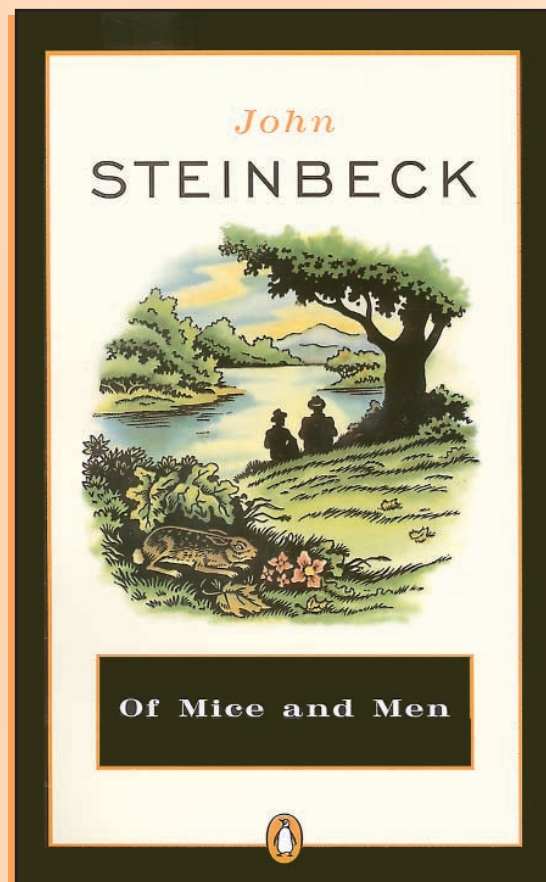




A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO THE PENGUIN EDITION OF

JOHN STEINBECK'S  
**OF MICE AND MEN**

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S E R I E S   E D I T O R S :

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## NOTE TO THE TEACHER

This guide is designed to assist teachers in moving students beyond the surface story of Steinbeck's novella. The prereading activities prepare students for what they will read in the novel. The brief discussion of the techniques of plot, character development and theme employed by Steinbeck in his deceptively simple story provides an overview of the story as well as an understanding of its simplicity and complexity. Teachers are encouraged to guide, help with reading, and yet allow the students to independently respond to the work.

## INTRODUCTION

John Steinbeck is one of the greatest storytellers of the twentieth century. His wonderful novellas *Of Mice and Men*, *The Pearl*, *Cannery Row*, and *The Red Pony* not only introduce readers to a fascinating, realistic cast of characters, make the hills and seacoast of California and Mexico come to life, but also tell intriguing stories of the lives of real people. Steinbeck's characters are not the rich men and women of California's boom days, but are the homeless, the migrant workers, the poor fishermen, and the farmers. However, each of these people has a deceptively simple, but important story to tell, a story filled with love and pain. The stories tell us not only of the lives of the poor who seek to live off the land and sea, but of the struggles of all people.

*Of Mice and Men* is a simple story, but in many ways the most complex of Steinbeck's short books. Although the themes are more obvious than in *The Pearl*, the intentional and unintentional violence in the book and the darkness of the plot and characters make it most appropriate for more mature readers. Its simple, easy-to-read plot but mature theme makes it an excellent choice for older students who experience difficulty reading complex works but are capable of handling mature material. However, teachers who teach the book to an entire class of students should do the following to avoid potential censorship issues:

1. Have the book approved by a selection committee or have it cleared by appropriate administrators if such a committee is not in place.
2. Write a rationale for teaching the book, using some information from this guide, but also citing critical reviews of the work.
3. Invite parents or guardians to read the book, sending home permission slips that must be signed. If there is objection to individual students reading the book, provide a good alternative, perhaps one of Steinbeck's other novellas or a book on a similar theme.

## BEFORE READING THE NOVEL

*Of Mice and Men* needs more prereading introduction than Steinbeck's other novellas. Students must understand something of the setting, particularly the time period, and the lives of migrant workers if they are to understand the work.

