

OF MICE AND MEN by John Steinbeck

CHAPTER 1: AT THE RIVER

The book opens along the banks of the Salinas River a few miles south of Soledad, California. Everything is calm and beautiful, and nature is alive. The trees are green and fresh, lizards are



skittering along, rabbits sit on the sand. There are no people in the scene.

Notice the words and images that Steinbeck uses in the description. His writing is filled with such devices as alliteration, repetition of words, similes, and metaphors.

As Steinbeck's "word camera" pans along the scene, it stops to focus on the first indication of the presence of people—a worn path. The path has been "beaten hard" and is littered with an ash pile. These images tell us something about the mark men have made on this natural setting: they have left destruction (ashes and barkless limbs) in their wake.

Suddenly, the calm is broken. Trouble is in the air.

Animals begin to scatter. Two men have arrived on the scene, and the environment seems troubled by their presence. A heron near the river flees from the scene, but it doesn't move gracefully. Instead, Steinbeck uses harsh words such as "labored" and "pounded" to describe its flight from the river. For a moment the scene becomes "lifeless." Then in walk George and Lennie.

From their first description, George and Lennie are opposites. George is small and quick, with clearly defined features. He is obviously the "brains" of the pair. Lennie, on the other hand, is huge and shapeless. He is not so much a man as a human animal.

Look over this first description of Lennie to see how often Steinbeck uses animal images to describe him. Lennie is at once a bear and a horse. He has paws instead of hands, and drinks water as a snorting horse does. Contrast Lennie's approach to the river with George's. George is cautious and aloof. We as readers don't know it yet, but this river will be a part of another very important scene at the end of the book. The attitudes of the two men toward the water—Lennie's trust and George's caution—will be reflected at that time as well.

NOTE: Lennie and Animal Imagery

One of the issues of the book is how human Lennie really is and whether he is capable of living in a human world. Look out for comparisons of Lennie with animals as you read and decide what insights they give you into Lennie's character and Steinbeck's style.

With the scene now set with these stage directions, the characters begin their dialogue.

George's first words are sharp and critical of Lennie, while Lennie's response is innocent and generous: "Tha's good," he says. "You drink some, George. You take a good big drink."

George does drink but is careful to warn Lennie of the hazards of bad water.

You are probably wondering what the relationship is between these two men. There are a lot of different possibilities. Are they brothers? Father and son? Friends? Can they really be friends if they are such complete opposites? What forces have brought them together and are keeping them together? You will get some of the answers in Chapter 1 and more in Chapter 2. George and Lennie are traveling companions, but they are a lot like family. George promised Lennie's Aunt Clara, who is now dead, that he would look after Lennie. As we discover, they really look after each other. George takes care of Lennie's physical needs, and Lennie helps

George fill his emotional needs, such as the need to be responsible and caring for another person.

The dialogue continues to follow this pattern of critical comments from George and innocent responses from Lennie through the next several pages. George's ranting seems to have little effect on Lennie. He has obviously heard it all before, or he is just too stupid to recognize George's sarcasm. George's emotions run from impatient to angry to exasperated, while Lennie's move swiftly back and forth between sad and happy.

Little by little, we discover that the two men have been travelling together for some time. Two elements make this clear. One is Lennie's constant imitation of George's actions. He acts like George's dog or younger brother. He obviously trusts George in a way that could come only from long association with him. A second element is George's knowing exactly what Lennie is doing, even when Lennie is trying to be secretive. When George sees Lennie's hand sneak into his pocket, he immediately asks, "What'd you take outa that pocket?" He demands to see Lennie's "treasure"— a dead mouse. And after George has thrown the mouse across the river, he knows that Lennie has gone to retrieve it.

NOTE: The Title

The mouse that George and Lennie throw around is not the reason for the book's title. The title is taken from a poem by Robert Bums. As you will see, George and Lennie have big plans, but the title gives a good hint that things may not turn out too well. The title may also relate to the two sides of Lennie—the person and animal. Or it may relate to the famous expression, "Are you a man or a mouse?" The expression means, are you brave or cowardly? There are lots of cowards in the novel, but not too many brave people.

After George has thrown the mouse away a second time, the relationship of the two men comes into clearer focus. Lennie starts to "blubber like a baby," and George begins to comfort him. "I ain't takin' it away jus' for meanness," George says. "That mouse ain't fresh, Lennie; and besides, you've broke it pettin' it. You get another mouse that's fresh and I'll let you keep it a little while." George obviously cares for Lennie a great deal. And Lennie is obviously a mixture of little kid and crazy adult. George is the thinker, the brains and the mouth of their partnership. He tells Lennie "not to say nothin' " when they see their new boss on the ranch. Lennie is the strength of the pair. His hands are his most important feature. His sense of touch is one he uses most. He prefers even a rotting dead mouse to a rubber one that "wasn't no good to pet." George, with his eyes and brains, spots the wood they will need for their campfire, but Lennie gathers the wood.

Their conversation has also touched on a troubling event, one that foreshadows an even more tragic happening later in the story. The two of them had to run from their last town, Weed, because of something that Lennie did that he has already forgotten about. The event involved "some girls coming by." Exactly what happened is not yet revealed, but you shouldn't let mysterious references such as these slip by unnoticed. They usually have lots of hidden meaning. We learn a little more about the incident a few pages later. Lennie was just feeling a girl's dress when she began to yell, and the two men had to hide and run away. Now they are moving on to a new town and new jobs.

But they are not heading straight to the ranch where they will be working. Instead, they are spending their last night of freedom in the woods. Lennie is concerned about what they will eat, but George's thoughts are on being a free man for one more day.

George begins another attack on Lennie, declaring that without the burden of looking after Lennie he could "live so easy." He could get a job, earn his money, and spend it on whiskey and a

cathouse. Then why does George stay with Lennie? Because their relationship makes the two of them special.

