**Themes, Symbols, Motifs**

**The Predatory Nature of Human Existence**

*Of Mice and Men* teaches a grim lesson about the nature of human existence. Nearly all of the characters, including George, Lennie, Candy, Crooks, and Curley’s wife, admit, at one time or another, to having a profound sense of loneliness and isolation. Each desires the comfort of a friend, but will settle for the attentive ear of a stranger. Curley’s wife admits to Candy, Crooks, and Lennie that she is unhappily married, and Crooks tells Lennie that life is no good without a companion to turn to in times of confusion and need. The characters are rendered helpless by their isolation, and yet, even at their weakest, they seek to destroy those who are even weaker than they. Perhaps the most powerful example of this cruel tendency is when Crooks criticizes Lennie’s dream of the farm and his dependence on George. Having just admitted his own vulnerabilities—he is a black man with a crooked back who longs for companionship—Crooks zeroes in on Lennie’s own weaknesses.

In scenes such as this one, Steinbeck records a profound human truth: oppression does not come only from the hands of the strong or the powerful. Crooks seems at his strongest when he has nearly reduced Lennie to tears for fear that something bad has happened to George, just as Curley’s wife feels most powerful when she threatens to have Crooks lynched. The novella suggests that the most visible kind of strength—that used to oppress others—is itself born of weakness.

ISOLATION THEME

No man is an island… unless he's an itinerant worker during the Great Depression, and then he's about as lonely as you can get. But for all the talk about loneliness in Of Mice and Men, these guys sure do hang out together a lot. (They even go to the whorehouse together. We bet they visit the bathroom at the same time, too.) Does this mean they're not isolated? Or do they meet, make new friends, new enemies, and then head out to their next job, all the while failing to make any real, human connections?

**Questions About Isolation**

1. Why does everyone seem to feel so isolated all the time? Is this a function of the ranch, the era, the world, human nature, or something else?
2. Crooks's isolation is also his protection, especially witnessed by that awful scene where Curley's wife threatens him. Is this isolation worth it? Is it ever worth it? Would Lennie have been safer if he'd been isolated?
3. Why do those who are isolated "get mean," as George says, even if they're surrounded by people all the time?
4. Are George or Lennie ever isolated?

JUSTICE THEME

Meet us at the OK Corral… and bring a gun, because you might end up having to shoot a dog. In Of Mice and Men, justice happens the cowboy way. The ranch operates by its own set of rules, without a higher order dictated by ethics, legal precedent, pity, or even common sense. Slim, the local ranch man of wisdom, hands down decisions, and the people around him accept his word as what's best, even if it's not always easy. Sometimes it means you have to get beat up because you had it coming, and sometimes you have to kill your best friend because it's the right thing to do.

**Questions About Justice**

1. Is it true that the ranch has its own kind of justice? What variables factor into that justice? What's most influential in deciding justice—ethics, the law, social status, intention, etc.?
2. Is Lennie justified in crushing Curley's hand? Is Slim justified in threatening Curley about letting anyone know what really what went on? Why or why not?
3. Is it reasonable to let Slim be the arbiter of justice on the ranch? Does Slim make good decisions?
4. Did Curley's wife get what she deserved?

VIOLENCE THEME

Of Mice and Men may be about men full of masculine bravado, and there may be some pretty shocking violence, but these guys also inflict psychological and emotional violence as though they're auditioning for Mean Girls: The Musical. Violence in the novel is physical, psychological, and emotional. Characters are so accustomed to suspicion and failure that they treat each other cruelly, more ready to destroy each other's dreams (and bodies) than to build them up. Violence may be a natural outlet for all of the ranch's despair and limited possibilities, but it sure does make the world an ugly place.

**Questions About Violence**

1. How do Lennie's violent tendencies affect the way we feel about him? Do we ever think of Lennie as violent, or does he seem more like a gentle guy who accidentally performs violent acts?
2. Is violence an acceptable part of life on the ranch? If so, at what point is it no longer acceptable?
3. Is Lennie's death ultimately a violent act or a loving act by George? Are Lennie's "murders" more or less violent than George's?

PREJUDICE THEME

Which –ism are you interested in today? Take your pick: Of Mice and Men offers racism, sexism, ageism, ableism, and (why not?) sizeism—and those who are discriminated against accept the prejudice against them as a way of life. There may be grumbling, but there's no sense that Curley's wife, Crooks, Candy, or Lennie feel like a grave and inexcusable injustice is being perpetrated against them. That's just the way it is, and people learn to operate in their little boxes. Our question: is Steinbeck speaking out against these prejudices? Or does he also just accept them?

**Questions About Prejudice**

1. How can prejudice be maintained in an isolated environment where people interact constantly? On second thought, scratch that: do all isolated environments just lead to prejudices (like, say high school or summer camp?)
2. How can we tell the line between being prejudiced and simply being discerning? If the boss had known what happened in Weed and refused to hire Lennie, would that have been discrimination, or sensible and life-saving?

INNOCENCE THEME

Lennie's mental disability makes him into a child, with a child's innocence: he likes hanging out with George and petting soft things. Sounds like a great Friday night! Oh, but there's a problem: he's a child trapped in the body of a powerful man. Innocence may protect Lennie, because he never has to deal with the reality of what he's done—but it doesn't protect the people (or pets) around him. Does Of Mice and Men see childlike innocence as the better path? Should we all be like Lennie? Or do we need to be more like George, crushing out our innocence to stay alive?

