

Section 1

Summary

The novel opens with the description of a riverbed in rural California, a beautiful, wooded area at the base of "golden foothill slopes." A path runs to the river, used by boys going swimming and rickshaws coming down from the highway. Two men walk along the path. The first, [George](#), is small, wiry, and sharp-featured, while his companion, [Lennie](#), is large and awkward. They are both dressed in denim, farmhand attire.

As they reach a clearing, Lennie stops to drink from the river, and George warns him not to drink too much or he will get sick, as he did the night before. As their conversation continues, it becomes clear that the larger man has a mild mental disability, and that his companion looks out for his safety. George begins to complain about the bus driver that dropped them off a long way from their intended destination—a ranch on which they are due to begin work. Lennie interrupts him to ask where they are going. His companion impatiently reminds him of their movements over the past few days, and then notices that Lennie is holding a dead mouse. George takes it away from him. Lennie insists that he is not responsible for killing the mouse, that he just wanted to pet it, but George loses his temper and throws it across the stream. George warns Lennie that they are going to work on a ranch, and that he must behave himself when they meet the boss. George does not want any trouble of the kind they encountered in Weed, the last place they worked.

George decides that they will stay in the clearing for the night, and as they prepare their bean supper, Lennie crosses the stream and recovers the mouse, only to have George find him out immediately and take the mouse away again. Apparently, Lennie's [Aunt Clara](#) used to give him mice to pet, but he tends to "break" small creatures unintentionally when he shows his affection for them, killing them because he doesn't know his own strength. As the two men sit down to eat, Lennie asks for ketchup. This request launches George into a long speech about Lennie's ungratefulness. George complains that he could get along much better if he didn't have to care for Lennie. He uses the incident that got them chased out of Weed as a case in point. Lennie, a lover of soft things, stroked the fabric of a girl's dress, and would not let go. The locals assumed he assaulted her, and ran them out of town. After this tirade, George feels sorry for losing his temper and apologizes by telling Lennie's favorite story, the plan for their future happiness. The life of a ranch-hand, according to George, is one of the loneliest in the world, and most men working on ranches have no one to look out for them. But he and Lennie have each other, and someday, as soon as they manage to save enough money, they will buy a farm together and, as Lennie puts it, "live off the fatta the lan'." They will grow their own food, raise livestock, and keep rabbits, which Lennie will tend. This familiar story cheers both of them up. As night falls, George tells Lennie that if he encounters any trouble while working at the ranch, he is to return to this clearing, hide in the bushes, and wait for George to come.

Section 2

Summary

The next day, [Lennie](#) and [George](#) make their way to the ranch bunkhouse, where they are greeted by [Candy](#), an aging "swamper," or handyman, who has lost his right hand. The bunkhouse is an unadorned building where the men sleep on "burlap ticking" and keep their few possessions in apple boxes that have been nailed to the walls. George is dismayed to find a can of lice powder in his bunk, but Candy assures him that he's in no danger of being infested, since the man who slept there before George was remarkably clean. George asks about the boss, and Candy reports that although the boss was angry that George and Lennie did not arrive the previous night as he had expected them to, he can be a "pretty nice fella." Candy relates how the boss gave the men a gallon of whiskey for Christmas, which immediately impresses George.

The boss appears and questions the pair about their late arrival. George blames it on the bus driver, who, he claims, lied to them about their proximity to the ranch. When the boss asks about their skills and previous employment, George speaks for Lennie to prevent him from revealing his lack of intelligence. When Lennie momentarily forgets George's instructions and speaks, George becomes visibly nervous. Their behavior strikes the boss as suspicious, and he asks why George feels the need to take such good care of his companion. He wonders if

George is taking advantage of a man who lacks the faculties to take care of himself. George replies that Lennie is his cousin and was kicked in the head by a horse when he was young, so George has to look out for him. The boss remains suspicious and warns George not to try to pull anything over on him. Nonetheless, they are assigned to one of the grain teams, working under a man named [Slim](#).