Under Lennie's prompting George articulates the specialness of the two of them. He begins his declaration in rhythmic tones, "as though he has said [the words] many times before":

Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don't belong no place. They come to a ranch an' work up a stake and then they go into town and blow their stake, and the first thing you know they're poundin' their tail on some other ranch. They ain't got nothing to look ahead to.

But Lennie's excitement at hearing the words and his interjections cause George to change his tone of voice. Little by little, his excitement builds too as he describes the farm they will have and the animals Lennie will get to tend. The words are no longer just oft repeated words; they have become almost a litany, a kind of prayer. Are you getting caught up in the excitement? Steinbeck wants you to be. He will be working on your emotions throughout the book.

What George is describing is often labeled "The American Dream." This dream involves the desire to have material possessions and the independence that being free from needing things can give you. Most characters in modern American literature are seeking this dream, but few ever achieve it. Now that Lennie has gotten George into a good mood, Lennie takes the upper hand in the relationship and begins to press it. He threatens to run away if George continues to pick on him. George quickly gives in, and we know his anger with Lennie isn't real. Lennie needs George to look after him, but George needs Lennie just as much. Lennie makes George understand his specialness and keeps the dream alive.

The chapter closes with the two men going to sleep around the dying embers of their campfire. Lennie presses once more about the rabbits he will get to tend and threatens to leave one more time. George tells him to "go to hell" with one final moment of mock anger. Everything is peaceful again. The only sounds are those of nature, alive again as it was at the beginning before the two men arrived. One small circle has been completed.

CHAPTER 2: IN THE BUNK HOUSE

The next morning George and Lennie arrive at the ranch where they will work. From the first we know that this ranch is not one of the rich spreads that we have often seen on television. This ranch is poor, like George and Lennie and like American society as a whole in the early 1930s.

NOTE: The Ranch as a Microcosm Steinbeck has said that he intended the ranch in *Of Mice and Men* to be a microcosm of American society. A microcosm is a miniature world. Individual people within a microcosm represent groups of people in the larger world. The ranch has many of the qualities of the rural U.S. during the Depression—poverty, loneliness, a homeless feeling. See if you can spot these qualities in some of the stories told about ranch life in this chapter, particularly those of Candy and Whit. The people on the ranch also represent many of the different kinds of people who lived in rural California and throughout this country during the 1930s. You will meet all of the different characters in this chapter. As you do, think about them two ways—as individual people and as symbols of groups in American society.

The second chapter, like the first, opens with a setting description. This one sounds like stage directions for a play. Steinbeck carefully takes us through the one-room bunk house. He points out even minor details, such as what type of boxes are nailed over each bunk and exactly what items are to be found stored in the boxes.

Do you notice a difference in style between the openings of Chapter 1 and Chapter 2? Look at Steinbeck's sentence structure and even his choice of words. Which opener seems more interesting or gives you a more positive feeling about the world?

Remember that Steinbeck's description of nature at the beginning of Chapter I was filled with imagery and interesting language patterns. The sentences were long and smooth flowing, like the river. The sentences in the bunk house description are short and bare, just like the room itself. Compare the first two sentences in each chapter:

A few miles south of Soledad, the Salinas River drops in close to the hillside bank and runs deep and green. The water is warm too, for it has slipped twinkling over the yellow sands in the sunlight before reaching the narrow pool.

The bunk house was a long, rectangular building. Inside, the walls were whitewashed and the floor unpainted.

Steinbeck has taken us from the world of nature to the world of civilization. How do you think he wants us to feel about this change? It is clear that the author doesn't seem too thrilled about it. We can tell this by the series of events and descriptions that follow.

The first person who greets George and Lennie and introduces us to ranch life is not a handsome cowboy; he is a stoop-shouldered old man carrying a broom. **Candy** informs the two men that they are already in hot water with the boss. He's "sore as hell" because they didn't arrive in time for the morning work shift. Candy points out their bunks with his handless right arm. Candy seems like something out of a Halloween story.

George immediately notices a problem with the bunk. The person who had the bunk last has left behind a can of roach powder. The powder will kill various insects that George refers to as "pants rabbits." Why does he choose the word "rabbit" here? It stands out because of Lennie's passion for rabbits that we learned about in the first scene. One interpretation might

be to contrast nature in the outside world with nature in the bunk house. Rabbits outside are soft and promise good things; pants rabbits inside are "scourges." Or maybe Steinbeck wants to show us a contrast between Lennie's gentle, soft view of nature and George's more sarcastic view.

Candy quickly begins to defend his bunk house world by pointing out that the guy who used that bunk was a neatness freak. He washed his hands even *after* he ate. George is still not convinced and wants to know why the man quit. "Why. ... he just quit, the way a guy will," Candy says. People move around a lot in the ranch world. Nothing stays permanently, except maybe the bugs.

George lifts his mattress and Lennie imitates him. This is the first time Lennie has been mentioned in the chapter. He is clearly following George's instructions about not standing out. Candy continues with his description of the people on the ranch. He mentions **Crooks** and the boss, the two opposite extremes of the ranch society. Crooks is the black stable buck who handles the dirty work around the ranch. Candy is fascinated by Crooks, who is both a "nigger" and reads a lot.

George is more interested in the boss, the other end of the scale. Candy tells him the boss has a temper but is pretty nice. He even gave the men a whole gallon of whiskey on Christmas Day. On that day Crooks was allowed to enter the main bunk house, only to be pushed into a fight. Following the fight the men, except for Candy (too old) and Crooks (black), headed into town to a whorehouse. Why do you think Steinbeck mentions this strange Christmas celebration? He could be trying to show how informal or simple the ranch world is. He could be trying to illustrate examples of discrimination in the society. Or he could be trying to help us understand Candy's character a little more by showing us the kinds of things he thinks about.

