

Of Mice and Men

By John Steinbeck

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Penguin Books

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Reading Level: Grades 6-12 + AP/IB

INTRODUCTION

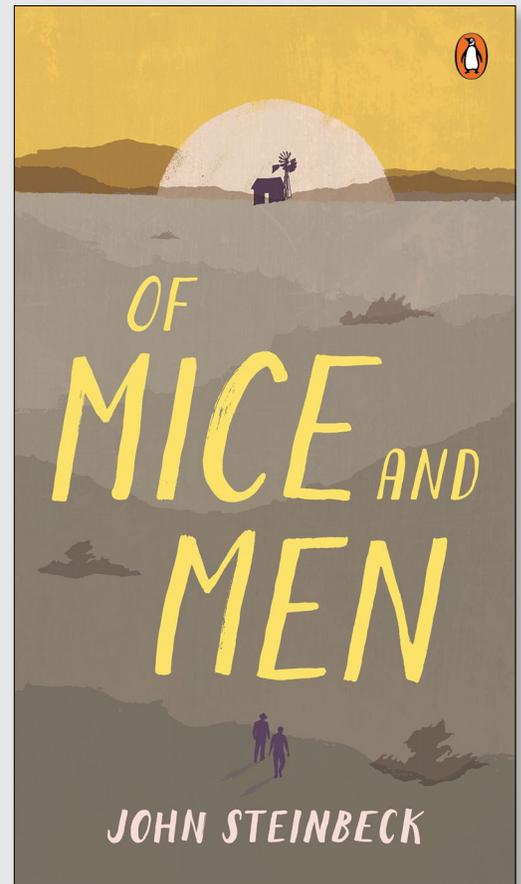
Of Mice and Men, originally published in 1937, is a staple in English classrooms across the U.S., appearing on most lists of top books for high school students. Reasons for the popularity of the novella include its short length and straightforward prose, its use of symbolism and foreshadowing, its accessibility for character and plot study, and its themes of friendship and moral dilemma that especially appeal to young adults. In addition, in the 21st century, the depiction of several characters has taken on new relevance in helping students to reflect on ideas of ability and disability, as well as racist and sexist stereotypes. *Of Mice and Men* challenges teachers to explore societal reactions to human differences with their students.

OVERVIEW OF THE NOVEL

George and Lennie, two itinerant farm workers, arrive at a ranch where they hope to make enough cash to fund their dream of acquiring their own piece of land where they can lead a self-sufficient and idyllic life. George instructs Lennie to keep quiet and stay out of trouble, unlike what happened at their last job. But soon there are complications, caused by the hot-headed and jealous Curly, his dissatisfied young wife, and Lennie's inability to handle upsetting situations. Tensions build until Lennie inadvertently kills Curley's wife. To protect Lennie from the mob, George shoots him in the back of the head while he and Lennie recite their dream of living "on the fatta the lan" (p. 105).

Teacher's Guide

**INCLUDES: CHAPTER SUMMARIES,
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS,
CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES,
AND RESOURCES**



PREPARING TO READ THE NOVEL

Of Mice and Men appears on the American Library Association's "List of Most Challenged Books of 21st Century" for its use of offensive language, its depiction of racism and sexism, its handling of issues of intellectual disability, and its dark themes of determinism and inhumanity. Before beginning a unit on the novel, it is important to consult school and district guidelines regarding notification of students and parents about issues presented in the novel and to prepare alternative readings or assignments. Particularly problematic in the novel is the language used to describe three characters: Lennie who is intellectually disabled, Curley's wife who is never called by her name, and Crooks, a Black stable hand who is ostracized by the other workers. George and the other stable hands call Lennie "nuts," "crazy bastard" and other expletives. The dehumanization of Crooks is conveyed through his enforced isolation and the way the workers speak to him. Curley's wife is labeled a "tramp" and worse by George who calls her a "piece of jail-bait" (p. 32). Teachers can use various methods to sensitize students to the author's language, so they can come to understand how authors use language to generate reactions in the reader as well as to delineate character.

