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Of Mice and Men

by

John Steinbeck

1937



MonkeyNotes Study Guide by TheBestNotes Staff

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

This book is set during the Great Depression of the 1930s in two places. It starts beside a stream, close to the Salinas River, a few miles South of Soledad. It then moves to a ranch, where the major part of the story is set. At the end of the novel, the setting comes back to where it started.

George and Lennie are introduced by the stream. They are on their way to a.....

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Major Characters

George Milton - the protagonist and main character of the book. He is a caring, compassionate, and understanding human being who dreams of owning his own piece of land. Physically, he is a small and intelligent man with strong features. He is Lennie's cousin.

Lennie Small- the obedient friend of George. He has a child's mind and a giant's body. He is mentally retarded, and relies upon George. It is these contrasting qualities and his impulsive nature that cause him problems.

Old Candy - one of the lonely ranch workers. He is a cripple (missing a hand), working as a 'Swamper'.

Crooks - a black ranch hand. He is sensible and neat, with a mind of his own. He is a lonely character, who is discriminated against, due to his race.

Slim - a ranch worker with leadership qualities. He commands respect from all on the ranch.....

Additional characters are outlined in the complete study guide.

CONFLICT

Protagonist - The protagonist of the story is George. He is the kind-hearted ranch hand who is concerned about his friend Lennie and watches out for him.

Antagonist - The antagonist of the story is George's trying to care for the handicapped Lennie. Because he has a giant's body and a child's mind, Lennie accidentally kills Curley's wife; at the.....

Climax - The climax occurs when Lennie accidentally kills Curley's wife. George knows that.....

Outcome - *Of Mice and Men* ends in tragedy. George feels compelled to mercifully kill his friend and companion, Lennie, in order to save him from a brutal death. The death of Lennie also.....

MOOD

The dominant mood of the story is that of expectation. This mood is developed through the dreams of the major characters. The other mood that prevails is premonitory, of.....

SHORT PLOT/CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

One evening, two men, on their way to a ranch, stop at a stream near the Salinas River. George, who is short and dark, leads the way. The person following him is Lennie, a giant of a man with huge arms. During their conversation by the stream, George repeatedly asks Lennie to keep his mouth shut on the ranch, suggesting that Lennie has some kind of problem. After supper and before going to sleep, the two of them talk about their dream to own a piece of land.

The next day, George and Lennie travel to the ranch to start work. They are given two beds in the bunkhouse. Then Old Candy introduces them to almost everybody on the ranch. They meet the boss and the boss's son Curley, who is quite rude. They also meet Curley's wife when she comes looking for her husband. She wears heavy make-up and possesses a flirtatious attitude. George warns Lennie to behave his best around Curley and his wife. He also suggests that they should meet by the pool if anything unfortunate happens to either of them on the ranch.

George and Lennie are assigned to work with Slim, who is sensible and 'civilized' and talks with authority. George finds Slim an understanding confidante, and a bond forms between the two of them. When Curley wrongly accuses Slim for talking to his wife, Slim gets very angry. Curley apologizes to him in the bunkhouse in front of everybody, but his apology is rejected. Curley vents his frustration on Lennie, trying to pick a fight. Lennie does not hit back initially, but when George asks him to, Lennie obliges and crushes Curley's hand. Curley agrees that he will not tell anyone about his hand, for it would mean losing his self-respect.

While working on the ranch, George and Lennie continue to dream about owning their own piece of land and make plans accordingly. Old Candy, one of the ranch hands, overhears their.....

THEMES

Major Theme

The major theme of the book, *Of Mice and Men*, is that a dream, no matter how impossible to obtain, can forge friendship and give meaning to life. George and Lennie dream of owning a little farm of ten acres, with a windmill, a little shack, an orchard, and animals. The dream keeps them going and lightens the load of their work. It also solidifies their friendship.

Minor Themes

One of the minor themes is the tragedy of mental retardation. Lennie never intends to harm anything, neither the puppy nor Curley's wife. He is simply too slow to realize his.....

