



Of Mice and Men KNOWLEDGE ORGANISER

Context – *Of Mice and Men* was written by John Steinbeck in 1937.

John Steinbeck – John Steinbeck was an American author, who lived between 1902 and 1968. He was a Nobel Prize winner for Literature. Many of his 27 books (including 16 novels) have been considered as classics of Western literature. His works frequently explore the themes of **fate and injustice**, as experienced by **everyman** characters. Many take place in the Salinas Valley of California.



The American Dream– The American Dream is a national ethos of the United States, which declares that freedoms, prosperity, success, and social mobility, can all be achieved through **hard work**. It implies that society has few barriers preventing anyone from achieving their dreams, should they be willing to put in enough effort. James Truslow Adams described it as life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone.”



Racism– Life was tough for black people living in America in the 1930s. **Racism was still rampant**, and there were not yet laws ruling against racial discrimination. White and black people were **segregated** at the time, and black people were considered 2nd class citizens. Black people often had to work harder for less money, often being given the ‘dirty work’ in their industry. The **lynching** of black people was common, sometimes for the most petty or unproven of crimes. The Jim Crow laws of post-1876 strongly reinforced racism.



The Wall Street Crash and The Great Depression –In the 1920s, the USA had been an enormously prosperous nation. However, in **October 1929** millions of dollars were wiped out in an event that became known as the **Wall Street Crash**. This triggered the **Great Depression** across the country throughout most of the 1930s. In this time, between 12 and 15 million (one third of the population at the time) became **unemployed**, and many people lost their life savings as banks went bust. With no social support system, many families were left to face **poverty**.



Gender Inequality– Women had filled in for men when they had participated in the First World War. However, after the Great Depression, when many jobs were lost, **women’s jobs were often the first to go**. Women were not trusted as they were seen to be ‘taking jobs away from men.’ With so few job prospects, many women consigned themselves to a life as a **housewife**. Curley’s Wife provides an example of the difficulties for women at the time – she is forced into a marriage with a man she does not love to stave off poverty.



Golden California – To further compound the effects of the Great Depression, in the 1930s America received a number of **severe dust storms**, which greatly damaged the ecology and agriculture across much of the country. The only state that remained relatively unaffected was California on the west coast, which soon became known as ‘**Golden California**.’ Workers from all over the country descended upon the state in order to work for little pay as **farm-hands**. As men would often travel to do this alone, it was as an extremely solitary existence.



Main Characters – Consider what Steinbeck intended through his characterisation of each of the below...

George – George is one of the two lead protagonists (with Lennie) in *Of Mice and Men*. Although he is **occasionally short-tempered** with Lennie, he is a **loyal and caring** friend. George could be described as an idealist, as he harbours **dreams** of one day owning his own farm and land. George is relatively **smart**, thinking and acting sharply in difficult situations.

Lennie– Lennie is a **kind and simple** character, who possesses enormous physical strength. At both the beginning and end of the novel he likes to pet soft things, is totally **devoted to George**, and is an unintentional threat to both himself and others. Lennie’s huge size makes him a target of others – principally Curley. Lennie dreams of tending the rabbits on his and George’s own farm.

George Quote: “Guys like us...the loneliest guys in the world” – p113

Lennie Quote: “I don’t like this place, George.” – p165

Curley– Curley is the **boss’s son**, and is perhaps the chief antagonist throughout the novella. He is **confrontational, mean-spirited and violent**, and to back up his threats he is rumoured to be a former prizefighter. Curley tries to compensate for this small stature by picking fights with larger men – such as Lennie. As a recently married man, Curley is extremely **paranoid, jealous and controlling**.

Curley’s Wife – Curley’s Wife is initially introduced to the reader as a ‘**tramp**’, a ‘**rat-trap**’ and a ‘**tart**’, such are the views towards women on the farm. However, she emerges as one of the most **complex characters** in the text, revealing openly that she is disappointed with her life, that ‘Curley ain’t a nice fella’ and that she is lonely. Eventually her longing for attention becomes her downfall.

