

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Of Mice and Men

by  
John Steinbeck

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### Book Information

John Steinbeck, Of Mice and Men

Quiz Number: 8665

Penguin Books, 2002

ISBN 0-14-200067-1; LCCN

103 Pages

Book Level: 4.5

Interest Level: UG

Rough-tongued, ribald men yearn for land of their own while working on a ranch in California's Salinas Valley.

**Topics:** Classics, Classics (All); Interpersonal Relationships, Friendship; Places, Farms; Places, Ranches; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Popular Groupings, Upper Grades Popular Authors/Starred Reviews; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12; U.S. States/Regions, California

### Main Characters

Candy an old, crippled, farm worker at the ranch who offers his savings to be a part of George and Lennie's dream

Carlson the farm worker who shoots Candy's old dog

Crooks a hunchback Negro farm worker who basically stays by himself

Curley a short, antagonistic man who is the boss's son

Curley's wife a lonely woman with broken dreams

George Milton a migrant farm worker who has taken on the responsibility of caring for his simple-minded friend, Lennie

Lennie Small an enormous man with the mind of a small child

Slim a farm worker who is sympathetic to George and Lennie

### Vocabulary

**apprehension** to anticipate with dread

**belligerently** an attitude of aggression or fighting

**mollified** soothed in temper

**morosely** in a sullen or gloomy manner

**pugnacious** prone to fighting

### Synopsis

George and Lennie have learned of some jobs on a nearby ranch. George decides to take his time getting there, and they decide to rest at a stream for the night. Later, Lennie finds a dead mouse to pet, which George takes away from him, telling him dead things are unsanitary. Simple-minded Lennie just wants to pet anything that is soft, which is what got him into trouble in the previous town; he tried to pet a girl's pretty dress.

They arrive at the ranch the next afternoon, and the boss becomes suspicious during the interview because only George is answering. Shortly after they are shown to a bunkhouse, Curley, the boss's son, comes looking for his wife. He likes to pick on bigger people, and George tells Lennie to stay away from him. He orders him to hide in the bushes by the stream if he gets into any trouble.

Later that night, Carlson complains of Candy's old dog smelling bad. He suggests that the dog be shot. Candy resists because he has raised the dog since it was a pup. Eventually he gives in and Carlson takes the dog out and shoots it. Curley comes into the bunkhouse again, and the men follow him to the barn to see if there will be a fight with Slim. Meanwhile, Lennie asks George to tell him the story about the rabbits and the place where they will one day live, even though he knows the words by heart. Candy overhears the story and offers to pitch in his own saved up money to purchase some land.

When Curley and the rest of the workers return to the bunkhouse a little later, Lennie is still smiling about the dream, and Curley mistakes it for mockery. He ferociously attacks Lennie, and Lennie is frightened, but he will not defend himself. When George tells him to let him have it, Lennie effortlessly crushes Curley's hand in his own.

One night, when everyone has gone into town except Lennie, he ventures over to see the old

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Negro, Crooks. At first he doesn't want a visitor, but soon invites Lennie in. He taunts him, asking him what he would do if something happened to George. He soon backs off, explaining he only wanted Lennie to see what it would feel like to be alone.

The next day, Lennie accidentally kills his puppy, and he is trying to hide it when Curley's wife comes in. He attempts to avoid speaking to her, because George has told him not to. She learns that he likes to touch soft, pretty things, and she encourages Lennie to stroke her hair, but makes the fatal mistake of screaming when Lennie gets too rough. Lennie holds on to her so tightly that he breaks her neck. He realizes he has done something bad and runs off to hide in the bushes.

Candy is the first one to spot the body, and then he shows George. George knows that Curley will hunt poor Lennie down like an animal, so he decides he must kill Lennie first. George goes to the hiding place, and Lennie asks him to be angry with him. George woodenly goes through his lines about how much better things would be if he did not have Lennie to look after. Then, he tells Lennie to look off in the distance, and he begins to recant the story of living off the land. With Lennie happy in his dreaming, George raises his pistol and shoots Lennie through the back of the head. Slim comforts George and tells him it was the only thing he could have done.

## Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

### Initial Understanding

How is Curley's wife portrayed?

*She has no identity, as evidenced by her lack of a name. She lives in the shadow of her cruel husband, who gives her no attention. She is a pathetic character who has lost her dreams, and she lives in the past. She seeks companionship and attention by dressing in a loose fashion. She appears to never leave the ranch. She is a prisoner.*

### Literary Analysis

How did Steinbeck use irony in this book?

*Answers should show such examples as the farm hands being sympathetic to the death of Candy's dog and not to the death of Lennie. Another example is that, had Carlson not shot Candy's dog, George would have never known where to find a gun. Also, it is ironic that Lennie can remember George's stories, as well as the hiding place, yet he cannot remember to be gentle with soft, pretty things.*

### Inferential Comprehension

Why was killing Lennie the kindest thing George could have done?

*If George had not killed him, Curley would have done so, and in a deliberate and malicious fashion. Lennie would have been confused and terrified. He would not have understood what was happening to him.*

### Constructing Meaning

In what ways is Lennie like an animal?

*He takes delight in the simplest of pleasures. He is often compared to an animal, and described as an animal, particularly in the first chapter when he and George are resting by the stream. George commands Lennie, and Lennie obeys. Lennie is protective and loyal to George, as a dog would be to his master.*

## Teachable Skills

**Recognizing Setting** This book is set in California, near Soledad and the Salinas River. John Steinbeck was born in Salinas, California, in 1902 and spent most of his life in the fertile valleys of this state. As a young man, he wandered around the countryside learning about and admiring nature. His love for nature and his mastery at describing it are apparent in this novel. For a project, have students imagine the same story set in an urban or modern setting where

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nature itself seems to be lacking. Instead, it might be replaced with the skyscrapers of New York City, or the ghettos of Chicago. Have students rewrite a nature-laden scene from this novel in an urban or city setting. Make any changes necessary. George and Lennie might work in a factory in Pittsburgh instead of a ranch in California, for example. How would George and Lennie handle this different environment?

the book? Whose performance is stronger--Sinise's or Malkovich's and why? Have students note any differences or changes in the movie. Have any scenes been added or deleted? Which ones? Does this add or detract from the original story? Then, ponder why Sinise, both director and actor, chose to interpret the book in the way he did.

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** *Of Mice and Men* was first published in 1937, during the era of "The Hungry Thirties," which was a time of labor conflicts, food lines and national depression. Steinbeck actually wrote articles about life in California's migrant labor camps. He also lived in a labor camp for a short time while researching material for one of his books. For a project, have students try to find the articles that Steinbeck wrote for such periodicals as *Esquire*, *Harper's*, and the *San Francisco News*. Use these articles as a springboard to learn more about how the Great Depression affected migrant workers, such as Lennie and George. Investigate the 1930s and see how those destitute and trying times are reflected in *Of Mice and Men*.

**Describing Actions or Events** In this story, George and Lennie travel to a farm where they work with barley and grain. They perform such tasks as bailing or bucking barley. For a project, have students research the methods of bucking barley and working with grain. Also, have students try to find out about the unusual terms given to the workers and their duties. Such terms might include swampers, jerkline skimmers and stable bucks.

**Responding to Literature** John Steinbeck's writing has been called cinematic. His written scenes have a sweeping, cut-away style that is similar to scenes in films. It is no wonder then that several of his books have been made into films. For a project, after reading the book, have students watch the 1992 Gary Sinise version of *Of Mice and Men*, starring Gary Sinise and John Malkovich. Have students compare the book with the movie. How are the characters in the movie portrayed? Do they do justice to the characters in