

Of Mice and Men

Background Info

Author Bio

Full Name: John Steinbeck

Date of Birth: 1902

Place of Birth: Salinas, California

Date of Death: 1968

Brief Life Story: John Steinbeck grew up in and around Salinas, California. Steinbeck's comfortable California upbringing instilled in him a love of nature and the land, but also of the diverse ethnic and socioeconomic groups featured throughout his fiction. He attended Stanford University, but never completed his degree. Instead he moved to New York in 1925 to become a freelance writer. He returned to California after that plan failed and earned his first real recognition for *Tortilla Flat* (1935), a collection of stories about peasant workers in Monterrey, California. He published many more novels throughout his lifetime and today is best known for the novella *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and the novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962 and died six years later.

Key Facts

Full Title: *Of Mice and Men*

Genre: Novella (short novel)

Setting: Salinas and Soledad, California during the Great Depression in the early 1930s

Climax: Lennie accidentally kills Curley's wife

Protagonist: Lennie Small and George Milton

Antagonists: Curley

Point of View: Third person omniscient

Historical and Literary Context

When Published: 1937

Literary Period: Modernist Novel

Related Literary Works: John Steinbeck and Woody Guthrie were perhaps the two most famous chroniclers of the Great Depression. Steinbeck's trilogy of novels portraying the struggle of migrant workers in California is the most enduring literary chronicle of the Great Depression: *In Dubious Battle*

(1936), *Of Mice and Men* (1937), and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940). Woody Guthrie (1912–1967), the leading American songwriter of the late 1930s and 1940s, released the *Dust Bowl Ballads* in 1940, an album of songs inspired by the drought-ravaged region of the American West that came to be known as the "Dust Bowl" in the early 1930s.

Related Historical Events: When the stock market crashed in 1929, an already awful situation for farmers and farm workers got considerably worse. Following World War I, crop prices plunged, forcing farmers to expand their farms and buy more equipment to make up for the shortfall. This situation was exacerbated when a severe drought crippled much of the American West. So when the market crashed, farmers could not pay back the debts they had built up in buying more land and equipment. As a result, many farmers and farm workers, migrated to California in hopes of finding enough work to live.

Plot Summary

Near the Salinas River in California, **George Milton** and **Lennie Small**, two migrant farm workers, walk toward a ranch. George is quick and smart, while Lennie is huge, strong, and mentally disabled. As they make their way to the ranch, George often whines that his life would be so much easier without Lennie. But when Lennie offers to leave him, George refuses. They bed down for the night, and George describes the **farm** that he and Lennie one day dream of owning together. George also reminds Lennie of the trouble Lennie got into at their last ranch and tells Lennie that if he gets into trouble again, he should hide at this spot where they're sleeping.

George and Lennie arrive at the ranch the next morning. There they meet **Candy**, an old handyman with only one hand, and the **boss**, who questions George and Lennie about their skills. The boss is skeptical when George answers for Lennie, but gives them work despite his suspicions. The men also meet **Curley**, the boss's ill-tempered and violent son, and, later, Curley's sexy **wife**, who likes to flirt with the ranch hands. Finally, George and Lennie meet **Slim** and **Carlson**. Slim's dog has just

given birth, and Carlson wants to replace Candy's old, useless **dog** with one of the puppies.

After their first day of work, Slim gives a puppy to an overjoyed Lennie, and George tells Slim about what happened to him and Lennie at the ranch in Weed: Lennie touched a woman's dress and the woman accused him of rape. Slim voices his appreciation of the deep and selfless friendship between George and Lennie. Carlson, meanwhile, convinces Candy to let him shoot his dog. Carlson takes the dog outside and shoots it in the back of the head to make sure it doesn't suffer, but Candy still seems upset. When Lennie once again asks George to describe the farm they'll someday own, Candy overhears and asks if he can help them buy it. A few minutes later, Curley enters and the other men tease him about his wife. Curley mistakenly thinks Lennie is also laughing at him, so he punches Lennie. Lennie doesn't fight back until George says it's all right. Then Lennie catches Curley's hand and breaks it.

All of the men except **Crooks**, Lennie, and Candy go to visit a brothel on Saturday night. Though at first Crooks, a black man, refuses to talk to the white men, after a while they all

end up talking about Lennie and George's farm. Crooks claims it will never work out. The conversation ends when Curley's wife enters. She mocks the men as weak and says she's so lonely that she's stooped to talking to them. When they tell her to leave, she threatens to have Crooks lynched.

The next afternoon, Lennie sits alone, consoling himself after accidentally killing his **puppy**. Curley's wife, lonely and desperate, sits beside him. She tells him of her failed dream of being an actress and offers to let Lennie touch her hair. But Lennie strokes it too hard. She tries to push him away. Lennie panics and shakes her, breaking her neck. Lennie flees to the spot by the river.

Candy discovers Curley's wife's body and alerts George. Curley leads a group of men to lynch Lennie, but George directs the men to the wrong place and finds Lennie first. As he once more describes the farm they're going to own and Lennie loses himself in imagination, George shoots Lennie in the back of the head with Carlson's gun. The men come running. George says he killed Lennie in a struggle for Carlson's gun. Slim tells George he did what he had to do.

