

Year 9 English Autumn Term

Debating the Great American Novel: *Of Mice and Men*

<u>Plot</u>	<u>Key Characters</u>	<u>Key Quotations</u>	<u>Key Themes</u>
<p><i>Of Mice and Men</i> is centred around two itinerant workers, George and Lennie, in California in the 1930s as they start work on a ranch in a place called Soledad (a Spanish word meaning 'solitude'). The whole story takes place over a period of four days, starting on Thursday evening and ending on Sunday. While at the ranch, George and Lennie meet other characters, who emphasise the loneliness and difficulty of life for the people living and working in these places.</p> <p>George is a small, intelligent man who looks after his friend Lennie, a large, strong man who has a learning disability. Lennie's strength becomes increasingly problematic throughout the story as it becomes clear that he does not understand how much damage he can cause.</p> <p>At several points during the novel, the two men discuss their dream of owning their own ranch and working for themselves, but this is shown to be impossible as by the end of the book Lennie has accidentally killed a woman and George's only option is to shoot him before he is caught.</p>	<p>Lennie - a large, lumbering, childlike migrant worker.</p> <p>George - a small, wiry, quick-witted man who travels with, and cares for, Lennie.</p> <p>Candy - an aging ranch handyman, Candy lost his hand in an accident and worries about his future on the ranch.</p> <p>Curley's wife - the only female character in the story, Curley's wife is never given a name and is only mentioned in reference to her husband.</p> <p>Crooks - the black stable-hand who gets his name from his crooked back.</p> <p>Curley - The boss's son, Curley wears high-heeled boots to distinguish himself from the field hands.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>Carlson - a ranch-hand, Carlson complains bitterly about Candy's old, smelly dog.</p> <p>The Boss - the stocky, well-dressed man in charge of the ranch, and Curley's father.</p> <p>Aunt Clara - Lennie's aunt, who cared for him until her death, does not actually appear in the work except at the end, as a vision chastising Lennie for causing trouble for George.</p> <p>Whit - a ranch-hand.</p>	<p>"Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don't belong no place. . . . With us it ain't like that. We got a future. We got somebody to talk to that gives a damn about us. We don't have to sit in no bar room blowin' in our jack jus' because we got no place else to go. If them other guys gets in jail they can rot for all anybody gives a damn. But not us".</p> <p>"A guy sets alone out here at night, maybe readin' books or thinkin' or stuff like that. Sometimes he gets thinkin', an' he got nothing to tell him what's so an' what ain't so. Maybe if he sees somethin', he don't know whether it's right or not. He can't turn to some other guy and ast him if he sees it too. He can't tell. He got nothing to measure by. I seen things out here. I wasn't drunk. I don't know if I was asleep. If some guy was with me, he could tell me I was asleep, an' then it would be all right. But I jus' don't know."</p> <p>"I seen hundreds of men come by on the road an' on the ranches, with their bindles on their back an' that same damn thing in their heads . . . every damn one of 'em's got a little piece of land in his head. An' never a God damn one of 'em ever gets it. Just like heaven. Ever'body wants a little piece of lan'. I read plenty of books out here. Nobody never gets to heaven, and nobody gets no land."</p> <p>"A water snake glided smoothly up the pool, twisting its periscope head from side to side; and it swam the length of the pool and came to the legs of a motionless heron that stood in the shallows. A silent head and beak lanced down and plucked it out by the head, and the beak swallowed the little snake while its tail waved frantically."</p>	<p>Dreams: The theme of dreams is introduced at the start of the book through George's description to Lennie of the farm that they hope one day to own together. They continue to discuss this throughout the text, with Candy also becoming involved and making it finally seem possible. This dream is very important to the men because it represents freedom and having control over their own lives, which they do not have while moving around looking for work.</p> <p>Loneliness: The name of the town close to the ranch where the novel is set is Soledad, which translates from Spanish to 'solitude', so loneliness is immediately established as an important theme in <i>Of Mice and Men</i>. Most of the characters on the ranch are lonely. George and Lennie stand out because their friendship means that they are not isolated and this is very unusual, making some others (like the Boss) suspicious of them. Steinbeck shows how the lifestyle that the men lead is very damaging to their relationships, making them lack compassion for others.</p> <p>Companionship: Companionship in <i>Of Mice and Men</i> is primarily demonstrated through the friendship of George and Lennie, as there are no other meaningful relationships between people in the book. The unusualness of their bond is emphasised throughout the novel, particularly through the contrast with the other characters who are isolated and lonely. Apart from Slim, the men on the ranch find it difficult to understand why George and Lennie stick together. Many of the other characters are searching for companionship but are unable to find it. By the end of the book, all of the characters are lonely in some way, even George, who has now lost his friendship with Lennie because Lennie is dead. George and Lennie's friendship was the only friendship evident in the text.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Context</u></p> <p>Written by American author John Steinbeck, <i>Of Mice and Men</i> was first published in 1937. The novel is set in a place called Soledad, (a Spanish word meaning solitude or loneliness) in California.</p> <p>The novel is set during the Great Depression, a period of significant poverty and unemployment across the USA following the Wall Street Crash in 1929.</p> <p>John Steinbeck was born in Salinas, California in 1902. Although his family was not poor, when he was a teenager he spent time working on ranches near his home and this had a big impact on his writing. His experience of working with farm labourers and his interest in their lives is clearly evident in <i>Of Mice and Men</i>, as well as in some of his other books, like <i>The Grapes of Wrath</i></p>			