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

Born on February 27, 1902, in Salinas, California, John Ernest Steinbeck was the third of four children. Though poor, Steinbeck had a normal childhood and attended public school, graduating from Salinas High School in 1919. As a student, he had an inclination towards reading and writing, which was encouraged by his mother, a schoolteacher herself. He was a frequent contributor to the school magazine.

Steinbeck studied at Stanford University from 1920 to 1925. Although he intended to become a marine biologist, he never completed a degree. The courses that attracted his attention most were zoology, English, and classical literature. While at Stanford, he wrote frequently and was often published in the college newspaper. After leaving the University, he worked at a variety of jobs. He went to New York, determined to become a writer. Between 1925 and 1927, he attempted to earn a living as a reporter and a free-lance writer, but was unsuccessful. Disappointed, he left New York and returned to the West Coast, where he met his first wife, Carol.

Steinbeck's first novel, *Cup of Gold* (1929), is based on the life of Sir Henry Morgan, a famous English pirate of the sixteenth century. His next work, *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932), is a

LITERARY / HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Started with a tentative title of *Something that Happened*, the book, *Of Mice and Me*, took the form of an extended short story. Steinbeck rejected the initial version of the story, for he felt that he had been unable to keep his own voice and viewpoint out of its narration. Steinbeck reworked and expanded the story, adding

more characters. He also added more dialogue, taking particular care to reflect the accent and dialect of uneducated farm workers. It is said that a large section of the book was rewritten by

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES AND ANALYSIS

CHAPTER 1

Summary

The book opens with a detailed geographic description of the countryside around the Salinas River, a few miles south of Soledad. As two men walk from the dusty road to the cooling stream, the native rabbits scurry away. George, a short man, is seen first. He has sharp features with a thin and bony nose and restless eyes. He also has strong hands and slender arms. George is followed by Lennie, a huge man, built like a bear. His giant arms hang like pendulums at his side. Both men are dressed in denim trousers, denim coats with brass buttons, black hats, and blankets, which are wrapped around round their necks.

Lennie is thirsty and dips his mouth into the green water, drinking like a horse. George stops him, for the stream appears stagnant. George remarks that Lennie would drink from a gutter if he were thirsty. George refreshes himself and lies down to rest. Lennie splashes in the water and then joins George.

When George talks about going to the ranch, the forgetful Lennie does not seem to understand. When Lennie inquires once more about what they are going to do there, George grows impatient. Lennie apologizes, saying that he tries hard not to forget things. George explains to him once again that they are going to work on a ranch, which is located nearby. He warns Lennie to refrain from talking to anyone at the ranch and begs him to behave.

George notices Lennie reaching into his pocket and asks him to hand over whatever he is hiding there. Lennie hands him a dead mouse that he has found along the road and put in his pocket to pet. George throws it away in disgust. He then reminds Lennie that whenever he pets things, it seems to get both of them in trouble, as it did on their last job. Lennie has already forgotten what has happened there.

George sends Lennie to look for some sticks so they can build a fire and prepare dinner. When he returns, George sees that he is wet and carrying only one stick. He immediately knows that Lennie has retrieved the dead mouse from where he has hurled it. George asks for the mouse, and Lennie resists giving it to him. George explains that a dead mouse is not a fit pet and demands that Lennie hand it over, which he does reluctantly. George then sends Lennie off to look for wood again. When Lennie returns with enough sticks, they build a fire and warm up three cans of beans for supper. While the beans are heating, Lennie asks for ketchup to go on his beans, even though it should be obvious that they have none. George is suddenly irritated with his friend's slowness and angrily explains all the things he could do without Lennie, including going to a "cat house", drinking lots of whiskey, and keeping a job.

Lennie knows that he has put George in a foul mood. Although he does not understand why George is angry, he still tries to make up, saying that he will go away to some far-off hills and live in a cave if George does not want them to stay together. George is touched by his friend's simplicity and honesty and reacts in a very understanding manner. He reassures Lennie that he does not want him to go away. Lennie then asks George to tell him again about their dream. George explains how the two of them are going to save their money and buy a ten acre farm, where they can raise rabbits, cows, pigs, chicken, and cherries.

