Neither have made him happy because he is obsessive about both. In fact, boxing has helped to make him even more aggressive and therefore even more unpopular and his marriage has made him a laughing stock. Curley is an example of life turning sour when dreams do come true.

Marriage has not proved to be a dream come true for his wife either, since she appears to have got married mainly to get away from her mother. Her dream is on a much grander scale and far harder to fulfil than the simple and practical ambition of owning land: Curley's wife is convinced she would have been much better off if she were in the movies. She dreams of this career because she was assured she would be good at it by an actor, although her mother wouldn't allow it because she was only fifteen. When another man claimed to be in the same business and said he'd write to her about getting into the movies; she thinks her mother must have stolen the letter and blames her for ruining her chances of becoming a famous actress.

One thing all the dreams have in common is the unlikelihood of ever coming true. Curley's wife suspects she may have missed her chance whereas George knows how difficult it will be to scrape enough money together. Crooks, momentarily allowing himself to hope for the best, changes his mind in the end and re-iterates his cynicism, showing the reader of the impossibility of George and Lennie's dream. Deep down all the characters probably know their dreams won't come true but cannot relinquish them because otherwise, they could not get by, living such a hard life. Lennie is the exception, simply because he doesn't understand; to the end, he remains blissfully ignorant.

# MAIN THEMES

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Above all, it is George and Lennie's dream which makes the book unforgettably and unbearably poignant. They need so little to make them happy and came so close to achieving it, but for them, it proves to be as impossible as wishing for the moon. The tragedy of Lennie's death is such that the reader is possibly inclined to overlook the fact that once George recovers, because he no longer has the responsibility of taking care of Lennie, he does in fact stand a far better chance of making his dream come true. And yet, without Lennie, would it mean anything to him?

## LONELINESS

Nearly all the characters experience loneliness in one way or another and George is perhaps the one who expresses his feelings most powerfully. He can ward off it off to a certain extent because of Lennie, which may be part of the reason that he looks after the other man and puts up with the trouble he so often, if unintentionally, causes. Lennie is his only real friend and companion but because he is backward, George finds it hard to relate to him and share his feelings with him.

Lennie appears to have no family except his Aunt Clara and has been with George ever since she died. However, loneliness does not bother him quite as much as it does the other men simply because he is incapable of fully understanding what it means to be lonely; it takes very little to make Lennie happy.

Candy is old and crippled and nobody pays him much attention; he is barely tolerated and so his dog really matters to him.

When Crooks tells Lennie about his idyllic childhood, he mentions that theirs was the only coloured family for miles around, recalling how his father didn't like him playing with white children. Now, there is just one coloured family in Soledad which means he is more isolated than ever. He is made to feel even more of an outcast because he is crippled and is therefore very suspicious of people. He keeps to himself, usually sitting in his room reading, which may be from choice but he still hates feeling lonely. Nobody visits him, except the Boss and Slim, and when Lennie and Candy go to see him, he seems annoyed because he is used to being alone and it's as if his privacy has been invaded. Secretly, he is pleased to have company.

Curley's wife is lonely because she doesn't like her husband and is always trying to avoid him, whilst at the same time making the excuse that she is constantly looking for him. Her foolish behaviour means she is regarded as a tart, which has developed into a vicious circle since the more she seeks attention, the less the men will talk to her in case they get into trouble. It is loneliness that ultimately leads to her death.

## PREJUDICE

Many of the characters are victims of prejudice, including George, simply because of his association with Lennie. Curley, however, is so insecure that he believes others are prejudiced against him. He bolsters his ego because of this, picking fights, and a woman who is highly unsuitable as a wife. Both he and his father wear high heeled boots as a badge of authority, as if it were to ward off prejudice on the hands' part: if they were to literally look down on these two men, simply because of their lack of height, this would challenge their status.

Lennie is excluded by the ranch hands when it comes to card games and the horse-shoe tournament because he is backward. This treatment is harsh but logical since he would never understand the rules. However, it is because he is backward that they won't even allow him to socialise with them and go into town.

Candy is largely ignored by the other hands and is expected to do all the dirty work. They have no respect for him because he is old and disabled and feel few qualms about having his dog put down.