Once the boss leaves the bunkhouse, George berates Lennie for having spoken up. Candy overhears George telling Lennie that he is glad they are not actually related. George warns Candy that he doesn't appreciate other people sticking their noses in his business, but Candy assures him that he minds his own business and has no interest in their affairs. An ancient, half-blind sheepdog accompanies Candy, an animal that the old man has raised since it was a puppy. Soon enough, [Curley](#), the boss's son, a small young man who wears a Vaseline-filled work glove on his left hand and high-heeled boots to distinguish himself from the laborers, joins them. Curley, an aggressive and malicious ex-boxer, immediately senses that he might have some fun at Lennie's expense, and begins to demand that "the big guy talk." After Curley leaves, Candy explains that Curley loves beating up big guys, "kind of like he's mad at 'em because he ain't a big guy." Curley's temper has only gotten worse since his recent marriage to a "tart" who enjoys flirting with the ranch-hands.

Candy leaves to prepare wash basins for the men who will soon return from the fields, and George tells Lennie to steer clear of Curley, because fighting the "bastard" will likely cost them their jobs. Lennie agrees, assuring George that he doesn't want any trouble. George reminds him again of the meeting place they agreed on should anything go wrong. At that moment, [Curley's wife](#), a pretty, heavily made-up woman with a nasal voice, appears. She claims to be looking for her husband and flirts with the two men and Slim, the skilled mule driver, who passes by outside. Slim tells her that Curley has gone into the house, and she hurries off. Lennie speaks admiringly of how "purty" the woman is, and George angrily orders him to stay away from "that bitch." Lennie, suddenly frightened, complains that he wants to leave the ranch, but George reminds him that they need to make some money before they can buy their own land and live their dream.

Slim enters the bunkhouse. His talents make him one of the most important and respected men on the ranch. There is a "gravity in his manner," and everyone stops talking and listens when he speaks. He converses with Lennie and George, and is quietly impressed by their friendship, appreciating the fact that they look out for one another. The men are joined by [Carlson](#), another ranch-hand. Carlson asks about Slim's dog, which has just given birth to nine puppies. Slim reports that he drowned four of the puppies immediately because their mother would have been unable to feed them. Carlson suggests that they convince Candy to shoot his old, worthless mutt and raise one of the pups instead. The triangle rings for dinner, and the men filter out of the bunkhouse, with Lennie suddenly excited by the prospect of having a puppy. As George and Lennie prepare to leave, Curley appears again, looking for his wife, and hurries off angrily when they tell him where she went. George expresses his dislike for Curley, and comments that he is afraid he will "tangle" with Curley himself.

Section 3

At the end of the workday, [Slim](#) and [George](#) return to the bunkhouse. Slim has agreed to give one of the pups to [Lennie](#), and George thanks him for his kindness, insisting that Lennie is "dumb as hell," but is neither crazy nor mean. Slim appreciates George's friendship with Lennie, saying that it is a welcome change in a world where no one ever "seems to give a damn about nobody." George confides in Slim the story of how he and Lennie came to be companions. They were born in the same town, and George took charge of Lennie after the death of Lennie's [Aunt Clara](#). At first, George admits, he pushed Lennie around, getting him to do ridiculous things, such as jumping into a river even though he didn't know how to swim. After watching his friend nearly drown, George felt ashamed of his behavior. Since that day, he has taken good care of his companion, protecting him even when he gets in trouble. For example, in Weed, the last town where they worked, Lennie wanted to touch the fabric of a girl's red dress. When she pulled away, Lennie became frightened and held on to her until George hit him over the head to make him let go. The girl accused Lennie of rape, and George and Lennie had to hide in an irrigation ditch to escape a lynch mob. Lennie comes into the bunkhouse, carrying his new puppy under his coat. George berates him for taking the little creature away from its mother. As Lennie returns the puppy to the litter, [Candy](#) and [Carlson](#) appear. Carlson begins to complain again about Candy's dog, saying that it stinks and that it "ain't no good to himself." He urges Candy to shoot the animal. Candy replies that he has had the dog for too many years to kill it, but Carlson continues to pressure him. Eventually Slim joins in, suggesting that Candy would be putting a suffering animal out if its misery. Slim offers him a puppy and urges him to let Carlson shoot the dog. Another farmhand, [Whit](#), enters and shows Slim a letter written by a man they used to work with published in a pulp magazine. The short letter praises the magazine. As the men marvel over it, Carlson offers to kill the dog quickly by shooting it in the back of the head. Reluctantly,

Candy gives in. Carlson takes the dog outside, promising Slim that he will bury the corpse. After a few awkward moments of silence, the men hear a shot ring out, and Candy turns his face to the wall.