Characters

George Milton – George is **Lennie's** friend and protector. Unlike the giant, lumbering Lennie, George is small and wiry with a quick and resourceful mind. In many ways, George is a typical migrant farm worker, a class of poor and lonely men who traveled from ranch to ranch looking for work during the Great Depression. But George differs from these often bitter men because of his friendship with Lennie, which keeps him, in his own words, from getting "mean." Though George sometimes resents Lennie as a burden, he also deeply loves him, and shares with him a dream of owning their own farm.

Lennie Small – **George's** companion. Lennie is huge and immensely strong, but a mental disability makes him entirely dependent on George, especially after his **Aunt Clara** dies (before the novella begins). Lennie is the most innocent, gentle, and kind character in the novel, and his sole dream is to tend **rabbits** and live off the "fatta lan'" on a **farm** that he and George will own. In the end, Lennie and his innocent dream fall prey to **Curley's** revenge and George's mercy, two powerful adult emotions beyond Lennie's control or comprehension.

Candy – An old handyman who greets **George** and **Lennie** at the ranch. The owner of an old and feeble dog, Candy is himself crippled—he lost his hand in an accident on the ranch. Candy is a man who has been broken by life in general and the Depression in particular, and he is desperate for some hope or dream to believe in. He therefore latches onto George and Lennie's plan to buy a **farm**, and offers his life savings to help them.

Curley – The son of the **boss** of the ranch, Curley is careful to make it clear that he is of a higher class than the other ranch hands by wearing fancy boots. He is also mean-spirited, violent, and insecure. Though the only married man on the ranch, he's extremely jealous and suspicious of his **wife**, and he tends to overcompensate for his lack of height by picking fights with larger men. Curley cares most about looking strong.

Curley's Wife – The only female character in the novel, and **Curley's** wife. The men on the ranch call her a "tart" because she flirts with them. They consider her dangerous because her attention might cause them to get fired, or worse. But beneath her sexy exterior, Curley's wife is deeply lonely, and has dashed dreams of her own.

Slim – A skilled mule driver with an ageless face, a grave manner, and a calm authority on how to run a ranch, Slim is a revered figure on the ranch. As the most self-assured of the men, he is the only one who never takes a swipe at anyone else in order to make himself feel stronger or better. At the same time, he is also the only one of the ranch hands who truly understands and appreciates the power and purity of the friendship between **George** and **Lennie**.

Crooks – The stable manager, and the only black man on the farm. Crook's name comes from his crooked posture, the result of a kick from a horse. Crooks is bitter from a lifetime of lonely segregation. He thinks of himself as a cynic, and immediately sees that **George** and **Lennie's** dream of owning a **farm** will never come about. Yet at the same time, he can't entirely resist the beauty of the dream, and wants to be a part of it.

Carlson – The ranch-hand who shoots **Candy's** dog in the back of the head. Though he isn't cruel, Carlson is without sentimentality, and has no qualms about killing or getting rid of anything that's no longer useful.

The Boss – The man who runs the ranch, and **Curley's** father. He is quick to anger and suspicion, but is otherwise fair. Like his son, the boss wears fancy boots to show that he occupies a station above the ranch hands.

Aunt Clara – Though not an actual character in the novel, Aunt Clara cared for **Lennie** until her death. She appears to Lennie in a vision near the end of the novel.

Whit – A ranch hand.

Andy Cushman – A childhood friend of **George** and **Lennie's** who is in prison "on account of a tart."

Themes

In LitCharts, each theme gets its own corresponding color, which you can use to track where the themes occur in the work. There are two ways to track themes:

- Refer to the color-coded bars next to each plot point throughout the *Summary and Analysis* sections.
- Use the *ThemeTracker* section to get a quick overview of where the themes appear throughout the entire work.

Broken Plans

Of Mice and Men takes its title from a famous lyric by the Scottish poet Robert Burns (1759-1796). Burns's poem "To a Mouse" contains the lines, "The best laid plans of mice and men / Often go awry." Nearly all of the main characters *Of Mice and Men* harbor dreams and plans that never come true. Most notably, **George**, **Lennie**, and **Candy** share a doomed dream of buying their own farm and living off the land. George often laments the life he could have had as a freewheeling bachelor, free of the burden of caring for Lennie. "[I]f I was alone I could live so easy," he says. Lennie has his own private dream of living in a cave with his own rabbits, while **Curley's wife** often regrets her missed chance to become a Hollywood actress. In the end, the novel's main theme is that people must learn to reconcile their dreams with reality, to accept that everyone's best laid plans often perish. These plans "go awry" not because the characters in the novella give up on them, but because forces beyond their control destroy them. In the bleak economic outlook of the Great Depression, during which the novel was written and set, coming to terms with dreams broken by out-of-control economic forces became a reality nearly everyone in America faced.