Curley's wife would be treated with disdain in any event because the men believe that a ranch is no place for a woman. In addition, since Curley is unpopular, they don't have any respect for her anyway. Furthermore, they take it for granted that her flirting means she is bound to cheat on him. Because they are prejudiced against her, they cannot see that her behaviour is actually the result of her loneliness.

Crooks is the one who suffers the most from prejudice. When the Boss loses his temper, he takes it out on the stable buck, yet Crooks seems almost proud that both the Boss and Slim visit him, unlike the other men; Candy has never set foot inside his room before. However, it's part of the Boss's job to keep an eye on the hands, just as it is Slim's job to take care of his team, which is why he is often in the harness room, where Crooks has his bunk.

Although the men let Crooks take part playing horseshoes, and he is grudgingly admired for his ability, he was only allowed in the bunk-house at Christmas and then as part of the entertainment: to fight one of the skinnners. He can't go in there to play card games or socialise with the other hands, who insult him by saying it is because he stinks. Carlson makes the same complaint about Candy's dog, which suggests he regards Crooks as no better than an animal, and a useless one at that.

### SEXISM

The reader should bear in mind that the book was not written with this theme specifically in mind though it is clear that Steinbeck feels very strongly about all kinds of prejudice. Sexism, as he shows, has always existed, even if not referred to by that particular label.

Curley's wife, for example, is shown to be regarded as completely unimportant in the way that she is not even given a name. She is nothing more than Curley's possession and because this is how everybody sees her, she has little identity of her own. One thing which makes matters worse is that her husband wears a glove filled with vaseline, purportedly to keep his skin soft and smooth, for her benefit. Far from showing any kind of consideration towards his wife, it is more to establish publicly his sexual prowess. It makes her appear to be nothing but a sexual object, good for only one thing.

Not surprisingly, she is desperately lonely and does not realise that her childish behaviour, a mixture of attention seeking and getting her own back on Curley, makes matters far worse. She tries to keep her spirits up by getting herself all dressed up, making something of herself, though there is nobody to impress but the hands. But the way she looks brands her as no better than a tart. The men are suspicious of her motives, uneasy in her presence because flirting with her will anger Curley. Since Lennie does not (cannot) react like the other men, she thinks he is sympathetic towards her and that he may even like her.

A ranch is a man's world, after all, so it is hardly surprising there are few female characters. However, none of them are viewed with much sympathy, although the down to earth conversation about Susy and Clara, who both run brothels, is by no means as obscene as some authors might have written about it. The only other woman is Lennie's Aunt Clara who seems to have been a very bossy, highly critical, foul-mouthed old woman. Nevertheless, she did give Lennie mice and when she stopped doing that because they always ended up dead, she even tried a rubber one though he didn't like it: 'It wasn't no good to pet.' He tells Curley's wife how Aunt Clara once gave him a piece of velvet because he liked the feel of soft things.

Ironically, when Whit is describing Susy to George, he appears to think more highly of her than he does of Curley's wife, saying she's 'a laugh' and has a 'hell of a nice place'. He assures George that she charges a reasonable amount, doesn't water down the whisky and the girls are clean. In fact, the only time Curley's wife is shown in a more sympathetic light is after her death: 'very pretty and simple' with a face that is 'sweet and young'. She looks the picture of innocence and no longer shows any sign of being mean, discontented and attention seeking. Being forced to live such a repressed, frustrating life, it seems that, like Lennie, she has now been put out of her misery.

### INSIDERS AND OUTSIDERS

There are three main figures of authority in the novel: The Boss, Curley and Slim. The Boss, however, has gained this status largely because of his job, not because of who he is, although the men seem to have few complaints about him. Other than Candy, who is wary of everybody, they do not appear to be in awe of him and although inclined to be short-tempered, he seems to treat them quite well, giving them whisky at Christmas.

Slim ranks high because people naturally look up to him and he is well respected and trustworthy. Likewise, Carlson and Whit are both accepted by everyone. Normal, friendly people, they make a contrast to the characters who are outsiders. Without Lennie, George would probably also be accepted as an insider; it is only his association with the other man which makes him an outsider.