[Crooks](#), the black stable-hand, comes in and tells Slim that he has warmed some tar to put on a mule's foot. After Slim leaves, the other men play cards and discuss [Curley's wife](#), agreeing that she will make trouble for someone; as George says, "She's a jailbait all set on the trigger." Whit invites George to accompany them to a local whorehouse the following night. Whit discusses the merits of old Susy's place over Clara's, it being cheaper and having nice chairs, but George comments that he cannot afford to waste his money because he and Lennie are trying to put together a "stake." Lennie and Carlson come in. Carlson cleans his gun and avoids looking at Candy. [Curley](#) appears looking for his wife again. Full of jealousy and suspicion, he asks where Slim is. When he learns that Slim is in the barn, he storms off in that direction, followed by Whit and Carlson, who hope to see a fight.

George asks Lennie if he saw Slim with Curley's wife in the barn, and Lennie says no. George warns his companion against the trouble that women cause, and then Lennie asks him to describe the farm that they hope to buy. As George talks, Candy listens and becomes excited by the idea of such a beautiful place. He asks if the place really exists. George is guarded at first, but soon says that it does and that the owners are desperate to sell it. Overcome with hope, Candy offers to contribute his life's savings if they allow him to live there too. Since he is old and crippled, he worries that the ranch will let him go soon. The men agree that after a month of work at this ranch, they will have enough money saved to make a down payment on the house. George tells the other two not to tell anyone else about their plan. As they hear the other men's voices approaching, Candy says quietly to George that he should have shot his old dog himself, and not let a stranger do it.

Slim, Curley, Carlson, and Whit return. Curley apologizes to Slim for his suspicions, and then the other men mock him. Knowing that Slim is too strong to be beaten in a fight, Curley looks to vent his rage elsewhere. He finds an easy target in Lennie, who is still dreaming of the farm and smiling with childlike delight. Though Lennie begs to be left alone, Curley attacks him. He throws several punches, bloodying Lennie's face, and hits him in the gut before George urges Lennie to fight back. On George's command, Lennie grabs Curley's right hand and breaks it effortlessly. As Slim leads Curley away to a doctor, he warns him not to have George and Lennie fired, or he will be made the laughingstock of the ranch. Curley consents not to fire them. George comforts Lennie, telling him that the fight was not his fault and that he has nothing to fear. Lennie's only fear is that he will not be allowed to tend the rabbits on their farm. George assures him that he will.

Section 4

Summary

The next evening, Saturday, [Crooks](#) sits on his bunk in the harness room. The black stable-hand has a crooked back—the source of his nickname—and is described as a "proud, aloof man" who spends much of his time reading. [Lennie](#), who has been in the barn tending to his puppy, appears in the doorway, looking for company. Crooks tells him to go away, saying that if he, as a black man, is not allowed in the white quarters, then white men are not allowed in *his*. Lennie does not understand. He innocently reports that everyone else has gone into town and that he saw Crooks's light on and thought he could come in and keep him company. Finally, despite himself, Crooks yields to Lennie's "disarming smile" and invites him in. Soon enough, Lennie forgets his promise to keep the farm a secret and begins to babble cheerfully about the place that he and [George](#) will buy someday. Crooks does not believe him, assuming that the fantasy is part of Lennie's mental disability. He tells Lennie about his own life, recounting his early days on a chicken farm when white children visited and played with him. Still, he says, he felt keenly alone even then. His family was the only black family for miles, and his father constantly warned him against keeping company with their white neighbors. The importance of this instruction escaped Crooks as a child, but he says that he has come to understand it perfectly. Now, as the only black man on the ranch, he resents the unfair social norms that require him to sleep alone in the stable. Feeling weak and vulnerable himself, Crooks cruelly suggests that George might never return from town. He enjoys torturing Lennie, until Lennie becomes angry and threatens Crooks, demanding to know "Who hurt George?" Crooks hastily backs down, promising that George will come back, and begins to talk about his childhood again, which returns Lennie to his dreams of owning the farm. Crooks bitterly says that every ranch-hand has the same dream. He adds that he has seen countless men go on about the same piece of land, but nothing ever comes of it. A little piece of land, Crooks claims, is as hard to find as heaven.

