

Themes

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

The Predatory Nature of Human Existence - *Of Mice and Men* teaches a grim lesson about the nature of human existence. Nearly all of the characters, including [George](#), [Lennie](#), [Candy](#), [Crooks](#), and [Curley's wife](#), admit, at one time or another, to having a profound sense of loneliness and isolation. Each desires the comfort of a friend, but will settle for the attentive ear of a stranger. Curley's wife admits to Candy, Crooks, and Lennie that she is unhappily married, and Crooks tells Lennie that life is no good without a companion to turn to in times of confusion and need. The characters are rendered helpless by their isolation, and yet, even at their weakest, they seek to destroy those who are even weaker than they. Perhaps the most powerful example of this cruel tendency is when Crooks criticizes Lennie's dream of the farm and his dependence on George. Having just admitted his own vulnerabilities—he is a black man with a crooked back who longs for companionship—Crooks zeroes in on Lennie's own weaknesses.

In scenes such as this one, Steinbeck records a profound human truth: oppression does not come only from the hands of the strong or the powerful. Crooks seems at his strongest when he has nearly reduced Lennie to tears for fear that something bad has happened to George, just as Curley's wife feels most powerful when she threatens to have Crooks lynched. The novel suggests that the most visible kind of strength, that used to oppress others, is itself born of weakness.

Fraternity and the Idealized Male Friendship - One of the reasons that the tragic end of George and Lennie's friendship has such a profound impact is that one senses that the friends have, by the end of the novel, lost a dream larger than themselves. The farm on which George and Lennie plan to live—a place that no one ever reaches—has a magnetic quality, as Crooks points out. After hearing a description of only a few sentences, [Candy](#) is completely drawn in by its magic. Crooks has witnessed countless men fall under the same silly spell, and still he cannot help but ask Lennie if he can have a patch of garden to hoe there. The men in *Of Mice and Men* desire to come together in a way that would allow them to be like brothers to one another. That is, they want to live with one another's best interests in mind, to protect each other, and to know that there is someone in the world dedicated to protecting them. Given the harsh, lonely conditions under which these men live, it should come as no surprise that they idealize friendships between men in such a way.

Ultimately, however, the world is too harsh and predatory a place to sustain such relationships. Lennie and George, who come closest to achieving this ideal of brotherhood, are forced to separate tragically. With this, a rare friendship vanishes, but the rest of the world—represented by [Curley](#) and [Carlson](#), who watch George stumble away with grief from his friend's dead body—fails to acknowledge or appreciate it.

The Impossibility of the American Dream - Most of the characters in *Of Mice and Men* admit, at one point or another, to dreaming of a different life. Before her death, Curley's wife confesses her desire to be a movie star. Crooks, bitter as he is, allows himself the pleasant fantasy of hoeing a patch of garden on Lennie's farm one day, and Candy latches on desperately to George's vision of owning a couple of acres. Before the action of the novel begins, circumstances have robbed most of the characters of these wishes. Curley's wife, for instance, has resigned herself to an unfulfilling

marriage. What makes all of these dreams typically American is that the dreamers wish for untarnished happiness, for the freedom to follow their own desires. George and Lennie's dream of owning a farm, which would enable them to sustain themselves, and, most important, offer them protection from an inhospitable world, represents a prototypically American ideal. Their journey, which awakens George to the impossibility of this dream, sadly proves that the bitter Crooks is right: such paradises of freedom, contentment, and safety are not to be found in this world.