
GRADE 11 ENGLISH STUDY GUIDE***Of Mice and Men***

by John Steinbeck

Introduction:

John Steinbeck (1902-1968) was born and grew up in Salinas, California, a small town in Salinas Valley, a very rich agricultural region a few miles in from the coast. Although extremely intelligent, he was not a disciplined scholar. He attended Stanford University sporadically for several years (1919-1925), but he took only courses that interested him, especially marine biology, and he never received a degree. Fortunately, his mother, a schoolteacher, instilled in him a love of reading; and, on his own, he became a competent medieval scholar. His early works reflect an interest in and mastery of Anglo-Saxon themes—comitatus,* e.g., in *Beowulf*, a motif clearly evident in *Of Mice and Men*—and the Arthurian legends, especially Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, most obvious in *Tortilla Flat*, but present also in *Of Mice and Men*.

While he was searching for a career, he worked at all manner of odd jobs, many of which provided him with the raw material of his later novels. Eventually, he made his way east to New York, where he became a newspaper reporter for a brief period.

His first three novels were largely unsuccessful, but in 1935 he finally succeeded in having *Tortilla Flat* published. This novel relates a story about simple working people, mostly farm hands. The plot closely parallels the Arthurian legends, although many critics of the day failed to recognize the connection. Later, in a preface to the novel, Steinbeck stated the following:

. . . Danny's house was not unlike the Round Table, and Danny's friends were not unlike the knights of it. And this is the story of how that group came into being, of how it flourished and grew to be an organization beautiful and wise.... In the end, this story tells how the talisman was lost and how the group disintegrated.

This novel was followed in 1937 by *Of Mice and Men*, which also builds on the Arthurian legends. The protagonist, George, is a type of knight errant, a poor man's Galahad, who journeys abroad with his vassal, Lennie, a simple-minded giant. The two share a common dream of an Edenic little spread or garden—a Camelot. The loyalty these two develop toward each other is a cross between the comitatus of *Beowulf* and the chivalric fealty of the Round Table. When George launches into the dream and rhapsodizes about the vision, his story assumes the dimension of ritual: "George's voice became deeper. He repeated his words rhythmically as though he had said them many times before. 'Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world'" (14-15).

Following *Of Mice and Men*, the last work to deal with Arthurian material, Steinbeck often turned to the Bible for motifs and titles: *Grapes of Wrath* (1939), his masterpiece, and *East of Eden* (1952), for example. His career culminated in 1962 when he was awarded the Nobel Prize.

*See end note for definition.

The title for *Of Mice and Men* is borrowed from a poem by Robert Burns (1759-1796), "To a Mouse." The poet has plowed up and destroyed the home of a field mouse:

But, Mousie, thou art no thy lane, (alone)
In proving foresight may be vain;
The best laid schemes o' mice an' men
Gang aft a-gley, (go awry)
An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain
For promised joy.

Of Mice and Men, then, is about schemes or plans (the dream of a little farm or spread) that are doomed. Why the dream is doomed is a matter which the reader must ponder. Is it because the conditions of life are beyond our control and man's fate is determined by uncontrollable forces? Does man lack the will to determine his own fate? Yet George has a free will. He deliberately decides to pull the trigger and then later decides to lie to the others about what has happened. Slim's final comment may provide an answer.

Style and Technique:

Although *Tortilla Flat* met with mixed reaction, *Of Mice and Men* was the work that really established Steinbeck as a national writer. Steinbeck had been striving toward an objective technique of narrating, keeping himself as author in the background, and in this work he achieved his objective brilliantly. So objective is the narrative that the author rarely intrudes. It reads like a cross between a novel and a play. In fact, in collaboration with George L. Kaufman, noted playwright, Steinbeck rewrote the work as a play, which won wide success on the New York Stage. It was subsequently produced as a very successful movie, and it has recently appeared on TV and even as an opera in Seattle in 1970.

Like Hemingway, his contemporary, Steinbeck was a master of economy, as demonstrated especially in this work and *The Pearl*. (Oddly, though, his masterpiece, *Grapes of Wrath*, is a prolix work.) The style is deceptive—not only brief but also plain and simple. The meaning, however, will require your close attention. A carefully crafted work, its every character has a very specific function. Although they may appear to be minor, Candy, Crooks, and Curley's wife require careful analysis. Carlson and Slim operate as opposites. These two characters conclude the novel, and it is important to consider how their concluding comments reflect basic themes.

The American Dream:

The novel is also about illusions or dreams, in Arthurian terms a vision or quest. The reader must consider the purpose of dreams and what happens when man's dreams are destroyed. The American dream is a basic motif that has always dominated our literature. It began when the first Europeans began to dream of a "promised land" where they could live and worship and prosper in peace. From colonial times American writers have pursued that dream. The dream may be manifest in many ways but always involves a home of one's own, a place where one can beget and rear a family—where one belongs! For centuries the dream/quest meant a westering. From very early, California was the "promised land" for countless hundreds of thousands, a place where people can live off "the fatta the lan'," as Lennie calls it. California is the "promised land" in *The Grapes of Wrath*, another novel in which the dream is central. George and Lennie (joined later by Candy and to a lesser degree, Crooks) share a dream. They come so close to the dream that they can see it, but then, like Galahad, Lennie is whiffed into eternity, and George's life figuratively comes to an end.