**Questions About Innocence**

1. Is Lennie the only innocent character in the novel? Is he the most innocent? Does Lennie's innocence protect him, or make him dangerous?
2. Though Lennie seems gentle and dumb, he's not all sunshine and rainbows—like when he tries to break the future cats' necks for hurting the future rabbits. Do we just feel that Lennie is innocent because he's mentally slow, when he's actually a hardened killer?
3. Is Curley's wife malicious because she's really an awful person, or is she simply lonely and naïve?

FREEDOM AND CONFINEMENT THEME

Lennie and George are tied down by their need for money. Curley's wife is limited by being a woman. Crooks is stuck because of his race. Except when they're caught up in the intensity of the dream, most characters in Of Mice and Men seem more focused on bemoaning their confinement than planning for their freedom. And you know what? In a world where death seems to be the only way out, we can't blame them.

**Questions About Freedom and Confinement**

1. Do Lennie and George see their life of traveling and working as a type of freedom? Do they ever consider the question of freedom?
2. Crooks is the only ranch hand to have his own room. Is this a type of freedom, or a type of confinement?
3. At the end of the story, when George is facing life without Lennie, does he feel freer, or more confined?
4. What does "freedom" mean to Lennie? Is it related to the "fatta the lan"? Does he find it in death?

WEAKNESS THEME

Some weakness are obvious: Lennie is a few knives short of a cutlery drawer; Crooks is black and crippled; Curley is short; Curley's wife is, well, a woman. Only a few characters in Of Mice and Men seem to rise above their subordinate positions by being willing to pull the trigger when no one else will. But is there more to strength than wielding a gun? Do Slim and George avoid weakness through force of character as well as firearms?

**Questions About Weakness**

1. What are the various weaknesses of the novel's different characters? Are any more serious than any others?
2. Does George and Lennie's relationship make them weaker or stronger? In general, does having close relationships in this novel seem to help or hurt the characters?
3. Does Lennie think of himself as weak? How do we interpret his mental weakness relative to his physical strength? Which defines his character more?

MAN AND THE NATURAL WORLD THEME

Like the ranch, the natural world is a dog-eat-dog place, where animal instincts trump any sense of justice or goodness and people accept cruelty as, well, natural: Lennie loves animals, but kills them; Candy loves his dog, but can't stand up for it; and even Crooks tends to the horses that maimed him. In the natural world, love has nothing to do with safety: sometimes, things that we love die. And sometimes, they have to be killed. Of Mice and Men asks us to consider how different Lennie is from Candy's old dog—and how different Carlson is from George.

**Questions About Man and the Natural World**

1. Why is Lennie constantly compared to an animal? Is this a fair comparison? Is the author suggesting that not all humans are animals?
2. What separates the rule of civilized law from the rule of the natural world? Does Steinbeck seem to suggest one is better than the other?
3. Are the natural world and man's world presented as parallels to each other or as contrasts to each other? (And what's the role of women in all this?)

**Fraternity and the Idealized Male Friendship**

One of the reasons that the tragic end of George and Lennie’s friendship has such a profound impact is that one senses that the friends have, by the end of the novella, lost a dream larger than themselves. The farm on which George and Lennie plan to live—a place that no one ever reaches—has a magnetic quality, as Crooks points out. After hearing a description of only a few sentences, Candy is completely drawn in by its magic. Crooks has witnessed countless men fall under the same silly spell, and still he cannot help but ask Lennie if he can have a patch of garden to hoe there. The men in *Of Mice and Men* desire to come together in a way that would allow them to be like brothers to one another. That is, they want to live with one another’s best interests in mind, to protect each other, and to know that there is someone in the world dedicated to protecting them. Given the harsh, lonely conditions under which these men live, it should come as no surprise that they idealize friendships between men in such a way.

Ultimately, however, the world is too harsh and predatory a place to sustain such relationships. Lennie and George, who come closest to achieving this ideal of brotherhood, are forced to separate tragically. With this, a rare friendship vanishes, but the rest of the world—represented by Curley and Carlson, who watch George stumble away with grief from his friend’s dead body—fails to acknowledge or appreciate it.

FRIENDSHIP THEME

Of Mice and Menis the equivalent of a bro hug: all sublimated emotion, gruff affection, and hearty back pats. George and Lennie don't text each other eleven times a day, and they don't like every single cat picture the other posts on Facebook—but we still get the sense that they take their friendship more seriously than anything. After all, what else do they have? And what else do any of us have?

**Questions About Friendship**

1. Friendship generally seems like a good thing, but the ranch life might be better suited to loners. Are there some circumstances under which it's simply better to be alone? Does George have to learn this lesson the hard way?
2. Is George and Lennie's friendship fully reciprocal? Do both members contribute and receive equally from each other? Are there any other sets of friends in the book? Why is friendship so rare?
3. It seems like everyone, from Crooks to Slim, spends an awful lot of time complaining to his friends about how he has no friends. Are these guys really that lonely, or do they simply not recognize they've all got one other? Do they all have one other?
4. George says quite a bit about how much better his life would be if he didn't have to take care of Lennie. If this is true, why does he stay with Lennie?