The **boss** arrives. He doesn't enter, he just stands in the doorway in a bosslike stance. His thumbs are stuck in his belt and he is wearing high-heeled boots that distinguish him from the workers. Candy notices the boss and immediately changes from a talkative guide to a quiet servant. He rubs his whiskers and shuffles from the room. The changes in Candy are another indication of how the ranch reflects the class structure of American society as a whole. It is a microcosm.

The boss begins to question George and Lennie about their late arrival. He then asks their names. For the first time, we learn their last names—Milton and Small. This is also our first indication that the book may be a symbolic story, an *allegory*.

NOTE: The Story as Allegory. An allegory is a common literary device. It is usually a short story or book that tries to get across an important message about how people live or how they should live. Characters in an allegory usually stand for ideas and their names often show the ideas they stand for. When you see names in a story that sound like symbols, you should ask yourself, What messages is this author trying to get across here? Think about the other characters' names as well. Most of them are short and descriptive—Crooks, Curley, Slim, the boss, Candy. They sound more like nicknames than names. Crooks' and Curley's names may show us that the ranch society isn't as straight or strong as it might be. Slim is the only really strong person on the ranch, but his name indicates that the ranch life is "slim" on strength as well.

The boss continues to question the new men, and George answers all the questions. He doesn't want Lennie's dumbness to show and maybe cost them their jobs. When Lennie does say something, two things happen—George scowls at him and the boss begins to address Lennie.

Lennie starts to panic, as he often does when he's put on the spot. To ease the boss' suspicions, George begins to make up a story about why he and Lennie travel around together.

George often has to defend his staying with Lennie. Why can't he just tell people that they like each other and enjoy sticking together? Maybe it is because he is a little ashamed of travelling with a dummy like Lennie. But if that were true, why have they stuck together so long? Perhaps it is because he is uncomfortable admitting that he gets lonely. Loneliness is a part of life on this ranch and in our world. Nobody likes it, but we have all learned to live with it. As Candy says, "A guy on a ranch don't never listen nor he don't ask no questions." As we will see later on, the ones who are bothered the most by loneliness — Candy, Crooks, and Curley's wife — all try to link themselves with the dream vision that George and Lennie present. After the boss leaves, George gets mad at Lennie for forgetting not to say anything. He notices that Candy has been listening, and yells at him for being nosy. Then he notices Candy's old dog. Keep your eye on this dog. He will play a big role in the story, foreshadowing future events.

A new character enters the bunk house, the boss' son **Curley**, who wears high-heeled boots like his father. Curley is always looking for someone. This time he is looking for his father; often he will be looking for his wife. Whenever Curley shows up he makes people feel uncomfortable. He is always trying to start a fight. You probably know people like Curley, and dislike them. They bring out the worst in everyone they meet.

Curley immediately starts to take on Lennie. He seems always to go after someone he thinks is weaker than he is. In the next two pages we are shown contrasts between Curley and Lennie. Curley is a "light weight, and he's handy." He's a small man who picks fights. Lennie is big and "not handy." George warns that Lennie doesn't like to fight, but he usually wins because he "don't know no rules." This last remark seems to be another comparison of Lennie with animals.

Why do you think Steinbeck is telling us all these things? One reason is probably to get us to like Lennie, because he's an underdog being picked on by a bully, and to dislike Curley. Another reason may be to warn us through foreshadowing that there is potential danger for Lennie and for George and Lennie's togetherness on this ranch. George senses this danger and says, "Look, Lennie! This here ain't no set up. I'm scared." George even repeats his instructions to Lennie to return to the riverbank if there should be any big trouble.

Another dangerous person, **Curley's wife**, comes into the room next. She's wearing lots of makeup and flashy clothes. She stands in the doorway showing off her body to the new men. Lennie is fascinated by her, but George is angry. George and Candy agree that she's a "tart." Once again, George has to warn Lennie about the potential danger he spots. You're probably beginning to get worried for Lennie by now. He seems so innocent, like a little child, and he's vulnerable too. Can he really survive all of these dangers? Lennie doesn't think so. He says, "I don't like this place, George. This ain't no good place. I wanna get outa here." George reluctantly says they've got to stay for a little while. They've got to get a little bit of a stake together to help pay for their dream farm. Little by little the hopefulness we and the characters felt at the end of the first chapter is starting to wear away.

The last two important characters enter the bunk house. They are Slim and Carlson. Throughout the book these two men will present us with opposite views of ranch life and ranch people.

Slim is the "prince" of the ranch. He is like a Greek god or knight of the Round Table. He's almost not human. What would you think of someone whose word was always accepted as law, whose "ear heard more than was said to him," and who had "understanding beyond

thought"? Slim seems too good to be true, doesn't he? George is willing to tell him his true feelings about Lennie: "It's a lot nicer to go around with a guy you know," he says.

Carlson is a lot more "earthy" than Slim. The first thing we learn about him is that he has a pot belly. He makes a joke on Lennie's name, and then proceeds to ask about Slim's "bitch." At first we think Carlson is swearing, but we learn that Slim has a female dog who has given birth to puppies. Both Carlson and Lennie want one of those puppies. Lennie wants one to pet; Carlson wants one to replace Candy's old dog, which he wants to have shot.

Slim and Carlson show us two opposite sets of qualities. Slim presents good will, compassion, and understanding. Carlson presents a lack of concern for others' feelings. We'll see more of these two men and their qualities in later chapters.

As the chapter draws to a close, George agrees to ask Slim for a puppy for Lennie and also nearly starts to fight with Curley. We see a mix of love and fear. Are things hopeful or not? We'll soon see.

CHAPTER 3: VIOLENCE ERUPTS

As Chapter 3 opens we are still in the bunk house later the same day. The men have finished working for the day, and there is a calmness in the air.

