

Of Mice and Men

Broken Dreams

George and Lennie may have a dream of owning a farm, but they don't get very far with their to-do list before it all crumbles in heartbreaking failure. As Crooks points out, all ranchhands dream of owning their own farm; it's their version of the American Dream. Unfortunately, during the Great Depression, many people's dreams did not work out. Of Mice and Men ends in the only way it can: with the utter collapse of everyone's dream. When it comes down to it, most of the characters in the novella really just want to be free. Curley's wife is limited by being a woman. Crooks is stuck because of his race. Lennie and George are tied down by their need for money. Except when they're caught up in the intensity of the dream, most characters in Of Mice and Men seem more focused on complaining about being trapped than actually planning for their dreams. In a world where death seems to be the only way out, it's hard to blame them.

Theme Questions:

1. Does the dream farm mean the same thing to Lennie as it does to George? If not, what are the differences?
2. Once Candy announces he has the money for the ranch, the narrator declares, "This thing they had never really believed in was coming true." Is that a fair statement? Did the guys ever really believe they'd get the ranch?
3. Do Lennie and George see their life of traveling and working as a type of freedom? Do they ever consider the question of freedom?
4. What does "freedom" mean to Lennie? Is it related to the "fatta the lan'"? Does he find it in death?
5. Can dreams become actual plans, or are they goals that should remain untouched, so that there's always something to reach for?
6. Do others on the farm also have dreams? Is it important to share these dreams with others, or is it more important that the dreams be kept secret?
7. At the end of the story, when George is facing life without Lennie, does he feel more free or more trapped than ever?

Consider these claims:

- In Of Mice and Men, dreams are necessary, even if the characters know that they'll never achieve them.
- For the characters in Of Mice and Men, dreams means settling down. The life of the open road is only a type of captivity.
- In Of Mice and Men, all the characters are stuck in place, either by their circumstances or who they are. Their lives are simply processes of becoming comfortable with those traps.
- In the novella, Steinbeck seems to show that dreams are foolish and unnecessary, just leading to more sorrow.

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Friendship & Loneliness

Of Mice and Men is the equivalent of a bro hug: buried emotion, gruff affection, and hearty back-pats. George and Lennie don't text each other eleven times a day, and they don't like every single cat picture the other posts on Facebook – but we still get the sense that they take their friendship more seriously than anything. After all, what else do they have? And what else do any of us have? Travelling works during the Great Depression were about as lonely as one can get. But for all the talk about loneliness in Of Mice and Men, these guys sure do hang out together a lot. Does this mean they're not lonely? Or do they meet, make new friends, new enemies, and then head out to their next job, all the while failing to make any genuine connections?

Theme Questions:

1. Friendship generally seems like a good thing, but the ranch life might be better suited to loners. Are there some circumstances under which it's simply better to be alone? Does George have to learn this lesson the hard way?
2. Why does everyone seem to feel so lonely all the time? Is this a function of the ranch, the time period, the world, human nature, or something else?
3. Crooks' isolation is also his protection, especially witnessed by that awful scene where Curley's wife threatens him. Is this loneliness worth it? Is it ever worth it? Would Lennie have been safer if he'd been isolated too?
4. Is George and Lennie's friendship a two-way street? Do both members contribute and receive equally from each other? Are there any other sets of friends in the book? Why is friendship so rare?
5. It seems like everyone (from Crooks to Slim) spends an awful lot of time complaining to his friends about how he has no friends. Are these guys really that lonely, or do they simply not recognize they've all got one other? Do they all have one other?
6. Why do those who are lonely "get mean," as George says, even if they're surrounded by people all the time?
7. George says quite a bit about how much better his life would be if he didn't have to take care of Lennie. If this is true, why does he choose to stay with Lennie?

Consider these claims:

- In Of Mice and Men, friendship is dangerous: every time any character gets close to anyone else, something goes wrong.
- George sees friendship as a practical relationship as much as an emotional one. Friends do difficult things for each other – like killing.
- Because they are together, George and Lennie are never truly lonely, no matter how different they may be.
- In Of Mice and Men, loneliness is safer than togetherness.

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Inequality

Some weaknesses are obvious: Lennie is a few feet short of a Happy Meal; Crooks is a mistreated black man and crippled; Curley is exceptionally short; Curley's wife is, well, a woman. Only a few characters in Of Mice and Men seem to rise above their low positions by being willing to pull the trigger when no one else will. But is there more to strength than wielding a gun? Do Slim and George avoid weakness through force of character as well as firearms? In Of Mice and Men, justice happens the cowboy way. The ranch operates by its own set of rules, without a higher order dictated by right and wrong, the law, pity, or even common sense. Slim, the local ranch man of wisdom, hands down decisions, and the people around him accept his word as what's best, even if it's not always easy. Sometimes it means you have to get beat up because you had it coming, and sometimes you have to kill your best friend because it's the right thing to do.

Theme Questions:

1. Is it true that the ranch has its own kind of justice? What's most important in deciding what is fair and equal – the law, social status, intention, ethics, etc.?
2. Is Lennie justified in crushing Curley's hand? Is Slim justified in threatening Curley about letting anyone know what really went on? Why or why not?
3. What are the various weaknesses of the novel's different characters? Are any weaknesses more serious than any others?
4. Does George and Lennie's relationship make them weaker or stronger? In general, does having close relationships in this novella seem to help or hurt the characters?
5. Does Lennie think of himself as weak? How do we interpret his mental weakness when we compare it to his physical strength? Which defines his character more?
6. Is it reasonable to let Slim be the one who makes the decisions (about what is right and wrong) on the ranch? Does Slim make good decisions?
7. Did Curley's wife get what she deserved?

Consider these claims ...

- Lennie has no grasp of the consequences of his actions, so justice has no meaning for him.
- You can't win in Of Mice and Men: the weak are pitied, and the strong are condemned.
- In the novella, Steinbeck suggests that weakness is better than strength.
- Throughout the story, Steinbeck suggests that mental disability shouldn't make someone immune to justice.