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# PART ONE: INTRODUCTION

## How can these Notes help me?

Are you ready to answer a detailed exam question on *Of Mice and Men*, its structure, characters, themes, language, background, and so on? If not, use the following table to focus on what you need help with and where you can find it in these Notes. Then, come back and record your progress!

Focus	Under control?	If 'no' – go to ...
Approaching study and revision of literature texts	✓	page ...
General background to <i>Of Mice and Men</i> – the setting and location, the main characters, the author's life and the historical context	✓	page ...
The main events of the story	✓	page ...
Detailed knowledge of what happens in each chapter	✓	page ...
The main characters – what they do, say and <i>why</i> they are important	✓	page ...
The key themes and issues – what these are and how the writer gets them across to the reader	✓	page ...
The language – how the writer uses particular techniques, features and choices of language	✓	page ...
The structure of the novel – how the events of the story are ordered and why this is important	✓	page ...
Understanding exam or essay questions so that you answer them relevantly	✓	page ...
Knowing how to improve your grade	✓	page ...
Understanding what a good answer looks like and why it is given a high grade	✓	page ...

## Study and revision advice

There are TWO main stages to your reading and work on *Of Mice and Men*. Firstly, the study of the book as you read it. Secondly, your preparation or revision for exam or controlled assessment. These top tips will help you with both.



### READING AND STUDYING THE NOVEL – DEVELOP INDEPENDENCE!

- Try to engage and respond personally to the **characters**, ideas and story – not just for your enjoyment, but also because it helps you develop your own **independent ideas** and **thoughts** about *Of Mice and Men*. This is something that examiners are very keen to see.
- **Talk** about the text with friends and family; ask questions in class; put forward your own viewpoint – and, if time, **read around** the text to find out about life in America in the 1930s.
- Take time to **consider** and **reflect** on the **key elements** of the novel; keep your own notes, mind-maps, diagrams, scribbled jottings about the characters and how you respond to them; follow the story as it progresses [what do you think might happen?]; discuss the main **themes** and ideas [what do you think it is about? Dreams? Friendship? Loneliness?]; pick out language that impresses you or makes an **impact**, and so on.
- Treat your studying **creatively**. When you write essays or give talks about the book make your responses creative. Think about using really clear ways of explaining yourself, use unusual **quotations**, well-chosen **vocabulary**, and try powerful, persuasive ways of beginning or ending what you say or write.