The American Dream

The American Dream is written into the *Declaration of Independence*: "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." **Lennie** and **George's** dream of owning a farm and living off the "fatta the lan" symbolizes this dream. *Of Mice and Men* shows that for poor migrant workers during the Depression, the American Dream became an illusion and a trap. All the ranch hands in *Of Mice and Men* dream of life, liberty, and happiness, but none ever gets it. As **Crooks** says when he hears of Lennie's dream to own his own farm, "Nobody ever gets to heaven, and nobody gets no land."

At the same time, while the dream may never be realized, *Of Mice and Men* suggests that in order for life to be full and meaningful, it *must* contain dreams. George and Lennie never achieve their dream, but the dream holds their remarkable friendship together. Their dream is real because it's real in their imaginations. The dream keeps Lennie happy and stops George from becoming "mean" and lonely like most ranch hands. The dream gives them life, even if life never allows them to achieve their dreams.

Male Friendship

Of Mice and Men explores the dynamics of male friendship. When **Lennie** asks **George** to tell him why they're not like other ranchers, George explains that they're different because they have each other. Usually ranchers have no family, no friends, and, therefore, no future. George and Lennie's friendship strikes the other ranch workers as odd: their dependence on each other makes the **boss** and **Curley** suspicious; and **Slim** observes that ranch workers rarely travel together because they're scared of each other. Although most of the men in the novel are entirely alone, they all crave true companionship. As **Crooks**, perhaps the novel's most solitary character because of his black skin, puts it, "A guy needs somebody—to be near him."

The Weak and the Strong

Though many characters in *Of Mice and Men* long for friendship and compassion, they live in fear of each other. As **Carlson's** unsentimental shooting of **Candy's** dog makes clear, in the Great Depression the useless, old, or weak were inevitably destroyed as the strong and useful fought for survival. Everyone on the ranch constantly tries to *look* strong, especially if they *feel* weak. The fear of the weak being overrun by the strong explains why **Curley** likes to fight larger men, why **Crooks** tells **Lennie** that **George** is going to abandon him, and why **Curley's wife** threatens to have Crooks lynched. Each character tries to appear strong by asserting power over another. The fear of the strong also explains why most of the other characters in *Of Mice and Men* can't comprehend Lennie and George's friendship. A human relationship devoid of power dynamics simply makes no sense to the other characters, all of whom assume they're in a fight for survival.

Women

There are two different visions of women in *Of Mice and Men*: the male characters' view of women, and the novel's view of women. The men tend to view women with scorn and fear, dismissing women as dangerous sexual temptresses. Women are often referred to as "tarts," a derogatory word for women that means "tramp." **Lennie** and **George** have a mutual friend in prison "on account of a tart," and their own troubles result twice from the enticing allure of a woman—the woman in Weed, and **Curley's wife**. Yet although Curley's wife plays into her role as sexy temptress, *Of Mice and Men* presents her, at least partly, as a victim. She craves the attention of the men because she's desperately lonely, and flaunts her power over the men because she herself feels weak. Similarly, the novella's portrayal of **Aunt Clara** as a vision of wholesome femininity from a more innocent age contrasts with the male characters' consistently negative view of women.

Symbols

Symbols are shown in **red** text whenever they appear in the *Plot Summary* and *Summary and Analysis* sections of this LitChart.

George and Lennie's Farm

The farm **George** and **Lennie** hope to own is a symbol of the American Dream. Like a mirage, the farm leads George, Lennie, and other ranchers like **Candy** and **Crooks**, to indulge in the dream of living "off the fatta the lan." George's elaborate description of the farm's abundant plants and animals also makes it seem like a symbol of paradise.

Rabbits

Lennie's dream is to tend the rabbits on the farm that he and **George** hope to one day own. This dream establishes Lennie's complete innocence. But Lennie loves the rabbits because of their soft fur, and his love of touching soft things leads to his doom. The rabbits, then, symbolize not only innocence, but also the downfall of innocence in a harsh world.

Candy's Dog


Candy's once powerful sheepdog is now old and useless. **Carlson's** killing of the dog makes it clear that during the De-

pression only the strong survive. The way in which Carlson kills the dog—with a gunshot to the back of the head—foreshadows Lennie's death and likens Lennie to Candy's dog: they're both powerless, innocent, and doomed.

Lennie's Puppy

Just as **Lennie** is dependent on **George**, Lennie's puppy is entirely dependent on Lennie. Like Lennie, the puppy symbolizes the fate of the weak in the face of the strong.

Summary and Analysis

The color-coded bars in *Summary and Analysis* make it easy to track the themes through the work. Each color corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section. For instance, a bar of  indicates that all five themes apply to that part of the summary.

Part 1

The novel begins with a detailed description of the lush rural area near the riverbed of the Salinas River a few miles south of Soledad, California. **George Milton** and **Lennie Small**, two men dressed in denim, are walking along a path on the riverbed. George, the leader, is small and quick. Lennie, huge and awkward, follows behind.