Curley has nominal authority because his father is the Boss and he is good at boxing. However, he is not popular and since the hands despise him, he is in effect an outsider. Lennie, Candy, Curley's wife and Crooks are all outsiders because they are clearly different to the others; their various weaknesses make each of them easy victims.

### LOYALTY

This is an important characteristic amongst the ranch hands because even though the jobs are transient, their way of life is very hard. It would be more unbearable while they are working together if they did not stick together and support each other. The Boss, naturally enough, would assume that all his hands are loyal and do their best for him. Curley banks on his father being loyal to him by not sacking him when he gets into fights with the other men. Ironically, this behaviour is disloyal to his father since it could leave him short of hands and the ranch would suffer.

Loyalty is also one of the mainstays of the relationship between George and Lennie. George protects the other man and is grateful for his company, which helps ward off loneliness, while Lennie relies on George to look after him. Even Slim is impressed by their loyalty to one another.

Candy shows his loyalty to the two men by offering all his savings and promising to keep their plans secret. However, the old man feels as if he has betrayed his loyal companion, the dog, when he is persuaded to have it put down.

Conversely, one reason the hands despise Curley's wife is because she is seen as disloyal to her husband.

### THE WORKING MAN

The plight of the migrant worker is that he spends his life working for others, never for himself. It makes no difference whether he is as skilled as Slim or given the lowliest of tasks like Candy, he has little chance to make something of his life since he is unlikely ever to earn enough money to buy a piece of land. In Steinbeck's view, the average working man is the salt of the earth; where would America (or any other country) be without them? He makes the point that these men should not be looked down upon because it is circumstances which denies them success and not their own abilities.

### PROTEST

Steinbeck's novel, *The Grapes of Wrath* is often regarded as his greatest work and is largely regarded as a protest against the way migrant workers suffered. However, even though this is also covered in the novella, it should not be regarded as having been written solely for a political purpose, i.e. to right the wrongs wrought by the system. Yet it is clear there are certain themes which Steinbeck feels very strongly about and wishes to draw his audience's attention to, in particular, prejudice of any kind.

(Numbers in brackets refer to sections in the book.)

## CHARACTERS

### GEORGE

(3) A smart little guy. Slim's summing up is apt, since George is both bright and clean and tidy.

(1) You never oughta drink water when it ain't running George is sensible, cautious, fastidious and used to looking after Lennie. He has his doubts about the water Lennie has been drinking though is quick to admit that it tastes all right when he samples it. He patiently takes the trouble to explain to Lennie how to tell if water is safe to drink. Once he has had a drink, he washes himself.

Lennie imitated George exactly and looked over to George to see whether he had just done it right. The two men have a father/son like relationship where Lennie looks up to George constantly, even copying what he does and checking to make sure he's got it right. He may be doing this to get George's approval, although perhaps he thinks that if he does as George does, maybe he won't get into trouble. As for George, he probably finds this as flattering as it is annoying.

God, you're a lot of trouble. George constantly reminds Lennie that he is a burden but both men are prone to using emotional blackmail, in George's case, out of sheer frustration and in an effort to make Lennie behave.

### EXERCISE:

Draw up a list of George's good and bad points. Which of the hands does he most resemble? Apart from Lennie, who does he get on with best?

### LENNIE

(3) He's jes' like a kid, ain't he? ; (3) He ain't mean Slim can see what Lennie is really like.

(2) Lennie don't know no rules In explaining what his friend is like, George anticipates the disaster which results from this.

(1) If you don' want me I can go off in the hills an' find a cave. Lennie has a kind of animal cunning and tries to make George feel guilty so he will stop telling him off.

(1)...somebody'd shoot you for a coyote if you was by yourself. George's comment likens Lennie to an animal, stresses his inability to look after himself and anticipates the ending.

(1) An' live off the fatta the lan' Lennie's excitement is very child like, especially in the way he repeats words he has heard George say many times before.

(5) I like to pet nice things Lennie is very fond of animals and when Curley's wife wants to know why, he tries to explain.