1. Begin by introducing students to the setting of the novella. First, its geographic setting in the farm country of California's Salinas valley. Talk about how farmers, even today, employ temporary laborers to harvest the crop. Now, look at the time period in which the book was written—the days following the Great Depression. Talk to the students about what life was like during that period of time. Some limited library research might be appropriate.
  2. It is also important to introduce the migrant worker to the students. If you are in a school system with migrant workers' children, students may already have formed opinions, not necessarily accurate, about them. It might be a good idea to have a group of students research the history of migrant farm workers in this country while other groups research the lives of the migrant worker in the 1930s and today. Students can present brief oral reports on these topics.
  3. Although you don't want to give too much of the story away prior to reading the book, it might be helpful to introduce the relationship of Lennie and George. Students may have difficulty with the first chapter of the book if they do not understand that Lennie is retarded and George has assumed responsibility for caring for him. Ask the students to imagine how difficult it would be to care for a disabled person if they were forced to keep moving from place to place in order to live. Also to help students understand the complexity of this relationship it is helpful to discuss why even a difficult relationship can make life more worthwhile. Students might give examples of relationships with handicapped, ill, or elderly and infirm people.
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**WHILE READING THE NOVEL**

Students must first understand the simple plot line of the tale before they enjoy its symbolic and thematic significance. It is helpful if they understand that the story is a tragedy with a tragic hero with a tragic flaw, a climax, and a tragic resolution. The story is organized in traditional novel fashion with short, chronological chapters. The chapters allow for movement between time and place. So that students can get beyond the story to the significance of the novella, it is helpful to begin discussion with a simple, bare bones plot outline.

**THE PLOT**

The central element of this novella is its plot. Like most tragedies, it has a climax and a tragic resolution. In chapter one we meet George and Lennie as they are leaving one migrant job and moving to the next. They are camped beside a stream. Early in the book we learn that Lennie is not like everyone else and that George, the tragic hero, is caring for Lennie. Lennie loves soft things, he loves to find a little mouse and put it in his pocket so he can pet it, but he is so strong that he kills the mouse with love. We learn of George's frustration with Lennie again forcing them to run. "You do bad things and I got to get you out...You crazy son-of-a-bitch. You keep me in hot water all the time." Lennie replies, "Jus' wanted to feel that girl's dress-jus' wanted to pet it like it was a mouse." We learn in this chapter that Lennie is constantly seeking George's approval. They have a dream, and George uses this dream to try to keep Lennie in line. Lennie keeps begging George to tell him what it will be like when they have their own little place. George tells Lennie that if he gets in trouble to come back here to this place by the river and he will find him here. Now, the reader knows that the trouble is about to begin, and may have discovered George's tragic flaw.

In the second chapter, they arrive at the new ranch and are taken to the bunk house. They meet the old swamper Candy, who is too old to work in the fields and now cleans the bunk house. Lennie and George meet the boss who is angry because they are late. He keeps asking Lennie questions which George answers. George tells the boss about Lennie, "He's my...cousin. I told his old lady I'd take care of him. He got kicked in the head by a horse when he was a kid. He's awright. Just ain't bright. But he can do anything you tell him." But, Lennie does talk, nothing important, but he talks. We learn that Lennie was not kicked in the head by a horse and that Lennie is not George's relative. We also learn that Candy has an old dog he's had since a pup and that the boss is "a nice fella." But, then Lennie and George meet the boss's son Curley, and we know quickly that he will play a role in whatever trouble is to come. Curley tries to make Lennie talk, telling him to talk when he's spoken to; Lennie looks to George for help. Candy tells the boys that Curley hates big guys and has a "purty" wife who has an eye for the ranch hands. George warns Lennie to watch out for Curley and his wife. Not long after the warning, Curley's wife comes into the bunkhouse claiming to be looking for Curley. She flirts with George and Lennie. Slim, a tall skinner who is the leader of the ranch hands, enters and tells her she's not looking very hard, he just saw Curley heading toward home. Lennie keeps repeating over and over, "Gosh, she was purty." Slim wonders aloud about George and Lennie traveling around together, and Carlson, another ranch hand, asks Slim about his dog who "slang her pups last night" suggesting that he encourage Candy to kill off his good-for-nothing old dog and take one of the pups. At the end of the chapter, Lennie begs George to ask Slim for one of the pups and Curley reappears looking for his wife. The setting for the story, the important characters, and impending doom of the tragedy have all been introduced.