George and Lennie's denim clothing show that they're poor ranch hands. Their single-file walking pattern reveals the dynamics of their relationship: George is the leader even though Lennie is larger.



The men stop. **Lennie** drinks huge gulps from a pool of standing water next to the river. **George** warns him not to drink too much or else he'll get sick again.

Lennie's lack of common sense is the first indication of his mental disability.



When **George** complains about the bus driver who dropped them off too far from the ranch, **Lennie** asks where they're going. George reminds Lennie about their plans, but stops when he notices a dead mouse in Lennie's pocket. Lennie picked it up because he likes to pet its soft fur, but accidentally killed it.

George clearly acts as a kind of parent to Lennie. Petting the mouse shows Lennie's innocence and the unintended consequences of his strength.



George throws the mouse away, and tells **Lennie** they're going to a ranch like the one they just left in Weed. George also tells Lennie not to say anything when they meet the **boss** at the new ranch.

George constantly worries that Lennie's disability will jeopardize their welfare and their future.



Lennie remembers that they were "run out" of Weed, but **George** says they ran away before they could be run out. George then says that his life would be so much easier and more free if Lennie wasn't always following him.

Given that Lennie keeps getting them fired, George is right: his life would be easier without Lennie. So why does he stay with Lennie?



George decides they should spend the night where they are. **Lennie** goes off to find firewood. While he's gone **George** thinks of him as a "poor bastard." When **Lennie** returns without wood, **George** suspects he's found the dead mouse again. **George** takes it, making **Lennie** cry. **Lennie** mentions how his **Aunt Clara** used to give him mice. **George** reminds **Lennie** that he always accidentally killed them.

Behind George's scolding and frustration are pity and love. Lennie's history with mice shows that he often destroys the things he loves, foreshadowing his fate. Aunt Clara's death shows the lack of family and community in the ranch workers' lives.



The men have a dinner of canned beans. When **Lennie** complains about the lack of ketchup, **George** again says how much easier his life would be without **Lennie**. He brings up the event that got them run out of Weed: **Lennie** touched a woman's dress and refused to let go. She accused him of rape. **Lennie** liked the dress because it felt soft as a mouse's fur.

George's bachelor fantasy shows how his feelings of responsibility for Lennie interrupted the plans he had as a youth. Lennie's obsession with soft things extends to women.



Lennie offers to leave **George** alone and go live in a cave. **Lennie** imagines that he could keep mice in his cave if he wanted to, without **George's** supervision.

Lennie understands he's a burden. He also has his own desire for freedom.



George says he wants **Lennie** to stay with him. He comments that ranch workers are always lonely, but he and **Lennie** are different. They have each other.

Deep feelings of friendship and loyalty keep George with Lennie.



At **Lennie's** urging, **George** describes their future. They'll save money until they can buy their own **farm**. **George** describes the farm right down to its rabbit hutches. **Lennie** can't contain his excitement about tending **rabbits** and living off the "fatta the lan."

The farm is George and Lennie's American Dream. This dream of a future together is the fullest expression of their friendship.



As they go to sleep, **George** asks **Lennie** to take a close look at their surroundings. He tells **Lennie** that if he gets into any trouble at the ranch he should back to this spot and hide in the bushes.

Yet even at this hopeful moment, George senses that Lennie's mental disability will dash their hopes.



Part 2

George and **Lennie** arrive at the ranch the next morning. At the bunkhouse, an old man with no right hand and a crippled **dog** greets them. His name is **Candy**. He says the **boss** was angry when they didn't show up last night.

The bunkhouse is a place inhabited by single, lonely men. Candy is a man broken by life and the Depression, dependent on the kindness of the Boss.



The **boss** enters. **George** blames the bus driver for their lateness. When the boss asks about their skills, **George** speaks for **Lennie**. The boss gets suspicious when **Lennie** repeats something **George** says.

Lennie's mental weakness has already made him forget his promise not to speak, foreshadowing more trouble ahead.



The **boss** has never seen a man go out of his way for another man like **George** does for **Lennie**, and suspects that **George** might be taking advantage of **Lennie**. **George** lies, and says that **Lennie** is his cousin. The boss is still suspicious, but lets them stay.

The boss can't fathom that two men could care for one another. The idea of lasting male friendship is foreign on a ranch where survival is the rule.



After the **boss** leaves, **Lennie** asks **George** if what he said was true. **George** says they were just lies, and notices that **Candy** has been listening to their conversation. He tells **Candy** to mind his own business. **Candy** assures him he wasn't eavesdropping.

Lennie can't remember his own past. George's feelings of friendship don't extend beyond Lennie. To other men, he tries to project strength.



Curley, the **boss's** son, enters, looking for his father. **Curley**, who wears fancy boots, quickly starts picking on **Lennie**, who refuses to speak. After **Curley** leaves, **Candy** says **Curley** is a lightweight boxer and has a history of picking fights with men larger than him.

Curley is careful to mark himself as richer than other men (through his boots) or stronger (by picking fights with larger men).