Loneliness and Friendship:

Like the dream, the theme of loneliness has been a pervasive one in the expanding panorama of our literature. The vast, open wilderness of the frontier isolated our pioneers and often doomed them to lives of haunting loneliness. The wilderness has disappeared, or changed, at least, to an equally hostile urban wilderness, but the need for companionship, the need to belong, remains basic and fundamental.

In *Of Mice and Men*, two lonely drifters cling to each other because they have nothing else to cling to. But they are not the only lonely ones. All of the major characters experience to some degree the excruciating pain of loneliness and isolation; however, the other characters have no one to cling to. Curley's wife, although she may be a tramp, as George calls her, is a pathetic victim of loneliness: "Think I don't like to talk to somebody ever' once in a while?" (85). Crooks, though, is probably the most poignant victim of loneliness because he is cruelly isolated by the process of segregation and doomed to seek solace and companionship in books, but "Books an't no good. A guy needs somebody—to be near him" (80).

Symbols/Recurring Images Motifs:

Because Steinbeck grew up in the Salinas Valley, he knew and loved the land and its people. Before writing the novel (and most of his major works), he lived among the people who would become his cast of characters. Therefore, the symbols and images he uses to develop his themes are closely related to the natural world he knew and loved so much. As you read, anticipate and think about the following:

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Arthurian motifs <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Chivalric code b. Camelot/Round Table c. Ritual d. Grail 2. The Dream <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Home b. Family and love c. Security d. "the fatta the lan" 3. Animals as symbols <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Dead mouse b. Rabbits c. Pups d. Candy's dog e. Water snakes | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. water, Salinas River 5. work 6. loneliness 7. Crooks and his room 8. survival 9. suffering 10. man's nature 11. physical deformities |
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General Study Questions:

1. Consider carefully all of the characters' names. Some names are ironic. Why? Why are other names appropriate? Why does one important character have no name?
2. Animal imagery permeates this novel, much of it the result of Steinbeck's training in biology. Why is the animal imagery appropriate? What is the effect?
3. In a critical essay about this novel, Warren French states, "Despite the grim events it chronicles, *Of Mice and Men* is not a tragedy, but a comedy...about the triumph of the indomitable will to survive." Do you agree with this statement? Who are the survivors and how do they survive?
4. Like many other great works of literature, this novel explores the nature of good and evil. How does George's final act fit into the good-evil dichotomy? How do you feel about this act? Why do you feel the way you do? How do you interpret Slim's final comment about the act? Carlson's final comment?
5. How do you feel about Curley's wife? Why do you feel as you do? How do you interpret Steinbeck's final comment about her?
6. What is the purpose of Candy's dog? What do you learn about Candy, Carlson, and others from the old dog? How does Candy's unwillingness to shoot the old dog relate to the ending of the story?
7. How would you describe the relationship between George and Lennie? Is the relationship one-sided or is it mutual? How does George react when others question their relationship, and what does his reaction show?
8. To what extent do George and Lennie determine the course of their lives? Do they exercise free will, or is their fate determined by circumstances beyond their control?
9. How do you think Steinbeck feels about dreams? Do you think anyone realizes his/her dream?
10. What is the function of the episode concerning Lennie's experience with the girl in Weed? What does it show about Lennie? What does it foreshadow?

11. John Clark Pratt, a prominent critic, concludes that George is "...Steinbeck's greatest tragic hero, one who is true to Mark Van Doren's definition, 'a man who is basically good, yet commits evil.'" Do you agree with this statement? Does George fit the pattern of a classical hero?

Definitions:

1. **comitatus**—In Anglo-Saxon culture, comitatus was a code of conduct by which warriors pledged themselves by personal oath to a chief with whom they lived and served. The chief pledged to care for and protect the warrior in return.
2. **symbol**—A symbol is an object, character or animal that stands for some idea. Usually a symbol contains the attributes of the idea it represents. Thus, Candy's old dog, worn-out and dying, suggests that Candy, also worn-out and useless, will meet with a similar fate, although he will be tossed into the poor-house rather than actually killed.
3. **image**—An image is simply a detail that evokes a sensory response; one can see it, feel it, taste, etc. Through images and imagery the writer directs and controls the reader's response. Thus the imagery in the opening scene, the same scene to which the story returns in the end, is intentionally quiet, tranquil and serene.
4. **theme**—Not to be confused with plot—simply the chronological sequence of events—theme actually reveals the meaning of the events, the idea and significance behind the plot. Themes will always imply something important about man—the human condition.