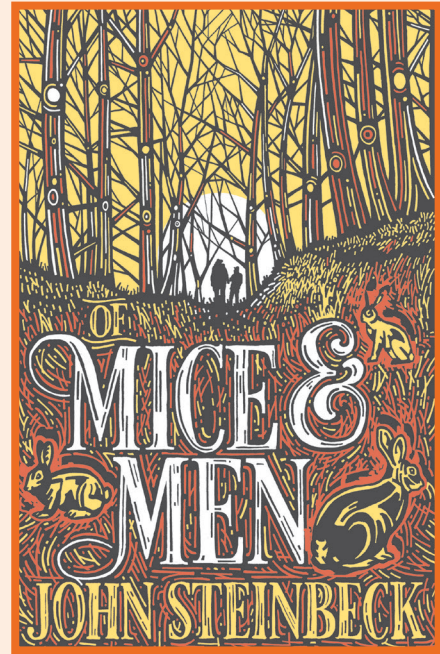




# Barrington Stoke

## CLASSROOM RESOURCES



# OF MICE AND MEN

## John Steinbeck

### INTRODUCTION

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**PART 2**      **Chapter One**

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## INTRODUCTION

This guide has been produced to provide ideas for guiding readers through John Steinbeck's **Of Mice and Men**, a classic of American literature and a brilliantly evocative example of the short novel form.

This guide will start with a synopsis and a brief cultural and historical background to the text. From here it is suggested that Chapter One of the novella be read and discussed in isolation with the provided questions. After the book has been read in full, this guide will break down the text into its key characters, themes and scenes. The questions assigned to each aspect of the novel are accompanied by quotes and are intended to further an understanding of the text and provide opportunities for classroom discussion or written work.

We hope you enjoy using these materials with your students.



## PART I SYNOPSIS AND BACKGROUND

### SYNOPSIS

**Of Mice and Men** is a short novel focusing on the story of two workers, George and Lennie, in 1930s California, who have found new work at a ranch in a town called Soledad. The whole story takes place over the course of four days and follows George and Lennie as they start work in Soledad alongside other 'down on their luck' workers. George cares for his friend Lennie, who has a learning disability and would struggle with life on his own. Throughout the short novel the two men discuss their plans and dreams to one day own land of their own where they can live and work for themselves. When a horrible incident sees Lennie accidentally kill a woman, George is forced to make the terrible decision to kill him and their hopes of living out their happy dream are cut tragically short.

### CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

First published in 1937, John Steinbeck's novel **Of Mice and Men** is still considered to be one of the great works of American literature and a shining example of the short novel form.

Set against the backdrop of the Great Depression, a catastrophic economic downturn that occurred in the wake of WWI, **Of Mice and Men** dramatises the lives of the desperately poor migrant agricultural workers of this time. For the majority of these workers life was destitute and lonely, and although California held the promise of prosperity, their choice to move only brought further struggles and unending poverty. Steinbeck based the novella on his own experiences of working alongside migrant workers as a teenager, and it is a subject that he returns to in his novel *The Grapes of Wrath*.

**Of Mice and Men** has been adapted several times into both films and plays, and in its original form it is still studied in schools and universities across the world today.

Before starting the novel with the group ask them the following questions:

**Have you heard of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* before?**

#### No

- What impression do you get of the novel from its front cover and title?
- What do you think the novel is about?

#### Yes

- What do you know about the book? (Try not to give away any of the plot!)



## PART 2 CHAPTER ONE

Read the first chapter as a group before reading the rest of the novel. Use the questions and quotes below to discuss the opening to the novel and to help encourage critical thinking as the readers progress through the rest of the text. We will return to some of these questions later:

### SETTING

*A few miles south of Soledad, the Salinas River drops in close to the hillside bank and runs deep and green [...] There is a path through the willows and among the sycamores, a path beaten hard by boys coming down from the ranches to swim in the deep pool, and beaten hard by tramps who come wearily down from the highway in the evening to jungle-up near water. [page 1–2]*

- Where is the book set?
- When is the book set?
  - Can you think of anything that might be important about this time period?

**The place George and Lennie are travelling to is called Soledad; find out what it means:**

- Why do you think Steinbeck has chosen to call the town Soledad?
- What could this place name and its meaning tell us about the rest of the book?
- Do you think the place name could have any further meaning for the book?



