

Of Mice and Men

by John Steinbeck · Language: EN

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Overview

Of Mice and Men, published in 1937, is a novella by John Steinbeck that tells the story of two migrant ranch workers, George Milton and Lennie Small, who travel together through California's Salinas Valley during the Great Depression. George is small, sharp-witted, and protective; Lennie is a large, physically powerful man with a mild intellectual disability and a deep love for soft things, which often leads to trouble. The pair dream of owning their own farm, a place where they can live off the land and, for Lennie, tend rabbits. Their dream sustains them through a series of temporary jobs, but it is repeatedly threatened by Lennie's inability to control his own strength and his innocent but destructive actions.

The story arc follows George and Lennie as they arrive at a new ranch near Soledad, where they meet a cast of lonely characters: Candy, an aging handyman with one hand; Curley, the boss's aggressive and insecure son; Curley's wife, who is unnamed and isolated; and Crooks, a Black stable hand who is segregated from the others. The central conflict builds as Curley's wife repeatedly seeks attention, and Lennie's fascination with her ultimately leads to a tragic accident. In the climactic scene, George is forced to make an impossible choice to protect Lennie from a worse fate, echoing the novel's title from Robert Burns's poem about the best-laid plans of mice and men going awry.

The novella is a powerful exploration of friendship, loneliness, and the fragility of dreams. It matters because it captures the harsh realities of the American Dream during the Depression, showing how economic and social forces crush the aspirations of the marginalized. Steinbeck's spare, dialogue-driven prose and his compassionate portrayal of outcasts make it a timeless critique of social injustice and a poignant meditation on what it means to be human. The book has been adapted into plays, films, and other media, and it remains a staple of American literature, frequently taught in schools for its themes and its masterful use of foreshadowing and symbolism.

Key Takeaways

- The American Dream is often an illusion, especially for the poor and marginalized, as the novel shows how economic and social forces can crush even the most sincere aspirations.
- Friendship and companionship can provide meaning and hope in a world that is otherwise lonely and indifferent, as seen in the bond between George and Lennie.

- Lennie's inability to control his strength and his childlike innocence highlight the tragic consequences of a society that does not accommodate those who are different.
- The novel demonstrates how systemic racism, sexism, and ageism isolate individuals, as shown through the characters of Crooks, Curley's wife, and Candy.
- The title, taken from Robert Burns's poem, warns that even the best-laid plans can go awry, a theme that is central to the plot's tragic outcome.
- George's final act of killing Lennie is a mercy killing, but it also symbolizes the death of their shared dream and the impossibility of escaping the cycle of poverty and loneliness.
- Steinbeck's use of foreshadowing, such as the deaths of mice and the puppy, prepares readers for the tragic ending and underscores the inevitability of the outcome.
- The novella emphasizes the importance of empathy and understanding, as each character's loneliness stems from a lack of connection with others.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1

The novella opens with a detailed description of the Salinas River and the surrounding countryside. George Milton and Lennie Small, two migrant workers, arrive at a clearing by the river, where they plan to spend the night before heading to a nearby ranch. Lennie, who has a habit of petting soft things, has a dead mouse in his pocket, which George throws away. George complains about the difficulties of traveling with Lennie, but also reveals their shared dream of owning a farm. Lennie asks George to repeat the dream, and George does, emphasizing the rabbits Lennie will tend. The chapter establishes the close bond between the two men and Lennie's childlike nature, as well as the theme of dreams as a source of hope.

Chapter 2

The next morning, George and Lennie arrive at the ranch and meet the boss, who is suspicious of their traveling together. They also encounter Candy, the old swamper, who tells them about the boss's son, Curley, a small man who is aggressive and recently married. Curley's wife appears, and Lennie is immediately drawn to her, but George warns him to stay away. They meet Curley, who is confrontational, and then Slim, the skilled mule driver, who is respected by everyone. George and Lennie learn that Curley is a boxer and has a chip on his shoulder. The chapter introduces the other ranch hands and sets up the tensions that will drive the plot, including Curley's jealousy and Lennie's vulnerability.

Chapter 3

That evening, the men gather in the bunkhouse. Slim and George talk about Lennie's strength and his mental disability, and George reveals that he and Lennie grew up together and that he promised Lennie's aunt to care for him. Candy's old dog is shot by Carlson, despite Candy's

protests, an event that foreshadows the novel's ending. Curley enters looking for his wife and picks a fight with Lennie, who crushes Curley's hand. Slim warns Curley to keep quiet about the incident to avoid humiliation. The chapter deepens the theme of loneliness and the disposability of the weak, as seen in the dog's death and the way Curley's injury is covered up.