This scene also opens with a description of the setting. This time the description involves images of light and darkness next to each other. Outside there is "evening brightness," inside there is "dusk." Slim and George enter the dark bunk house together and turn on a "brilliant" light. You have already seen in the first two chapters that the opening description of the setting helps to create an atmosphere for the whole chapter, so you probably suspect that this chapter will deal with opposites. Some of the events will be "dark" and upsetting and some will be "bright" and promising. If that's your feeling, you're right.

George and Slim continue the conversation they began in the last chapter. Once again George is willing to open up his true feelings to Slim. For the first time we learn all the facts about the history of Lennie and George's partnership. Lennie has always been retarded. He was brought up by his Aunt Clara, and when she died Lennie began going places with George. At first George took advantage of Lennie's stupidity and innocence. But when he realized that Lennie would do anything he said, even something dangerous, George stopped kidding him.

Little by little, George has come to realize what Lennie means to him. Lennie makes George feel "God damn smart alongside him." He also helps him avoid the loneliness that is "no fun" and causes a ranch hand to "get mean." Slim understands all of this and supports George's opinions fully.

George feels so secure talking to Slim that he even reveals what happened in Weed that caused George and Lennie to flee. Lennie, with his passion for soft things, began feeling a girl's soft dress. She screamed, Lennie panicked and tore the dress, the girl accused him of rape, and a posse chased after the men. They hid in an irrigation ditch. Water seems always to provide George and Lennie with safety.

Remember this story. In fact, remember all of the events that occur in this chapter. They are part of Steinbeck's foreshadowing technique.

NOTE: Steinbeck's Use of Foreshadowing

Foreshadowing is a writing technique that involves having early events or descriptions in a story give hints about what will happen later. You've probably seen this technique used a lot in mystery stories you have read or seen on television. For example, the wind begins to whistle and a dog howls. Later the hero discovers that a murder occurred at exactly that time. Or a victim reads about a gruesome death in a book and is later killed in just that way.

Foreshadowing is used to build drama or suspense.

Steinbeck uses foreshadowing often in his books, particularly in *Of Mice and Men*. It is one of the main ways that he moves that story along and links one event to another. Watch for the following event in this chapter: the description of the "rape" in Weed, the killing of Candy's dog and Candy's response to it, and Lennie's fight with Curley. Each will be echoed in later parts of the book. All of these events involve violence, so there is sure to be more violence to come.

While George continues his conversation with Slim, Lennie walks into the bunk house. He is crouched over. George knows exactly what is going on. Lennie is hiding his puppy just as he had hidden the mouse the night before. George warns him, prophetically, that he'll kill the puppy if he handles it too much.

The rest of the men come into the bunk house alter their game of horseshoes. When Carlson enters, Steinbeck presents another pair of light/dark images. Carlson turns on a light and declares "Darker'n hell in here." This line is setting us up for what is to come next— a dark moment.

Carlson begins pressuring Candy to shoot his dog. He says it's for the dog's own good, but that's not true. Carlson's senses are offended by the dog's smell and the fact that "he don't have no fun." Slim tells Candy, "I wisht somebody'd shoot me if I get old an` cripple." Since Candy is the only old cripple on the ranch, he is probably a little worried by this last comment.

Why do you think Carlson wants to get rid of the dog so badly? And why does Steinbeck present such a long scene around the killing of the dog? Here are a few possible reasons. Decide which one or ones you think may be right.

For one thing, Steinbeck wants to show that Carlson and the other ranch hands live only for today. They can't understand why Candy would prefer an old, crippled dog to a new puppy. Ranch hands like Carlson, don't think about the past or the future. They work for a month, spend their money on Saturday night fun, and start over again from scratch. Maybe that's why most of them have trouble understanding why George and Lennie want to plan for the future. *Candy's* dog is part of his past and a symbol of future old age of all of the men. Carlson wants to remove this reminder.

Here's a second possible reason. All of the ranch hands are loners, except George and Lennie, and Candy with his dog. Killing the dog restores nearly total loneliness to the bunk house world.

A third reason may be that Carlson wants to show his manhood by killing the dog. When Candy challenges Carlson about whether he has a gun, Carlson says proudly, "The hell I ain't. Got a luger." He then puts the pistol in his hip pocket like some Western gunslinger. Steinbeck may be showing us how far this "new West" has fallen from the "old West" of movie, book, and magazine fame. Carlson is not out to kill an outlaw to prove his manhood. He's going to shoot an old, crippled animal.

Still a fourth reason involves Steinbeck's foreshadowing technique. We'll learn more about what is being foreshadowed later.

Whatever the reason, Candy eventually does give in, largely because Slim backs Carlson, and Slim's word is law. Carlson continues to demonstrate his lack of compassion before and after the shooting. He shows Candy exactly how he will shoot the dog and then afterwards cleans his gun in front of Candy.

Meanwhile, a new character has come into the bunkhouse— **Whit**. Whit makes only two brief appearances in the book, both during this chapter. In one appearance he reads a letter written by one of the former ranch hands to a popular western magazine. In the other appearance he tells George about the way to spend a Saturday night in town, in the right whorehouse.

What is Whit's role in the book? He seems to have two.

One, he shows us what the life of a ranch hand is like when he is not working. He reads cheap magazines and spends his money on Saturday night entertainment. Whit's excitement in describing both pastimes tells us a little about the emptiness of ranch life.

Whit's second role is to take our minds off of the killing of the dog. Through Whit, Steinbeck seems to be saying that death is a natural part of life, even if man causes it. He doesn't want us to feel too emotional about the event.