## GEORGE AND LENNIE

*Both were dressed in denim trousers and in denim coats with brass buttons. Both wore black, shapeless hats and both carried tight blanket rolls slung over their shoulders. The first man was small and quick, dark of face, with restless eyes and sharp, strong features. Every part of him was defined: small, strong hands, slender arms, a thin and bony nose. Behind him walked his opposite, a huge man, shapeless of face, with large, pale eyes, with wide, sloping shoulders; and he walked heavily, dragging his feet a little, the way a bear drags his paws. His arms did not swing at his sides, but hung loosely.*  
[page 4–5]

- What can we tell about George and Lennie from their introduction?
- What sort of men do you think they are?
- What are the differences between them?

**Take George and Lennie in turn and try to describe them in your own words.**

*“Where we goin’, George?” The little man jerked down the brim of his hat and scowled over at Lennie. “So you forgot that awready, did you? I gotta tell you again, do I? Jesus Christ, you’re a crazy bastard!”*

*“I forgot,” Lennie said softly. “I tried not to forget. Honest to God I did, George.”*

[...]

*“That ranch we’re goin’ to is right down there about a quarter mile. We’re gonna go in an’ see the boss. Now, look – I’ll give him the work tickets, but you ain’t gonna say a word. You jus’ stand there and don’t say nothing. If he finds out what a crazy bastard you are, we won’t get no job [...] “OK. Now when we go in to see the boss, what you gonna do?” “I ... I,” Lennie thought. His face grew tight with thought. “I ... ain’t gonna say nothin’. Jus’ gonna stan’ there.”*

[...]

*“God, you’re a lot of trouble,” said George. “I could get along so easy and so nice if I didn’t have you on my tail. I could live so easy and maybe have a girl.” [page 8–15]*

- What can we tell about George and Lennie’s relationship?
- Do you think they are friends? Brothers? Or work colleagues?
- Who is in charge in the relationship?
- Why do you think they are travelling together? Do you think they would be able to travel separately?

**How does the opening chapter make you feel about the central characters?**

- Do you like George and Lennie?
- Do you feel sorry for George and Lennie?
- What sort of life do you think George and Lennie lead? Is it a happy one?

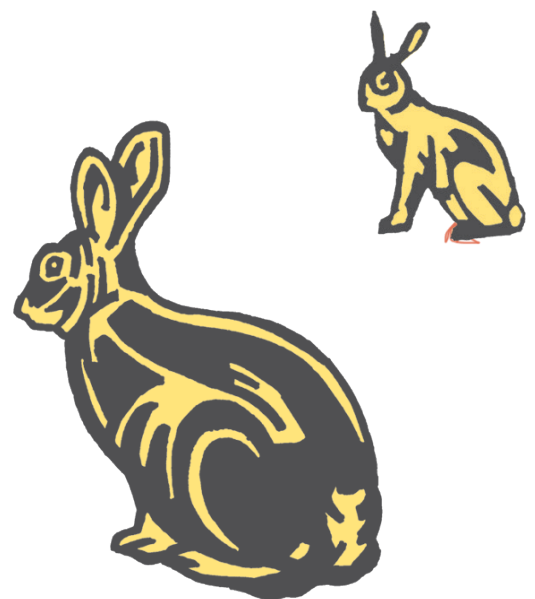
## GEORGE AND LENNIE'S DREAM:

"Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don't belong no place [...] "With us it ain't like that. We got a future [...] Someday – we're gonna get the jack together and we're gonna have a little house and a couple of acres an' a cow and some pigs and –"

"An' live off the fatta the lan'," Lennie shouted. [...] "Well," said George, "we'll have a big vegetable patch and a rabbit hutch and chickens. And when it rains in the winter, we'll just say the hell with goin' to work, and we'll build up a fire in the stove and set around it an' listen to the rain comin' down on the roof" [page 30–33]

- What can George and Lennie's 'dream' tell us about their position in life?
- Why do you think this dream is so important to them?
- Do you think this 'dream' helps them?
- What might this 'dream' tell us about the time period this book is set in?
- Do you know the phrase 'The American Dream'?
  - What do you think 'The American Dream' means?
  - Do you think George and Lennie's 'dream' is representative of this idea?

Does the opening chapter to *Of Mice and Men* make you want to keep reading the book? Why?