SENSITIVITY TO DISABILITY LANGUAGE

From the beginning of the novel, Steinbeck introduces Lennie as intellectually disabled. Lennie cannot remember important information, he repeats words, he imitates slavishly, he is unable to make connections between his actions and outcomes, he cannot control impulses. It is difficult for him to follow social cues or to live independently. While readers may want to label his behavior as autistic, Steinbeck wrote the description of Lennie well before the clinical definition of autism was developed in 1947. Lennie's disability is a combination of developmental, intellectual, cognitive, and physical factors.

Students need to be aware of correct ways to describe a person with disabilities. Divide the class in half, having one group read the section on "Disability Language Guidelines" from the Fact Sheet of Special Olympics, available at <https://tinyurl.com/y266ab7q>. The other half of the class reads "Respectful Disability Language: Here's What's Up!" at <https://tinyurl.com/y84cuzq5>.

Ask students individually to summarize four general rules that they learn from the information sheets and to share their rules in small groups. Then as a whole class categorize and develop a set of rules based on these summaries which the class will use while discussing the character of Lennie in the novel.

AUTHOR'S PURPOSE: RACIST AND SEXIST LANGUAGE

1. To become sensitive to the impact of racist language in the novel, have students compare Steinbeck's choice of language with a bowdlerized version of the same passage. A good choice is the attempt by Crooks to stand up to Curley's wife near the end of Chapter 4 (pp. 80-81). First ask students to read an edited version of the conversation and note their reactions and what they learn about the characters. Then ask students to read Steinbeck's version with the slur words and threats of violence. Discuss with students their reaction to the two versions. What is Steinbeck's purpose in using derogatory language? How does the language affect the reader? What do they learn about the characters from their use of language? How is the impact changed when taboo language is used?

Use a similar strategy to consider the sexist language of George and the other ranch hands, using the passage in Chapter 2 when Lennie first sees Curley's wife and George warns him to stay away from her (p. 32).

**AUTHOR'S PURPOSE: RACIST
AND SEXIST LANGUAGE**
(CONTINUED)

2. Invite students to consider an author's choice of language by reacting to a controversial statement, such as "Words have no power," "Authors should not use swear words in literature" or "It is okay to use pejorative words for women or men." Ask students to work collaboratively with a partner to generate a summary of their reactions either positive or negative to the statement starter and post on a Google.doc. In the next session, review and categorize the responses. Ask students to write a summary sentence, synthesizing their point of view and providing at least two statements to support their claim. Then discuss: How does an author's purpose determine word choice?

**BUILDING KNOWLEDGE:
MIGRANT WORKERS OF
THE DEPRESSION ERA**

1. Build a class Web with students drawing on their knowledge of the Depression in the U.S., asking what forced people to migrate and the conditions of migrant workers. Then ask students to listen to the following Woody Guthrie folk songs, stopping after each song, inviting students to add information to the Web gleaned from the song lyrics. After listening to all three songs, ask students to summarize new insights learned about the experiences of Depression era migrants from Guthrie's songs.

- "Dust Bowl Blues" <https://tinyurl.com/glongud>
Lyrics: <https://tinyurl.com/y3l7jhan>
- "I Ain't Got No Home in This World Anymore" <https://tinyurl.com/nm95vqm>
Lyrics: <https://tinyurl.com/yd2hz4ab>
- "Hobo's Lullaby" <https://tinyurl.com/y6n7y7ow>
Lyrics: <https://tinyurl.com/yxfd539n>

Then ask students to do a "close read" of the opening chapter *Of Mice and Men* independently. When they have read the chapter, ask them to re-read while creating a Citation Table, a two-column table with the labels: Phrase/Sentence and Purpose/Significance. Model the strategy at the beginning of the exercise so students will read closely to determine what the author is trying to convey about the lives of the characters. Discuss: How does Steinbeck's depiction of the lives of George and Lennie match the insights gained through Guthrie's songs?

2. In 1936 Steinbeck wrote a series of newspaper articles, "The Harvest Gypsies" for the *San Francisco News* depicting conditions of migrant farm workers in the Salinas Valley. Ask students to read Article One which describes the exodus of farmers from the Midwest and their struggle to survive: <https://tinyurl.com/y2s2tv57>

As they read, ask students to create a comparison/contrast graphic organizer, a Venn Diagram, that compares the lives and conditions of these migrants before and after they arrived in California looking for work. Discuss: What traits were consistent for migrants throughout their ordeals? What was their dream? What obstacles did they face?