Meanwhile, a more interesting situation is developing. Curley has come into the bunk house looking once again for his wife. He suspects that she may be in the barn with Slim, and is going looking for him. You've probably seen situations like this before. Someone is out to pick a fight, and everyone wants to go watch it. All of the men rush out, except for George, Lennie, and Candy.

George and Lennie start talking. George warns Lennie to stay away from Curley's wife. All women are trouble, he says, and the only safe woman is a whore. Since we're getting used to Steinbeck's foreshadowing, we're starting to suspect that warnings like these are to be taken seriously. They are hints of bad things to come.

Lennie is getting a little worried too and asks George to reassure him about the dream farm again. George starts off without hesitating this time. This version of the dream is similar to the one we heard last night, but it is not exactly the same. Everything seems even more real now. George even names the kind of trees and crops they will plant, the kinds of animals they will have, and the kind of house they will live in. The vision sounds so real that Candy, who is listening, asks George, "You know where's a place like that?" It turns out that George does indeed have a real place in mind. The ranch costs only \$600, but it might as well cost \$6000 as far as George and Lennie are concerned. They don't have any money. Candy offers to put up more than half of the money. He has \$300 in the bank, most of it received when his hand was cut off. He even agrees to leave his share to the other two men when he dies. All Candy wants is security in his old age and a place of his own for a little while.

Remember the discussion about light and dark images at the beginning of this scene? Good feelings (light) now seem to have replaced the dark clouds caused by the killing of the dog. Steinbeck comments, "This thing they had never really believed in was coming true." Both George and Lennie experience unusual religious feelings. In a "reverent" way, George says, "Jesus Christ! I bet we could swing her," and Lennie adds, in his imitating way, "I bet by Christ he [the puppy] likes it there, by Jesus."

Why do you think Candy is the one who wants to be part of the dream instead of one of the other men, such as Slim or Whit? Maybe because Candy is as afraid of loneliness as George and Lennie. Or maybe because he feels as out of place in the bunk house as they do. Or maybe because he is the only other person on the ranch who understands the importance of companionship.

Now that Candy is accepted as a friend, he can confide a deeply important and personal thought to George. He tells George that he should have shot his dog himself and not let a stranger do it. Remember this comment: it's another important moment of foreshadowing. We have now seen one dark event and one light event in this chapter. We're about to confront another dark happening. Curley, who did not fight Slim, comes into the bunk house. He is still itching for a fight. When he sees Lennie still smiling over the thought of the future ranch, Curley thinks Lennie is smirking at him. He begins to punch the big man and draws blood. Lennie doesn't know what to do until George urges him to fight back. He grabs Curley's hand in his "paw" and flops the man around until the hand is crushed.

NOTE: Hand Images

In the fight between Curley and Lennie, we are swamped with mentions of the word "hand" or with hand images. In fact, "hand" or its synonyms are used more than 100 times in the novel. Curley is "handy"; Lennie is "not handy"; Lennie has paws; Candy is missing a hand. Steinbeck seems to be trying to show us that the people on the ranch are manual labourers, people who use their hands more than, or instead of, their brains. Slim's comment to Curley after the fight seems to fit this idea. Slim asks Curley, whose hand is crushed, "You got your

senses in hand enough to listen?" Look for more hand images in the book and remember that it is Lennie's thinking and acting with his hands that usually gets him in trouble.

The scene draws to a close with Slim's convincing Curley to say his hand got caught in a machine and George's assuring Lennie that he did nothing wrong. Violence is a natural part of the ranch world, as it is in nature. Once again everything is calm as the curtain falls on another scene.

CHAPTER 4: THE OUTCASTS

You have probably noticed that until the fight at the end of Chapter 3, George and not Lennie has been in the center of the action and a part of the conversations going on at the ranch. That's all going to change. The focus is shifting now, and Lennie is going to be taking over throughout most of the rest of the book. And from what we've already seen of Lennie, we can guess that bad things are likely to happen.

One way that Steinbeck signals that changing focus is to move the setting of Chapter 4 from the bunk house to a place outside of the main life of the ranch. Steinbeck chooses as his "outside" setting Crooks' room off of the barn. Interestingly enough, there will be several more setting changes before the end of the book, but the action will never return to the bunk house. Things will never get back to normal. This switch of setting as a way to change the focus from George to Lennie makes sense because, as we have seen, George can fit into the bunk house life, but Lennie can't. George plays horseshoes with the other men and goes along to the whorehouse. Meanwhile, Lennie stays in the barn to play with his puppy. Choosing the black man's room as the setting makes sense for another reason. Steinbeck wants us to feel the isolation and discrimination that misfits such as Lennie, Candy, Crooks, and Curley's wife have to deal with. As we discover early in the chapter, only the boss and Slim have ever entered Crooks' room. Crooks is isolated both by his skin color and by the home he has been assigned.

You've all seen cluttered rooms, but not many have as much stuff in them as Crooks' room. Part of the stuff is for Crooks himself and part of it is for the horses. Steinbeck describes all of the possessions in detail. Crooks has a lot of things, but look carefully at them. There are broken harnesses and split collars and drippy cans of tar. Nothing is whole. Even Crooks' personal items include tattered books, battered magazines, and gold-rimmed glasses hanging from a nail. Remember the description of the bunk house at the beginning of the last chapter? Compare this room with that one. There are several contrasts you could make, particularly about openness and closeness and lightness and darkness. Though there doesn't seem to be any brightness here; Lennie can spot the one light shining out of the room. It calls him to enter and start talking to Crooks.

For the first time we are seeing Lennie without George. We have a chance to find out what kind of person he really is. George has already told us that Lennie is good to talk to. He seems to let people share their ideas without sticking his opinions in. In that way he is a lot like Slim. In fact, within Crooks' room, Lennie seems to command the same kind of respect that Slim commands within the bunk house. People sort of circle around him.