## PART 3 THE KEY CHARACTERS

In this section we will return to the characters of George and Lennie whilst also looking at the five biggest supporting characters. All of these characters help to illuminate and support the book's central themes, and play major roles in the key scenes of the text:

### GEORGE AND LENNIE

**Return to the discussion of their characters from Chapter One:**

- Has your perception of these characters changed after finishing the full text?
  - How has it changed? Did they act the way you expected them to?
  - What do you think about these characters now?
- How has their characterisation changed from chapter one?
- What new information did we learn about them as the story progressed? Give examples.
- Have your feelings towards them changed? At what point in the text did you start to feel differently about them?
- Are they sympathetic characters? Why?
- Are they tragic characters? Why?
- How do you think Steinbeck wants us to feel about them?

**How would you describe George and Lennie? What do you think are their most prominent characteristics?**

- Take each one in turn and describe them again in your own words. Focus this time on their personality, the way they act, and their flaws and strengths. Try not to focus on their physical descriptions.
- You may use examples from the text to support your descriptions.

**Compare your descriptions of each character:**

- How are George and Lennie different from each other? What contrasts are there?
- Do you think their differences are important to the story? Why?
- What similarities do they have? What does that tell us about their relationship?

## SLIM AND CURLEY

*A tall man stood in the doorway [...] When he had finished combing his hair he moved into the room, and he moved with a majesty only achieved by royalty and master craftsmen [...] There was a gravity in his manner and a quiet so profound that all talk stopped when he spoke. His authority was so great that his word was taken on any subject, be it politics or love. This was Slim, the jerkline skinner. His hatchet face was ageless. He might have been thirty-five or fifty. His ear heard more than was said to him, and his slow speech had overtones not of thought, but of understanding beyond thought. His hands, large and lean, were as delicate in their action as those of a temple dancer. [page 75–76]*

- What sort of character is Slim? Do you like him?
- What role does Slim play within the book?
- What do the other characters think of Slim?
- How does Slim treat George and Lennie? What does that tell us about him?
- What are Slim's main characteristics? What language does Steinbeck use to highlight them?
- Do you think Slim is a good man? Why? What actions can you identify that show this?
- What three words would you use to describe Slim?

*A thin young man with a brown face, with brown eyes and a head of tightly curled hair. He wore a work glove on his left hand, and, like the boss, he wore high-heeled boots [...] His eyes passed over the new men and he stopped. He glanced coldly at George and then at Lennie. His arms gradually bent at the elbows and his hands closed into fists. He stiffened and went into a slight crouch. His glance was at once calculating and pugnacious. [page 56]*

- What sort of character is Curley? Do you like him?
- What role does Curley play within the book?
- Does it matter that Curley is the son of the boss? Why? Does this change his character at all?
- What do the other characters think of Curley?
- How does Curley treat George and Lennie? What does that tell us about him?
- What are Curley's main characteristics? What language does Steinbeck use to highlight them?
- Do you think Curley is a good man? Why? What actions can you identify that show this?
- What three words would you use to describe Curley?

### In what ways are Slim and Curley in opposition to each other?

- Look at their introductions. What descriptive language does Steinbeck use to set up these differences? Pull out examples and compare them.



## CANDY AND HIS OLD DOG

*The door opened and a tall, stoop-shouldered old man came in. He was dressed in blue jeans and he carried a big push-broom in his left hand [...] He pointed with his right arm, and out of the sleeve came a round stick-like wrist, but no hand [...] The old swamper looked quickly at him, and then shuffled to the door rubbing his whiskers with his knuckles as he went. [page 40–46]*

- What sort of character is Candy? Do you like him?
- What role does Candy play within the book?
- What do the other characters think of Candy?
- How does Candy treat George and Lennie? What does that tell us about him?
- What are Candy's main characteristics? What language does Steinbeck use to highlight them?
- What three words would you use to describe Candy?

*The old man came slowly into the room. He had his broom in his hand. And at his heels there walked a drag-footed sheep dog, gray of muzzle, and with pale, blind old eyes. The dog struggled lamely to the side of the room and lay down, grunting softly to himself and licking his grizzled, moth-eaten coat. [page 54]*

**Candy is closely linked to his old pet dog and there are many similarities in the way that they are described.**

- Compare their descriptions and look at the language that Steinbeck chooses. What similarities are there?
- Why do you think Steinbeck does this?
- What does this tell us about Candy's role in the group and how he is viewed by the other characters?
- How does this comparison affect the way that you feel about Candy?

## CROOKS

*“Ya see the stable buck’s a nigger.” “Nigger, huh?” “Yeah. Nice fella too. Got a crooked back where a horse kicked him. The boss gives him hell when he’s mad. But the stable buck don’t give a damn about that ...”*

[...]

