***Of Mice and Men* Study Guide**

***Author Biography***

John Steinbeck (1902-1968) was born in Salinas, California. He came from a middle class family. His father was the county treasurer, and his mother was a former schoolteacher. She inspired and encouraged his love of books and reading.

He attended Stanford University, but he did not graduate. In his twenties, he traveled to New York City with the dream of supporting himself as a freelance writer. When his efforts failed, he went home to California. He then began to work seriously on novels and short stories.

When Steinbeck was a young adult, he spent his summer vacations working as a hired hand on local ranches. His interactions with the people he met during those summers greatly influenced the characters he created throughout his career. In an interview following the publication of *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck revealed that all the characters in the novel are composites based on real people.

Steinbeck said in his essay “Advice For Beginning Writers” (1963) that he still felt afraid every time he began writing a story, even though he had a long successful writing career behind him. He went on to say that a writer who does not experience this fear may not have an appropriate respect for the art of writing.

***Book Summary***

***Background***

*Of Mice and Men* was published in 1937, after John Steinbeck had achieved literary acclaim with his novel *Tortilla Flat* but before he wrote his better known works *The Grapes of Wrath* and *East of Eden.* The story epitomizes the themes and ideas that Steinbeck propounded throughout his novels: the plight of the laborers, the perils of isolation, and the hope for a better future. Set in California during the Great Depression, *Of Mice and Men* is an excellent vehicle to learn about the life and times of migrant works in the 1930s. With its beautiful descriptive passages, easily accessible dialogue, and fast-paced timeline, it is very easy to follow along. Readers are drawn in by the memorable characters, that, ironically, represent a segment of society that was largely ignored in its day. Analyzing the balance of power, the importance of friendship, and the role of dreams in our lives allows readers to gain a deeper understanding of the text while applying valuable lessons to their own lives.

***Novel Setting***

*Of Mice and Men* is set in the Salinas Valley of Southern California in the late 1930’s, the era of the Great Depression. Like many writers of the Modern Period (1915-1945), John Steinbeck attempts to make sense of the early decades of the 20th century; he sees the humanity in a class of people who are often ignored by writers and by society at large. These issues are further developed in Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath.*

***Character List***

Below is a list of the major characters from *Of Mice and Men*.

* **Lennie Small**: a nondescript, hulking creature of a man whose childlike mentality continually gets him into scrapes with men who neither respect nor understand him.
* **George Milton**: a small, lean man, used to fighting for his place in the world. He oversees and protects Lennie.
* **Slim**: a tall skinner (a highly skilled mule-driver) that serves as a counselor to the ranch hands.
* **Candy**: The one-handed ranch worker who has lived past his prime.
* **Curley’s wife**: never named, she is not respected by the men on the ranch.
* **Crooks**: the African-American stable buck is called Crooks because of a spinal injury inflicted by a kicking horse.
* **Curley**: the boss’ son, he possesses a jealous, cruel streak.

***Synopsis***

John Steinbeck’s novel *Of Mice and Men* places the reader in Depression-era California, traveling from job to job with two migrant laborers, George Milton and Lennie Small. The novel explores their friendship, in contrast to the isolation of their peers, and the way dreams can either sustain or discourage people. It also addresses a variety of issues, including racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination, that play out against the backdrop of lonely people seeking happiness. In addition examining important ethical dilemmas, studying *Of Mice and Men* provides an opportunity to discuss literary devices such as foreshadowing, symbolism, and point of view.

**Section 1 - Directions:** **Answer these questions in complete sentences.**

1. Describe the atmosphere that is created by the imagery in the first two paragraphs of the novel.
2. Why does George get angry with Lennie after they arrive in the clearing?
3. What does the dead mouse in his jacket pocket reveal about Lennie?
4. Why does George urge Lennie to remain quiet when they meet the boss at the ranch where they’ll be working?
5. As they prepare the campfire for dinner, Lennie remarks that he likes his beans with ketchup, sending George into a rage. How is George’s tirade revelatory?
6. Is Lennie capable of manipulating George?
7. What is the purpose of the story of the rabbits that George tells Lennie?
8. Before they go to sleep, George tells Lennie to “hide in the brush” near their campsite and wait for George to come if he gets into any trouble. What prediction can readers draw from George’s instructions?
9. Why does Steinbeck describe Lennie in animalistic terms?
10. What did you learn in first section of *Of Mice and Men*?

