

OF MICE AND MEN

by

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Study Notes; A Hynes

Outline/Plot Development/Characters/Analysis

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Lennie Small and George Milton are two of the main characters in the novel. They are friends. Lennie is a little slow but he is a good worker and kind to animals. He is **naïve** (he doesn't understand a lot of things going on around him, and sometimes he trusts people too easily) and he gets hurt easily. George looks after him. George is smart and sacrifices a lot in his life to stay with Lennie.

- 1) Lennie and George have left Weed. They've been run out of the place after Lennie mistakenly pulled at the dress of a girl. They sit by a river. They are heading for another ranch.
- 2) George has to remind Lennie about what happened to them in Weed and where they are going. He takes a dead mouse from Lennie who's been petting it in his pocket.
- 3) George warns Lennie not to say a word when they get to the new farm.
- 4) That night they make a fire and George tells Lennie that he'd like to settle down and marry but Lennie keeps him from doing so. Then he promises that he and Lennie will get a farm and they will live of 'the fat of the land'.
- 5) George takes another mouse from Lennie. They eat. It's possibly the best, and certainly the last, time they'll be alone and enjoy one another's company. George tells Lennie how a lot of men like them don't have a home or friends or love in their lives. They are drifters, moving from one job to the next.

Note:

It is important to know the **cultural** context of the novel. Cultural context looks at the country, the people, **values** and times that a novel or play, or any art form, is dealing with. The background to *Of Mice And Men* is 1930s America. Life is hard.

The novel is set in California during the **Depression years**. This was when there was large unemployment in America. In the novel we see how hard people had to work and how **poverty** was a part of many people's lives. It is very much a **male world** we are reading about. The story is told mainly about men on a ranch.

Old age, death, loneliness and violence are major **themes** that come up throughout the novel. It is a **racial society**. As we see in the novel a black stable hand, Crooks, has to live on his own. At that time American society was **racially divided**.

- 6) George and Lennie have a dream. They want to buy a farm. If they succeed it will free them. They will be able to work for themselves. Lennie talks about the animals they'll have on the farm, in particular George's promise that he'll get to tend the rabbits.
- 7) The boss of the Tyler Ranch interviews them. He asks George how come he does the talking for the two of them? George explains that Lennie needs looking after.
- 8) Soon after, the boss's son, Curley, comes into the bunkhouse. He's not as understanding as his father when Lennie doesn't talk to him.
- 9) Candy, the old sweeper, warns them that Curley likes to take on bigger men just to prove he's no pushover. He says Curley is dangerous.
- 10) Lennie is worried. George warns Lennie to stay away from Curley. Never talk to him. If anything bad happens, he tells Lennie, go to the river where they spent the night before. Lennie should wait for George in the woods.

Note:

There is already a lot of **tension** in the novel. Curley's aggressive attitude causes most of it. And we worry that Lennie will say the wrong thing at the wrong time.

We see how **vulnerable** (easily hurt, lacking confidence, afraid) Lennie is, even though he is much bigger and stronger than Curley.

11) Curley's wife comes in the door. She says she's looking for Curley. When she's gone George warns Lennie to be careful with her. Lennie says he doesn't like this place. He can sense there's something wrong. It's an important statement because it is the last place Lennie will be in his life.

12) Slim and Carlson come in. Slim, a tall man, is a charge-hand. Carlson, a big, strong man, works with Slim. They all get to know one another. Slim likes Lennie and promises to give him one of the puppies he has.

Note:

The tension increases when Curley's wife enters the picture. She looks for a lot of attention. She too feels **lonely** and **isolated** on the farm. She is the only woman there. She had higher ambitions than to marry Curley. She wanted to be a Hollywood movie star. She thinks living on the farm has ruined her chances of fame and success.