# USEFUL QUOTATIONS AND EXERCISES

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(1) .. you've broke it pettin' it. George tries to warn Lennie to be careful but the other man does not know his own strength and literally ends up hurting the things he loves.

EXERCISE:

If the character of Lennie were different, i.e. if he were not backward, how would this affect the story?

SLIM

(2) His authority was so great that his word was taken on any subject, be it politics or love This sums up the way everybody on the ranch feels about him.

(2) You wouldn't tell? - no, 'course you wouldn't. Slim's relaxed nature helps people to be at ease with him and they know he is trustworthy; even George, who is wary of others (usually on Lennie's behalf) and has not known Slim very long.

EXERCISE:

Does the story need such a heroic character?

CURLEY

(2) Curley is cockier'n ever since he got married. This shows how unpopular the man is.

(2) Well, what the hell was she doin' ? He is obsessed with his wife, as well as being suspicious of her and forever following her around. By contrast, she pretends to be looking for him as an excuse to go and talk to the other men.

(2) An' I bet he's eatin' raw eggs and writin' to the patent medicine houses George has sized Curley up pretty accurately. This also shows his fastidious nature and is a good example of Steinbeck's down to earth humour.

(2) By Christ, he's gotta talk when he's spoken to Curley is arrogant and cocky, forever causing trouble. He objects to George trying to stick up for Lennie.

(2) Curley ain't givin' nobody a chance Candy explains that Curley can't lose - he fights bigger men because if he wins, he looks good and even if he loses, he still gets away with it because people think the other man should pick on somebody his own size.

(5) Shoot for his guts. That'll double 'im over Curley has a vicious streak and it seems he wants revenge on Lennie as much for hurting his hand as for killing his wife. He expresses no sorrow at all over her death and even Slim cannot persuade him to stay with her.

CURLEY'S WIFE

(5) You god-damn tramp....You lousy tart Candy, bitter as he is that the death of Curley's wife means the death of all their dreams, is saying what all the men think of her.

(5) I can't talk to nobody but Curley. Else he gets mad. Lennie is the only one she explains her behaviour to, but, of course, he doesn't understand.

# USEFUL QUOTATIONS AND EXERCISES

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## CANDY

(4) When they can me here I wisht somebody'd shoot me Candy is prejudiced against because he is old and disabled and wants to be put out of his misery, as they did his dog. This also anticipates Lennie's fate, as does Slim's comment about the dog: I wisht somebody'd shoot me if I get old an' a cripple

## CROOKS

(4) I can't play because I'm black. They say I stink. Well, I tell you, you all of you stink to me,' Crooks explains to Lennie that he is not allowed to socialise with the others because of his colour. He wouldn't dare show defiance to anyone else, let alone make derogatory comments like the ones which he is forced to endure.

(4) They'll tie ya up with a collar, like a dog Crooks is deliberately unkind to Lennie, probably all the more so because he wouldn't dare say anything nasty to the other hands.

(4) An' never a god-damn one of 'em ever gets it. Crooks is cynical about men dreaming of owning a piece of land because he's heard it all before. As far as he's concerned, it's as impossible as getting to heaven.

## EXERCISE:

If Steinbeck decided he had to dispense with one of these two characters, which would you say has the more important role in the story?

## THEMES

### THE AMERICAN DREAM

(1) Some day - 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 George and Lennie's dream, all they need to make them happy. Lennie is forever asking George to tell him about it, like a child asking for a favourite fairy story.

(4) Everybody wants a little bit of land, not much. Jus' som'thin' that was his. Candy's explanation for wanting to become involved in George and Lennie's plans.

(4) I remember when I was a little kid on my old man's chicken ranch. Crooks' dream is similar, except it is based on his memories. He can remember every detail of his childhood home and wants to relive the past, go back to a time when he was happy and secure.

(5) I could make somethin' of myself; He says he was gonna put me in the movies Curley's wife dreams of something far more ambitious, far more glamorous and quite impossible. The men's dreams would depend on hard work and earning a living; hers is a question of sheer good luck.

## EXERCISE:

What would you say was Steinbeck's main purpose in writing this novel?