WOMEN AND FEMININITY THEME

In Choose Your Own Woman: Of Mice and Men, you have two options: a prostitute, or Curley's wife. There's no such things as a nice girl to settle down with, if your life is spent moving from ranch to ranch on the open road. So, women are reduced purely to sexual objects—and at least with prostitutes, George says, you pay for what you get. Curley's wife is a sexual object, but all she can really offer is trouble. We get the feeling that the characters in Of Mice and Men would really be better off without women.

**Questions About Women and Femininity**

1. Is Curley's wife viewed as an especially bad woman, or is she pretty standard as far as the guys are concerned? What makes her so bad?
2. Do any of the characters have a positive attitude towards any woman in the story? Are there any positive women around for them to have good attitudes toward? What about Aunt Clara? What about Suzy, who runs the good whorehouse?
3. Is there a place for women in ranch life? Is ranch life supposed to be just a phase before the stability that comes with settling down and "having a girl"?

**The Impossibility of the American Dream**

Most of the characters in *Of Mice and Men* admit, at one point or another, to dreaming of a different life. Before her death, Curley’s wife confesses her desire to be a movie star. Crooks, bitter as he is, allows himself the pleasant fantasy of hoeing a patch of garden on Lennie’s farm one day, and Candy latches on desperately to George’s vision of owning a couple of acres. Before the action of the story begins, circumstances have robbed most of the characters of these wishes. Curley’s wife, for instance, has resigned herself to an unfulfilling marriage. What makes all of these dreams typically American is that the dreamers wish for untarnished happiness, for the freedom to follow their own desires. George and Lennie’s dream of owning a farm, which would enable them to sustain themselves, and, most important, offer them protection from an inhospitable world, represents a prototypically American ideal. Their journey, which awakens George to the impossibility of this dream, sadly proves that the bitter Crooks is right: such paradises of freedom, contentment, and safety are not to be found in this world.

DREAMS, HOPES, AND PLANS THEME

George and Lennie may dream a little dream of owning a farm, but they don't get very far with their to-do list before it all crumbles in heartbreaking failure. As Crooks points out, all ranch hands dream of owning their own farm; it's their version of the 2.5 kids and white picket fence. Unfortunately, white picket fences are in short supply during the Great Depression, and Of Mice and Men ends in the only way it can: with the utter collapse of everyone's dream—even Curley's.

**Questions About Dreams, Hopes, and Plans**

1. Does the dream farm mean the same thing to Lennie as it does to George? If not, what are the differences?
2. Once Candy announces he has the money for the ranch, the narrator declares, "This thing they had never really believed in was coming true." Is that a fair declaration? Did the guys ever really believe they'd get the ranch?
3. Can dreams become actual plans, or are they aspirations that should remain untouched, so that there's always something to reach for?
4. Do others on the farm also have dreams? Is it important to share these dreams with others, or is it more important that the dreams be kept secret?

VISIONS OF AMERICA THEME

Of Mice and Men's America is filled with dreamers and strugglers, who all have a different idea of what life should be: Hollywood, a quiet ranch, the pages of a pulp magazine. What all these visions have in common in their absolute impossibility. The wanna-be starlet never will be; the quiet ranch is just a bedtime story; the magazine is just peddling advertisements. Does the novel suggest that there's no such thing as the American dream? Or does that real America of hope and possibility exist somewhere just over the horizon?

**Questions About Visions of America**

1. In Of Mice and Men, is America the land of futility or opportunity? Are dreams ever realizable? If so, for whom? For anyone, or only for particular people?
2. Could this be a story about making it in a tough agricultural migrant town anywhere? Is it a universal story still relevant today, or is it particularly keyed to issues of the Great Depression http://www.shmoop.com/great-depression/?
3. Is struggle and overcoming obstacles part of the American story?
4. Is it possible to achieve the American Dream without struggling? Or is struggle a necessary element of the American Dream?

**Motifs**

*Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, and literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text’s major themes.*

**The Corrupting Power of Women**

The portrayal of women in *Of Mice and Men* is limited and unflattering. We learn early on that Lennie and George are on the run from the previous ranch where they worked, due to encountering trouble there with a woman. Misunderstanding Lennie’s love of soft things, a woman accused him of rape for touching her dress. George berates Lennie for his behavior, but is convinced that women are always the cause of such trouble. Their enticing sexuality, he believes, tempts men to behave in ways they would otherwise not.

A visit to the “flophouse” (a cheap hotel, or brothel) is enough of women for George, and he has no desire for a female companion or wife. Curley’s wife, the only woman to appear in *Of Mice and Men,*seems initially to support George’s view of marriage. Dissatisfied with her marriage to a brutish man and bored with life on the ranch, she is constantly looking for excitement or trouble. In one of her more revealing moments, she threatens to have the black stable-hand lynched if he complains about her to the boss. Her insistence on flirting with Lennie seals her unfortunate fate. Although Steinbeck does, finally, offer a sympathetic view of Curley’s wife by allowing her to voice her unhappiness and her own dream for a better life, women have no place in the author’s idealized vision of a world structured around the brotherly bonds of men.

**Loneliness and Companionship**

Many of the characters admit to suffering from profound loneliness. George sets the tone for these confessions early in the novella when he reminds Lennie that the life of a ranch-hand is among the loneliest of lives. Men like George who migrate from farm to farm rarely have anyone to look to for companionship and protection. As the story develops, Candy, Crooks, and Curley’s wife all confess their deep loneliness. The fact that they admit to complete strangers their fear of being cast off shows their desperation. In a world without friends to confide in, strangers will have to do. Each of these characters searches for a friend, someone to help them measure the world, as Crooks says. In the end, however, companionship of his kind seems unattainable. For George, the hope of such companionship dies with Lennie, and true to his original estimation, he will go through life alone.