In these scenes we also see how there is **friendship** and **camaraderie** among the workmen. Though they might be **drifters** (going from farm to farm looking for work), lead tough lives and work hard, they show **empathy** (that is understanding and concern) for one another and for animals. Candy loves his old dog. It is his true friend. Slim loves cattle, horses, and he cares very much for the puppies.

Lennie, as we know, loves mice and rabbits and puppies.

13) That evening Slim tells George that Lennie is a great worker. He's the strongest man on the farm. George feels he can trust Slim and tells him that Lennie's Aunt Clara asked him to look after Lennie. Lennie can't live on his own.

George goes on to tell Slim how they had a problem in Weed. Lennie touched the red dress of a girl in Weed. The girl was scared and she shouted for help. This made Lennie nervous and he held on to the dress, but he didn't hurt her. Still, the men in Weed went after him. George and Lennie had to leave in a hurry.

14) George makes Lennie take the puppy back to its mother, since its only been born a few days. Lennie wants to keep the puppy with him all the time. Slim says Lennie might be a big man but he's only a little boy on the inside.

Note:

Slim is right about Lennie. He is a good worker and a kind man. But really Lennie is a child. He cannot cope in the 'big' world. He needs people like George to help him. Otherwise he will never **survive**. There is also a matter of **trust** here. George trusts that he can tell Slim things, like Aunt Clara's asking him to mind Lennie when she dies, and what happened in Weed. We also learn from George that Lennie can be fun.

We admire George because he stays with Lennie no matter what. He keeps his **promise** to Aunt Clara. Sometimes George gets frustrated and gives out to Lennie. This is natural. George would like to be left alone, or have a wife and a family.

15) Candy cleans out the bunkhouse. He can't use his right hand. He hears Lennie talk to George about the farm they hope to buy. Candy says he'd like to go in on a deal with them. Soon the three of them are talking about purchasing the farm. It is a place that George knows. He says he can get the farm for \$600. Candy says he can put together \$300. They just need to put Candy's savings and their wages together and they'll have the farm. Candy can cook, George and Lennie can farm, though Lennie's main concern is to 'tend the rabbits'. They will have vegetables and they will 'live of the fat of the land'.

- 16) Candy is old. He is lonely. Soon he will have to put his old dog down. He won't be wanted anymore on the farm. Here is his chance to make something of his last years.
- 17) George and Lennie get excited because soon they can have **control** over their own **destiny**. They will own their own land and work it as they see fit. There will be no bosses or fighting or drifting for them anymore.
- 18) Slim and some of the workmen play cards in the bunkhouse. George and Lenny watch. Carlson cleans his gun. They decide to go to Susy's Bar in the town next night. Just then Curley comes in. He's in bad humour and looking for a fight. He asks if anyone's seen his wife. When told no he bangs the door after him.
- 19) Lennie tells George that he doesn't want any trouble. Curley comes back with Slim. He's apologising to Slim for asking him if he knew where his wife was, but now he's even angrier and when he sees everyone is against him he turns on Lennie. He asks Lennie: 'what are you laughing at?' Lennie moves away but suddenly Curley hits him across the face. George tells Lennie to hit back. Curley hits Lennie again, this time in the stomach. Lennie crushes Curley's hand. George has to stop him.

Note:

This is **humiliation** for Curley. Lennie has beaten him right in front of the men. The men say that if Curley does nothing to Lennie then they won't tell what really happened to him. They'll pretend that Curley got his hand caught in a machine. This is another example of **violence** and **conflict** in the novel. Curley will have **revenge** on his mind. Also, it shows how Curley is a very **insecure** and **jealous** man. He only knows to pick on the simple minded Lennie.

- 20) When the men go into town for a night out Lennie minds his pup. After a while he goes into Crooks' room. Crooks lives away from the other men. He has a room of his own. Crooks doesn't want Lennie in his room but eventually lets him in.
- 21) Crooks thinks Lennie is crazy when he talks about minding rabbits. He upsets Lennie by asking what he'd do if anything happened to George, or if George decided not to come back anymore. Lennie gets nervous and wants to know who hurt George. Crooks realises that Lennie could be dangerous if upset and eventually calms him down.