Candy adds that **Curley** has only gotten worse since his recent marriage to a pretty "tart" who flirts with the ranch hands. **Candy** also reveals that **Curley** keeps vaseline in his left glove to keep his fingers soft.

The mention of Curley's wife shows the men's fear of women and their effects on men.



When **Candy** leaves, **George** tells **Lennie** to stay away from **Curley**. Fighting with **Curley**, he warns, will get them fired. **Lennie** promises. **George** again tells **Lennie** to hide and wait for **George** in the bushes by the river if he ever gets into trouble at the ranch.

George continues to look out for Lennie, and senses that Curley's macho posturing will wind up a threat to them.



Just then, **Curley's wife** enters. She is very pretty and wears a lot of makeup. While asking where **Curly** is, she moves to ensure that she shows off her body.

Curley's wife enjoys threatening the men with her good looks.



Slim tells her that **Curley** is back at the main house. When she's gone, **Lennie** calls her "purty." **George** warns him to stay away from her. **Lennie**, frightened, begs to leave the ranch. **George** says first they have to make enough money to buy their own land.

George foresees that Lennie's attraction to feminine softness will again cause trouble, and threaten their dream of a farm.



Slim is a leader and authority among the other ranch hands. After talking to **George** and **Lennie** and seeing their friendship, **Slim** is impressed. He says it's rare to see two men travel together because most people are scared of each other. **George** agrees that it's better to travel with a friend.

Slim's admiration for George and Lennie's friendship shows how extraordinary that friendship is. It also shows Slim's ability to see beyond the harshness of ranch life.



Carlson, another ranch hand, introduces himself to **George** and **Lennie**, then asks **Slim** about his dog. **Slim** says she gave birth to nine puppies, but that he had to drown four because there wasn't enough food for them all. **Carlson** proposes shooting **Candy's** crippled **dog** and replacing it with one of the puppies. **Lennie** wonders if he can get a **puppy** of his own.

On the ranch during the Depression, the men believe killing the weak protects the weak from prolonged suffering. While killing is therefore seen as mercy, it also means that if you want to live it's crucial that you seem strong.



Curley enters again, looking for his **wife**. When he leaves, **George** says he might end up in a fight with **Curley** himself. The triangle rings, signalling that it's time for dinner.

Curley's wariness about his wife makes George uneasy; he foresees trouble.



Part 3

Slim agrees to give **Lennie** a **puppy**. When **George** thanks him, **Slim** says **Lennie** is the best worker he's ever seen even though he's "cuckoo." **George** defends **Lennie**, and **Slim** again admires **George** and **Lennie's** friendship.

George's pride when Slim praises Lennie's work and his defense of Lennie when Slim calls him "cuckoo" conveys George's heartfelt affection for Lennie.



George explains that he grew up with **Lennie** and took care of him after his **Aunt Clara** died. **George** admits that at first he took advantage of **Lennie's** willingness to do whatever he told him, but soon felt ashamed and since then has taken good care of him. He adds that having **Lennie** as his companion keeps him from getting "mean," as most ranch workers do.

George describes his own moral development. George once took advantage of Lennie, as all the men on the ranch take advantage of each other. But his friendship with Lennie taught him to avoid such "meanness."



George also tells **Slim** what happened in Weed. **Lennie** touched a woman's dress. She objected. He panicked and wouldn't let go. The woman claimed it was rape, and **Lennie** and **George** had to flee a mob.

Lennie and George's earlier trouble stems from Lennie's innocent love of soft things and a woman's false accusation of rape.



Lennie enters with his **puppy** under his coat. **George** orders him to return the puppy to its litter. While **Lennie** is gone, **Candy** and his crippled **dog** enter the bunkhouse, followed by **Carlson**. **Carlson** again suggests they put the dog out of its misery. **Slim** agrees and offers **Candy** one of his puppies.

Slim and Carlson can't imagine that Candy has an emotional attachment to his dog, so they can't comprehend that killing the dog would pain him.



Whit enters, holding a magazine containing a letter to the editor from a ranch hand they once knew. Meanwhile, **Carlson** persuades **Candy** to let him shoot the **dog**. He takes the dog outside. As the men play cards, a shot fires. **Candy** stares at the wall.

The "mercy" killing of Candy's dog shows how the strong destroy the weak on the ranch. The killing also foreshadows future events.



Crooks, the black stable manager enters with news for **Slim**. **Slim** leaves with **Crooks**, and the men discuss **Curley's wife**. They agree with **George** that women don't belong on ranches, and that she'll end up causing trouble. **Whit** invites **George** to come to a brothel with him the next night. **George** declines, saying he and **Lennie** are trying to save money.

George again predicts that Curley's wife will cause trouble. He views all women as temptresses. And he implies that women might interfere with his dream of buying a farm with Lennie.



Lennie and **Carlson** enter the bunkhouse. **Curley** enters soon after, again looking for his **wife**. He suspects she's with **Slim** in the barn and storms out. The other men follow, hoping for a fight.

Curley's wife is a threat even to Curley. He thinks she'll humiliate him by cheating on him.



