Of Mice and Men

Of Mice and Men was written by John Steinbeck in 1937 and is considered a classic in American literature. It is based on a line from Robert Burns' (1785) poem "To a Mouse, On Turning Her Up In Her Nest With The Plough" regarding chance and tragic circumstances interfering with good intentions.

The Setting: Salinas Valley, California in 1937

Recommended Grade Level: 7-12

Synopsis: California migrant workers George and mentally-compromised Lennie seek work on a ranch, sustained by their dream of one day buying their own place. They encounter a number of residents of the ranch, one of whom accidentally plays a devastating role in forever changing their fate.

The Story

Two California migrant workers, George and Lennie, seek employment at a ranch during the Great Depression. Lennie often carries mice to keep them for pets but unintentionally ends up killing them. George complains that his life would be easier without having to care for Lennie, but they share a dream of owning own piece of land, where Lennie would be allowed to have rabbits.

George and Lennie report to the nearby ranch where they meet Boss, Candy, Curley's Wife, Slim, and Curley. Curley is very possessive of his attractive wife and George commands Lennie to stay away from Curley and
his wife. George confides in Slim about Lennie's mental capacity, and gives Lennie a newborn puppy to keep him occupied. Ranch hands Carlson and Whit persuade helpless Candy to allow his geriatric dog to be euthanized. When the men leave the bunkhouse, curious to see a fight between Curley and Slim, George and Lennie discuss their plans to buy land. Candy overhears, and offers his life's savings if they will let him live there. Curley returns to the bunkhouse still angry and finds an easy target in Lennie, who defends himself and crushes Curley's hand.

The next evening, most of the men leave the ranch to go into town. Lennie is left alone with Crooks, an African-American stable buck, and Candy. George arrives back at the ranch early, having decided to save his money for crop seed instead of spending it. Curley's Wife appears and attempts to make conversation with them, but is again rejected.

The following afternoon, Lennie accidentally kills his puppy in the barn while petting it and tries to hide it, afraid that George won't allow him to care for future rabbits. Curley's Wife witnesses the situation and consoles him. While Lennie talks about rabbits, Curley's Wife talks about her dream of leaving the ranch to become a movie star in Hollywood. Lennie tells her that he loves petting soft things, and when she offers to let him feel her hair, he grabs too tightly and won't let go. Curley's Wife screams and Lennie tries to silence her, accidentally killing her.

Lennie runs away as George had previously instructed her to do and hides in a place previously designated by George as a meeting place if there was any trouble. Candy discovers Curley's Wife dead body in the barn and alerts George, who sneaks away to join Lennie at their meeting place after he asks for Slim's advice to protect Lennie. While the ranch hands are hunting for Lennie, George repeats the story of the place they will have together someday. As the men grow nearer, George acts to save his best friend from a terrible fate.
THEMES

The American Dream

The American Dream was unattainable for at least one out of four people during the Great Depression; a difficult realization in a country whose unofficial motto is one that anyone can succeed if they work hard.

Minorities

Multiple characters in the story are ostracized because of their status as minorities: Crooks, a disabled African-American character; Lennie, who is mentally-challenged; Candy, a handicapped, older man; Curley's Wife, the sole female character who remains unnamed.

Friendship

The friendship between George and Lennie is the center of the story and the mercy-killing ending is still debated as an ultimate act of friendship.

Loneliness

Many of the characters experience profound loneliness, despite the company of others, and even a marriage contract.

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History

In 1937, the rate of unemployment was 25%. Because of a lasting drought in the Dust Bowl region, California was inundated by men who had moved
there to look for work. Many of them had families to support, and lived in meager conditions inside tent camps. Other men traveled by foot owning nothing but a simple pack (bindle) with basic necessities.

**Biography**

John Steinbeck was born in Salinas, California in 1902. He came from an affluent family and attended Stanford University but did not complete his degree. He spent time as a migrant worker in Salinas, California, and derived material for his books such as *Tortilla Flats*, *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Of Mice and Men* from his direct observations. The character of Lennie was taken from a man personally known to Steinbeck, who killed a man with a pitchfork and ended up in an insane asylum.

*Of Mice and Men* is both a novel and a play, with novel dialogue written specifically to be lifted into play form. George S. Kaufman helped Steinbeck to successfully adapt *Of Mice and Men* for the theater, a production which Steinbeck never saw in person. It remains on the list of most banned books, due to language and content, and is widely read in schools around the world.

**To a Mouse** (1785) - Robert Burns

Wee, sleekit, cow’rin, tim’rous beastie
O, what a panic’s in thy breastie!
Thou need na start awa sae hasty,
Wi’ bickering brattle!
I wad be laith to rin an’ chase thee,
Wi’ murd’ring pattle!

I’m truly sorry man’s dominion
Has broken Nature’s social union,
An’ justifies that ill opinion,
Which makes thee startle,
At me, thy poor, earth-born companion,
An’ fellow-mortal!

I doubt na, whiles, but thou may thieve;
What then? poor beastie, thou maun live!
A daimen icker in a thrave
‘S a sma’ request:
I’ll get a blessin’ wi’ the lave,
An’ never miss’t!

Thy wee bit housie, too, in ruin!
Its silly wa’s the win’s are strewin’!
An naething, now, to big a new ane,
O’ foggage green!
An’ bleak December’s winds ensuin’,
Bait snell an’ keen!
thou saw the fields laid bare and waste,
An’ weary winter comin’ fast,
An’ cozie here, beneath the blast,
Thou thought to dwell,
Till crash! The cruel coulter past
Out thro’ thy cell.

That wee bit heap o’ leaves and stibble,
Has cost thee mony a weary nibble!
Now thou’s turned out, for a’ thy trouble,
But house or hald,
To thole the winter’s sleety dribble,
An’ cranreuch cauld!

But, Mousie, thou art no thy lane,
In proving foresight may be vain:
The best-laid schemes o’ mice and men
Gang aft a-gley,
An’ lea’e us nought but grief and pain,
For promised joy.

Still thou art blest, compar’d wi’me!
The present only toucheth thee:
But, och! I backward cast my e’e
On prospects drear!
An’ forward, tho’ I canna see,
I guess an’ fear!

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Questions for writing or discussion

1. The Great Depression of the 1930’s was a period of significant pain and dislocation for large portions of the American people. In what ways is that period similar to, and different from, the circumstances of the current “Great Recession”?

2. Identify the social “safety nets”, both economic and cultural, that were present for the people of the Depression. How do they differ from those of today? Consider emotional support structures as well as economic.

3. George, Lennie and several other characters in Of Mice and Men express their “dream” in terms of being able to own their own land, free from the control of larger forces. How realistic is their dream?

4. How would you express the “American Dream” for your generation?

5. In the story Slim tells George that there is “only one way out” for solving Lennie’s problem. Do you agree that this is the only solution? What others might have been possible?

6. Is George’s final action with regard to his friend a moment of resolution or of defeat? Is Of Mice and Men ultimately hopeful or depressing?
7. Loneliness is a major theme in Of Mice and Men. Why do you think the characters are so lonely? What outside/inside forces have pushed them there? And how do the different characters attempt to deal with it?

8. Lennie seems to become a figure around/through whom the other characters find connection. Why is this?

9. Curley’s Wife is not given a name. Why do you think that is? If you were to write Of Mice and Men today would you have given her a name? Why or why not? (What would it be?)

10. Censorship and banning books is an ongoing debate. Of Mice and Men has sometimes been banned in school districts because of its inclusion of the term “nigger” in its dialogue, and because of its ending. Do you think that some books or artistic works should be banned? Why or why not? Is "anything" allowable? Who should get to make that decision?