THEMES OF THE NOVEL

Of Mice and Men presents several complex themes:

- Dehumanization of others: racism, sexism, negative attitudes towards disability
- Complexity of moral decisions
- Isolation of individuals vs. friendship/companionship
- Struggle for autonomy or independence

Based on these themes, teachers can create an Essential or Compelling Question to frame the discussion of the novel and guide students to conduct their own inquiry and in turn meet Common Core Standards. Essential questions connect with students' interests and experiences. They ask students to think about genuine and relevant ideas and so provoke deep thinking and lively discussion. Grant Wiggins provides a succinct description of essential questions at <https://tinyurl.com/q6u7ezn>

An essential question to guide students' reading *Of Mice and Men* might be one of the following:

- What do we owe to a friend?
- Are there limits about what we should do for a friend?
- What makes life meaningful?
- What do people seek in their lives?
- Why do we treat some people as "outsiders"?
- Why do we judge people based on their race or sex or abilities?

DURING READING DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Steinbeck wrote *Of Mice and Men* using a structure typical of a play: introduction or exposition, rising action or complications, climax or highest moment of tension, and resolution or denouement. The discussion questions are organized according to this pattern.

Introduction (Chapter 1)

1. In the opening chapter George and Lennie are introduced. Describe what you learn about each man.
2. List Lennie's behaviors as he and George sit by the water. What do these observations suggest about him?
3. George says that if he were alone, life would be "so easy." Does he want to be alone? Cite evidence from the text for your answer.
4. What is the dream of the two men? Is this dream a possibility for them? What obstacles might stand in the way of their dream?

Complications (Chapters 2-4)

1. Why is the Boss immediately suspicious of George's relationship with Lennie?
2. Why does Curley take an immediate dislike to Lennie?
3. What is George's reaction to Curley?
4. How does Lennie react when he sees Curley's wife? What might his reaction foreshadow?
5. Who is Slim? Why does he have the respect of all the ranch hands? What is Slim's role in the decisions and events that take place on the ranch?

**DURING READING
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**
(CONTINUED)

6. George tells Slim about the episode in Weed. What does it tell about Lennie's ability to handle situations or control his impulses?
7. Carlson forces Candy to kill his old dog. Why might this episode be in the novel?
8. Why does Curley pick a fight with Lennie?
9. How do the ranch hands and Curley's wife treat Crooks?
10. What do Candy and Crooks both want?
11. Why is Curley's wife angry and how does she treat the men?

Climax (Chapter 5)

1. Why did Curley's wife marry Curley?
2. Why is the woman never named?
3. What is George's reaction to the woman's death? What decision does he make?

Resolution (Chapter 6)

1. As Lennie hides in the brush waiting for George, he has two hallucinations. What do they show about his state of mind?
2. Why isn't George mad at Lennie?
3. Did George have to kill Lennie? Why or why not?
4. Why did the other two men, Curly and Carlson, not understand the feelings of George and Slim?

DURING READING ACTIVITIES

1. Ask students to engage in a collaborative conversation about their reactions to the text, using an online discussion forum or a paper Foldable Discussion Tool. For example, students post specific text from the novel online with their reactions and analysis. Other students can add comments or questions to each post. The next day students review the posts and select ideas to discuss as a group. As students discuss, they use the following questions to guide their responses: Are we citing specific language from the text? Is our evidence convincing about the author's intent? Instructions about setting up a Blog for the first time are available at <https://tinyurl.com/yykywm2m>

For the Foldable Discussion Tool, students fold a paper into three columns with the following headings: Text and Interpretation, Partner's Response, My Response. As they read a section of the text, students write down key words or sentences and their interpretation in the first column. Their partner responds, making suggestions or asking questions in the second column. The student then addresses these comments or adds to his/her interpretation in the third column.

2. Ask students to create a Character Map for each major character by recording, as they read the novel:
 - Physical and character traits
 - Challenges faced by the character
 - Ways the character changes/grows/or meets challenges

A description and examples of this strategy are available at: <https://tinyurl.com/y6gw4c4q>

DURING READING ACTIVITIES (CONTINUED)

3. Questioning the Author (QtA) encourages students to build meaning from a text by analyzing the author's purpose in writing. Students go beyond the literal meaning of a text to construct their own interpretations and to identify themes. It also calls on students to relate outside experiences from other texts and personal histories. With QtA teacher and students collaborate to build understanding of the text. The teacher participates in the discussion as facilitator, guide, questioner, and responder.