### REVISION – DEVELOP ROUTINES AND PLANS!

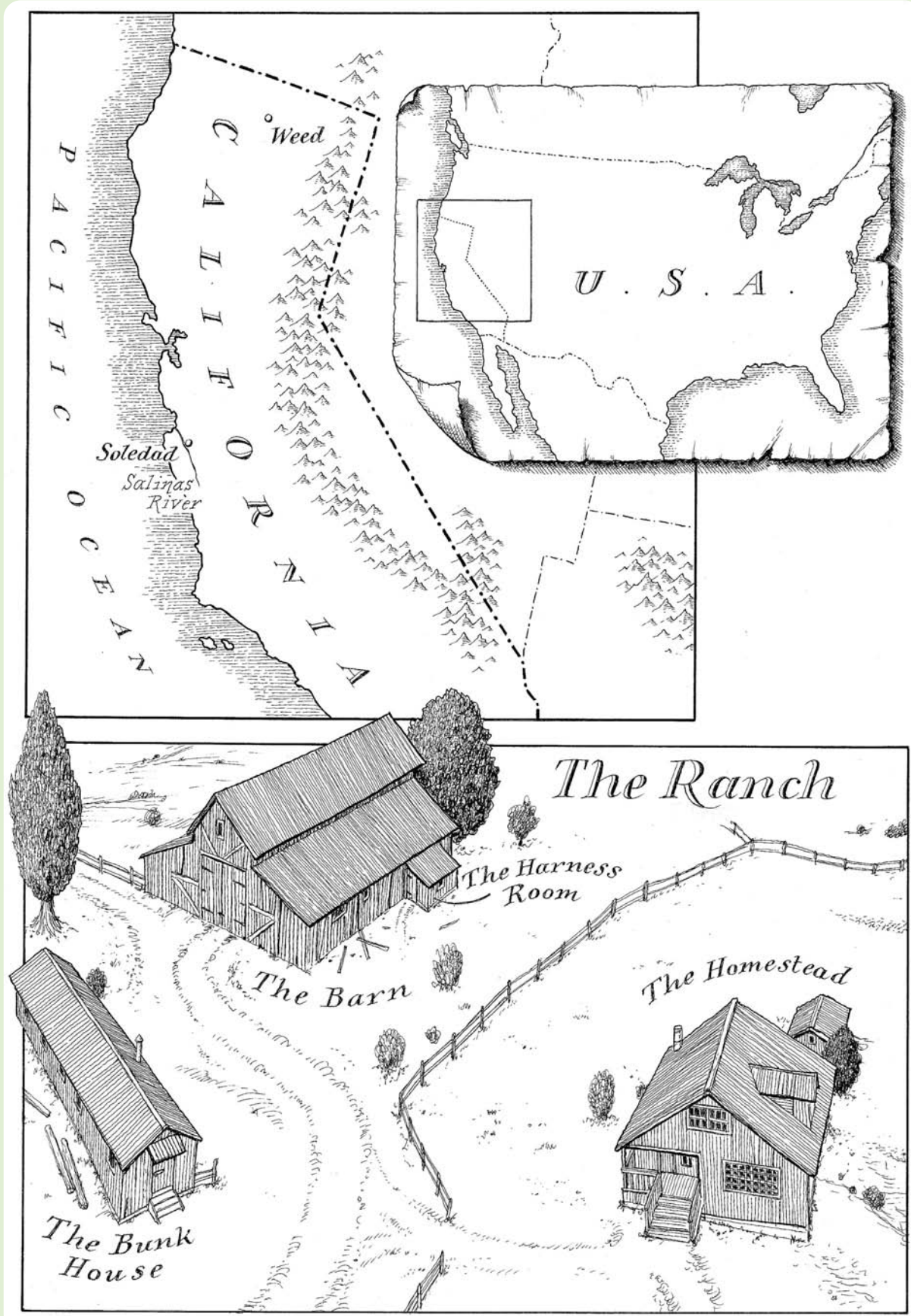
- **Good revision** comes from **good planning**. Find out when your exam or controlled assessment is and then plan to look at key aspects of *Of Mice and Men* on different days or times during your revision period. You could use these Notes – see ‘How can these Notes help me’ – and add dates or times when you are going to cover a particular topic.
- Use **different ways** of **revising**. Sometimes talking about the text and what you know/don’t know with a friend or member of the family can help; other times, filling a sheet of A4 with all your ideas in different colour pens about a character, for example LENNIE, can make ideas come alive; other times, making short lists of quotations to learn, or numbering events in the plot can assist you.
- **Practise plans** and **essays**. As you get nearer the ‘day’, start by looking at essay questions and writing short bulleted plans. Do several plans [you don’t have to write the whole essay]; then take those plans and add details to them [quotations, linked ideas]. Finally, using the advice in the ‘Examiner’s Desk’, write some practice essays and then check them out against the advice we have provided.



