



OF MICE AND MEN

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STUDY GUIDE

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THE PLOT

Our setting is Soledad, California during the Great Depression. George Milton, a self-made man, and Lennie Small, a strong, intellectually disabled man are travel to Soledad, California to work on a farm. They dream of settling down on their own piece of land someday. Lennie's dream is to tend and pet rabbits on the farm. He loves touching soft animals. This dream is one of Lennie's favorite stories, which George constantly retells. They had fled from another town in California named Weed after Lennie grabbed a young woman's skirt and would not let go, leading to an accusation of rape.

After being hired at a farm, the pair are confronted by Curley — the Boss's small, aggressive son with a Napoleon complex who dislikes larger men. Curley starts to target Lennie. Curley's wife, to whom Lennie is instantly attracted, poses an issue as well. They also meet Candy, an elderly ranch handyman with one hand and a loyal dog, and Slim, an intelligent and gentle worker whose dog has recently had a litter of puppies. Slim gives a puppy to Lennie and Candy, whose loyal, accomplished sheep dog is put down by fellow ranch-hand Carlson.

Candy offers to pitch in \$350 with George and Lennie so that they can buy a farm at the end of the month. He also asks to live with them in return for his investment. Soon after this exchange, Curley attacks Lennie, who defends himself by crushing Curley's fist while urged on by George.

George leaves Lennie behind on the ranch while he goes into town with the other ranch hands. Lennie wanders into the stable, and chats with Crooks, an educated stable hand, who is segregated from the other workers because he is black. Candy finds them, and they discuss their plans for the farm with Crooks, who cannot resist asking them if he can hoe a garden patch on the farm. Curley's wife makes another appearance and talks with the men. As the conversation turns ugly, she belittles the men and threatens to have Crooks lynched.

The next day, Lennie accidentally kills his puppy while stroking it. Curley's wife enters the barn and tries to speak to Lennie, admitting that she is lonely and how her dreams of becoming a movie star are crushed. After finding out about Lennie's habit, she offers to let him stroke her hair, but panics and begins to scream when she feels his strength. Lennie becomes frightened, and unintentionally breaks her neck, and then runs away. When the other ranch hands find the corpse, they form into a mob intent on killing him, then send for the police before beginning the search. George then quickly realizes that their dream is at an end and hurries to find Lennie, hoping he will be at the meeting place they designated in case he got into trouble (the riverbank where they camped at the start of the book).

George meets Lennie at their camping spot before they came to the ranch. The two sit together and George retells the beloved story of the dream, despite knowing it is something they will never share. Upon hearing the mob near them, George shoots Lennie, knowing it to be a more merciful death than that at the hands of a mob. Curley, Slim, and Carlson arrive seconds after. Only Slim realizes what happened, and consolingly leads him away. Curley and Carlson look on, unable to comprehend the subdued mood of the two men.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR JOHN STEINBECK



JOHN STEINBECK is heralded as one of the most important American writers of the 20th century. His writing is known for its truthful voice and social commentary on the callousness of capitalism. He is credited with lifting the stories of the working class before and after the Great Depression, and his influence can still be seen in writers of today.

John Steinbeck was born in California in 1902. Raised in Salinas Valley, he worked as a farm hand on a ranch to make money during the summer. After graduating high school in 1919, he went to Stanford University as an English major. He never finished his degree but instead moved to New York City to be a freelance writer.

Unable to find work in New York, Steinbeck returned to his home in California in 1928. He then wrote *Tortilla Flat* in 1935, which gained him critical praise and notoriety. Soon after he wrote *Of Mice and Men* in 1937 and *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1939. These books won him the National Book Award and the 1940 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Many of his novels would go on to become feature films garnering many accolades including two Academy Awards for John Ford's film version of *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Of Mice and Men was adapted by Steinbeck and directed by George S. Kaufman in 1938. The play, which predates the Tony Awards and the Drama Desk Awards, earned the 1938 New York Drama Critics' Circle Best Play. In 1943, Steinbeck served as a World War II war correspondent for the New York Herald Tribune and worked with the Office of Strategic Services. In 1952, Steinbeck's longest novel, *East of Eden*, was published, and although it was a great commercial success, it didn't receive praise from many critics. Undeterred, Steinbeck continued to write novels and short stories up until his death in 1968 while living in New York City.