**Strength and Weakness**

Steinbeck explores different types of strength and weakness throughout the novella. The first, and most obvious, is physical strength. As the story opens, Steinbeck shows how Lennie possesses physical strength beyond his control, as when he cannot help killing the mice. Great physical strength is, like money, quite valuable to men in George and Lennie’s circumstances. Curley, as a symbol of authority on the ranch and a champion boxer, makes this clear immediately by using his brutish strength and violent temper to intimidate the men and his wife.

Physical strength is not the only force that oppresses the men in the book. It is the rigid, predatory human tendencies, not Curley, that defeat Lennie and George in the end. Lennie’s physical size and strength prove powerless; in the face of these universal laws, he is utterly defenseless and therefore disposable.

**Symbols**

*Symbols are objects, characters, figures, and colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.*

**George and Lennie’s Farm**

The farm that George constantly describes to Lennie—those few acres of land on which they will grow their own food and tend their own livestock—is one of the most powerful symbols in the book. It seduces not only the other characters but also the reader, who, like the men, wants to believe in the possibility of the free, idyllic life it promises. Candy is immediately drawn in by the dream, and even the cynical Crooks hopes that Lennie and George will let him live there too. A paradise for men who want to be masters of their own lives, the farm represents the possibility of freedom, self-reliance, and protection from the cruelties of the world.

**Lennie’s Puppy**

Lennie’s puppy is one of several symbols that represent the victory of the strong over the weak. Lennie kills the puppy accidentally, as he has killed many mice before, by virtue of his failure to recognize his own strength. Although no other character can match Lennie’s physical strength, the huge Lennie will soon meet a fate similar to that of his small puppy. Like an innocent animal, Lennie is unaware of the vicious, predatory powers that surround him.

**Candy’s Dog**

In the world *Of Mice and Men* describes, Candy’s dog represents the fate awaiting anyone who has outlived his or her purpose. Once a fine sheepdog, useful on the ranch, Candy’s mutt is now debilitated by age. Candy’s sentimental attachment to the animal—his plea that Carlson let the dog live for no other reason than that Candy raised it from a puppy—means nothing at all on the ranch. Although Carlson promises to kill the dog painlessly, his insistence that the old animal must die supports a cruel natural law that the strong will dispose of the weak. Candy internalizes this lesson, for he fears that he himself is nearing an age when he will no longer be useful at the ranch, and therefore no longer welcome.

**Nature of Dreams**

In essence, Of Mice and Menis as much a story about the nature of human dreams and aspirations and the forces that work against them as it is the story of two men. Humans give meaning to their lives — and to their futures — by creating dreams. Without dreams and goals, life is an endless stream of days that have little connection or meaning. [George](http://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/o/of-mice-and-men/critical-essays/~/link.aspx?_id=0268260E274F44469D275822151BD506&_z=z) and [Lennie](http://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/o/of-mice-and-men/critical-essays/~/link.aspx?_id=4449E0F16ECB45E5805D76340238C36D&_z=z)'s dream — to own a little farm of their own — is so central to Of Mice and Menthat it appears in some form in five of the six chapters. In fact, the telling of the story, which George has done so often, becomes a ritual between the two men: George provides the narrative, and Lennie, who has difficulty remembering even simple instructions, picks up the refrain by finishing George's sentences.

To George, this dream of having their own place means independence, security, being their own boss, and, most importantly, being "somebody." To Lennie, the dream is like the soft animals he pets: It means security, the responsibility of tending to the rabbits, and a sanctuary where he won't have to be afraid. To [Candy](http://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/o/of-mice-and-men/critical-essays/~/link.aspx?_id=3C9700FC8D204C13909BD85C1FF7706A&_z=z), who sees the farm as a place where he can assert a responsibility he didn't take when he let Carlson kill his dog, it offers security for old age and a home where he will fit in. For [Crooks](http://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/o/of-mice-and-men/critical-essays/~/link.aspx?_id=087296B0342246FD833609EA94184364&_z=z), the little farm will be a place where he can have self-respect, acceptance, and security. For each man — George, Lennie, Candy, and Crooks — human dignity is an integral part of the dream.

Having and sharing the dream, however, are not enough to bring it to fruition. Each man must make a sacrifice or battle some other force that seeks, intentionally or not, to steal the dream away. Initially, the obstacles are difficult but not insurmountable: staying out of trouble, not spending money on liquor or in bordellos, and working at the ranch long enough to save the money for a down payment. But greater obstacles soon become apparent. Some of these obstacles are external (the threat from [Curley's wife](http://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/o/of-mice-and-men/critical-essays/~/link.aspx?_id=98D057BFA3C84824B37BBF8A96AA0AD8&_z=z)and [Curley](http://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/o/of-mice-and-men/critical-essays/~/link.aspx?_id=9B55ACA3941B43A28639CBEA122270E0&_z=z)'s violence, for example, as well as the societal prejudices that plague each man); others are internal (such as Lennie's strength and his need to touch soft things). For George, the greatest threat to the dream is Lennie himself; ironically, it is Lennie who also makes the dream worthwhile.