After dinner, George decides they should spend the night by the stream and head to the ranch in the morning. He then reminds Lennie again about not talking to other people on the ranch. He also tells him that if there is ever trouble on the ranch, Lennie should return to this same site and hide in the near-by bushes, where George will come and find him. Lennie promises to remember the place. They drift peacefully off to sleep, thinking about the little farm they want to own.

Notes

The book opens with a detailed description of the physical landscape around the Salinas River, which Steinbeck knew very well. He then gives a physical description of the two major characters, contrasting George's small stature and Lennie's giant body. George appears first, leading his friend and suggesting that he is in control. Almost immediately, it becomes obvious as to why, for Lennie is slow. Steinbeck describes him eagerly snorting water from the stagnant stream as if he were a horse. When he sees what Lennie is doing, George commands him to stop, for he does not want his friend to get sick. Suddenly, the stage is set for the entire novel. Lennie is retarded, and George's role is to watch over and protect him.

Lennie's character as an innocent, immature, unthinking, and highly dependent character is developed in this section. He splashes in the cool stream like a child. He constantly forgets things that he is told or has experienced, even though he tries and tries to remember; he cannot even remember having to escape from the last town because of trouble. He naively puts a dead mouse in his pocket for a pet, not understanding that it is dirty and unfit. He asks for things that are impossible, demanding ketchup for his beans. George knows Lennie's limitations and watches out for his friend.

Quite contrary to Lennie's gigantic body, which can do the work of two or three men, his spirit is tender and gentle. Like a child, he is fond of petting soft things, like a mouse or rabbit. When he upsets George, he offers to go away and live by himself in a cave. He constantly dreams of owning a small farm, where he can raise some rabbits as pets. His fondness for small creatures is symbolic of his identification with them. Just as rabbits are delicate and need to be protected from preying animals, Lennie has to be constantly looked after by George.

George shows that he is a sensible man, who understands how he must care for Lennie. For his friend's own good, he knows that he must treat Lennie like a child, giving him the same instructions several times and disciplining him to encourage proper behavior. George recollects the problem created by Lennie at their previous work place, when he touched and held the soft dress of a little girl until she screamed for help; the incident forced them to quit their jobs and run from town. As a result, he repeatedly warns Lennie to refrain from touching things or talking to the other workers on the next ranch. He also tells Lennie that if there is ever trouble, he should return to the stream and hide in the bushes, where George will come and find him.

George is also shown to be caring and compassionate. Although he grows irritated with Lennie's requests and questions, he regrets being mean to him and reassures him that he does not want him to go and live in a cave. He also constantly watches out for his welfare, insisting he not drink the stagnant water or carry the dirty mouse. He also explains to Lennie more than once how he should act on the ranch so that he can stay out of trouble. Most importantly, he includes Lennie in his dreams, planning to take his friend with him to his ten-acre farm that he wants to buy and promising him that he can raise rabbits there.

It is important to notice the close bond that exists between the two men. Although George does grow frustrated with Lennie's handicaps, they genuinely care about one another and plan their future together. George states, "Guys like us. . .got no fambly. . .don't belong no place. . .with us it ain't like that. We got a future. We got somebody to talk to that gives a damn." In the company of each other, they do not feel loneliness in this stark and lonely landscape. This will be in sharp contrast to the loneliness that the other workers feel on the isolated ranch.

It is also important to notice the foreshadowing that occurs in this first section of the book. Lennie is fascinated with soft things; he hides the mouse in his pocket for it has a soft touch, and he dreams of raising soft, furry rabbits. The fact that Lennie does not know his own strength is also explained when he says, *'I'd pet 'em (mice), and pretty soon they bit my fingers and I pinched their heads a little and then they was dead.'* George makes it clear that Lennie's "petting" things has gotten them into trouble before. He also explains that

they have had to leave other jobs quickly because of problems caused by Lennie. All of these facts foreshadow the trouble that will occur on the new ranch.

It is finally important to remember that the title of the book is *Of Mice and Men*. In this first chapter, both mice and men are introduced and discussed at length.

