DREAMS, HOPES, AND PLANS

George and Lennie may dream a little dream of owning a farm, but they don't get very far with their to-do list before it all crumbles in heartbreaking failure. As Crooks points out, all ranch hands dream of owning their own farm; it's their version of the 2.5 kids and white picket fence. Unfortunately, white picket fences are in short supply during the [Great Depression](https://www.shmoop.com/great-depression/), and *Of Mice and Men* ends in the only way it can: with the utter collapse of everyone's dream—even Curley's.

Questions About Dreams, Hopes, and Plans

1. Does the dream farm mean the same thing to Lennie as it does to George? If not, what are the differences?
2. Once Candy announces he has the money for the ranch, the narrator declares, "This thing they had never really believed in was coming true." Is that a fair declaration? Did the guys ever really believe they'd get the ranch?
3. Can dreams become actual plans, or are they aspirations that should remain untouched, so that there's always something to reach for?
4. Do others on the farm also have dreams? Is it important to share these dreams with others, or is it more important that the dreams be kept secret?

FRIENDSHIP

*Of Mice and Men* is the equivalent of a [bro hug](http://www.mediabistro.com/mediajobsdaily/files/2011/11/Screen-shot-2011-11-11-at-4.27.05-PM.png): all sublimated emotion, gruff affection, and hearty back pats. George and Lennie don't text each other eleven times a day, and they don't like every single cat picture the other posts on Facebook—but we still get the sense that they take their friendship more seriously than anything. After all, what else do they have? And what else do any of us have?

Questions About Friendship

1. Friendship generally seems like a good thing, but the ranch life might be better suited to loners. Are there some circumstances under which it's simply better to be alone? Does George have to learn this lesson the hard way?
2. Is George and Lennie's friendship fully reciprocal? Do both members contribute and receive equally from each other? Are there any other sets of friends in the book? Why is friendship so rare?
3. It seems like everyone, from Crooks to Slim, spends an awful lot of time complaining to his friends about how he has no friends. Are these guys really that lonely, or do they simply not recognize they've all got one other? *Do*they all have one other?
4. George says quite a bit about how much better his life would be if he didn't have to take care of Lennie. If this is true, why does he stay with Lennie?

ISOLATION

[No man is an island](http://isu.indstate.edu/ilnprof/ENG451/ISLAND/)… unless he's an itinerant worker during the [Great Depression](http://www.shmoop.com/great-depression/), and then he's about as lonely as you can get. But for all the talk about loneliness in *Of Mice and Men*, these guys sure do hang out together a lot. (They even go to the whorehouse together. We bet they visit the bathroom at the same time, too.) Does this mean they're not isolated? Or do they meet, make new friends, new enemies, and then head out to their next job, all the while failing to make any real, human connections?

Questions About Isolation

1. Why does everyone seem to feel so isolated all the time? Is this a function of the ranch, the era, the world, human nature, or something else?
2. Crooks's isolation is also his protection, especially witnessed by that awful scene where Curley's wife threatens him. Is this isolation worth it? Is it ever worth it? Would Lennie have been safer if he'd been isolated?
3. Why do those who are isolated "get mean," as George says, even if they're surrounded by people all the time?
4. Are George or Lennie ever isolated?

INNOCENCE

Lennie's mental disability makes him into a child, with a child's innocence: he likes hanging out with George and petting soft things. Sounds like a great Friday night! Oh, but there's a problem: he's a child trapped in the body of a powerful man. Innocence may protect Lennie, because he never has to deal with the reality of what he's done—but it doesn't protect the people (or pets) around him. Does *Of Mice and Men* see childlike innocence as the better path? Should we all be like Lennie? Or do we need to be more like George, crushing out our innocence to stay alive?

Questions About Innocence

1. Is Lennie the only innocent character in the novel? Is he the most innocent? Does Lennie's innocence protect him, or make him dangerous?
2. Though Lennie seems gentle and dumb, he's not all sunshine and rainbows—like when he tries to break the future cats' necks for hurting the future rabbits. Is Lennie seen as innocent because he's mentally slow, or is he actually a hardened killer?
3. Is Curley's wife malicious because she's really an awful person, or is she simply lonely and naïve?

JUSTICE

Meet us at the [OK Corral](http://www.ok-corral.com/)… and bring a gun, because you might end up having to shoot a dog. In *Of Mice and Men*, justice happens the cowboy way. The ranch operates by its own set of rules, without a higher order dictated by ethics, legal precedent, pity, or even common sense. Slim, the local ranch man of wisdom, hands down decisions, and the people around him accept his word as what's best, even if it's not always easy. Sometimes it means you have to get beat up because you had it coming, and sometimes you have to kill your best friend because it's the right thing to do.