*The door opened quietly and the stable buck put in his head; a lean negro head, lined with pain, the eyes patient. [page 44 & 114]*

- What sort of character is Crooks? Do you like him?
- What do the other characters think of Crooks?
- How does Crooks treat George and Lennie? What does that tell us about him?
- What three words would you use to describe Crooks?

### **Look at Crooks’ full introduction at the beginning of Chapter 4:**

- What makes Crooks stand out from the other characters?
- Why is Crooks separated from the other characters?
- Why do you think Steinbeck spends so long describing him and the space he lives in compared to the other characters?
- What characteristics define Crooks? What language does Steinbeck use to show this?

### **Crooks is the only black man on the ranch and the only black character in the book.**

- How does his race define his relationship with the other characters? Do they treat him differently?
- How does his race define his role within the book?
- Do you think Crooks is lonely? Why?
- Are there any other characters that are sidelined or isolated in the way Crooks is? Compare these characters to Crooks.
  - Do they act differently?
  - How are they described in comparison to Crooks?
  - What descriptive language does Steinbeck use for them?  
(Characters to consider could include Curley’s wife and Candy)

## CURLEY'S WIFE

"Well, you look her over, mister. You see if she ain't a tart."

[...]

*A girl was standing there looking in. She had full, rouged lips and wide-spaced eyes, heavily made up. Her fingernails were red. Her hair hung in little rolled clusters, like sausages. She wore a cotton house dress and red mules, on the insteps of which were little bouquets of red ostrich feathers. "I'm lookin' for Curley," she said. Her voice had a nasal, brittle quality [...] She put her hands behind her back and leaned against the door frame so that her body was thrown forward [...] Lennie's eyes moved down over her body, and though she did not seem to be looking at Lennie she bridled a little. [page 64 & 70]*

- What sort of character is Curley's wife? Do you like her?
- What role does Curley's wife play within the book?
- What do the other characters think of Curley's wife?
- How does Curley's wife treat George and Lennie? What does that tell us about her?
- What are her main characteristics? What language does Steinbeck use to highlight them?
- What three words would you use to describe Curley's wife?

### **Look closely at Curley's wife's introduction.**

- How does it differ from that of the male characters?
- What differing language is used to describe her? Find some examples to compare.
- How does the way the characters choose to talk about her differ or compare with the description given by the narrator?

### **Curley's wife is the only female character in the book.**

- How does her gender define her relationship with the other characters? Do they treat her differently?
- How does her gender define her role within the book?
- Do you think she is lonely? Why?

### **Curley's wife is never given a name and is only thought of in relation to her husband.**

- Why do you think this is? Why does Steinbeck choose to leave her nameless?
- What can this tell us about the time period of the book and when it was published?
- Do you think she is aware of this? How do you think it affects her?

## PART 4 THE KEY THEMES

Before taking the group through this section and the key themes of the text ask them:

- What do you think the major themes of **Of Mice and Men** are? Why?  
(Give evidence to support your answers)

### THEME 1: DREAMS

*“There wouldn’t be no more runnin’ round the country and gettin’ fed by a Jap cook. No, sir, we’d have our own place where we belonged and not sleep in no bunk house.” [George – page 131]*

*“I tell you I ain’t used to livin’ like this. I coulda made somethin’ of myself.” She said darkly, “Maybe I will yet.” And then her words tumbled out in a passion of communication, as though she hurried before her listener could be taken away. “I lived right in Salinas,” she said. “Come there when I was a kid. Well, a show come through, an’ I met one of the actors. He says I could go with that show. But my ol’ lady wouldn’t let me. She says because I was on’y fifteen. But the guy says I coulda. If I’d went, I wouldn’t be livin’ like this, you bet. [Curley’s wife – page 200–201]*

*“I seen hunderds of men come by on the road an’ on the ranches, with their bindles on their back an’ that same damn thing in their heads. Hunderds of them. They come, an’ they quit an’ go on; an’ every damn one of ’em’s got a little piece of land in his head. An’ never a God damn one of ’em ever gets it. Just like heaven. Ever’body wants a little piece of lan’. [Crooks – page 169]*

*“– I think I knowed from the very first. I think I knowed we’d never do her. He usta like to hear about it so much I got to thinking maybe we would.” [George – page 216–217]*

