Your notes

GCSE English Literature: revision notes

# Of Mice and Men

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## Plot

- California in the 1930s, during the **Great Depression**. George Milton and Lennie Small are migrant ranch workers. Lennie is very strong but has a learning disability, loves stroking soft things and depends on George.
- They arrive at a ranch near Soledad after fleeing the town of Weed, where Lennie grabbed a girl's dress. They share a dream of owning a small farm where Lennie can tend rabbits. Candy, an old worker, offers his savings to join them.
- Curley, the boss's aggressive son, attacks Lennie, who crushes his hand. Lennie accidentally kills his puppy, then Curley's wife, by breaking her neck when she panics.
- Lennie runs to the pool where the story began. George finds him, tells him about the dream farm once more, and shoots him before Curley's men arrive.

## Characters

- George: small, quick and tired of caring for Lennie, but loyal. His final act is both mercy and the end of his own dream.
- Lennie: childlike and gentle, but his strength makes him dangerous.
- Candy, Crooks and Curley's wife are lonely outsiders: old, Black and a woman. Crooks is isolated by racism; Curley's wife, never given a name, dreamed of being in films.
- Slim: calm and respected, he understands George. Carlson shoots Candy's old dog, which foreshadows Lennie's death.

## Themes and context

- Loneliness: most of the men have no one, which makes George and Lennie's friendship rare.

- Dreams: the **American Dream** of owning land and being free, which the Depression makes impossible.
- Power and weakness, prejudice (race, gender, age and disability), and fate: the title comes from a Robert Burns poem about how carefully made plans often go wrong.
- Steinbeck published it in 1937. In the Depression, many workers travelled from ranch to ranch with no security.

## Form and structure

- A short **novella** in six sections, written almost like a play: each section opens with a description of the setting, then mostly dialogue.
- It is cyclical: it begins and ends at the pool by the Salinas River. **Foreshadowing**, such as the dead mouse, the puppy and Candy's dog, prepares the reader for the ending.

## Key quotations

- George says men like them are "the loneliest guys in the world", which sums up the theme of loneliness.
- Lennie's line "I got you to look after me" shows how much their friendship matters.

## Key terms

| | |
|---|---|
| **Migrant worker** | A worker who moves from place to place to find work. |
| **Great Depression** | The economic collapse of the 1930s, with mass unemployment. |
| **American Dream** | The belief that anyone can succeed and be free through hard work. |
| **Foreshadowing** | Hints of what will happen later. |
| **Novella** | A short novel. |

## Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. Where is Of Mice and Men set?
2. Why did George and Lennie leave Weed?
3. What do George and Lennie dream of?
4. Whose hand does Lennie crush?
5. Who shoots Candy's dog?
6. Why is Crooks isolated on the ranch?
7. What does Curley's wife dream of?

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8. Where does the novella begin and end?

### Answers

1. A ranch in California
2. Lennie grabbed a girl's dress
3. Owning a small farm
4. Curley's
5. Carlson
6. He is Black and made to live apart
7. Being in films
8. At the pool by the river

## What to do next

**Practise 10 questions on this topic**

**Try 3 exam questions, with mark schemes**

**Read the lesson, one step at a time**

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