**Loneliness**

In addition to dreams, humans crave contact with others to give life meaning. Loneliness is present throughout this novel. On the most obvious level, we see this isolation when the ranch hands go into town on Saturday night to ease their loneliness with alcohol and women. Similarly, Lennie goes into Crook's room to find someone with whom to talk, and later Curley's wife comes for the same reason. Crooks says, "A guy goes nuts if he ain't got nobody. Don't make no difference who the guy is, long's he's with you." Even [Slim](http://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/o/of-mice-and-men/critical-essays/~/link.aspx?_id=8AF8093F16AF4408A21581331210B5C7&_z=z) mentions, "I seen the guys that go around on the ranches alone. That ain't no good. They don't have no fun. After a long time they get mean."

George's taking care of Lennie and the dream of the farm are attempts to break the pattern of loneliness that is part of the human condition. Similarly, Lennie's desire to pet soft things comes from his need to feel safe and secure, to touch something that gives him that feeling of not being alone in the world. For Lennie, the dream of the farm parallels that security.

George and Lennie, however, are not the only characters who struggle against loneliness. Although present in all the characters to some degree, the theme of loneliness is most notably present in Candy, Crooks, and Curley's wife. They all fight against their isolation in whatever way they can. Until its death, Candy's dog stopped Candy from being alone in the world. After its death, Candy struggles against loneliness by sharing in George and Lennie's dream. Curley's wife is also lonely; she is the only female on the ranch, and her husband has forbidden anyone to talk with her. She combats her loneliness by flirting with the ranch hands. Crooks is isolated because of his skin color. As the only black man on the ranch, he is not allowed into the bunkhouse with the others, and he does not associate with them. He combats his loneliness with books and his work, but even he realizes that these things are no substitute for human companionship.

Steinbeck reinforces the theme of loneliness in subtle and not so subtle ways. In the vicinity of the ranch, for example, is the town of Soledad. The town's name, not accidentally, means "solitude" or "alone." Also, the others' reactions to George and Lennie traveling together reinforces that, in Steinbeck's world, traveling with someone else is unusual. When George and Lennie arrive at the ranch, four other characters — the boss, Candy, Crooks, and Slim — all comment on the suspicious nature of two guys traveling together. This companionship seems strange and, according to at least the boss and Curley, the relationship is sexual or exploitative financially.

**Barriers**

Unfortunately, despite a need for companionship, people set up barriers that maintain loneliness, and they sustain those barriers by being inhumane to each other. One barrier is based on gender: The bunkhouse is a male world, where women are not to be trusted. While Curley's wife is always looking for attention, Curley's jealousy causes all the hands to stay away from her. Although Curley's wife is often portrayed as cruel and troublesome (and therefore, we can see why she is left alone), the real thing that isolates her is that she is a female in an all-male world. Race is another barrier. Crooks, for example, must occupy a room in the stable alone, and he is not welcome in the bunkhouse. For Candy, the barriers are age and handicap. He is afraid that, when he is too old to work, he will be thrown out on the ash heap, a victim of a society that does not value age and discriminates against handicaps.

**Fate**

Life's unpredictable nature is another subject that defines the human condition. The title of the novel is taken from the poem of Robert Burns, "To a Mouse On Turning Her Up in Her Nest with a Plow," November, 1785. Burns wrote that "The best laid schemes o' mice and men / Gang aft a-gley [often go astray], / And lea'v us nought but grief and pain, / For promised joy."

Just when it appears that George and Lennie will get their farm, fate steps in. Lennie just happens to be in the barn burying his dead pup when Curley's wife comes in. In this case, fate is given a hand by Lennie's inability to control his strength and understand what to do. Nevertheless, often life seems unpredictable and full of overwhelming difficulties.

**Powerlessness**

Steinbeck's characters are often the underdogs, and he shows compassion toward them throughout the body of his writings. Powerlessness takes many forms — intellectual, financial, societal — and Steinbeck touches on them all.

Although Lennie is physically strong and would therefore seem to represent someone of power, the only power Lennie possesses is physical. Because of his mental handicap and his child-like way of perceiving the world, he is powerless against his urges and the forces that assail him. For example, he knows what it is to be good, and he doesn't want to be bad, but he lacks the mental acuity that would help him understand and, therefore, avoid the dangers that unfold before him. Hence, he must rely on George to protect him. George, in this regard, is also powerless. Although he can instruct Lennie on what to do and not do, and although he perceives the danger posed by Curley's wife, he cannot be with Lennie every hour of every day and, therefore, cannot truly protect Lennie from himself. In the end, the only thing that George can do is protect Lennie from the others.

Another type of powerlessness is economic. Because the ranch hands are victims of a society where they cannot get ahead economically, they must struggle again and again. George and Lennie face overwhelming odds in trying to get together a mere $600 to buy their own land. But they are not the only ones who have shared the dream of owning land, nor the only ones who have difficulty securing the mean by which to do it. As Crooks explains, "I seen guys nearly crazy with loneliness for land, but ever' time a whorehouse or a blackjack game took what it takes." In other words, it is part of the human condition to always want instant gratification rather than save for tomorrow. As long as the men spend their money on the weekends, they will continue to be powerless. On the other hand, living lives of unremitting loneliness and harshness makes companionship — even for a weekend — alluring enough to overshadow a dream. Furthermore, the men are paid so little that it is difficult to save enough to make a dream come true.

