George and Lennie are itinerant farm workers who have a dream of one day owning their own farm.

Topics:  Adventure, Danger; Adventure, Survival; Adventure, Travel; Animals, Farm Animals; Family Life, Death; Natural Environments, Forests/Jungles; Natural Environments, Rivers/Lakes; Occupations/Industries, Farming/Agriculture; People, Friends; Social Issues, Homelessness; Social Issues, Inequality/Minority Groups; Social Issues, Mental Illness; Social Issues, Poverty/Money Crisis

Main Characters

Candy  an old, crippled farm worker at the ranch who offers his savings to be a part of George and Lennie's dream
Carlson  the farm worker who shoots Candy's old dog
Crooks  the negro stable buck who lives on his own in a room off the barn
Curley  the boss's son; a short, antagonistic man
Curley's wife  a lonely woman with broken dreams, who likes to talk to the men
George Milton  an itinerant farm worker who has taken on the responsibility of caring for his simple-minded friend, Lennie
Lennie Small  a large, strong man with the mind of a child
Slim  a farm worker who is sympathetic to George and Lennie

Vocabulary

- **apprehension**: fearful anticipation, dread
- **belligerently**: in an aggressive manner
- **mollified**: soothed, appeased
- **morosely**: in a sullen or gloomy manner
- **pugnacious**: prone to fighting

Synopsis

George and Lennie are on their way to a ranch where they are due to start work the next morning. George is small and likes to avoid work whenever possible, while Lennie is a strong and willing worker but is mentally slow. Lennie gets the pair into trouble wherever they go: they were forced to flee from their last place after a girl falsely accused Lennie of rape. Lennie strokes a mouse he has found, though his rough handling has killed it. George admonishes him, but then promises to get Lennie a puppy, which might cope better with Lennie's affection. George tells Lennie throughout the story about how one day they will own a farm of their own. Lennie particularly wants some rabbits to breed and look after.

They arrive at the ranch the next day but are too late to work that morning, and the boss is not happy. They meet Curley, the boss's son, who married two weeks earlier and likes to pick fights. George tells Lennie not to have anything to do with Curley, and to hide in the bushes by the stream if he gets into any trouble.

Later on they meet Slim, the jerkline Skinner, whose dog has just had puppies. Lennie wants one badly, and Slim agrees that he can have one when they are old enough to leave their mother. Lennie picks one out and goes into the stable whenever he can to stroke the puppy. Candy, the swamper, has an old dog and the other men urge him to shoot it, saying he can
have one of Slim's pups. After much discussion, reluctantly Candy agrees to let Carlson take the dog out and shoot it with his Luger.

Candy brightens up when he hears about the place George and Lennie are going to have, and offers to put up all his money if they'll let him go in with them. Meanwhile Curley, who has been looking everywhere for his wife, tries to pick a fight with everyone and ends up taking on Lennie. Lennie takes his punches until George tells him to fight back, and Curley ends up with a broken hand.

On Saturday night, while everyone else has gone into town, Lennie and Candy talk with Crooks, the stable buck, and for a short time Crooks is also taken in by their talk of having their own place. Curley's wife appears at the stable door, and will not leave until they hear the others return.

Lennie’s pup dies, apparently because he was too rough with it. He knows George will be upset with him, and he is wondering whether to tell George or to hide the pup in the straw, when Curley's wife appears and they start talking. She lets Lennie stroke her hair but when Lennie doesn't let go, she panics. Lennie is afraid that she will yell and that George will be mad at him. He shakes her so she'll stop, and accidentally breaks her neck.

Lennie hides in the bushes, and Curley's wife's body is found in the barn. George considers having Lennie locked up for his own safety, but Candy urges him to let Lennie get away, because Curley will kill him if he finds him. Candy tells George that they can now have the place they buy just for themselves, but George explains that it was just a story that he told to make Lennie happy. George decides it would be kinder to kill Lennie himself, so he takes Carlson's Luger and goes to Lennie's hiding place. As he tells him to think about their place and the rabbits, he shoots Lennie from behind.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

How is Curley's wife portrayed?

She has no identity, as evidenced by her lack of a name. She lives in the shadow of her cruel husband, who gives her no attention. She appears to never leave the ranch, and yet Curley seems to be always looking for her. When she speaks to the farmhands, she reveals herself as a pathetic character who has lost her dreams.

Literary Analysis

How does Steinbeck use irony in this book?

Steinbeck uses irony to highlight the desolation of the characters' lives, and also the insignificance of life, be it animal or human. It is also used to reveal the needs and emotions of individuals, such as in the friendship between George and Lennie, the attachment of Candy to his dog, and Curley's wife's desperate need for company, while showing the uselessness of having such needs and emotions. One example of irony is that both Lennie and Candy's dog were killed using Carlson's gun, and their deaths were treated with the same sense of resignation. Another example is that Lennie has a childlike affection for soft things, yet he cannot control his strength and he ends up destroying them.
Inferential Comprehension
Why was killing Lennie the kindest thing George could have done?

*If George had not killed Lennie, Curley would have done it in a rough, vindictive fashion, and Lennie would have been terrified. When Lennie had killed things, it had not been done with hate, and he had tried to do what George told him to do. George probably felt partly responsible for what had happened because he had promised to look after Lennie.*

Constructing Meaning
In what ways is Lennie like an animal?

*He takes delight in the simplest of pleasures and acts on instinct. He is often compared to an animal, and described as an animal, particularly in the first chapter when he and George are resting by the stream. George commands Lennie, and Lennie obeys. Lennie is protective and loyal to George, as a dog is to its master.*

Teachable Skills

**Recognizing Setting:** This book is set in California, near Soledad and the Salinas River. John Steinbeck was born in Salinas, California, in 1902 and spent most of his life in the fertile valleys of this state. As a young man, he wandered around the countryside learning about and admiring nature. His love for nature and his mastery at describing it are apparent in this novel. Have students imagine the same story set in an urban or modern setting where nature itself is replaced by tall buildings, traffic lights and concrete. George and Lennie might work in a factory. How would George and Lennie cope in this environment?

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors:** *Of Mice and Men* was first published in 1937, during the era of "The Hungry Thirties", a time of labour conflicts, food lines and depression. Steinbeck wrote articles about life in California's labour camps, and he also lived in a labour camp for a short time while researching material for one of his books. Australian workers also suffered during the Great Depression in Australia during the 1930s. Ask the students to research this period of time, perhaps using newspaper or magazine articles, or reading Australian works of fiction such as Jackie French's *Somewhere Around the Corner*. Then ask them to place the characters of Lennie and George in this setting, and discuss what their life may have been like. What would Curley's wife's life have been like, and would she have been treated differently?

**Describing Actions or Events:** Mens' leisure and sporting activities are highly detailed, and many are very specific to the era and to the location. These activities include horse-shoe tenements, and card games like euchre and solitaire. Using the book as a guide, ask the students to imagine what a horse-shoe tenement might be like, and then write two to three paragraphs describing one. Is there anything today that might be something like this?

**Responding to Literature:** John Steinbeck's writing has been called cinematic. His written scenes have a sweeping, cut-away style that is similar to scenes in films. In fact, several of his books have been made into films. After reading the book, have students watch the 1992 version of *Of Mice and Men*, starring Gary Sinise and John Malkovich. Have students compare the book with the movie. How are the characters in the movie portrayed? How far do they resemble the characters in the book? Whose performance is stronger--Sinise's or Malkovich's and why? Have students note any differences or changes in the movie. Have any scenes been added or
deleted? Which ones? Does this add to or detract from the original story? Ponder why Sinise, both director and actor, chose to interpret the book in the way he did.