[Candy](#) eventually joins them, entering Crooks's room for the first time in all of the years they have worked together. Both men are uncomfortable at first but Candy is respectful and Crooks pleased to have more company. Candy talks to Lennie about raising rabbits on the farm. He has been busy calculating numbers and thinks he knows how the farm can make some money with rabbits. Crooks continues to belittle their dream until Candy insists that they already have the land picked out and nearly all the money they'll need to buy it. This news piques the black man's

interest. Shyly, Crooks suggests that maybe they could take him along with them. But [Curley's wife](#) appears and interrupts the men's daydreaming.

Curley's wife asks about her husband, then says she knows that the men went to a brothel, cruelly observing that "they left all the weak ones here." Crooks and Candy tell her to go away, but instead she starts talking about her loneliness and her unhappy marriage. Candy insists that she leave and says proudly that even if she got them fired, they could go off and buy their own place to live. Curley's wife laughs at him, then bitterly complains about her life with [Curley](#). She sums up her situation, admitting that she feels pathetic to want company so desperately that she is willing to talk to the likes of Crooks, Candy, and Lennie. She asks what happened to her husband's hand, and does not believe the men when they insist that he got it caught in a machine. She teases Lennie about the bruises on his face, deducing that he got injured in the scuffle with Curley.

Fed up, Crooks insists that she leave before he tells the boss about her wicked ways, and she responds by asking if he knows what she can do to him if he says anything. The implication is clear that she could easily have him lynched, and he cowers. Candy says that he hears the men coming back, which finally makes her leave, but not before she tells Lennie that she is glad he beat her husband. George appears, and criticizes Candy for talking about their farm in front of other people. As the white men leave Crooks, he changes his mind about going to the farm with them, calling out, "I wouldn't want to go no place like that."

Section 5

Summary

It is Sunday afternoon and [Lennie](#) is alone in the barn, sitting in the hay and stroking the dead body of his puppy. He talks to himself, asking the animal why it died: "You ain't so little as mice. I didn't bounce you hard." Worrying that [George](#) will be angry and will not let him raise the rabbits on their farm, he starts to bury it in the hay. He decides to tell George that he found it dead but then realizes that George will see through this lie. Frustrated, he curses the dog for dying and hurls it across the room. Soon, though, Lennie retrieves the puppy, strokes it again, and reasons that perhaps George won't care, since the puppy meant nothing to George. As he talks to himself, [Curley's wife](#) enters and sits beside him. He hastily hides the puppy and tells her that George ordered him not to speak to her. She reassures him that it is safe for him to talk to her, pointing out that the other men are occupied with a horseshoe tournament outside and will not interrupt them. She discovers the puppy and consoles him about its death, declaring that "the whole country is fulla mutts." She then complains about her loneliness and the cold treatment she gets from the ranch-hands. She tells Lennie about her dreams of living a different life. She reveals that her mother denied her the opportunity to join a traveling show when she was fifteen and then, years later, a talent scout spotted her and promised to take her to Hollywood to become a movie star. When nothing came of it, she decided to marry [Curley](#), whom she dislikes.

Lennie continues to talk about his rabbits, and she asks him why he likes animals so much. Lennie replies that he likes to touch soft things with his fingers. She admits that she likes the same thing, and offers to let him stroke her hair. She warns him not to "muss it," but he quickly becomes excited and holds on too tight, frightening her. When she cries out, Lennie panics and clamps his strong hands over her mouth to silence her. The more she struggles, the tighter his grip becomes, and he shakes her until her body goes limp. Lennie has broken her neck.