When Lennie first walks in, Crooks is angry about this "invasion" of his privacy. He says Lennie has no right to be there. The use of the word "right" seems to fit in with one of the books on Crooks' shelf, the California civil code of 1905. Why is that date significant? Perhaps it represents the time when Crooks' father was a landowner and a respected person. Crooks' calling for his rights also echoes similar cries from blacks in the U.S. in the 1930s and since.

NOTE: The Symbol of the Black Man

Steinbeck was always sensitive to the plight of oppressed people, particularly migrant workers and blacks. The character of Crooks gives him an opportunity to make a statement about racial discrimination. Crooks comes from a higher background than most of the ranch hands. His father was not a Southern slave, but a California landowner. He can read, and not just the Bible. He has a dictionary and a law book on his shelf. He points out that his father didn't want him associating with whites. His father was right- through his connection with whites he has become "just a nigger." The way that Lennie changes Crooks' feelings and opinions in the

next few pages seems to symbolize Steinbeck's belief that sensitive communication between blacks and whites could help break down discrimination and isolation. Insensitive treatment, such as that illustrated by Curley's wife later in the chapter, puts Crooks "back in his place." Think about these ideas as you read the dialogue in the rest of this chapter.

Have you ever taken part in a conversation where both people were talking at the same time and neither one really heard the other? That's what goes on for the next few pages. Lennie and Crooks are each talking but not listening. Lennie talks about the rabbits, while Crooks fills us in on his history.

Crooks goes rapidly through a series of opposite emotions. First he gets excited just from the enjoyment of having someone to talk to. He says, "George can tell you screwy things, and it don't matter. It's just the talking. It's just bein' with another guy. That's all." Then he seems to feel jealous of George and Lennie's companionship and begins to take out on Lennie his bad feelings about his own isolation. He suggests to Lennie that George may not come back from town; he may have deserted Lennie. He presents an image that is at once frightening and foreshadowing: "They'll tie ya up with a collar, like a dog," Crooks says. When he realizes how upset Lennie is, Crooks backs down and eases Lennie's mind about George's safety and loyalty.

NOTE: Lennie and Dogs

Lennie is often compared or linked to animals—mice, horses, dogs, bulls. From here to end of the book, he is most often linked with dogs. Notice Crooks' comment above about the dog collar. The only two dogs we have seen so far in the book are Lennie's puppy and Candy's dog. One of these has already met a tragic end, and Lennie has been warned several times that the puppy may die if it is mistreated. You have seen that nothing good seems to happen to dogs in this book and this should prepare you for the worst to happen to Lennie.

Having gotten his anger and frustration out of his system, Crooks suddenly begins listening to what Lennie is saying about his rabbits and the dream farm. Crooks is scornful about the vision. He has seen hundreds of guys with the same dream come and go, and they never made their dreams come true. Then Candy comes in. He is hesitant at first to enter the black man's room. Crooks pretends to be angry about another invasion, but he is really happy for the company.

Are you noticing what has happened to Crooks' personality and sense of isolation since Lennie has entered his room? Crooks' world seems to be changing for the better. Lennie is like that. He seems to suspend the loneliness of those he comes in contact with.

The Candy who enters Crooks' room is also a different person from the man we saw in earlier chapters. He seems more self-assured and important. Like a businessman, he discusses profits to be gained from raising the rabbits. He becomes really emotional when Crooks mentions his doubts about the farm dream ever coming true. "But we gonna do it now, and don't you make no mistake about that," Candy cries.

Crooks is so impressed by this new Candy that he asks to join them as well. He will work for no pay, just his keep. "I ain't so crippled I can't work like a son-of-a-bitch if I want to," he says. The vision seems to have given new manhood to another misfit in the ranch microcosm. Curley's wife, the last of the outcasts on the ranch, enters the room next. She announces, accurately, "They left all the weak ones here." The atmosphere in the room quickly changes. Curley's wife is clearly a threat to all of them, even though Lennie is too dumb or love-struck to realize how vulnerable he is. Candy and Crooks try to put her down, but she knows she has the upper hand. It has been a long time since she has been in such a position of power, and she won't give it up easily.

Look at what happens to the three men when Curley's wife confronts them. Candy and Crooks try to act brave but fail. (They become mice instead of men.) Candy begins to mumble again. And, according to Steinbeck, "Crooks had retired into the terrible protective dignity of the Negro.... He had reduced himself to nothing."

Having cut down the other two men, she begins in on Lennie. She is not trying to attack him, however. She is trying to seduce him. She says, "I like machines," referring to Lennie's strength. She adds, "I might get a couple of rabbits myself," an obvious sexual comment. Doesn't it seem a little strange to you that Curley's attractive young wife should be after Lennie? He certainly doesn't seem like someone sexy or even interested in sex. Perhaps she sees in Lennie what the others have found, a way out of her loneliness. Or perhaps Steinbeck is showing us that man-woman love in this ranch microcosm is as empty as all the other relationships. There is still a third possibility. Perhaps Steinbeck is trying to re-create an Adam and Eve-type situation. A woman is going to topple the vision of Eden by bringing evil into the world. Whether you see Curley's wife as a real person or as a symbol, one thing is clear: she seems pretty dangerous. Is this another case of foreshadowing? We will find out in the next chapter.

When George comes back to the ranch, he once again takes over control from Lennie. He takes on each of the three men in Crooks' room in turn. He tells Lennie he shouldn't be in the room. He is angry that Candy has told someone else about the dream. And he attacks Crooks in an unspoken way. George seems just as bigoted as the other men on the ranch. Crooks senses this and asks to be removed from his place in the vision.

The three men leave Crooks alone, and the black man seems to remember his crippledness. He begins rubbing liniment on his crooked back. All the hopefulness the outcasts have felt, and the new-found manhood that Lennie has helped them achieve, seem lost.