***Setting***

**Setting is determining time, place, and tone in fiction. This activity helps you see that the setting at the beginning of each scene establishes the atmosphere for the scene.**

**Directions:** Read the following passage from the beginning of the first section. Circle five examples of descriptive language that develop and establish the atmosphere of the first section. In the space below, explain how the descriptions you circled build atmosphere.

**“A few miles south of Soledad, 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. On one side of the river the golden foothill slopes curve up to the strong and rocky Gabilan mountains, but on the valley side the waters is line with trees – willows fresh and green with every spring, carrying in their lower leaf junctures the debris of the winter’s flooding; and sycamores with mottled, white, recumbent limbs and branches that arch over the pool. On the sandy bank under the trees the leaves lie deep and so crisp that a lizard makes a great skittering if he runs among them. Rabbits come out of the brush to sit on the sand in the evening, and the damp flats are covered with the night tracks of ‘coons, and with the spread pads of dogs from the ranches, and with the split-wedge tracks of deer that come to drink in the dark.”**

**1.**

**2.**

**3.**

**4.**

**5.**

**Section 2 - Directions:** **Answer these questions in complete sentences.**

1. How does the boss react to Lennie’s silence?
2. Why does the boss find George and Lennie’s relationship unusual?
3. How does the boss treat George and Lennie?
4. What is George’s fear at this point in the novel?
5. When Lennie questions George about telling the boss Lennie was kicked in the head by a horse, George says, “Be a damn good thing if you was…Save ever’body a hell of a lot of trouble.” What does this mean?
6. Describe Candy’s connection to his dog.
7. How is Candy’s relationship with his dog reflective of George’s relationship with Lennie?
8. When George confronts Candy about eavesdropping, Candy says, “A guy on a ranch don’t never listen nor he don’t ask no questions.” What does this reveal about the lives of the migrant workers?
9. Steinbeck describes Curley’s glance as “at once calculating and pugnacious,” and he strides about with “his elbows…still bent out a little.” How does this description reveal Curley’s personality?
10. How do George and Lennie react to seeing Curley’s wife for the first time?

***Imagery***

**Imagery is language that stirs up one or all of the five senses: seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, touching. By examining the author’s word choices, you lean more about the way the authors write and why some words are better than others.**

**Directions:** Read the following passage from the beginning of the second section. Circle five descriptive words or phrases. In the space below, explain the importance of each description the author uses.

**“Over each bunk there was nailed an apple box with the opening forward so that it made two shelves for the personal belongings of the occupant of the bunk. And these shelves were loaded with little articles, soap and talcum powder, razors and those Western magazines ranch men love to read and scoff at and secretly believe. And there were medicines on the shelves, and little vials, combs; and from nails on the box sides, a few neckties. Near one wall there was a black cast-iron stove, its stovepipe going straight up through the ceiling. In the middle of the room stood a big square table littered with playing cards, and around it were grouped boxes for the players to sit on.”**

**1.**

**2.**

**3.**

**4.**

**5.**

**Section 3 - Directions:** **Answer these questions in complete sentences.**

1. What caused George to stop playing mean-spirited jokes on Lennie?
2. What detail is added to the Weed story when George confides in Slim?
3. Carlson offers a simple solution to the problem of Candy’s dog’s smell and feebleness: shot it. Slim concurs, saying that the old dog only suffers. What is the significance of this scene?
4. When Carlson starts to take Candy’s dog out to be shot, Slim reminds him to “take a shovel.” What does he mean?
5. The discussion of Curley’s wife leads Whit to invite Geoge to come with the other men “to old Susy’s place.” What is “old Susy’s place,” and what purpose does it serve in the novel?
6. What is Candy’s reaction to the gunshot and later to Carlson cleaning his gun?
7. What is the attraction off the vision of the farm and the rabbits to Candy?
8. Why does Candy say that he should have shot his own dog?
9. Why is Slim angry with Curley when they return to the bunk house?
10. Why does Curley attack Lennie?

***Character Analysis***

**Characterization is the method used by a writer to develop how the character looks, acts, and thinks.**

**Directions:** Read the following passage from the novel and answer the questions that follow it. Refer directly to the passage for support. Answer in complete sentences.