Curley Quote: “You the guys the old man was waitin’ for?” – p74

CW Quote: “I tell ya I could of went with shows” – p102-103

Crooks – Crooks is the **lively and quick-witted stable-buck**, who is named so because of his crooked back. As with many of the other characters in the novella, Crooks openly admits that he is lonely – however in his case this is caused by the **racial discrimination** and separation that he suffers. Crooks **loneliness** can manifest itself into cruelty towards those who are even weaker, such as when he taunts Lennie. More than anything else, Crooks seems to want to belong.

Candy – Candy is an **old odd-job worker** who lives on the farm, who only has **one hand** after an accident. Candy worries that one day the boss will declare him unfit to work and he will be cast aside, left to die in poverty. His **old, smelly dog** (that is shot by the other ranch workers) is a harsh reinforcement of this belief. Candy is revitalised as he begins to share in **George and Lennie’s dream** of owning their own place.

Crooks Quote: “It’s just bein’ with another guy. That’s all.” – p39-40

Candy Quote: “Had him since he was a pup” – p56

Themes – A theme is an idea or message that runs throughout a text.

Dreams – Each character in the text has their own dreams that they live and work for: George, Lennie, and Candy share in the dream of owning their own place. Curley’s dream is to be respected by others, whilst Curley’s Wife’s dream is to be a famous actress. Crooks simply longs to be accepted and treated equally. None of the characters make their dream, showing the impossibility of the American Dream.

Loneliness– All of the characters, in some sense, experience loneliness, except for Lennie (who has George). Curley’s Wife (isolated because she is a woman) and Crooks (isolated due to his colour) bemoan their lonely existences at any given opportunity, whilst all of the other men on the ranches live solitary lives as farm-hands, without families. At the end of the text, George is lonely too.



Inequality – *Of Mice and Men* was set in a time in which the laws favoured white people, and men held far more rights than women. This is evident through the characters of Crooks and Curley’s Wife. Similarly, life at the time could be deemed more selfish and predatory, as the strong do not care for (and many actively attack) the weak. Other characters’ behaviour towards Candy and Lennie is evidence of this.

Animals and Nature – Steinbeck makes frequent references to animals and nature, both literally and figuratively. At the start and end of the novella, he vividly describes the scene of nature, including the animals that reside there. He also compares characters to animals, for example Lennie is compared to a bear, whilst Curley is compared to both a fish and a frog.



Scene-by-Scene Summary – Alongside key quotations from each scene.