Chapter 4

On a Saturday night, the men go to the local brothel, but Lennie stays behind and visits Crooks, the Black stable hand, in his room. Crooks is initially hostile, but he eventually warms to Lennie and shares his own loneliness and memories of his childhood. Candy joins them, and they discuss the dream of owning a farm, which briefly gives Crooks hope. However, Curley's wife enters and threatens Crooks, reminding him of his place in the racial hierarchy. She also reveals her own loneliness and her shattered dreams of becoming an actress. The chapter exposes the racism and sexism of the time and shows how the dream is fragile and exclusive.

Chapter 5

On Sunday afternoon, Lennie is in the barn with his puppy, which he has accidentally killed by petting it too hard. He is distressed and worried that George will be angry. Curley's wife enters and tries to comfort him, but she begins to talk about her own dreams and loneliness. She invites Lennie to feel her hair, but when he does, he becomes overwhelmed and holds on too tightly. She panics and screams, and Lennie, in a panic, shakes her and breaks her neck. Lennie realizes what he has done and flees to the river, as George had instructed him to do in case of trouble. Candy finds the body and alerts George, and they both realize that the dream is over. The chapter is the climax of the novel, showing the tragic consequences of Lennie's strength and the fragility of their plans.

Chapter 6

The final chapter returns to the clearing by the river where the novel began. Lennie is hiding there, and he imagines his aunt and a giant rabbit scolding him. George arrives, and they have a final conversation about their dream, which George repeats one last time. George then shoots Lennie in the back of the head, using Carlson's Luger, as a mercy killing to spare Lennie from a worse fate at the hands of Curley and the other men. The other men arrive, and George lies to them, saying that Lennie had the gun and that he took it from him. Slim understands what George did and offers comfort, while George is left with the loss of his friend and the end of their dream. The novel ends with George and Slim walking away, leaving the dream behind.

Themes

- Loneliness and isolation
- The American Dream
- Friendship and loyalty

- Strength and power
- Fate and free will
- Marginalization and prejudice

Notable Quotes

- "Well, we'll have a big vegetable patch and a rabbit hutch and chickens. And when it rains in the winter, we'll just say the hell with goin' to work, and we'll build up a fire in the stove and set around it an' listen to the rain comin' down on the roof." — George describes the dream farm to Lennie, emphasizing the comfort and freedom it would bring.
- "I got you to look after me, and you got me to look after you, and that's why." — Lennie explains to George why they are different from other ranch hands who are alone.
- "Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don't belong no place." — George tells Lennie about the loneliness of their life, contrasting it with their friendship.
- "A guy needs somebody—to be near him. A guy goes nuts if he ain't got nobody." — Crooks speaks about his isolation and the universal need for companionship.
- "I could of hoed in the garden and washed dishes for them guys. But I tell ya, I wasn't gonna stay in the house no more. I was gonna go out in the fields and work." — Curley's wife expresses her regret and her desire for a different life, revealing her own dreams.
- "I ought to of shot that dog myself, George. I shouldn't ought to of let no stranger shoot my dog." — Candy reflects on his failure to protect his dog, foreshadowing George's decision to shoot Lennie himself.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is *Of Mice and Men* about?

Of Mice and Men is about two migrant ranch workers, George and Lennie, who travel together during the Great Depression. They share a dream of owning their own farm, but Lennie's mental disability and his tendency to accidentally harm soft things lead to tragedy. The novel explores themes of friendship, loneliness, and the impossibility of achieving the American Dream for the poor and marginalized.

Is *Of Mice and Men* worth reading?

Yes. It is a classic of American literature, praised for its powerful themes, memorable characters, and Steinbeck's masterful use of dialogue and foreshadowing. The novella is short, but it packs an emotional punch and offers deep insights into human nature and social injustice. It is widely taught in schools and remains relevant today.

How does *Of Mice and Men* end?

Spoiler: Lennie accidentally kills Curley's wife, and the men form a lynch mob. George finds Lennie at their designated meeting spot by the river and, to spare him from a brutal death, shoots him with Carlson's Luger. The other men arrive, and George lies, saying Lennie had the gun. The novel ends with George and Slim walking away, leaving the dream behind.

Who should read *Of Mice and Men*?

Anyone interested in classic American literature, social justice, or the human condition. It is a staple in high school and college curricula, but its themes of friendship, loneliness, and the fragility of dreams resonate with readers of all ages. It is also a quick read, making it accessible to those new to literary fiction.

How long does it take to read *Of Mice and Men*?

At an average reading speed of 250 words per minute, *Of Mice and Men*, which is about 29,000 words, takes roughly 2 hours to read. Most readers finish it in one sitting, as it is a short novella of about 107 pages, depending on the edition.