George and **Lennie** stay behind, and soon begin talking about their **farm**. Having overheard George's description of the farm as a place where they can just "belong," **Candy** offers his life savings of \$350 to help them buy it. Though George is at first suspicious, soon the three men are making plans.

As the other men return, **George** warns **Lennie** and **Curley** to keep the **farm** a secret. Candy whispers back that he should have shot his **dog** himself.

Slim, **Curley**, **Carlson**, and **Whit** enter. Curley apologizes to Slim for suspecting him, and all the men mock Curley for being so insecure. Curley thinks **Lennie** is also laughing at him, though Lennie was just smiling while thinking of tending **rabbits** on the **farm**. Curley starts punching Lennie, bloodying his face. Lennie only fights back when George tells him he may. He then easily breaks Curley's hand.

Curley wants to fire **George** and **Lennie**, but **Slim** tells him if he does no one on the ranch will respect him. Curley gives in. Lennie asks George if he can still tend the **rabbits** on their **farm**. George says yes.

In losing his dog, Candy lost his community. He's now attracted to George and Lennie's idea of a farm as a new community. He'll give everything he has for fellowship.



George will later heed Candy's advice.



Curley's insecurity about his wife leads him to mistake Lennie's heartfelt smile for a taunt, and to try to save face by showing he's stronger than Lennie. This suggests that Lennie and George's dream will lead unintentionally to trouble.



This moment may be the most hopeful in the novel. The men have rallied around George and Lennie. Their dream seems achievable.



Part 4

Crooks, whose nickname stems from his crooked back, sits on his bunk in the stable. **Lennie** stops by Crooks' room, but Crooks demands he leave. Crooks shouts that if he's not allowed in the white men's quarters, then the white men aren't allowed in his. But Lennie's innocent loneliness (all the other men have gone into town to visit a brothel) wins Crooks over.

As they talk, **Lennie** forgets the **farm** is a secret and mentions it. **Crooks** thinks this just one of Lennie's fantasies.

Crooks describes his childhood in California. As a black man he was always lonely. Even on the ranch he's forced to sleep apart from the other men.

Suddenly angry and bitter, **Crooks** tells **Lennie** that **George** might not return to the ranch. In terrible fear, Lennie nearly attacks Crooks.

Crooks says he was just trying to make **Lennie** understand what it's like to be black and, therefore, alone. "A guy needs somebody," Crooks says.

The conversation turns back to the **farm**. **Crooks** says all ranch hands dream about owning land, but nobody ever does, just like nobody ever gets to heaven.

Candy wanders in. When **Crooks** again says they'll never own a **farm**, Candy replies that they have a spot of land picked out and nearly all the money they need. Crooks wonders if he might be able to go with them.

Curley's wife walks in and starts mocking the men in the room as the "weak ones" not allowed to go to the brothel.

Despite the men's demands that she leave, **Curley's wife** starts talking about how sad she is. She claims she could have been a movie actress, but instead is so lonely she's in the bunkhouse talking to a bunch of losers. She asks what happened to **Curley's** hand, and gets angry when they deny he hurt it in a fight.

Candy tells her to leave. If she fires them, he says, they'll just buy their own **farm**. **Curley's wife** laughs at him. **Crooks** also demands she leave, but quiets when she curses him and threatens to have him lynched. Candy finally says he hears the men returning. Curley's wife leaves. On the way out, she thanks **Lennie** for beating up her husband.

Crooks' race makes him even more trapped and alone than the other men. Crooks and Lennie are outcasts. Each is "weak." Each has suffered the unfair consequences of a "disability": retardation and race.



Crooks has suffered too much to believe in dreams.



All ranchers are lonely men. Crooks's skin color makes him even lonelier.



Crooks makes himself feel strong by making Lennie feel weaker.



Crooks's fear is a reminder of how physically powerful Lennie is.



Crooks, who's experienced so much suffering, sees all dreams as shams.



Crooks's sudden interest in the plan shows how powerful the dream can be to hope-starved ranchers.



Now Curley's wife asserts her power by making the men feel weak.



Curley's wife reveals her own failed dreams. Despite the fact that the men hate Curley, they cover for him, siding with men against women.



Immediately after showing weakness, Curley's wife asserts dominance over all of the men. In doing so, she crushes their dream. She makes it clear that there's no room for such a dream in the reality of the ranch or the Depression.



The other men return. When **George** discovers **Lennie** was talking about the **farm**, he gets angry. But **Crooks** says **Curley's wife** was right, and that he's no longer interested in going to their farm.

Crooks's sudden claim that he doesn't want anything to do with the farm confirms the crushing impact of Curley's wife's verbal assault.



Part 5

On Sunday, **Lennie** sits in the barn stroking his **puppy**, which is dead. He fears this means he won't be allowed to tend the rabbits. He throws the puppy away, then retrieves it and starts stroking it again.

The dead puppy is an ominous sign. Once again, Lennie's innocent strength has created accidental tragedy.