Before introducing the strategy, select a passage that will interest the students and create a good discussion. For example, George's speech in Chapter One when he says he "could live so easy" if it wasn't for Lennie (p. 11). Create questions that promote inferential thinking: What is George saying? Does it make sense? What is the author showing us about the relationship between George and Lennie?

Follow-up questions should help students make connections between their ideas and their sense of what the author is conveying in the text: Why do you think Steinbeck has George speak like a little girl when describing what happened in Weed? Why is George suddenly ashamed? Why is Lennie's face "drawn with terror"? What does the author's word choice suggest about his overall meaning?

Narrative-based questions ask students to think about character and the author's craft: What have we learned about George and Lennie? What are they each seeking? Why are they together? How is our idea of George and Lennie's relationship expanding? What might happen next?

Once you have selected the passage and prepared several questions, you can choose to project the passage for the class to see or direct them to the text. Model how you read the passage and how you might answer one or more of the questions. A description of QtA is available at <https://tinyurl.com/3ujvslz>

SYNTHESIZING ESSAYS AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These questions can be used to initiate discussions in small or whole groups or as essay prompts. Ask students in both situations to explain or elaborate on their ideas by providing evidence from the text.

1. At times George is tender and protective of Lennie and at other times he is angry and frustrated. Lennie both loves and fears George. Given this complex relationship between George and Lennie, explain what keeps them together. What does each offer the other?
2. Will George continue to dream of having a home of his own and "living off the fat of the land" after Lennie's death? Was this dream ever possible, with or without Lennie?
3. Explain the factors that lead to George killing Lennie. Did George have any other choice? Defend your point of view.
4. Describe Slim's role in the community of the ranch. What sets him apart from the others? At the end of the novel, why does he alone understand what George has done?

**SYNTHESIZING ESSAYS
AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**
(CONTINUED)

5. Contrast the relationship of Curly and his wife to that of George and Lenny. Why do both relationships end so tragically?
6. Steinbeck depicts the ranch as a microcosm of America during the late 1930s, the Depression era. What differences of economic class, racial identity, and gender are represented on the ranch?

**SYNTHESIZING ACTIVITIES/
PROJECTS**

1. Ask students to listen to a contemporary song about the plight of migrant farmworkers during the Depression, Bruce Springsteen's "Ghost of Tom Joad," available at <https://tinyurl.com/p6bxwjh> with lyrics at <https://tinyurl.com/y2wvtux8>. Remind students that Tom Joad is the main character of Steinbeck's 1939 novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*. Ask students to identify the parallels between Tom's story in the song and that of Lennie and George. What is the message of the song? Is this message different from the theme of Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* and in what ways?

Give students two options to create their own song about Lennie and George. Students can use Springsteen's song as a model, letting Lennie or George be the main speaker. For a second option, students can use the Found Poem strategy to create a poem or song from words they select in the novel.

Instructions are available at <https://tinyurl.com/8t2vndr>

2. Two popular movie versions of *Of Mice and Men* are the 1939 film based on the original stage play and the 1992 film directed by Gary Sinise:
 - 1939 *Of Mice and Men* (Based on the 1937 stage play) directed by Lewis Milestone, featuring Burgess Meredith, Lon Chaney, Jr., and Betty Field
Trailer: <https://tinyurl.com/y3k8zoxr>
 - 1992 *Of Mice and Men* directed by Gary Sinise, starring John Malkovich and Gary Sinise
Trailer: <https://tinyurl.com/zdggfg32>

Before viewing the trailers to these films ask students to take the role of a director and decide what they will emphasize as the theme of the film. For example, would they emphasize the struggles of migrant farmhands during the Depression, their dreams and plans, or the friendships that sustain the men? Then watch the trailer of each film, stopping after each so students can jot down key words or images and the themes they suggest. Then as a class discuss:

- What are the key images in each trailer?
 - What themes do these images suggest?
 - What would you anticipate about the film from the trailer?
 - Has each director taken a different approach to the novel? How might their films differ?
 - In your opinion, which film version is closest to the themes of the novel? Provide evidence for your choice.
3. Ask students to compare the final scene in *Of Mice and Men* in two film versions at <https://tinyurl.com/y3hkmw33> by first writing about their reactions and then discussing in small groups. Questions to consider: Do they feel differently about the characters? Do they learn more about George's motivation in either version? Which version do they prefer and why?