Crooks represents another type of powerlessness. As the sole black man on the ranch, he is isolated from the others, and, in ways that the others are not, subject to their whim. This is never more apparent than when Curley's wife threatens to have him lynched. Despite his inherent dignity, Crooks shrinks into himself, essentially becoming invisible under her assault. The fact that she, another powerless person, wields such power over him demonstrates how defenseless he is in this society.

**Christian, Classical, and Natural Influences**

Many critics have compared Of Mice and Mento influences from John Milton's Paradise Lostand the Bible. And, indeed, many of the events of Steinbeck's novel parallel the biblical stories of the loss of paradise and Cain and Abel. Of particular relevance to Of Mice and Menis the question posed in the biblical story of Cain and Abel: Am I my brother's keeper? Also relevant is the story of Adam and Eve and their being cast out of Eden. Although a biblical story, this story is also the basis of John Milton's epic poem, Paradise Lost, which describes Lucifer's (Satan's) fall from heaven and the creation of hell, as well as Eve and Adam's fall from grace.

Steinbeck was influenced by the Arthurian legends as well, and the fellowship embodied in these tales also is relevant to Of Mice and Men. The loyalty and companionship, the love and trust shown between George and Lennie, are similar to the comradeship of the knights of the Arthurian tales. The knight's pledge to help those who are less fortunate and to defend the poor and powerless is also a motif apparent in Of Mice and Men. Additionally, the idea that nothing endures forever — especially perfection — reflects an Arthurian influence.

Throughout his novel Steinbeck uses nature to reflect the mood of the scenes and provide locations that reinforce themes. Steinbeck was a lover of nature, particularly the California countryside, and he uses nature in this story as both a place of sanctuary and also a reflection of foreboding.

**Loss of Paradise**

There are parallels between the biblical tale of Adam and Eve and the events that transpire in Of Mice and Men. Of particular interest are the nature of imperfect humans, the presence of temptation, and the consequences of doing, as Lennie would say, a "bad thing."

The story of Adam and Eve's fall from grace is a tale of how even our "best laid plans" go astray because of the imperfection of our humanity. Though mankind was created in God's image, man's reaction to temptation causes him to lose his way. Just as man is imperfect, so Lennie represents the flawed human appetite that makes the chance for Eden futile. His desire to touch soft things and his inability to foresee the results of his actions put him in a collision course with other human beings. While he sometimes realizes he has "done a bad thing," he often loses his way because of temptation. The girl in Weed and Curley's wife are both temptations that encouraged his curiosity and that he could not resist.

Curley's wife also has a part to play, as the serpent in the garden. She is temptation — a liar and a manipulator of men in order to get her way. She could also be compared to Eve. In the Garden of Eden, Eve is curious about the forbidden tree. She tempts Adam and manipulates him in order to get her way. Like Eve, Curley's wife is curious about Lennie. From the moment she realizes he is the "machine" that hurt her husband, she is attracted to his strength. When they talk in the barn, she invites him to touch her soft hair, not realizing the consequences. Her actions are innocent, but the consequences are vast. Just as Eve's actions caused mankind to be sent out of the perfect place, Curley's wife's actions tempt Lennie, whose subsequent actions cause him and the others to lose their dream of a little farm.

Also, because Adam and Eve were thrown out of Eden for disobeying God, mankind is forced to live a pattern of loneliness and wandering, having thrown away existence in Eden. Steinbeck reinforces this idea when George asks about the worker who used to inhabit his bunk and is told by Candy that he just left, saying, "'gimme my time' one night like any guy would." George takes his spot, bringing Lennie along, an action causing suspicion in the minds of others on the ranch. Guys don't travel together. Even Slim comments on their unusual companionship. In the end, with Lennie's death, George is once again sentenced to wander alone and to reflect on the loss of Lennie in his life.

**My Brother's Keeper**

In the story of Cain and his brother Abel, found in the fourth chapter of Genesis, Cain, an imperfect human and son of Adam and Eve, slew his brother out of jealousy. When God asked Cain where his brother was, Cain replied, "Am I my brother's keeper?" God knew Cain murdered his brother and sentenced Cain to walk the earth as a wanderer. When the loneliness was too much for Cain to bear, he begged God to kill him and put an end to it, but God forbade anyone to kill Cain because he must be punished for breaking God's law.

This story has many parallels in *Of Mice and Men*. The first parallel is the question of Cain, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Steinbeck essentially asks this same question in his other works such as *The Grapes of Wrath*or *East of Eden*when he wonders if mankind should go alone in the world or be responsible and helpful to others who are less fortunate. In the character of George, the answer seems to be the latter. George takes responsibility for Lennie, and Lennie depends on him. Furthermore, the noble characters — such as Slim — are those that recognize and honor this responsibility.

When George kills Lennie, he is sentenced to be like the other migrant hands, no longer traveling with someone he loves and no longer with goals or a dream of a different future. George is sentenced to the scenario described by Crooks when he told the others that no one ever gets their dreams. George will now wander from ranch to ranch, alone like the other migrant workers, and he will live the nightmare he described when he talked about his life without Lennie: no companion, no roots, no future.