BEFORE YOU WATCH

1. Discuss the following **historical events, concepts and terms** as a class:

THE AMERICAN DREAM
THE DUST BOWL
EUTHANASIA
THE GREAT DEPRESSION

2. Write a **letter to a loved one or friend** as if you are living in The Great Depression era. Try to imagine what life would be like during this time either living in the city or in the country (on a farm).
3. Take a look at the **archive of photos** from The Great Depression at this link:
cptv.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/great-depression-ken-burns-dust-bowl/ken-burns-the-dust-bowl/kenburnsclassroom
4. Listen to **music** from the Great Depression era. Try listening to this playlist of Depression Era songs:
www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/a-depression-era-playlist-143922723
5. Pause the film at the top and look at the **set**. Before the action begins, what do you see on the stage? How does it make you feel? Where might the setting be located? Can you tell what time of day or year it is based on the set and lighting? Does the set seem **abstract** or **realistic**?

DEFINITION

An **abstract set** is one that does not attempt to represent reality, but seeks to achieve its effect using shapes, forms, colors, and textures.

A **realistic set** design (or realism) is a set that attempts to reflect a concrete world as close to real life as possible.

AFTER YOU WATCH

1. In the adaptation, do you notice any **differences between the play and the novel**? If so, why do you think Steinbeck chose to cut certain aspects from the novel for the play adaptation?
2. In 1990, the federal government passed the **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)**. It prohibits discrimination and guarantees that people with disabilities have the same opportunities as everyone else to participate in the mainstream of American life. As our ideas have evolved about people with disabilities, how could you adapt the play to reflect this change?
3. **Power** is a recurring theme in the play. How do the characters use their power in the play? Do the power relationships change over the course of the play? Who uses their power for good? Which characters misuse their power?
4. **Loneliness** is also a recurring theme in the play. How does Crooks loneliness differ from others in the play? Are other characters lonely in the play? Make a list of these characters and try to site a passage from the play that connects to their loneliness.
5. How is the **idea of dreams** used in the play? Make a list all the characters names and their dreams. Could any of the dreams you listed be describe as the “American Dream?” How has the “American Dream” changed since The Great Depression?
6. What **parallels** do you see between Candy’s dog and Lennie?
7. How does this play reflect the idea of one’s **chosen family**?
8. At the end of the play, George feels he must kill Lennie to spare him a more violent death or the possibility of being inhumanely locked away. This was a controversial ending at the time it was written. Do you agree with George’s decision or not? Discuss the idea of **euthanasia**. How might the concept of euthanasia have factored into Steinbeck’s ending?

SCRIPT ANALYSIS

Using the selected passages below, discuss the following excerpts from the text:

“Oh, I don’t know. Hardly none of the guys ever travels around together. I hardly never seen two guys travel together. You know how the hands are. They come in and get their bunk and work a month and then they quit and go on alone. Never seem to give a damn about nobody. Jest seems kinda funny. A cuckoo like him and a smart guy like you traveling together.”

DISCUSS: Slim seems puzzled by the strong friendship that exists between George and Lennie. Why is their relationship odd to him? What social and historical factors would make this friendship different?

“God Almighty, that dog stinks .Got no teeth. All stiff with rheumatism. He ain’t no good to you, Candy. Why don’t you shoot him?... This ole dog jus’ suffers itself all the time. If you was to take him out and shoot him — right in the back of the head why he’d never know what hit him. Aw, he’d be better off dead.”

DISCUSS: Carlson badgers Candy quite a while before the old man agrees to give up his dog. What does this attitude say about the characters’ views of life? How do they react differently to these events? How does this scene relate to the rest of the play?

“S’pose they was a carnival, or a circus come to town or a ball game or anydamn thing. We’d just go to her. We wouldn’t ask nobody if we could. Just say we’ll go to her, by God, and we would. Just milk the cow and sling some grain to the chickens and go to her.”

DISCUSS: George and Lennie have big dreams about a farm of their own. Much of their dream was based on the idea that this farm would offer them true freedom. What does this excerpt demonstrate about the importance of freedom? Is this feeling unique to George, or do you think others share this feeling.

“Why, he’d do any damn thing I tole him. If I tole him to walk over a cliff, over he’d go. You know that wasn’t so damn much fun after a while. He never got mad about it, neither. I’ve beat hell out of him and he could bust every bone in my body jest with his hands. But he never lifted a finger against me.”

DISCUSS: When George is explaining Lennie’s condition to Slim, we see how much Lennie truly relies on George to care for and protect him. How has this duty changed George’s life? How has it changed Lennie’s? What responsibilities come with this friendship?