Section 1	The story opens with a vivid description of the wooded area around the Salinas River in California. Two men approach: George and Lennie. As they talk more, it becomes clear that Lennie has a mild mental disability, and that George looks out for him. George catches Lennie petting a dead mouse and takes it off him, angrily. Lennie swears that he didn’t kill it, although it becomes clear that Lennie’s enormous strength means that he kills things unintentionally. George reminds Lennie that they are going to work on a ranch and he needs to behave. The two eat beans for dinner, with George losing his temper with Lennie for persistently asking for ketchup. He states that he would get along much better without Lennie. He then feels guilty about losing his cool, and reminds Lennie of their dream: one day, they are going to own their own farm. They then settle for the night.	“With us it ain’t like that. We got a future. We got somebody to talk to that gives a damn about us.”
Section 2	The two men arrive at the ranch, and after being scolded by their new boss, are assigned to a picking team led by Slim. They meet Candy, and also Curley, who immediately becomes aggressive towards Lennie. After he leaves, Lennie tells George to stay away from Curley. Curley’s Wife then appears at the bunk, who Lennie finds ‘purty’ and who flirts with them. George has to tell Lennie to stay away from her. Slim then enters, who is clearly admired by all. He stokes up a friendship with George and Lennie.	“She smiled archly and twitched her body. “Nobody can’t blame a person for lookin’,” she said.”
Section 3	Slim gives one of his new pups to Lennie. George tells Slim of how they got chased out of the last town – Lennie grabbed hold of a girl’s red dress, and wouldn’t let go. Carlson begs Candy to let him shoot his old, stinking dog, to which Candy reluctantly agrees. After an awkward silence, the gunshot is heard. Curley comes in, asking where his wife is. When he learns that she is not there, and neither is Slim, he storms out. The others follow, hoping to see a fight. Thinking they are left alone, George discusses the dream again to Lennie. Candy overhears, and swears to devote his life savings to it if he can be in. The other men return, Curley apologising to Slim for false accusations. Being mocked by the others, Curley turns his attention on Lennie, beating him. Lennie only fights back when George tells him to, severely crushing Curley’s hand. Curley is warned by Slim not to get them fired.	“Curley’s fist was swinging when Lennie reached for it. The next minute Curley was flopping like a fish on a line.”
Section 4	Crooks sits in his room alone. Lennie soon wanders in, lonely as the other men have gone out to town. Crooks initially tells him to go away, saying that he (as a black man) is not allowed in the others’ bunk, and so they should not be allowed in his. Lennie persists, and eventually Crooks lets him in. Soon enough, Lennie begins to babble about his and George’s dream. Crooks speaks of his own loneliness, before then taunting Lennie by suggesting that George might never return. He only relents when Lennie grows aggressive. Candy enters and begins to speak again of the men’s dream. Curley’s Wife interrupts, and taunts the men about being ‘the weak ones’ left behind. She speaks of her own loneliness. Crooks asks her to leave, but she threatens that she could easily have him lynched if he says too much more. The other men then return and Curley’s Wife leaves.	“...You go on get outta my room. I ain’t wanted in the bunk house, and you ain’t wanted in my room.” “Why ain’t you wanted?” Lennie asked. “Cause I’m black...”
Section 5	Lennie sits in the barn, stroking his dead puppy, questioning why it died. He decides to try and hide the puppy but then gets angry with it for dying and hurls it across the room. Curley’s Wife enters, reassuring him that it is safe to talk to her. She speaks of her loneliness, and her past dreams. She explains that she doesn’t like Curley. She asks Lennie to stroke her hair, but he quickly becomes too excited and holds on too tight. When she cries out, he tries to silence her, and accidentally breaks her neck. He runs away, towards the clearing that he and George were in at the beginning of the story. Candy finds the body and informs George – they immediately know what has happened. George asks Candy to pretend that George hasn’t seen it, so he can’t be implicated. Candy agrees. After a while, he calls the other guys in. Curley almost instantly asks for his shotgun, to track down Lennie.	“And when they were gone, Candy squatted down in the hay and watched the face of Curley’s wife. “Poor bastard,” he said softly.”
Section 6	Steinbeck starts the last chapter as he starts the first, by describing in some depth the riverside scene from the opening. Lennie appears, anxious, but also proud that he has remembered the place that he should come to if he finds himself in trouble. He has two visions: of his Aunt Clara scolding him for getting into trouble, and a giant rabbit telling him that George will leave him. George appears, seeming unusually quiet. George tells Lennie that he is not made at him, comforting Lennie. Lennie asks him to talk about the dream again, which George does. As Lennie sits, listening to the story, looking out over the stream, George pulls Carlson’s gun from his jacket and shoots Lennie in the back of the head. Lennie immediately dies, his body jerking to the ground. The sound of the gun causes the rest of the lynch party to locate the two. Carlson questions what happens, and George lies that he had to wrestle the gun from Lennie and shoot him with it. Only Slim understands what has truly happened and agrees with what George did. They walk away.	“Lennie said, “I thought you was mad at me, George.” “No,” said George. “No, Lennie, I ain’t mad. I never been mad, and I ain’t now. That’s a thing I want ya to know.”

Steinbeck’s Literary Devices

Simile	“Slowly, like a terrier who doesn’t want to bring a ball to its master, Lennie approached, drew back.” (p9)	The Meaning of the Title The title of the book is derived from a poem by the 18th Century Scottish poet: Robert Burns. In the poem, a mouse carefully builds a nest in a wheatfield, yet it is destroyed when the field is ploughed. The mouse had looked forward to a comfortable and prosperous future, only to have its dreams crushed – much like George and Lennie. It is written in a Scottish dialect: <i>The best laid schemes o’ mice an’ men Gang aft a-gley, An’ lea’e us nought but grief an’ pain, For promised joy!</i>
Personification	“The sycamore leaves whispered in a little night breeze.” (p16).	
Metaphor	“Lennie covered his face with huge paws and bleated with terror.” (p63)	
Foreshadowing	The shooting of Candy’s dog foreshadows the shooting of Lennie. Lennie killing animals foreshadows him killing people.	