**Ephemeral Nature of Life**

Steinbeck was also influenced by the Arthurian legends. These tales reinforce the ideas that perfection cannot last and that nothing is permanent. In the stories of Camelot, the dream of the perfect place — similar to the Garden of Eden — is lost because of human weakness. Just as Camelot comes crumbling down because of the illicit love of Lancelot for the king's wife and the improper circumstances of Arthur's birth, so mankind is always subject to temptation. In Steinbeck's story, the dream of the little farm is lost because of Lennie's inability to control his strength or make decisions about how he uses it. His weakness is one of intellect and common sense. The dream of perfection — their little farm — will always elude George and Lennie because they are far from perfection.

In addition, the fellowship of the knights in that story contains a human element that the reader sees in the love and compassion of George for Lennie and the trust and loyalty of Lennie for George. George tells the others that he took Lennie along with him — almost like a puppy — after Lennie's Aunt Clara died. But George also gets Lennie his own pup and laughs at Lennie's delight, and he tells Lennie to defend himself against Curley. George explains to Slim that he felt bad when he played a joke on Lennie and he will not ever do that again just to feel superior. George's frustration in the end — when Lennie remembers so well everything George tells him — is a measure of George's love before he mercifully kills his friend. Furthermore, Lennie constantly watches and emulates George, copying his actions and attitudes. George says, "If I tol' him to walk over a cliff, over he'd go." Whatever George says, Lennie quickly does. Throughout the story, their relationship reflects the same fellowship as the Arthurian knights who pledged their love and loyalty to each other.

**Nature**

Steinbeck also uses nature images to reinforce his themes and to set the mood. In Chapter 1, for example, before Lennie and George get to the ranch, George decides they will stay at the pond overnight. This pool is a place of primeval innocence, a sanctuary away from the world of humans. If Lennie gets in trouble, it is the place to which he should return. In this scene, nature is a place of safety, a haven from the troubles of the world.

When Lennie returns to the pond in the last scene, nature is not so tranquil. The sun has left the valley, and a heron captures and swallows a water snake "while its tail waved frantically." The wind now rushes and drives through the trees in gusts, and the dry leaves fall from the sycamore. Instead of a place of happiness, dream retelling, and fellowship — as it was at the beginning — the pond is now a place of loneliness, fear, and death. Here, nature reflects the mood of the human world. Steinbeck's thoughts on man's relationship to the land is a motif throughout his writing.

The words of the Swedish Academy in awarding Steinbeck the Nobel Prize for Literature recognized this close relationship between man and the land in Steinbeck's writing: "But in him [Steinbeck] we find the American temperament also in his great feeling for nature, for the tilled soil, the wasteland, the mountains, and the ocean coasts, all an inexhaustible source of inspiration to Steinbeck in the midst of, and beyond, the world of human beings."

**Characters**

[George](http://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/o/of-mice-and-men/critical-essays/~/link.aspx?_id=0268260E274F44469D275822151BD506&_z=z) and [Lennie](http://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/o/of-mice-and-men/critical-essays/~/link.aspx?_id=4449E0F16ECB45E5805D76340238C36D&_z=z) are the only two characters in the novel who are explained in any detail. The other characters are all "types," or people whom the reader might recognize as one of a certain group. Even the names of the characters, short and descriptive, say something about them. Lennie Small, for instance, is anything but small physically, and other characters seem to notice and comment on that. His brain is small and his ability to reason is small, but his body is huge and very powerful. [Curley's wife](http://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/o/of-mice-and-men/critical-essays/~/link.aspx?_id=98D057BFA3C84824B37BBF8A96AA0AD8&_z=z) has no name, indicating her powerless position on the ranch.

Each of the characters represents a kind of person in American society and often one that is a victim of discrimination. For example, [Crooks](http://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/o/of-mice-and-men/critical-essays/~/link.aspx?_id=087296B0342246FD833609EA94184364&_z=z) represents a segment of American society that is discriminated against because of race; Curley's wife, because of gender; [Candy](http://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/o/of-mice-and-men/critical-essays/~/link.aspx?_id=3C9700FC8D204C13909BD85C1FF7706A&_z=z), because of old age and physical handicap. Carlson is a perfect example of a selfish oaf, interested only in his creature comforts and oblivious to any one else's feelings. [Slim](http://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/o/of-mice-and-men/critical-essays/~/link.aspx?_id=8AF8093F16AF4408A21581331210B5C7&_z=z) is the consummate example of understanding and gentleness beneath a wise and experienced exterior. The pugnacious [Curley](http://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/o/of-mice-and-men/critical-essays/~/link.aspx?_id=9B55ACA3941B43A28639CBEA122270E0&_z=z) is the little guy who loves to flaunt his power and status. Each of these minor characters impact, negatively or positively, Lennie and George's dream of having their own farm.

**Locations**

The pool described in the first paragraph of the novel is a place of sanctuary. Away from the world of humans, "the Salinas River drops in close to the hillside bank and runs deep and green. The water is warm too, for it has slipped twinkling over the yellow sands in the sunlight before reaching the narrow pool." Steinbeck goes on to describe the "strong and rocky" Gabilan Mountains and the "golden foothill slopes." A gentle breeze and fresh, green willow trees line the pool. In this place of sanctuary, George and Lennie enjoy one last night before going in to the ranch. Here there are no voices, no "scary things" for Lennie, no hurry, and no concerns about work.