Questions About Justice

1. Is it true that the ranch has its own kind of justice? What variables factor into that justice? What's most influential in deciding justice—ethics, the law, social status, intention, etc.?
2. Is Lennie justified in crushing Curley's hand? Is Slim justified in threatening Curley about letting anyone know what really what went on? Why or why not?
3. Is it reasonable to let Slim be the arbiter of justice on the ranch? Does Slim make good decisions?
4. Did Curley's wife get what she deserved? Why or why not?

The American Dream

*Of Mice and Men*'s America is filled with dreamers and strugglers, who all have a different idea of what life should be: Hollywood, a quiet ranch, the pages of a pulp magazine. What all these visions have in common in their absolute impossibility. The wanna-be starlet never will be; the quiet ranch is just a bedtime story; the magazine is just peddling advertisements. Does the novel suggest that there's no such thing as the American dream? Or does that real America of hope and possibility exist somewhere just over the horizon?

Questions About The American Dream

1. In *Of Mice and Men*, is America the land of futility or opportunity? Are dreams ever realizable? If so, for whom? For anyone, or only for particular people?
2. Could this be a story about making it in a tough agricultural migrant town anywhere? Is it a universal story still relevant today, or is it particularly keyed to issues of the Great Depression?
3. Is struggle and overcoming obstacles part of the American story? How so?
4. Is it possible to achieve the American Dream without struggling? Or is struggle a necessary element of the American Dream?

VIOLENCE

*Of Mice and Men* may be about men full of masculine bravado, and there may be some pretty shocking violence, but these guys also inflict psychological and emotional violence as though they're auditioning for [*Mean Girls*:*The Musical*](http://www.buzzfeed.com/nowthisnews/mean-girls-the-musical-749g). Violence in the novel is physical, psychological, and emotional. Characters are so accustomed to suspicion and failure that they treat each other cruelly, more ready to destroy each other's dreams (and bodies) than to build them up. Violence may be a natural outlet for all of the ranch's despair and limited possibilities, but it sure does make the world an ugly place.

Questions About Violence

1. How do Lennie's violent tendencies affect the way we feel about him? Do we ever think of Lennie as violent, or does he seem more like a gentle guy who accidentally performs violent acts?
2. Is violence an acceptable part of life on the ranch? If so, at what point is it no longer acceptable?
3. Is Lennie's death ultimately a violent act or a loving act by George?
4. Are Lennie's "murders" more or less violent than George's? Explain.

PREJUDICE

Which –ism are you interested in today? Take your pick: *Of Mice and Men* offers racism, sexism, ageism, ableism, and (why not?) sizeism—and those who are discriminated against accept the prejudice against them as a way of life. There may be grumbling, but there's no sense that Curley's wife, Crooks, Candy, or Lennie feel like a grave and inexcusable injustice is being perpetrated against them. That's just the way it is, and people learn to operate in their little boxes. Our question: is Steinbeck speaking out against these prejudices? Or does he also just accept them?

Questions About Prejudice

1. Which characters seem to be the most prejudiced? The least prejudiced? How do you know?
2. What causes the above characters to either be prejudiced or not based on what we know of the story and the time period?
3. Does being in an isolated environment (the farm workers being around each other all the time) make them more prejudiced or less prejudiced? Do all isolated environments (like high school or English class or summer camp) lead to prejudices?
4. How can we tell the line between being prejudiced and simply being wise? If the boss had known what happened in Weed and refused to hire Lennie, would that have been discrimination, or sensible and life-saving?

WOMEN AND FEMININITY

In *Choose Your Own Woman: Of Mice and Men*, you have two options: a prostitute, or Curley's wife. There's no such things as a nice girl to settle down with, if your life is spent moving from ranch to ranch on the open road. So, women are reduced purely to sexual objects—and at least with prostitutes, George says, you pay for what you get. Curley's wife is a sexual object, but all she can really offer is trouble. We get the feeling that the characters in *Of Mice and Men* would really be better off without women.

Questions About Women and Femininity

1. Is Curley's wife viewed as an especially bad woman, or is she pretty standard as far as the guys are concerned? What makes her so bad?
2. What are some factors that cause Curley’s wife to be the way that she is (attention-seeking, flirtatious, insecure, etc.)?
3. Do any of the characters have a positive attitude towards any woman in the story? Are there any positive women around for them to have good attitudes toward? What about Aunt Clara? What about Suzy, who runs the good whorehouse?
4. Is there a place for women in ranch life? Is ranch life supposed to be just a phase before the stability that comes with settling down and "having a girl"?