Curley's wife enters. **Lennie** tells her he's not allowed to talk to her, but she says no one will ever know. She notices the dead puppy and consoles him, then explains that she almost became a movie actress, but her plans were thwarted by her mother and a bad talent agent. She says she doesn't even like **Curley**.

Like the men on the ranch, Curley's wife also suffers from lack of love and attention, and also from having sacrificed her plans and dreams for Curley.



Lennie starts talking about the **farm** and **rabbits**, and explains that he likes to pet soft things. She says her hair is soft. He strokes it excitedly, messing it up. Curley's wife gets upset and tells him to let go. Lennie panics and shakes her head, breaking her neck.

A moment of connection between Lennie and Curley's wife ends in tragedy. Just as he killed his puppy, Lennie kills her, and his dream.



Aware that he's done "another bad thing," **Lennie** sneaks out of the bunkhouse.

Lennie is referring to the events in Weed.



Candy enters and finds **Curley's wife's** body. He runs and gets **George**, and the two of them realize that **Curley** will lynch **Lennie**. Candy then asks if the plan to buy the **farm** is now officially off. George says he never really thought it would happen, but Lennie believed in it so much he had started to as well.

Lennie stopped George from growing "mean" because his belief in their dream made George believe it too. Now George is doomed to live a lonely rancher's life.



Fearing **Curley** will think he had something to do with the murder, **George** tells **Candy** to pretend George never saw the body. George leaves. Candy curses at **Curley's wife's** body. He cries, then goes to alert the men.

Candy cries for the death of the dream that had saved him, for a while, from hopelessness. George, meanwhile, protects himself.



Slim, **Whit**, **Carlson**, **Curley**, **Crooks**, and **George** enter the barn. Curley demands that **Lennie** be killed. Carlson says his gun is missing and guesses Lennie stole it. Slim tells George that Lennie has to be killed. George, who knows where Lennie is hiding, sends the lynch mob in the wrong direction.

Curley's first emotional response to his wife's death is not sorrow, but anger. Note the parallel: earlier it was Carlson's gun that killed Candy's dog, and Slim who agreed the dog had to die.



Part 6

Hiding in the brush by the river, **Lennie** has a vision of his **Aunt Clara**, who tells him **George** would have had a much easier life without him. **Lennie** then has a hallucination of a giant **rabbit**, which tells him **George** will abandon him.

Lennie understands the destructive consequences of his actions on his friendship and dream. The things he holds most dear condemn him.



George shows up. He is quiet and not angry. **Lennie** begs George to yell at him. George does, but he shows no real anger. Lennie offers to go live in a cave, and George, as usual, tells him not to.

In this terrible moment, Lennie wants to act as if everything is normal. George plays along.



Lennie then asks **George** to describe their **farm**. George does, and tells Lennie to take off his hat and to look out over the river and try to imagine the farm. As Lennie happily says they should buy the farm now, George lifts Carlson's gun and shoots Lennie in the back of the head.

George takes Candy's advice: he makes sure Lennie dies at the hand of someone he loves while imagining the unattainable dream that made his life meaningful.



The other men hear the gun shot. **George** tells **Carlson** that **Lennie** had his gun and that he shot him after wrestling it away from him. **Slim** leads the distraught **George** away, repeating over and over that George had to do it. **Carlson** and **Curley** can't figure out what's "eatin'" George and Slim.

Men like Carlson and Curley have no understanding of the friendship that can exist between men. Slim and George do, because of Lennie. That is the legacy of Lennie's dream.



Important Quotes

Part 1 Quotes

Slowly, like a terrier who doesn't want to bring a ball to its master, Lennie approached, drew back, approached again.

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... 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. An' that ain't the worst. You get in trouble. You do bad things and I got to get you out.

Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don't belong no place...With us it ain't like that. We got a future.... An' why? Because... because I got you to look after me, and you got me to look after you, and that's why.

"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."

Part 2 Quotes

"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."

Part 3 Quotes

"Carl's right, Candy. That dog ain't no good to himself. I wisht somebody'd shoot me if I got old an' a cripple."

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.

"We could live offa the fatta the lan'."

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

I ought to of shot that dog myself, George. I shouldn't ought to of let no stranger shoot my dog.

Part 4 Quotes

I seen it over an' over-a guy talkin' to another guy and it don't make no difference if he don't hear or understand. The thing is, they're talkin', or they're settin' still not talkin'. It don't make no difference, no difference....It's just the talking.

A guy sets alone out here at night, maybe readin' books or thinkin' or stuff like that. Sometimes he gets thinkin', an' he got nothing to tell him what's so an' what ain't so. Maybe if he sees somethin', he don't know whether it's right or not. He can't turn to some other guy and ast him if he sees it too. He can't tell. He got nothing to measure by. I seen things out here. I wasn't drunk. I don't know if I was asleep. If some guy was with me, he could tell me I was asleep, an' then it would be all right. But I jus' don't know.

'A guy needs somebody-to be near him.' He whined, 'A guy goes nuts if he ain't got nobody.'

I seen hundreds 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 . . . 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.

Part 5 Quotes

Why can't I talk to you? I never get to talk to nobody. I get awful lonely.