The barn goes still as Lennie realizes what he has done. He tries to bury Curley's wife in the hay, worrying chiefly that George will be angry with him. Taking the puppy's body with him, he flees toward the meeting place that George designates at the novel's opening, the clearing in the woods. [Candy](#) comes looking for Lennie and finds the body. He calls George, who realizes immediately what has happened. George expresses the hope that maybe Lennie will just be locked up and still be treated well, but Candy tells him that Curley is sure to have Lennie lynched. Candy asks George if the two of them can still buy the farm, but sees from George's face that the idea is now impossible. George says quietly that he thinks he knew all along that it would never happen, but because Lennie liked the idea so much, he had started to believe it himself.

George worries that the other men will think that he had something to do with the death of Curley's wife, so he instructs Candy how to inform them. George will pretend that he has not seen the body and act surprised when Candy delivers the news. George exits, and Candy curses Curley's wife for destroying their dream of a farm. After a few moments, his eyes full of tears, he goes to alert the rest of the ranch. A crowd soon gathers. George comes in last, with his coat buttoned up. Curley demands that they find Lennie and kill him. [Carlson](#) reports that his gun is missing, and assumes that Lennie must have taken it. Curley orders them to fetch [Crooks](#)'s shotgun, and the mob sets off after Lennie.

Section 6

Summary

In the same riverbed where the novel began, it is a beautiful, serene late afternoon. A heron stands in a shaded green pool, eating water snakes that glide between its legs. [Lennie](#) comes stealing through the undergrowth and kneels by the water to drink. He is proud of himself for remembering to come here to wait for [George](#), but soon has two unpleasant visions. His [Aunt Clara](#) appears "from out of Lennie's head" and berates him, speaking in Lennie's own voice, for not listening to George, for getting himself into trouble, and for causing so many problems for his only friend. Then a gigantic rabbit appears to him, also speaking in Lennie's own voice, and tells him that George will probably beat him and abandon him. Just then, George appears. He is uncommonly quiet and listless. He does not berate Lennie. Even when Lennie himself insists on it, George's tirade is unconvincing and scripted. He repeats his usual words of reproach without emotion. Lennie makes his usual offer to go away and live in a cave, and George tells him to stay, making Lennie feel comforted and hopeful. Lennie asks him to tell the story of their farm, and George begins, talking about how most men drift along, without any companions, but he and Lennie have one another. The noises of men in the woods come closer, and George tells Lennie to take off his hat and look across the river while he describes their farm. He tells Lennie about the rabbits, and promises that nobody will ever be mean to him again. "Le's do it now," Lennie says. "Le's get that place now." George agrees. He raises [Carlson](#)'s gun, which he has removed from his jacket, and shoots Lennie in the back of the head. As Lennie falls to the ground and becomes still, George tosses the gun away and sits down on the riverbank.

The sound of the shot brings the lynch party running to the clearing. Carlson questions George, who lets them believe that he wrestled the gun from Lennie and shot him with it. Only [Slim](#) understands what really happened: "You hadda, George. I swear you hadda," he tells him. Slim leads George, who is numb with grief, away from the scene, while Carlson and [Curley](#) watch incredulously, wondering what is "eatin' them two guys."

Character List

Lennie - A large, lumbering, childlike migrant worker. Due to his mild mental disability, Lennie completely depends upon George, his friend and traveling companion, for guidance and protection. The two men share a vision of a farm that they will own together, a vision that Lennie believes in wholeheartedly. Gentle and kind, Lennie nevertheless does not understand his own strength. His love of petting soft things, such as small animals, dresses, and people's hair, leads to disaster.

George - A small, wiry, quick-witted man who travels with, and cares for, Lennie. Although he frequently speaks of how much better his life would be without his caretaking responsibilities, George is obviously devoted to Lennie. George's behavior is motivated by the desire to protect Lennie and, eventually, deliver them both to the farm of their dreams. Though George is the source for the often-told story of life on their future farm, it is Lennie's childlike faith that enables George to actually believe his account of their future.

Candy - An aging ranch handyman, Candy lost his hand in an accident and worries about his future on the ranch. Fearing that his age is making him useless, he seizes on George's description of the farm he and Lennie will have, offering his life's savings if he can join George and Lennie in owning the land. The fate of Candy's ancient dog, which Carlson shoots in the back of the head in an alleged act of mercy, foreshadows the manner of Lennie's death.