But the pool represents another kind of sanctuary. George asks Lennie if he can remember this place, especially since it is on the river, an easy sign for Lennie to follow. George repeats several times his directions to Lennie: "Lennie — if you jus' happen to get in trouble like you always done before, I want you to come right here an' hide in the brush … till I come for you." This is the place where Lennie can come and George can meet him and help him again as he did when Lennie got in trouble in Weed. If necessary, the pool will be their meeting place so they can get away once again. Later, when the doomed Lennie returns to the pool, he sadly repeats, "I di'n't forget, you bet. God damn. Hide in the brush an' wait for George." For Lennie, this is where George will make everything right, and he will be safe.

While this is also the place where Lennie's dream will die, it will do so with peace and tranquility, at least in Lennie's mind. When George describes the dream, later at this pool, the atmosphere of nature and its beauty obviously inspire his words. He tells Lennie, "You … an' me. Ever'body gonna be nice to you. Ain't gonna be no more trouble. Nobody gonna hurt nobody nor steal from @'em." Now this place has also become enmeshed in the retelling of the dream that will bring them better lives. And even though we know that the dream is retold here with another meaning for George, we also see that Lennie hears the story once again with eagerness in his voice and anticipation in his words. Here, in this beautiful place, George will save Lennie from the cruelty of Curley and help him die with his picture of their farm in his head.

The dream farm is another location; it does not exist in reality but is very real in the minds of Lennie and, eventually, George. It becomes a symbol for their relationship, and the retelling of the dream has become a ritual. This is the place where George and Lennie will have self-respect and independence. They will live off the fat of the land, and no one will tell them what to do. Lennie can have what he likes the best — soft rabbits to pet — and he will feel safe. George can have a more normal life that involves putting down roots and staying in one place. At the farm, George will also have an easier time keeping track of Lennie. When Candy offers the money to put down a payment, the symbol begins to become a reality. Unfortunately, the dream is an enchanted concept, and once its reality becomes possible, it begins to die.

In opposition to these two positive symbols is the bunkhouse, which represents the cruel world of reality. Even Lennie, with his mental handicap, can intuitively feel that the bunkhouse is not a good place. After meeting Curley, Lennie tells George, "I don't like this place, George. This ain't no good place. I wanna get outa here." And as soon as Curley's wife comes alone to the bunkhouse, George knows exactly where the trouble is going to originate. He cautions Lennie not to talk to Curley's wife and to stay away from Curley. It is also in the bunkhouse that we see discrimination (against Candy and Crooks), cruelty (Curley's wife's attack on Crooks and Curley's attack on Lennie), insensitivity (Carlson's killing Candy's dog), and suspicion (Curley's jealousy, several characters presumptions about why Lennie and George are traveling together). This is also a world in which fate often plays a hand, and the humans are frequently defenseless and see their "best laid plans" go awry.

**Animal Imagery**

Steinbeck also uses animal images in his story. Most often applied to Lennie, imagery is particularly apparent in his physical description. His hands are called "paws" and indicate trouble when he uses them. He lumbers along like a bear in Steinbeck's earliest descriptions of him. Lennie is also associated with rabbits, which are part of his dream (he will get to tend them on the farm) and because they are soft things he likes to pet. Rabbits also symbolize his realization that he is in trouble; if Lennie does "a bad thing," George will not let him tend the rabbits. In the last scene, when Lennie is at the pool, waiting for George, a rabbit appears to him, berating him and telling him that George will not let him care for the rabbits. In addition, Lennie's loyalty to George is frequently described like that of a dog, especially a terrier. Steinbeck chose these images because they connote particular traits: unleashed power, conscience, and loyalty. In this way, it helps the reader understand Lennie and why he often acts instinctively.

**George's Card Game**

Steinbeck is often described by critics as a believer in a "non-teleological world." This is a world where chance plays a major role. It is chance, for instance, that Slim happens to be in the barn when Curley comes into the bunkhouse looking for his wife. It is also chance that George is absent from the barn when Lennie is burying his pup and Curley's wife comes in. Steinbeck tries to show that man cannot understand everything that happens, nor can he control the world around him. For this reason, events often appear to be random.

George's Solitaire game in the bunkhouse is exactly that. It symbolizes the random appearance of events just as cards are drawn out at random from the deck. All is a matter of chance in Solitaire, and the same is true of the events in the book that Steinbeck thought about titling "Something That Happened." The isolation of the ranch and the interplay of personalities in the bunkhouse also contribute to the idea of chance. The world is unpredictable, and in this setting, plans often "go awry."

**Hands**

Hands are also used symbolically throughout the novel. The men on the ranch are called "hands," indicating that each has a job to do to make the ranch work as a whole. This takes away their humanity and individual personalities. They are workers, not men. Lennie's hands, or paws, are symbols of trouble. Whenever he uses them — as he does on Curley — trouble ensues. Candy's missing hand is a symbol of his helplessness in the face of advancing old age and his fear that he will be deemed useless and fired when only one hand is not enough. George's hands are small and strong, the hands of a doer and planner. Curley's hands are mean and cruel and one, of course, is crushed in the machine that is Lennie; Curley's hand that he keeps soft for his wife is a symbol of his impotence and inability to satisfy his wife sexually. Crooks' hands are pink, and Curley's wife's hands have red nails. Slim has large, skillful hands like those of "a temple dancer." The hand images represent the essence of each person.