### THEME 2: LONELINESS/ISOLATION

*“I ain’t got no people,” George said. “I seen the guys that go around on the ranches alone. That ain’t no good. They don’t have no fun. After a long time they get mean. They get wantin’ to fight all the time.” [George – page 92]*

*A guy needs somebody – to be near him.” He whined, “A guy goes nuts if he ain’t got nobody. Don’t make no difference who the guy is, long’s he’s with you. I tell ya,” he cried, “I tell ya a guy gets too lonely an’ he gets sick.” [Crooks – page 166]*

*“Why can’t I talk to you? I never get to talk to nobody. I get awful lonely.” [...] “I get lonely,” she said. “You can talk to people, but I can’t talk to nobody but Curley. Else he gets mad. How’d you like not to talk to anybody?” [Curley’s wife – page 198]*

*But the rabbit repeated softly over and over, “He gonna leave you, ya crazy bastard. He gonna leave ya all alone. He gonna leave ya, crazy bastard.” Lennie put his hands over his ears. “He ain’t, I tell ya he ain’t.” And he cried, “Oh! George – George – George!” [Lennie – page 235]*



### THEME 3: COMPANIONSHIP

*“Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don't belong no place [...] With us it ain't like that. We got a future. We got somebody to talk to that gives a damn about us.” [George – page 30–31]*

*“I'm so used to him,” he said softly. “I had him from a pup.” [...] Candy looked helplessly at him, for Slim's opinions were law. “Maybe it'd hurt him,” he suggested. “I don't mind takin' care of him.” [...] “I ought to of shot that dog myself, George. I shouldn't ought to of let no stranger shoot my dog.” [Candy – page 102–103 & 141]*

*“Crooks said irritably, “You can come in if you want.” Candy seemed embarrassed. “I do' know. 'Course, if ya want me to.” “Come on in. If ever'body's comin' in, you might just as well.” It was difficult for Crooks to conceal his pleasure with anger. [Crooks – page 171]*

*“But not us,” Lennie cried happily. “Tell about us now.” George was quiet for a moment. “But not us,” he said. “Because –” “Because I got you an' –” “An' I got you. We got each other, that's what, that gives a hoot in hell about us,” [Lennie & George – page 239]*

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**All of the characters and the key scenes within the book relate to and are defined by these themes. Take each theme and the attributed quotes and explore the following key questions:**

1. How does Steinbeck convey this theme throughout the book?
2. How do these key quotes show this theme in action?
3. What characters are most predominantly shaped by this theme?
4. How does it affect their story arcs and characterisation?
5. Why do you think Steinbeck wanted to explore this theme?



## PART 5 THE KEY SCENES

In this short novel almost every chapter is crucial to the shape and climax of the story. In fact, Steinbeck wrote **Of Mice and Men** intending for it to be used as both a book and a play. As such the text follows an arc of three distinct acts across two chapters each, giving a very clear structure to the book and allowing for the key scenes to be easily identified.

We've highlighted below 5 scenes that clearly depict the central themes at play and explore the defining characteristics of each central and supporting character:

### Key scene 1 – The death of Candy's dog [page 100–113]

*"He ain't no good to you, Candy. An' he ain't no good to himself. Whyn't you shoot him Candy?" [...]* At last Candy said softly and hopelessly, "Awright – take 'im." He did not look down at the dog at all. He lay back on his bunk and crossed his arms behind his head and stared at the ceiling. [...] A shot sounded in the distance. The men looked quickly at the old man. Every head turned toward him. For a moment he continued to stare at the ceiling. Then he rolled slowly over and faced the wall and lay silent.

### Key scene 2 – Sharing the dream [page 131–138]

*"We'd jus' live there. We'd belong there. There wouldn't be no more runnin' round the country and gettin' fed by a Jap cook. No, sir, we'd have our own place where we belonged and not sleep in no bunk house." [...]* George sat entranced with his own picture. When Candy spoke they both jumped as though they had been caught doing something reprehensible. Candy said, "You know where's a place like that?" [...] "They'll can me purty soon. Jus' as soon as I can't swamp out no bunk houses they'll put me on the county. Maybe if I give you guys my money, you'll let me hoe in the garden even after I ain't no good at it. An' I'll wash dishes an' little chicken stuff like that. But I'll be on our own place, an' I'll be let to work on our own place." [...] They all sat still, all bemused by the beauty of the thing, each mind was popped into the future when this lovely thing should come about.