Curley's wife - The only female character in the novel, Curley's wife is never given a name and is only referred to in reference to her husband. The men on the farm refer to her as a "tramp," a "tart," and a "looloo." Dressed in fancy, feathered red shoes, she represents the temp-tation of female sexuality in a male-dominated world. Steinbeck depicts Curley's wife not as a villain, but rather as a victim. Like the ranch-hands, she is desperately lonely and has broken dreams of a better life.

Crooks - Crooks, the black stable-hand, gets his name from his crooked back. Proud, bitter, and caustically funny, he is isolated from the other men because of the color of his skin. Despite himself, Crooks becomes fond of Lennie, and though he derisively claims to have seen countless men following empty dreams of buying their own land, he asks Lennie if he can go with them and hoe in the garden.

Curley - The boss's son, Curley wears high-heeled boots to distinguish himself from the field hands. Rumored to be a champion prizefighter, he is a confrontational, mean-spirited, and aggressive young man who seeks to compensate for his small stature by picking fights with larger men. Recently married, Curley is plagued with jealous suspicions and is extremely possessive of his flirtatious young wife.

Slim - A highly skilled mule driver and the acknowledged "prince" of the ranch, Slim is the only character who seems to be at peace with himself. The other characters often look to Slim for advice. For instance, only after Slim agrees that Candy should put his decrepit dog out of its misery, does the old man agree to let Carlson shoot it. A quiet, insightful man, Slim alone understands the nature of the bond between George and Lennie, and comforts George at the novel's tragic ending.

Carlson - A ranch-hand, Carlson complains bitterly about Candy's old, smelly dog. He convinces Candy to put the dog out of its misery. When Candy finally agrees, Carlson promises to execute the task without causing the animal any suffering. Later, George uses Carlson's gun to shoot Lennie.

The Boss - The stocky, well-dressed man in charge of the ranch, and Curley's father. He is never named and appears only once, but seems to be a fair-minded man. Candy happily reports that he once delivered a gallon of whiskey to the ranch-hands on Christmas Day.

Aunt Clara - Lennie's aunt, who cared for him until her death, does not actually appear in the novel except in the end, as a vision chastising Lennie for causing trouble for George. By all accounts, she was a kind, patient woman who took good care of Lennie and gave him plenty of mice to pet.

Whit - A ranch-hand.

Key Facts

FULL TITLE · *Of Mice and Men*

AUTHOR · John Steinbeck

TYPE OF WORK · Novel

GENRE · Fiction; tragedy

LANGUAGE · English

TIME AND PLACE WRITTEN · Mid-1930s; Pacific Grove and Los Gatos ranch, California

DATE OF FIRST PUBLICATION · 1937

PUBLISHER · Covici, Friede, Inc.

NARRATOR · Third-person omniscient

CLIMAX · Lennie accidentally kills Curley's wife in the barn

PROTAGONISTS · George and Lennie

ANTAGONISTS · Curley; society; the cruel, predatory nature of human life

SETTING (TIME) · 1930s

SETTING (PLACE) · South of Soledad, California

POINT OF VIEW · The novel is told from the point of view of a third-person omniscient narrator, who can access the point of view of any character as required by the narrative.

FALLING ACTION · Lennie runs away from the barn; the men return and find Curley's wife dead; Curley leads a mob of men to search for and kill Lennie; George finds Lennie in the clearing and, while retelling the story of life on their farm, shoots him in the back of the head

TENSE · Past

FORESHADOWING · Lennie petting the dead mouse, Lennie being run out of Weed for the incident involving the girl in the red dress, and Lennie killing his puppy—all of which anticipate Lennie accidentally killing Curley's wife; the death of Candy's dog, which anticipates the death of Lennie; Candy's regret that he didn't kill his old dog himself, which anticipates George's decision to shoot Lennie

tone · Sentimental, tragic, doomed, fatalistic, rustic, moralistic, comic

THEMES · The predatory nature of human existence; the importance of fraternity and idealized relationships between men; the impossibility of the American Dream; the destructive imbalance of social power structures in American society

MOTIFS · The corrupting power of female sexuality; strength and weakness; loneliness and companionship

SYMBOLS · The clearing in the woods; Lennie and George's farm; mice; Candy's dog; the heron that plucks water snakes from the stream; Curley's boots; Lennie's puppy