Note:

Crooks is treated differently to the other men. This is because he is black and in those times there was **segregation** of black and white. It is known as **racial discrimination**. African-Americans were treated like second class citizens. The men on the farm were seen as lower class at the time, yet Crooks was caste even lower. Ironically it is Lennie who breaks the **segregation barrier** by visiting Crook's room.

- 22) Candy joins Lennie and Crooks for a chat. This is the first time Candy has entered Crook's room. Eventually they get round to talking about the farm. Crooks is sceptical that they will get a farm.
- 23) Curley's wife enters. The men don't like her coming round. Crooks tells her she shouldn't be in the room. Candy tells her to go back to the house but she says she's lonely and wants to talk to somebody. She finds out that Lennie got his facial bruise from Curley, while it was Lennie who smashed Curley's hand.

Note:

This is another example of **loneliness** and **isolation** in the novel. Curley's wife is the only woman on the ranch. This is very isolating. Also, she had higher ambitions for herself (Hollywood actress) and never wanted to marry so young and settle down with some one like Curley. She is alone in the big farmhouse. She has no friends. Curley does not understand her. He is an immature man. She is an unhappy woman.

24) The next day the men play games outside the bunkhouse. Lennie plays with his pup in one of the farm buildings. The pup dies. Lennie is greatly upset.

Again, he doesn't realise his strength.

25) Curley's wife comes into the farm building. Lennie says he can't talk to her. George would be upset. But soon he's talking about the dead pup, how he didn't mean for it to die, how upset George will be.

26) Curley's wife allows Lennie to rub her hair. It is like the silky soft skin of a puppy. Unfortunately Lennie rubs too hard and Curley's wife gets upset. She tells him to stop! Lennie panics when she shouts. He shakes her, holds her mouth, breaks her neck

27) Lennie knows: 'I did a bad thing'. He remembers what George told him to do if there's trouble. Wait for him in the woods. As soon as the dead woman is discovered there is a search party lead by Curley.

28) George is the first to find Lennie. Lennie is surprised that George is not angry with him after what happened. They talk about the farm they will buy, the animals they will have on the farm, and in particular Lennie getting to tend the rabbits. George tells Lennie to look towards the river.

29) George pulls out Carlson's gun. Lennie continues to talk about the animals on their new farm and how happy they will be (a new paradise he hopes to live in). George shoots Lennie in the back of the head.

Note:

This is the only kind of **Justice** Lennie could receive in *Of Mice And Men*. Had George not shown this 'kindness' then the men, lead by Curley, would have hung Lennie from the nearest tree. There would be no law or trial for Lennie. Proper justice did not exist for people like Lennie, nor for the poor and powerless people in the novel.

We come across many **themes** and **issues** in this novel, many of which have a **universal** relevance. These are important issues the novel deals with, like loneliness, poverty, racism, unemployment, violence, friendship, death, are as relevant to our lives today as they were in the America of John Steinbeck's time.

In the film **genre** (genre is another form of narration or expression, like the short story, or poem, a novel, a play, a song, etc) the DVD version (starring John Malkovich as Lennie and Gary Sinise as George, and Directed by Gary Senise) we see an excellent portrayal of the main characters, especially Lennie. He is tall, lovable, simple, naïve. George is anxious but caring. Curley is angry and frustrated. Candy is sad, old, uncared for. Slim is strong, in authority. Curley's wife is lonely and unhappy. Crooks is isolated and learns how to protect himself.

Scenes of George and Lennie looking for work, living in the bunkhouse like 'family, the long hot days in the fields, threats from Curley, men losing their money on a night out in the town, old age, death are well covered by the film as they are in the novel.

The landscape in the film is also well portrayed. The machinery, housing, and clothes of the time are well researched. This was the life of a farm hand in nineteen thirties America.