How have your feelings changed during this chapter? Have you gained new respect for Lennie and lost a little respect for George? Does the vision of the ranch seem closer or farther away than it did at the end of Chapter 3? Think about these questions as you head into Chapter 5.

One thing is interesting to note before you go on. In the play version of *Of Mice and Men*, Chapters 3 and 4 make up the second act of the play. In a three-act play, the first act usually sets up the dramatic situation and introduces the characters. The second act presents slow development of the themes. And the third act brings everything to a climax and conclusion. Think about all the ideas that have been developed in Chapters 3 and 4. What do you think the climax to come in the next act is going to involve? All of the hints Steinbeck has given seem to point to a painful rather than a hopeful ending. Candy's dog has been killed. Lennie has fought with Curley. Lennie hasn't been able to avoid Curley's wife completely. George has gotten very nervous and possessive about the dream. He doesn't want to share it with anyone else. It is almost as if he believes in the superstition that telling someone your wish will keep it from coming true. And Lennie has told everyone about it.

CHAPTER 5: DEATH IN THE BARN

You have been getting lots of hints about bad things that may happen to spoil George and Lennie's dream vision. Here come those bad things—and they are going to come quickly. The first four chapters of *Of Mice and Men* have developed slowly and almost lazily at times. There has been a lot of talk so far and a few brief outbursts of action. The pattern is going to change in these last two chapters. They are shorter than the preceding chapters and packed with more activity.

You wouldn't know about this new pattern from the description of the barn Steinbeck presents at the beginning of Chapter 5: "quiet and humming and lazy and warm." But something seems to contradict this atmosphere right away. Lennie is petting his puppy, but the dog is dead.

You probably aren't surprised that Lennie has killed the puppy. Steinbeck has been foreshadowing this all along. Think back to some of the events that gave us clues—the dead mice in Chapter 1, George's warnings in Chapter 3, the death of Candy's dog in Chapter 3.

How do you think that you would respond to the puppy's death if you were Lennie? Lennie's emotions range from anger at the puppy for being so fragile, to worry that George won't let such an irresponsible person tend the rabbits on the farm, to wondering if this killing is bad enough to make him flee to the brush along the riverbank. The one thing Lennie doesn't seem to feel is sadness for the puppy. Once again, Steinbeck seems to be thinking like a biologist. Death occurs in nature. Animals respond to death, but they don't feel regret at having killed. Lennie even tries to act tough about the whole thing. He curses at the dog for getting killed and adds, "This here God damn little son-of-a-bitch wasn't nothing to George."

Things start to get worse. Curley's wife comes into the barn. Lennie quickly buries the puppy and tries to follow George's advice to avoid dealing with her. But she pushes him into a conversation by speaking the almost magic words, "I get lonely." Lennie always seems ready to respond to anyone's need for companionship.

This conversation is a little like the one Lennie and Crooks had in the last chapter. Both people talk, but they don't listen to each other. He tells her about the dead puppy, and she tells him about her sad life. Her words "tumble out in a passion of communication." Once again, Lennie the great listener brings out the talker in other people. She too has dreams that have been cut off. She wanted to be a movie star or a model. Instead she married a man she dislikes, just to spite her mother. She is not living the life of a famous person. In fact, her life is so anonymous that we never even learn her name.

All the time she is talking to Lennie, Curley's wife moves closer to him. Suddenly she realizes that he is not listening to her. She angrily asks him, "Don't you think of nothing but rabbits?"

Now Lennie moves close to her. Lennie has to think about his answer. Doesn't this seem a little strange to you? You would figure that since he's been talking about rabbits from the beginning, he knows why he wants to have them. Maybe he's not so much trying to think of an answer as just trying to think of the right words to explain it. He finally answers that he likes to pet nice things. Curley's wife has been worried that Lennie is nuts, but she can understand his love of soft things. She agrees with him, and then invites disaster. She takes Lennie's hand and puts it on her head. We want to warn her and Lennie. But it is too late.

Think back over the different steps that have led up to this point. They have happened almost in slow motion. Curley's wife walks in. Lennie turns away from her. She sits down beside him. She begins moving toward him. Then he moves toward her. She moves away a little and then comes dose again. She takes his hand. The movements seem a little like a dance or a fight, don't they?

Suddenly we are in fast motion, and the dance becomes a dance of death. Curley's wife screams and struggles. Lennie, afraid of what George will say, tries to quiet her forcefully and eventually breaks her neck. Throughout the description of the struggle and for the next few pages, Steinbeck uses lots of animal images to describe Lennie's actions. He paws the hay and

listens to "the cry of men." He crouches and listens like a frightened beast. Perhaps Steinbeck is trying to show us that Lennie is more an animal than a person.

NOTE: The Nonhuman Side of Lennie

Lennie has been compared to various animals since the first chapter in the book. Yet his animal nature never really seemed dangerous before. Now we are struck with the idea that Lennie cannot fit in human society; he is a more primitive form of life. This idea will be reinforced by Slim's statement at the end of this chapter that if Lennie is left alive he will be strapped down and put in a cage.

Steinbeck created a similar character in his earlier novel, *The Pastures of Heaven*. The character's name was Tularecito. People try to "civilize" Tularecito by sending him to school and beating him until he behaves like a normal boy. But he never does. Instead he strikes back violently when he thinks people are trying to block him from communicating with his real ancestors, the gnomes who live within nature. You might want to read "The Origin of Tularecito" in *The Pastures of Heaven* and see if he is a model for Lennie.