The next chapter begins with George thanking Slim for giving Lennie a pup. We learn more of Lennie's strength in the same conversations when Slim says, "Say, you sure was right about him. Maybe he ain't bright, but I never seen such a worker. He damn near killed his partner buckin' barley. There ain't nobody can keep up with him. God awmighty I never seen such a strong guy." We also learn more about George and Lennie's story. Lennie enters the bunk house hiding the pup he is carrying. Like the mouse in chapter one, Lennie denies he has it and finally tells George, "I didn't mean no harm, George. Honest I didn't. I jus' wanted to pet'um a little." George warns him to put it back in its nest. Slim remarks that Lennie is just like a kid, and George replies, "Sure he's jes' like a kid. There ain't no more harm in him than a kid neither, except he's so strong." The men try to convince Candy to shoot his old dog to keep it from suffering. Slim tells Candy he can have the pup if he wants to and agrees that it is time to shoot the old dog. We learn that Lennie is in the barn messing around with the pups. Curley again comes in looking for his wife and thinks she is with Slim. Some of the other ranch hands leave, looking for a fight. Lennie tells George that Curley's wife was not in the barn with Slim and again asks, "how long's it gonna be till we get that little place an' live on the fatta the lan'-an' rabbits?" Old Candy who is still on his bunk overhears and offers to contribute his savings so that the three of them can get a place together. George tells him, "I gotta think about that. We was always gonna do it by ourselves." The ranch hands and Curley reenter the bunk house with Slim scowling at Curley about his wife. Lennie is still smiling over his delight at their ranch and Curley thinks he's laughing at him. At first Lennie tries to avoid a fight, hiding his face in his hands as Curley pummels him. But soon George tells him,

"Get him, Lennie. Don't let him do it." Finally, Lennie grabs Curley's hand and won't let go. George keeps slapping Lennie in the face trying to get him to, "Leggo of him, Lennie. Let go." When he does it is clear Curley is badly injured. They decide to take Curley to the doctor and to warn him to say that "you got your han' caught in a machine." The chapter ends with Lennie feeling bad about the fight and asking George, "I can still tend the rabbits, George?"

At the beginning of chapter three we meet Crooks, the Negro stable buck. Crooks lives in a room in the stable, not in the bunk house with the other men. Lennie does not understand that the white ranch hands do not enter Crooks' room and he wanders in. At first Crooks tries to kick him out, but then decides that talking to him is better than having no one to talk to. Lennie tells Crooks about the ranch they are going to buy with Candy. Candy comes to Crook's door looking for Lennie. Crooks tells him to come in but he hesitates never having been in Crooks' room before. When he enters Lennie begins to talk to him about the rabbits, but Candy quickly changes the subject. After some ribbing from Crooks, Candy admits that they're going to get their own place. All of a sudden Curley's wife is at the door claiming to be looking for Curley. They tell her to leave, but she stays at the door flirting with them, telling them how hard her life is, and asking about Curley's hand. Lennie keeps watching her "his mouth half open." When she sees the bruises on Lennie's face, she realizes how Curley got hurt, "OK Machine," she says to Lennie, "I'll talk to you later. I like machines."

Chapter five is the climax of the tragedy and begins with Lennie in the barn on Sunday afternoon. He is saying to his, "Why do you got to get killed? You ain't so little as mice. I didn't bounce you hard." He worries that now George will not let him take care of the rabbits. As Curley's wife enters, Lennie quickly hides the puppy under the hay. She is dressed in a bright dress, mules, and ostrich feathers. Lennie tells her, "George says I ain't to have nothing to do with you-talk to you or nothing." Lennie resists her until she asks, "What you got covered up there?" All Lennie's emotion comes out and he begins to cry. She consoles him, moves closer to him, and speaks soothingly. She talks to Lennie about how tough her life is with Curley. He listens to her voice, but does not understand the words. She begins to stroke her hair and encourages Lennie to do so by placing his hand on her head. He begins to stroke it, harder and harder, and she cries out in fear. He panics, the more she struggles, the harder he strokes. When she starts to scream, he puts his hand over her mouth so George won't hear and be angry at him. He covers her dead body partially with hay and decides he'll throw the dead pup away so that George won't know he killed it. He puts it under his coat and creeps out of the barn away from the horseshoe game that is going on outside. Candy comes looking for Lennie and finds Curley's wife; he calls George. When George realizes she is dead, he says, "Lennie never done it in meanness." He tells Candy, "We gotta tell the guys. They got to bring him in, I guess. They ain't no way. Maybe they won't hurt 'im." George asks Candy to give him a couple of minutes to go back to the bunk house and then to tell the men just like he just found her. Candy yells at the dead woman, "You God damn tramp...You done it, di'nt you? I s'pose you'r glad." Ever'body knowed you'd mess things up." And he cries, realizing his dream is over. Candy brings the men to the barn. Curley comes to life, "I know who done it...That big son-of-a-bitch done it." George doesn't answer but nods slowly. George, knowing where Lennie has gone, misleads the men telling them, "We come from north so he would of went south." Carlson discovers that his gun is gone and blames it on Lennie. The men head off to the south, Curley with his shotgun and Carlson with Crooks' gun. George follows behind.