He pawed up the hay until it partly covered her.

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.

Part 6 Quotes

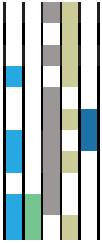
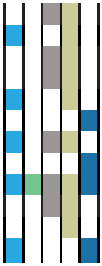
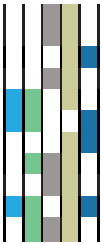
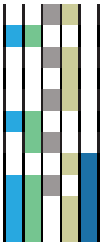
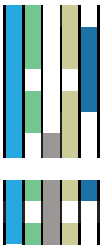

A water snake glided smoothly up the pool, twisting its periscope head from side to side; and it swam the length of the pool and came to the legs of a motionless heron that stood in the shallows. A silent head and beak lanced down and plucked it out by the head, and the beak swallowed the little snake while its tail waved frantically.

No, Lennie. I ain't mad. I never been mad, an' I ain't now. That's a thing I want ya to know.

"Never you mind," said Slim. "A guy got to sometimes."

ThemeTracker™

The LitCharts ThemeTracker is a mini-version of the entire LitChart. The ThemeTracker provides a quick timeline-style rundown of all the important plot points and allows you to track the themes throughout the work at a glance.

Themes	Part
	<p>Back-story</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Lennie and George work on a ranch in Weed, California. – Lennie touches a woman's dress. She accuses him of rape. – George and Lennie flee Weed.
	<p>1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Lennie and George walk toward another ranch, looking for work. – Lennie can't remember where they're going. George explains, but then notices that Lennie is petting a dead mouse. Lennie picked up the mouse because he likes soft things, but then accidentally killed it. – George says that his life would be so much freer if Lennie wasn't with him. Lennie offers to go and live in a cave, saying that he could then keep mice there with him. But George responds that he wants Lennie to stay with him. – George describes the farm he and Lennie dream of owning. Lennie talks about living off the "fatta the lan." – George tells Lennie to return and hide by the river if he gets into trouble.
	<p>2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – George and Lennie meet the boss, who is suspicious of the way that George looks after Lennie. Even so, the boss gives them work. – After meeting Curley, George tells Lennie to keep away from him. Lennie promises to obey. – Curley's wife enters, searching for Curley. When she leaves, Lennie calls her "purty." George warns Lennie to avoid her. – Slim admires George and Lennie's friendship. – Carlson asks Slim about his dog's new puppies. The dog gave birth to nine, but Slim had to drown four of them because there wasn't enough food for all of them. Carlson suggests that they shoot Candy's crippled dog and replace it with one of the puppies. – Curley again enters looking for his wife. The men go to dinner.
	<p>3</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Slim agrees to give Lennie a puppy, and again expresses admiration at George and Lennie's friendship. George tells Slim that Lennie keeps him from becoming "mean." – Carlson persuades Candy to let him shoot his dog. He shoots the dog. – Thinking themselves alone in the bunkhouse, Lennie and George talk about their dream farm. Candy overhears them and offers to contribute his life savings of \$350 to their savings for the farm. George warns Lennie and Candy to keep the farm secret. Candy whispers back that he should have shot his dog himself. – The men taunt Curley about his wife. Curley mistakenly thinks Lennie is also laughing at him, and punches him in the face. Lennie fights back only when George gives him permission, and then easily breaks Curley's hand. – Curley wants to fire George and Lennie on the spot, but Slim dissuades him.
	<p>4</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – All the men but Lennie, Crooks, and Candy go to a brothel. Crooks tells Lennie how terrible it is to be lonely, and says, "A guy needs somebody." – Lennie accidentally mentions the farm to Crooks. Crooks tells Lennie all ranch workers dream getting of land, but none ever succeed. – Candy enters and convinces Crooks that this time they'll get the land. Crooks asks if he could go with them. – Curley's wife enters and mocks Crooks, Candy, and Lennie as being weak because they don't go to the brothel. But she also admits that she's sad and lonely. – Crooks tells Curley's wife to leave. She threatens to have him lynched. – Crooks ceases to be interested in the farm.
	<p>5</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – One Sunday, Lennie sits in the bunkhouse petting his puppy, which he has accidentally killed. Curley's wife enters. She tells Lennie about her dreams, and let's him stroke her hair. But he strokes too excitedly, and when she gets upset Lennie accidentally breaks her neck. Lennie sneaks away. – Candy finds Curley's wife's body and gets George. They realize that Curley will lynch Lennie. – Candy asks if this means they'll never own the farm. George says he never really believed they'd own a farm, but had begun to believe because Lennie had. – Curley rounds up the men to lynch Lennie. George knows Lennie is hiding by the river—where he told Lennie to hide—and sends the men in the wrong direction.
	<p>6</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – George finds Lennie. He shoots Lennie while describing their farm. – Slim tells the distraught George that he had to do it, but Carlson and Curley can't understand what has George so upset.

Theme Key

-  Broken Plans
-  The American Dream
-  Male Friendship
-  The Weak and the Strong
-  Women