# USEFUL QUOTATIONS AND EXERCISES

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## LONELINESS

(4) I tell ya a guy gets too lonely, an' he gets sick. Crooks is the loneliest character of all, shunned because of his colour, his disability and his bitterness.

(1) Guys like us, that work on the ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don't belong no place. George tries to explain how he feels to Lennie.

(2) A guy on a ranch don't never listen nor he don't ask questions Candy sums up the difficulty of migrant workers' relationships.

(3) After a long time they get mean George is shrewd enough to realise that it's having Lennie for company which stops him getting lonely and means he won't end up fighting all the time, like some of the other migrant workers.

(2) Funny how you an' him string along together.' Slim's comment shows how unusual it is for two migrant workers to travel around together. Even Lennie realises that this makes them different to the other men.

(5) I get lonely; What's the matter with me? she cried. Ain't I got a right to talk to nobody? Because Curley's wife is so lonely, she seeks out the other men. This makes her a danger to them, because of his temper, and to herself, because seeking Lennie's company leads to her death.

## EXERCISE:

Does Steinbeck condemn or condone Curley's wife? Do you feel sorry for her or do you think she is to blame for her downfall?

## PREJUDICE

(4)...just a nigger talkin'....So it don't mean nothing Crooks even feels he has to justify himself to Lennie

(4) I could get you strung up on a tree so easy it ain't even funny Curley's wife's vindictive response when Crooks asks her to leave his room. He is very dignified and she turns on him, threatening him - any hint of rape and he would be lynched.

## EXERCISE:

What techniques does Steinbeck use here to convey the atmosphere and how effective are they?

## SEXISM

I seen 'em poison before, but I never seen no piece of jail-bait worse than her George's condemnation of Curley's wife is very harsh but probably due to his anxiety in making sure that Lennie understands he mustn't go near her. Again, it paves the way for the action to come.

## INSIDERS AND OUTSIDERS

(2) Maybe ever'body in the whole damn world is scared of each other This remark has greater impact because it comes from Slim. It shows both his insight and the insecurity of the average migrant worker.

(4) Ever' one of you's scared the rest is goin' to get something on you Curley's wife is saying virtually the same thing as Slim but lacks his insight. She is complaining about her own predicament because, on his own, a man will talk to her, but not when there's two or more of them, in case of trouble.

(4) They left all the weak ones here Curley's wife is well aware where all the other men have gone, including her husband. This comment appears ironic in its lack of self-awareness, since she is as weak as they are, but later she openly admits that she's pitiful for wanting to be in their company rather than all alone.

## EXERCISE:

Which character would you say suffers the most prejudice? Which one do you feel the most sympathy for?

## LOYALTY

(1) I was jus' foolin', Lennie. 'Cause I want you to stay with me. George and Lennie are loyal to each other, even if George has to constantly reassure Lennie that he will not abandon him.

I shouldn't ought to of let no stranger shoot my dog. Candy feels guilt over not shooting his dog, as if he has betrayed the animal.

(5) He ain't a nice fella; Swell guy, ain't he? Sometimes I'd like to bust him myself Curley's wife is disloyal to her husband, making her feelings very clear to the hands, which, in turn, makes them think the worse of her.

(5) Well, I guess we got to get him Slim knows Lennie is not really to blame; he even tries to make Curley stay behind with his dead wife, as much to try and protect Lennie as to observe the proprieties.

(6) I swear you hadda Slim knows what happened at the end, reassures George and takes him away to get a drink. George already knows he can trust Slim and that the other man is loyal. Having always looked after Lennie, now he is the one who will be protected.

## THE WORKING MAN

(1) we'll be bucking grain bags, bustin' a gut George's description of what the job entails shows how hard they have to work. Ironically, for all he keeps telling Lennie he is a liability, it is the other man's immense strength which helps to guarantee that they are hired as ranch hands.

## PROTEST

(2) I planted crops for damn near ever'body in this state, but they wasn't my crops. Candy is bitter about his hard working life, which never got him anywhere and cost him his hand. It is even worse for him now he is reduced to the most menial tasks, looked down on by all the other hands.