The final chapter opens where the book began, next to "the deep green pool of the Salinas River." Lennie is kneeling by the edge of the pool drinking water. He sits on the bank, knowing George will come to where he has told him to hide. George comes quietly out of the brush and tells Lennie he ain't going to leave him. They talk of the bad thing Lennie has done. Lennie asks him to talk about how they have each other. George begins in the same monotonous tone he always uses when he begins the story. He keeps talking, takes off his hat, and tells Lennie to take his off and look across the river. As Lennie does, George reaches for Carlson's gun, and as he hears the men's voices in the distance, he keeps talking and shoots Lennie in the back of the head. The men arrive and Curley tells George how he must of wrestled the gun from Lennie and shot him in the back of the head; George says, "Yeah. Tha's how." And, the story is tragically resolved.

## **THE CHARACTERS**

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The tragic hero of the novella is George, who has agreed to care for Lennie and at first finds it fun, but later understands his responsibility for his life and eventually for his death. Although he appears noble, his tragic flaw is in his willingness to hide the wrongs that Lennie has committed, perhaps for his own good. Lennie is a retarded man who means no harm, but in seeking warmth and comfort kills animals and finally a woman with his strength. Lennie in his ignorance is an innocent but can't help from doing harm because of his brute strength. George is willing to give up his own life for Lennie, realizing that in some ways Lennie gives his life hope, but he is unwilling to deal with the problems Lennie causes. The supporting cast of characters are those who move the plot along and those who provide its symbolic significance. Curley and his wife provide the suspense and climax of the plot. Slim, Candy, Carlson, and Crooks provide the symbolism and foreshadow the events. Candy and Carlson foreshadow the death of Lennie. Crooks' lonely life provides the counterpoint

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to Lennie and George's life, helping explain why George is willing to put up with Lennie and hide his crimes. And Slim is the voice of reason in the tragedy. When George finally must kill Lennie, it is Slim who says to him, "You hadda, George. I swear you hadda."

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## THE SETTING

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Although the setting may not appear to be significant, the plot could take place in few other places. Migrant life is essential to the story; it must occur in a location and at a time in which male migrants were used to farm the land and carry out the work of ranches. It is also essential that the ranch be relatively isolated to provide George and Lennie their cover and escape.

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## SYMBOLS

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Candy's old dog is a symbol of what happens to migrant workers when they live alone and can no longer do the work of the farm or ranch. The rabbits that Lennie constantly imagines are symbolic of the comfort he wants to find in a home place. It can also be said that Lennie provides this same kind of comforting symbol to George. Curley and Curley's wife both represent evil—both oppress and abuse the migrants in different ways.

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## FORESHADOWING

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The killing of Candy's old dog is the ending of a hard life and foreshadows the death of Lennie. At the same time, the killing of the dog represents the end of a relationship that made life worth living and provided hope. This, too, foreshadows Lennie's death. The death of the mouse in the first chapter foreshadows the later death of the pup and the death of Curley's wife. When Curley's wife suggests that Lennie stroke her hair, we know she, too, is doomed.

Themes: Although this novella does not have as many themes as some of Steinbeck's other short works, students can explore several: the importance of relationships, responsibility to others, the nature of home, respect for old age, the difference between right and wrong, and the evil of oppression and abuse.

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## TEACHING METHODOLOGY

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Because of the importance of the plot of this novella, it is useful to complete a plotline as a class or in small groups. This can be done for each chapter on chart paper in timeline format and displayed somewhere in the room.

This novella produces a great deal of emotional response that can lead to excellent discussions. Each chapter provides an event or a series of events to which students can respond in writing and orally.

## AFTER READING THE NOVEL

Students can write about or explore a variety of ways in which to respond to *Of Mice and Men*. One of the most important response techniques teachers can employ is the dialogue journal. While students are reading the story (or the story is being read to them), periodically have them stop reading and write to you (or to a peer or, perhaps, a local college student) about what they have read. The person to whom they are writing, whether the teacher, peer, or college student, should respond, in letter format in the journal, to what they have written. If you are the person responding, you may want to in writing to five or six students per day, thereby writing to an entire class in the course of a week. If some class time is used to have the students write in their dialogue journals, you can utilize this time to write responses to them. In addition to the dialogue journal technique, students can respond in the following ways:

1. **Personal statement**—these include emotional reactions, expressions of identification or empathy with characters or place, conjecture about characters, and autobiographical associations.

**Suggested Activities**—React in writing to the relationship between George and Lennie. Do you have to know people that have relationships with retarded or handicapped people? Write about the difficulties and the values of these relationships. or, write about a relationship you have or had with a pet. If that pet has died, write about how you felt.