**“He ain’t no cuckoo,” said George. “He’s dumb as hell, but he ain’t crazy. An’ I ain’t so bright neither, or I wouldn’t by buckin’ barley for my fifty and found. If I was bright, if I was even a little bit smart, I’d have my own little place, an’ I’d be bringin’ in my own crops, ‘stead of doin’ all the work and not getting what comes up outa the ground.” George fell silent. He wanted to talk. Slim neither encouraged nor discouraged him. He just sat back quiet and receptive.**

1. Why does George feel that he’s not intelligent?
2. Why does George need to talk?
3. Why does Slim neither encourage nor discourage George from talking?

***Thematic Analysis***

**A theme is a general concept or idea, such as love, justice or sorrow. One way to help you think of themes is to complete the following sentence: “This is a book about \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.” The theme of the American Dream permeates John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*; several of the major characters seek a version of the American Dream.**

**Directions:** Answer the following questions in complete sentences.

1. What is the “American Dream”?
2. Specifically, what “American Dream” are each characters persuing? Use examples from the book (with page numbers).
   * George
   * Lennie
   * Candy

***Literary Analysis: Point of View***

**The point of view is the way that the narrator sees the events in the story. *Of Mice and Men* is written from an objective, third-person point of view. The benefit of this choice is the reader is aware of everything that happens in the novel. The drawback is that the reader cannot enter into the thoughts and emotions of any one character. Use this opportunity to explore the effects of using a first-person point of view from the story.**

**Directions:** In the space provided, rewrite one page from Section 3 in the first person (use I, me, my). View the scene through the eyes of any of the following characters: George, Slim, Lennie, Carlson, Candy, Crooks, or Curley. Add feelings and ideas that are consistent with the character’s personality. Include the page reference for the passage you are rewriting.

***First-Person Rewrite:***

**Section 4 - Directions:** **Answer these questions in complete sentences.**

1. Curley’s wife is lonely because she’s a woman. Candy is lonely because of his age. Why is Crooks lonely?
2. Why does Lennie wander into Crooks room?
3. Why is Crooks rude to Lennie?
4. What is Crooks’ initial evaluation of Lennie?
5. How does Crooks taunt Lennie?
6. Why does Crooks relent in his taunting of Lennie?
7. What does Curley’s wife suspect about Curley’s injury?
8. What is Curley’s wife’s reaction to the dream of the farm with the rabbits?
9. How does the promise of the farm embolden Candy and Crooks?
10. Why does Crooks abandon the dream of the farm?

***Character Analysis: Crooks***

**Characterization is the method used by a writer to develop how the character looks, acts, and thinks. Finding connections is one way to improve your critical thinking skills.**

**Directions:** Read the following passage, then respond to the questions to understand how one character fits into the novel.

Crooks laughed again. “A guy can talk to you an’ be sure you won’t go blabbin’. Couple of weeks an’ them pups’ll be all right. George knows what he’s about. Jus’ talks, an’ you don’t understand nothing.” He leaned forward excitedly. “This is just a nigger talkin’, an’ a busted-back nigger. So it don’t mean nothing, see? You couldn’t remember it anyways. I seen it over an’ over – a guy talkin’ to another guy and it don’t make no difference.” His excitement had increased until he pounded his knee with his hand. “George can tell you screwy things, and it don’t matter. It’s just the talking. It’s just bein’ with another guy. That’s all.”

1. Do Crooks’ thoughts in this passage reflect any of the thoughts of the novel’s other characters?
2. How does Crooks’ race contribute to his outcast nature?
3. What is the significance of talking to “another guy” to Crooks?
4. Why does Crooks emphasize hiss race in this passage?
5. What would it take for Crooks to feel any degree of acceptance among the workers?

***Setting***

**When an object represents a concept or idea, it is called symbolism. There are many symbols in *Of Mice and Men.* This activity demonstrates how place in the novel can symbolize emotions or ideas. Although you may not fully understand everything each place represents until you finish the novel, you should have a fairly good idea at this point in the story. This activity asks you to think about the complex ideas represented by simple places. Considering these elements more carefully increases your appreciation for the novel.**

**Directions:** For each place listed below, write down all of the emotions/ideas that you feel it may represent.

1. the bunkhouse as a place of danger for Lennie
2. the clearing by the river as a place of peace
3. the harness room as a place of separation
4. the barn as a place of foreboding or uncertainty

***Symbolism: Defining the Characters***

**A symbol is an object or action that stands for something else. After finishing Section 4, you have learned a great deal about each of the character’s personalities. In this assignment, demonstrate your understanding of one character through the use of symbolism (for example, choose an object that represents one aspect of your character). This activity asks you to apply your knowledge of symbolism and of the story.**