After the killing, everything becomes still and quiet. Slim's dog is the first one to sense death in the air, and she cringes in with her puppies. Meanwhile Curley's wife lies in the barn. She looks more peaceful and lovelier than ever before. In death, she has regained her innocence. Then all hell breaks loose. Candy discovers the body and brings George. They discuss what will happen to Lennie now, but Candy is more interested in their dream. He says that he and George could still get "that little place" and "live nice there." George doesn't even bother to answer. Without Lennie to keep reminding him to discuss the dream and to keep making him feel needed, the dream cannot come true. George has become just another lonely, rootless ranch hand. He says, "I'll work my month an' I'll take my fifty bucks an' I'll stay all night in some lousy cat house." Remember, these are the same words he used to describe the "loneliest guys in the world" in Chapter 1. Lennie is no longer going to be there to chime in, "But not us. ... Because I got you to look after me, and you got me to look after you!"

What do you think about this exchange between Candy and George? Some readers think that it is powerful and emotional; others think that it is overly sentimental. Do you think the exchange is really necessary to get across Steinbeck's message about loneliness being at the heart of life in the 1930s? Or do you think the author is trying to knock you over the head with the message? Your opinion here will probably determine whether or not you like *Of Mice and Men*.

The action continues with the other ranch hands arriving on the scene and setting up a search party (or lynching party) to find Lennie and bring him to "justice." Curley is all for lynching Lennie or shooting him in the guts. After all, Curley has his manhood to defend. Lennie has beaten him in a fight and has now taken away his wife. Slim suggests to George that he not allow Lennie to be captured and caged like an animal (see the previous note). But George already knows this. And we suspect that it was George who stole Carlson's Luger, the gun that was used to kill Candy's dog.

The chapter draws to a close. Candy, who has been left behind, lies down on the hay and covers his eyes with his arm. This is the same pose his dog used to take. There is more death in the air.

CHAPTER 6: DEATH AT THE RIVER

The final scene is set in the same place as the first scene, along the banks of the Salinas River. Even the time of day is almost the same. The story has now made a full circle. The location may be the same, but Steinbeck's description of the setting is quite different. Look carefully for those differences. Look particularly for images of death. There are lots of them.

George had always intended that the brush along the riverbank be a haven for Lennie and him should anything go wrong. But this "new" place doesn't seem so safe. Instead of lizards, rabbits, and deer, we see a water snake gliding along like a submarine, looking for prey. The snake becomes the victim of a heron that "lanced down and plucked it out by the head, and the beak swallowed the little snake while its tail waved frantically." We also saw a heron in the first scene, but it was flying away, not attacking. Instead of "a little wind," we now have a "rush of wind" that gusts through the trees. The leaves are no longer green; they are brown and rotting.

Just as in Chapter 1, man (Lennie) invades nature. But this time Lennie doesn't drink with trust and glee. He barely touches his lips to the water. Lennie has come to wait for George and reassurance that everything will be okay.

As we have seen, Steinbeck's setting descriptions at the beginning of each chapter not only set the scene but create atmosphere as well. The atmosphere here is obviously one of trouble and death.

Even Lennie senses that he has done something really bad this time. Lennie may not be fully human, but his primitive human conscience begins to trouble him. He is haunted by two strange visions. First his Aunt Clara appears to accuse him of not listening to George and of making George's life miserable. She presents Lennie with one of his alternatives—going off by himself. Then Aunt Clara fades away and is replaced by a giant rabbit that says Lennie "ain't fit to lick the boots of no rabbit." The rabbit suggests another alternative—getting beaten by George or deserted by him. Lennie begins to cry for George, and his friend suddenly appears.

NOTE: The Visions

Lennie's two visions give us an interesting insight into his feelings of guilt. Neither Aunt Clara nor the giant rabbit mentions the killing of the girl or the puppy. Lennie isn't really guilty of murder because he isn't responsible for his actions. Lennie's guilt lies more in his failure to live up to the human side of his character, his desire for friendship and a sense of responsibility.

It is interesting that neither vision is included in the play version of *Of Mice and Men*. Perhaps Steinbeck felt that a play audience would not understand or appreciate the presentation of Lennie's lack of guilt.

George and Lennie have two different stories that they share and repeat throughout the book. One involves the vision of the farm; the other is George's mock attack on Lennie as someone who ruins the "good life" he could have. Now Lennie wants to hear the second story. It would convince him that George still wants him around. George starts the attack, but he can't carry it off. He knows that soon Lennie won't be around and he will be forced to live that not-so-good life. So George begins telling the first story instead. Lennie doesn't seem to notice. He just joins in where he always does.

Meanwhile George is placing Carlson's Luger behind Lennie's ear, just where Carlson said he would shoot Curley's dog. George hesitates to pull the trigger. He tells Lennie to look across the river where he can "almost see" the farm. That's how close the vision seemed to him just a day ago. When the voices of the other men sound close by, George shoots.

George has one more act to carry out before the story ends. He lies about Lennie's death, saying that his friend was going to shoot him. Why does George lie? The most logical reason is that George is a survivor. If he admitted that he had stolen Carlson's Luger, he would have been suspect around the ranch from now on. If he admitted that he shot Lennie in cold blood, he would have been labeled a murderer by some. George chooses to go on living with his own feelings. Do you think he feels guilty about killing Lennie? Probably not. Instead, he just feels empty.

The last words in the book are left to Slim and Carlson, the two opposite poles of humanity on the ranch. Slim compassionately says, "You hadda, George." Carlson coldly comments, "Now what the hell ya suppose is eatin' them two guys?" That Steinbeck chooses to leave us with Carlson's message instead of Slim's shows us that he sees the world as a cold, lonely place.

This entire last part is not included in the play version of *Of Mice and Men*. The play ends with Lennie's death. The play ending is moving and a little sentimental. The novel ending is pretty cynical. Which version do you think is more satisfying? Your answer may depend on whether you are sitting in an audience or reading a book. A playwright wants to get a huge round of applause after a performance. A novelist wants to leave the audience in a thoughtful mood. With his two versions of *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck was able to try out both methods.