2. **Description**—statements which attempt to classify or describe the form, language, structure content of the work; such responses can range in complexity from the simple recall of explicitly stated information to an analysis of the stylistic properties. **Suggested Activities**—Orally, in your own words, describe what happens when Candy's old dog
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is killed. Why do you think Steinbeck includes this scene with the killing of the old dog in the story? If you have not yet finished the story, discuss or write about what you think might occur? If you have finished the book, discuss or write about how the killing of the dog foreshadows what happens in the novel.

What does the mouse in the first chapter tell you about Lennie? What does it tell you about the relationship of George and Lennie? How does George try to keep Lennie from getting in trouble? Does Lennie really believe what he does is wrong? What does he think about what he does? Why does he worry about it? Write or discuss a time when you were more concerned about what someone else thought about what you did rather than whether it was wrong or right.

3. **Interpretation**—responses aimed at identifying the symbolic or thematic meaning of a work; interpretation requires of readers an ability to infer the intentions of Steinbeck. **Suggested Activities**—Write your own interpretation of what happens between Crooks and Lennie. How does Steinbeck use Crooks' life to help explain the relationship between George and Lennie? How does what Crooks says to Lennie help explain why George will come back?

Discuss in small groups what happens when Lennie is alone in the barn in chapter five. How did he kill the pup? What does this tell you about how Lennie responds to what is right and wrong? What does he think when he kills the pup? What does he do? What does his killing the pup tell you about what is likely to happen when Curley's wife comes in? Why does this change? How does he kill her? Why? What does he think and do after he kills her?

When we see Lennie at the pool in the next chapter, why does Steinbeck have him imagine Aunt Clara and the rabbit? What does this tell us about Lennie? Does he really believe what he has done is wrong? Is George right when he says, "He never done this to be mean"? Why does Lennie do it?

4. **Evaluation**—responses aimed at assessing the construction, meaningfulness, or appropriateness of *Of Mice and Men*.

**Suggested Activities**—Write about the suspense you found in the novel. How does Steinbeck create that suspense? What is the climax of the book (the place at which the action turns)? What is the resolution? Why does George kill Lennie? Is Slim right when he says, "You hadda, George."?

Many critics consider this one of the greatest short works of fiction of all time. Why do you think they say this? Write about or discuss some of the important themes Steinbeck addresses in this short book: The importance of relationships, responsibility to others, the nature of home, respect for old age, the difference between right and wrong, and the evil of oppression and abuse. Discuss how he uses the story and characters to address the theme. What can we learn about the theme from Steinbeck's book?

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## ABOUT THE EDITORS OF THIS GUIDE

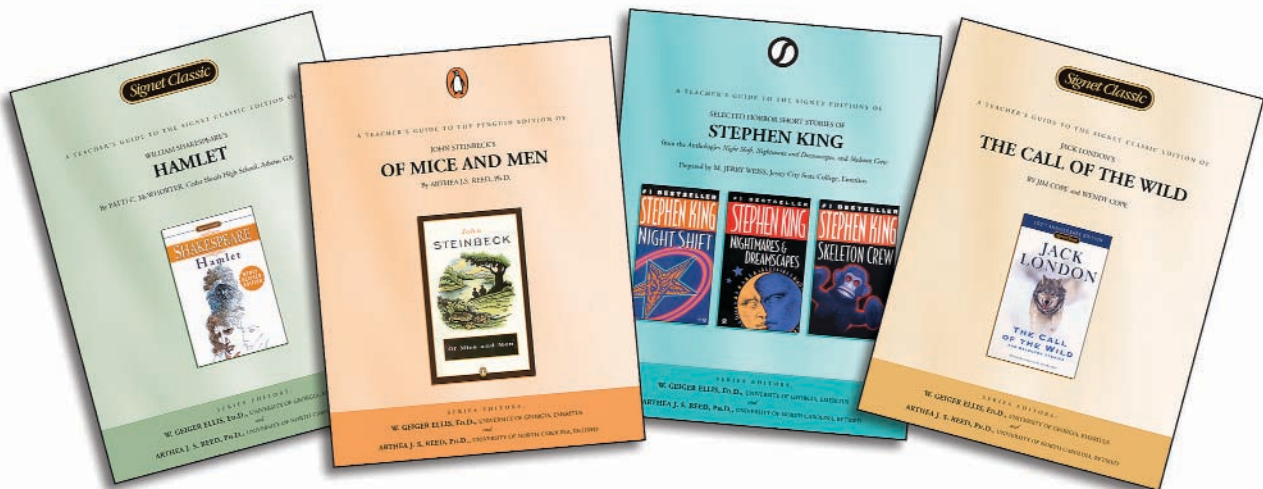
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