**SYNTHESIZING ACTIVITIES/
PROJECTS**
(CONTINUED)

Follow up this discussion, asking students to consider George's decision by engaging in a Constructive Controversy which debates his decision to kill Lennie. Using this strategy, students prepare arguments on both sides of the question: Did George make the right decision?

Students work in small groups to generate ideas for their assigned position, pro or con, before they have one minute to present their best arguments for their position. Then students return to their groups and prepare arguments for the opposite position, drawing on what they have heard in the presentations. Once students have presented the opposite side of the argument, the whole class can engage in a discussion of George's action and the author's intentions.

4. Three different characters talk about their idea of the American Dream in the novel: Curly's wife, George, and Crooks. Prepare students to engage in a Reader's Theatre on the American Dream by assigning small groups to each character. First, students will identify their character's speeches about his/her ideal life or dream. Then they will select and edit the text that most reveals the character's ideas. Instructions for designing and preparing students for Reader's Theatre are available at: <https://tinyurl.com/y5ct3ol6>
5. Ask students to listen to an NPR news report from August 28, 2016 about a Supreme Court case that looks at the definition of intellectually disabled persons: "Supreme Court Will Consider Legality of the 'Lennie Standard'" (<https://tinyurl.com/y5vpzpxdy>). Students can read the transcript of the interview, to summarize the main ideas about the standards used by Texas to identify persons with intellectual disability. Discuss with students: Will the Supreme Court rule in favor of Texas or not? Why? What factors might the Court consider?

Then ask students to read a summary of the Supreme Court decision from March 28, 2017, particularly focusing on the Court's reasoning: <https://tinyurl.com/y3g2qdau>. Following a review of these standards, discuss with students: Could Lennie get a fair trial in the 21st century? How might the courts today understand Lennie's motivation and mental ability to make decisions?

6. Some students may be familiar with a contemporary film about a young man who has Down syndrome and runs away from his nursing home to fulfill his dream of attending a professional wrestling school, *The Peanut Butter Falcon* (2019; stars Shia LaBeouf and Dakota Johnson, with the lead played by Zack Gottsagen, who has Down syndrome). Show the trailer and a few key scenes of the developing relationship between the two male characters, asking students to look for parallels to the relationship of Lennie and George depicted in *Of Mice and Men*. Discuss: Based on initial impressions after viewing these scenes, what will happen to the main character in this film? Why? How is the relationship in the film different from that depicted in the novel?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY FACTS

"Intellectual Disability Fact Sheet." 2020. Kansas State Department of Education. <https://tinyurl.com/yxwrqx2d>

"Intellectual Disabilities." 2018. American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. <https://tinyurl.com/y2xc7rlv>

TEACHING LITERATURE WITH RACIST LANGUAGE

Baker, Debra Solomon. "The N-Word or No N-Word? That Is the Question" (January 19, 2011). <https://tinyurl.com/y296boqm>

Essien, Enobong. "The N-Word: Confronting Racial Slurs in Literature" (January 27, 2020). <https://tinyurl.com/y6a9byxv>

Kenney, Michelle. "Teaching the N Word" (Fall 2014). <https://tinyurl.com/yyvg42c2>

SEXIST LANGUAGE GUIDELINES

"A Brief Guide to Challenging Sexist and Sexual Language and Bullying." (2017). Developed by Brighton & Hove's Equality and Anti-Bullying Schools Strategy Group, 2016. <https://tinyurl.com/y25uv9g7>

"School Teaches Pupils about Impact of Sexist Language." (2018). <https://tinyurl.com/y2e9c9h5>

FILM

"Films: Portrayals of People with Disabilities." 2021. The IRIS Center Peabody College Vanderbilt University. <https://tinyurl.com/y2z7bfrk> This site states that "ways in which individuals and groups are portrayed in popular media can have a profound effect on how they are viewed by society at large." The authors note that while the films listed may provide accurate or inaccurate portrayals of persons with disabilities, the list is intended to stimulate discussion.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS GUIDE

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