### Key scene 3 – Crook's room and the outcasts [page 166–186]

*Crooks said gently, "Maybe you can see now. You got George. You know he's goin' to come back. S'pose you didn't have nobody. S'pose you couldn't go into the bunk house and play rummy 'cause you was black. How'd you like that? [...]" "I tell ya a guy gets too lonely an' he gets sick." [...]* They swung their heads toward the door. Looking in was Curley's wife [...] "Well, I ain't giving you no trouble. Think I don't like to talk to somebody ever' once in a while? Think I like to stick in that house all time?" [...] She looked from one face to another, and they were all closed against her [...] "Well, you keep your place then, Nigger. I could get you strung up on a tree so easy it ain't even funny." Crooks had reduced himself to nothing. There was no personality, no ego – nothing to arouse either like or dislike. He said, "Yes, ma'am," and his voice was toneless.

#### **Key scene 4 – Curley’s wife’s death [page 200–209]**

*“Wha’s the matter with me?” she cried. “Ain’t I got a right to talk to nobody? Whatta they think I am, anyways? You’re a nice guy. I don’t know why I can’t talk to you. I ain’t doin’ no harm to you.” [...] She demanded, “You listenin’?” “Me? Sure.” “Well, I ain’t told this to nobody before. Maybe I ought’n to. I don’t like Curley. He ain’t a nice fella.” [...] Curley’s wife laughed at him. “You’re nuts,” she said. “But you’re a kinda nice fella. Jus’ like a big baby”*

[...]

*Lennie’s big fingers fell to stroking her hair. “Don’t you muss it up,” she said. Lennie said, “Oh! That’s nice,” and he stroked harder. “Oh, that’s nice.” [...] Lennie was in a panic. His face was contorted. She screamed then, and Lennie’s other hand closed over her mouth and nose. “Please don’t,” he begged. “Oh! Please don’t do that. George’ll be mad.” [...] “I don’t want ta hurt you,” he said, “but George’ll be mad if you yell.” When she didn’t answer nor move he bent closely over her. He lifted her arm and let it drop. For a moment he seemed bewildered. And then he whispered in fright, “I done a bad thing. I done another bad thing.”*

#### **Key scene 5 – Lennie and George’s goodbye [page 240–243]**

*Lennie said, “Tell how it’s gonna be.” [...] “When we gonna do it?” “Gonna do it soon.” “Me an’ you.” “You ... an’ me. Ever’body gonna be nice to you. Ain’t gonna be no more trouble. Nobody gonna hurt nobody nor steal from ’em.” Lennie said, “I thought you was mad at me, George.” “No,” said George. “No, Lennie. I ain’t mad. I never been mad, an’ I ain’t now. That’s a thing I want ya to know.”*

*The voices came close now. George raised the gun and listened to the voices. Lennie begged, “Le’s do it now. Le’s get that place now.” “Sure, right now. I gotta. We gotta.” And George raised the gun and steadied it, and he brought the muzzle of it close to the back of Lennie’s head. The hand shook violently, but his face set and his hand steadied. He pulled the trigger.*

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**You will have discussed aspects of these scenes already when discussing both the characters and themes of the book. However, it’s important (and good practice!) to return to them here and to continue thinking about the book as a whole.**

Read and discuss the above scenes in relation to the following questions:

1. How does this scene make you feel? Why?
2. What themes are being explored by Steinbeck in this scene?
3. What characters are affected by this scene? What do we learn about them from this scene?
4. Pick five words or phrases that have been very carefully chosen by Steinbeck to highlight themes or characterisation.
5. What effect does this scene have on the book as a whole?

**Remember to provide evidence from the scenes to support your answers!**



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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John Steinbeck was born in 1902 in California. He dropped out of college and worked as a manual labourer before achieving success as a writer. His 1939 novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, won a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award. Steinbeck served as a war correspondent during World War II, and was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962. He died in New York City in 1968.

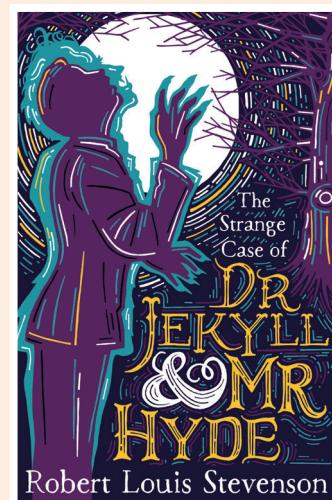
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