CHAPTER 2

Summary

The next morning, George and Lennie reach the ranch around ten o'clock. They go to the bunkhouse, a long rectangular room filled with beds and shelves made of apples boxes. The room also has a table for playing cards. An old ranch hand assures George that the boss is a nice man and that the place is very clean, in spite of the insect repellent that George spies on his bed.

The boss enters the room and inquires of George the reason for being a day late to work. George explains that they had to walk a long way. When the boss asks for their names, George tells him both names and explains that Lennie is a slow thinker but a strong, hard worker. He also says that Lennie is his.....

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

George - George is the protagonist and one of the two main characters in *Of Mice and Men*. A compassionate, kind, responsible, patient, and understanding man, he faithfully watches out for Lennie, his retarded friend and constant companion. When Lennie gets into trouble, George always helps him find a solution or get away. George is also shown to be a thinking person. He knows he must discipline Lennie in order to help him, and he is often seen telling Lennie what he has done wrong and what he must do to improve. He is also a planner, telling Lennie where he should go if there is trouble on the ranch. He also works hard to make the dream of owning a ten-acre farm become a reality. Unlike the other ranch hands that.....

Lennie - Lennie is George's friend and constant companion, who is mentally retarded and highly dependent on George. He suffers from a child's mentality within a giant's body. He is innocent and forgetful like a child. He is also attracted to small, soft things because of his child-like, gentle nature. Unfortunately, he often harms the things he loves accidentally. As a huge man with heavy arms and powerful hands, he does not know or understand his own strength.

Lennie idolizes George, his kind caretaker, almost like a god. In Lennie's eyes, George is totally kind, faithful, and good. He tries hard to remember everything George tells him to do and.....

Additional characters are analyzed in the complete study guide.

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

Of Mice and Men is almost a long short story, divided into six chapters. Steinbeck takes great care to develop the tragic plot in a classical fashion. The first two chapters are largely expository, describing the isolated setting, introducing the characters, and developing the relationship between Lennie and George. The rising action begins in the third chapter with the confrontation between Curley and Lennie. When the huge man easily crushes Curley's hand, his strength is actually seen for the first time and foreshadows that there will be trouble on the ranch. The fourth part of the book focuses on the theme of loneliness and develops Curley's wife, who is shown to be a lonely woman, constantly seeking company. In the fifth.....

THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

Major Theme

The major theme of the book is the *beauty of a dream*, for it gives a person a purpose in life. George and Lennie dream of owning a farm that they can call their own and where Lennie can raise rabbits and stay out of trouble, free from the constraints of society. Both men constantly keep this dream in front of them. In fact, Lennie asks George to repeat the dream over and over. George, himself, refuses to frivolously spend any money, for he is saving every dime to buy the land. The dream keeps both of the working; it also keeps them close.

Curley's wife and Crooks, two cynics, scoff at the dream of Lennie and George as being unrealistic, but Candy sees its possibility and its beauty. He offers to give his life savings to help.....

IRONY

The major irony in the book is that George kills Lennie **because he loves him**. He wants to spare Lennie from dying a brutal death at the hands of Curley and the other ranch hands who are enraged over the death of Curley's wife; therefore, he selflessly does the terrible deed himself, as a merciful act to his friend. Ironically, George steals Carlson's pistol to use; it is the same pistol that.....

VOCABULARY - GLOSSARY

A Glossary is provided below of various colloquial terms. The words are presented in the order in which they appear:

'coons' - racoons

split-wedge - a crack or tear which is triangular in shape.

jungle-up - a camp for tramps who spend the night in just about any place.

bucking grain bags - carrying bags of grain

bindle - a bundle binding all the necessary things with a cloth or blanket

cat-house - whore house

foundin' their tail - working really hard

blowen' in our jack - spending or wasting all our money.

Burcap - a coarse canvas for wall coverings etc.

pants rabbits - fleas.....

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Describe the setting of the novel. Why is it so important?
2. Compare and contrast George and Lennie.
3. Contrast Lennie and Curley.
4. What is the role of Curley's wife in the novel?
5. Discuss the dream of George and Lennie in detail.....

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