SCRIPT ANALYSIS (cont'd)

“I seen hundreds of men come by on the road and on the ranches, bindles on their back and that same damn thing in their head. Hundreds of ‘em. Jus’ like heaven. Everybody wants a little piece of land. Nobody never gets to heaven. And nobody gets no land.”

DISCUSS: When Crooks hears of George and Lennie’s plans to get a farm of their own, he attacks their plan. If he has seen hundreds of men with the same dream, what does this say about human nature? What are all these men truly striving for?

GEORGE: “Guys like us got no families. They got a little stake and then they blow it in. They ain’t got nobody in the world that gives a hoot in hell about ‘em! But not us ... Because I got you, and ...”

LENNIE: “And I got you.”

DISCUSS: At the end of the play, this exchange between George and Lennie shows the true nature of their relationship. What does this scene tell us about the nature of George and Lennie’s relationship? About loneliness and friendship? What do you think of George’s decision to “save” his friend from the lynch mob?

ACTIVITIES

1. Investigate and discuss these **terms** (in the context of the play):

SKINNER
SWAMPER
BUCKER
STABLE BUCK
GRAY-BACKS
LUGER
CULTIVATOR
VALISE
EUCHRE

2. Investigate and discuss the following **themes** in the play:

FREEDOM VS. CAPTIVITY
THE AMERICAN DREAM
FEAR
LONELINESS
WEAKNESS VS. STRENGTH

▶ *Can you think of any other themes in the play?*

3. Investigate and discuss the following **symbols** in the play:

THE BUNKHOUSE
CANDY'S DOG
LENNIE'S PUPPY
GEORGE AND LENNIE'S DREAM OF A FARM

▶ *Can you think of any other symbols in the play?*

4. List the similarities and differences between **migrant workers** in the 1930s and our present day.

5. Write a **review** of the production. Here are some helpful guidelines for a theater review.

A review should include:

- ▶ *Title of the play and author/playwright*
- ▶ *Name of the director*
- ▶ *Where the production was held and when*
- ▶ *Brief summary of the play*
- ▶ *Three examples of moments in the play or specific scenes that the reviewer liked or disliked and why*
- ▶ *Brief description of the set, costumes, and lighting*
- ▶ *Overall recommendation of the play*

ACTIVITIES

6. Create a **poster** or collage of images in response to our production. Try listening to this playlist of Depression Era songs while you create your pieces.

www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/a-depression-era-playlist-143922723

7. **ONE-WORD GAME:** With the students standing in a circle, the teacher will give out a name of a character from the play, e.g. Lennie. Then, the teacher will throw a ball (preferably soft) to a student across the circle. As they throw the ball across the circle, each student will say a characteristic that describes that character. After every student describes the character, the teacher can stop the action and discuss the words.

EXTENSION LESSON

As an extension, a student can act as a scribe and write the words on the board.

With the words on the board, have the students walk around as a group (at the same time) physicalizing the words. They can also add vocal traits in a further extension or maybe say lines from the play (if they can recall them).

8. **CAST THE PLAY:** Go to IMDB. com (Internet Movie Database) and pick present-day actors for the characters in the play.

- ▶ *Although this play is set in 1937, feel free to pick any actor that feels most relatable to the character. Non-traditional casting is encouraged.*

DEFINITION

Non-traditional casting is the practice of casting without considering the actor's ethnicity, skin color, body shape, sex and/or gender.

FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

To learn more about the rights of people with disabilities in America (1800–present)

A Brief History of the Disability Rights Movement

<https://www.adl.org/education/resources/backgrounders/disability-rights-movement>

The ADA: A History of the Americans with Disabilities Act

<https://westportlibrary.libguides.com/adahistory>

In Their Own Words: A History of Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

<https://acl.gov/ada/origins-of-the-ada>

Timeline of Disability and Employment in the United States

<https://www.dol.gov/agencies/odep/ada30/timeline>

Disability Right and Education Defense Fund

<https://dredf.org/about-us/>

To learn more about The Great Depression

Ken Burns in the Classroom: The Great Depression

<https://cptv.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/great-depression-ken-burns-dust-bowl/ken-burns-the-dust-bowl/kenburnsclassroom/>

Office of the Historian: The Great Depression

<https://history.state.gov/milestones/1921-1936/great-depression>

Franklin Delano Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum: The Great Depression facts

<https://www.fdrlibrary.org/great-depression-facts>

To learn more about John Steinbeck

Steinbeck Center

<https://www.steinbeck.org/>

The Nobel Prize: John Steinbeck biography

<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1962/steinbeck/biographical/>