**Directions:** Follow the steps below.

**Step 1**: Choose a character from the novel and write his/her name here: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**Step 2:** Consider this character’s personality and behavior. Which trait do you feel is the most important one? Write it here:

**Step 3:** Choose an object that represents the personality trait described above. Think outside the box. What object will you use to symbolize your character? Write it here:

**Step 4:** In the space below, describe how your object represents the character’s personality trait. You may use note form or use complete sentences. Write your explanation here:

**Section 5 - Directions:** **Answer these questions in complete sentences.**

1. What has Lennie done as the section opens?
2. What is Lennie’s fear?
3. What personal information does Curley’s wife reveal to Lennie in the barn?
4. To console Lennie over the death of his puppy, Curley’s wife tells him that he can get another one, that “the whole country is fulla mutts.” What is the significance of this line?
5. Why does Curley’s wife get angry when Lennie tells her that George said he shouldn’t talk to her?
6. What was Curley’s wife’s dream? She indicates that life with Curley is not what she wanted for herself.
7. Why does Curley’s wife offer to let Lennie stroke her hair?
8. Why does Curley’s wife become afraid of Lennie as he’s stroking her hair?
9. Why does Lennie kill Curley’s wife?
10. Why does Lennie leave Curley’s wife body in the barn, but take the puppy with him when he leaves to go to the river?

***Thematic Analysis: Dreams***

**A theme is a general concept or idea, such as love, justice, or sorrow. One way to help you think of themes is to complete the following sentence: “This is a book about \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.” One of the major themes in *Of Mice and Men* is the elusiveness of dreams; several characters’ hopes have been dashed by the end of Section 5.**

**Directions:** Identify the dream of each of the following characters, and explain how that dream is destroyed. Explain what you can learn from this at the bottom of the page.

|  |
| --- |
| **George and Lennie** |
| Dream:  How it dies: |
| **Crooks** |
| Dream:  How it dies: |
| **Candy** |
| Dream:  How it dies: |
| **Curley’s Wife** |
| Dream:  How it dies: |

**Lessons Learned**

What message is the author giving the readers? Will anyone’s dream come to fruition? How do you feel after examining this rather depressing theme?

**Section 6 - Directions:** **Answer these questions in complete sentences.**

1. The novel ends where it began, in the clearing by the river. What is the atmosphere established by the description at the beginning of the final section?
2. What is the purpose of Aunt Clara’s appearance in Lennie’s mind’s eye?
3. What does Lennie fear his punishment will be?
4. Why does the giant rabbit appear to Lennie?
5. Why does George’s struggle with the description of the farm when Lennie asks him to recite it to him there, on the river bank?
6. What is Slim’s role at the end of the story?
7. What is the significance of Carlson asking George and Lennie had his gun and supplying the story that George wrestled the gun away from Lennie and shot him.
8. When George – obviously upset – and Slim go for a drink, Carlson remarks, “Now what the hell ya suppose is eatin’ them two guys?” Why doesn’t he understand?

***Symbolism***

**Symbols, objects that represent other things, are significant literary elements; they become a type of shorthand for particular ideas or concepts in a piece of literature.**

**Directions:** The following are recurring symbols in *Of Mice and Men*. Explain how the symbols are alike and what they represent.

1. the rabbits as symbols of George and Lennie’s dreams
2. the fate of Candy’s dog as a symbol of Lennie’s ultimate fate and human tragedy
3. the color red as a symbol of danger or trouble
4. the bunk house as a symbol of danger for Lennie
5. Curley’s wife as a symbol of women of the early twentieth century

***Setting***

**There are six major scenes in *Of Mice and Men*, and each scene begins with an extended description of the setting, which establishes both a sense of place and of atmosphere.**

**Directions:** Match the settings with the appropriate scene descriptions. Use some settings more than once.

**the bunkhouse the harness room the barn the clearing by the river**

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ 1. George cooks up some beans for himself and Lennie.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ 2. Curley’s wife threatens to get Crooks hanged.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ 3. George shoots Lennie in the back of the head.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ 4. Curley attacks Lennie.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ 5. There are apple crates on the walls for shelves that are littered with personal items

and Western magazines.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ 6. Lennie accidentally kills Curley’s wife.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ 7. Crooks taunts Lennie about George’s well-being.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ 8. The peaceful spot Lennie must go to if he gets in any sort of trouble.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ 9. Whit shows Slim the published letter from Bill Tenner.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ 10. Lennie attempts to cover the dead puppy with hay.