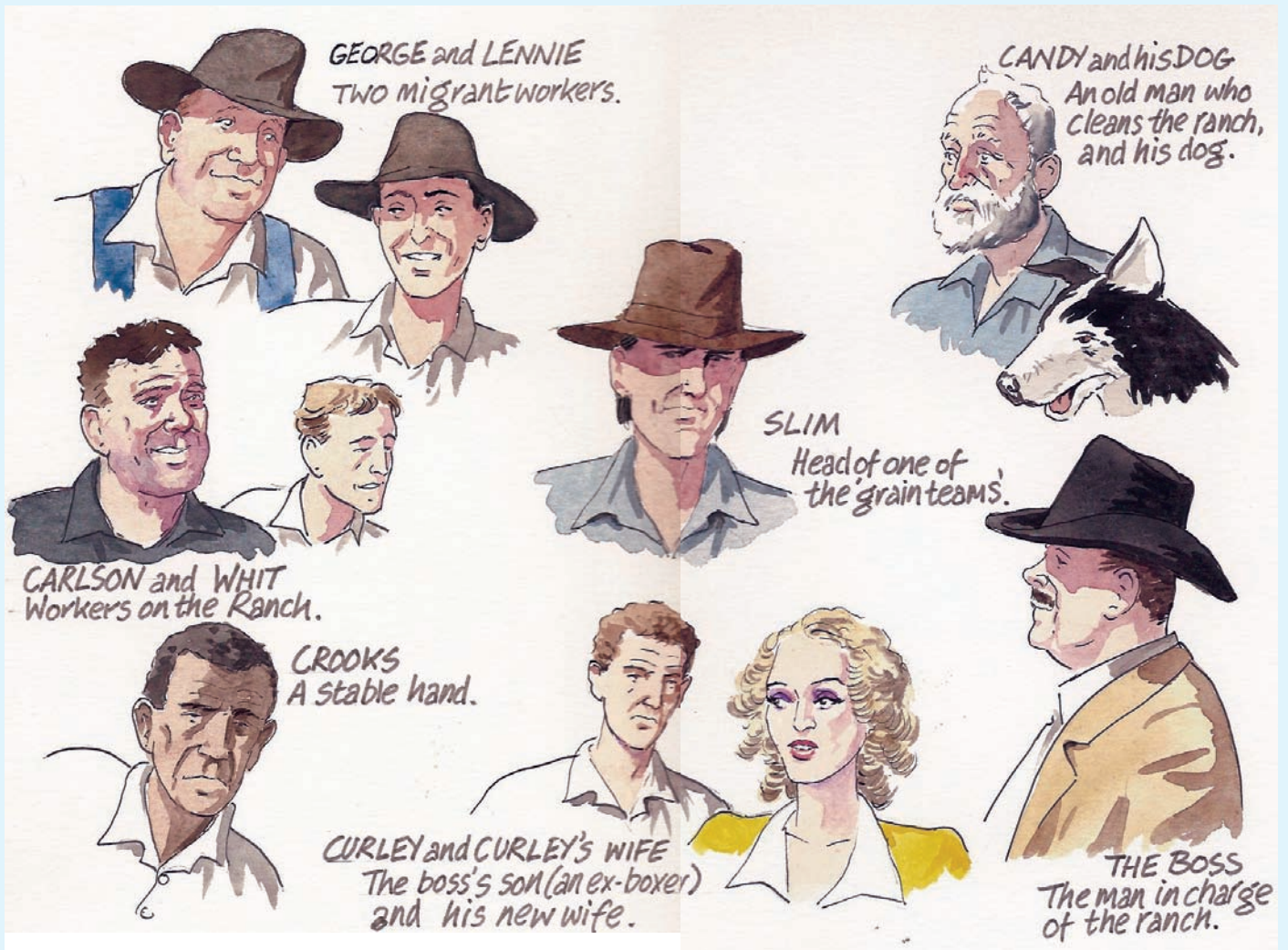
Prepare for the exam/assessment! Whatever you need to bring, make sure you have it with you – books, if you’re allowed, pens, pencils – and that you turn up on time!

# Introducing *Of Mice and Men*

## SETTING



## CHARACTERS: WHO'S WHO



## JOHN STEINBECK: AUTHOR AND CONTEXT

**1902** John Ernst Steinbeck born 27 February in Salinas, California

**1917** USA enters First World War

**1925** Steinbeck leaves university without a degree and goes to New York

**1929** 'Great Crash' on Wall Street, start of the Great Depression; Steinbeck publishes his first novel, *Cup of Gold*

**1930** Steinbeck marries Carol Henning

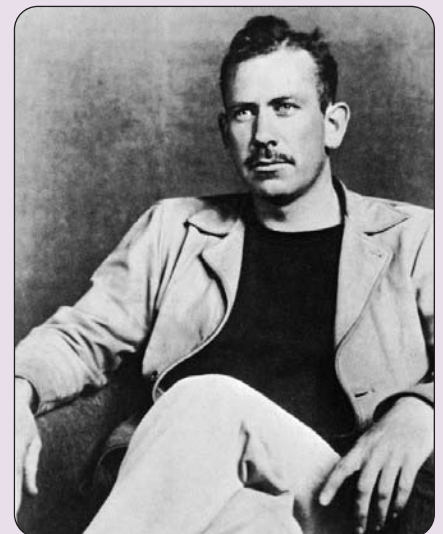
**1937** *Of Mice and Men* published

**1939–45** Second World War

**1940** Steinbeck's first marriage breaks up; *Grapes of Wrath* wins Pulitzer Prize

**1962** Steinbeck awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature

**1968** Steinbeck dies of heart disease



# PART TWO: PLOT AND ACTION

## Plot summary: what happens in *Of Mice and Men*?

### REVISION ACTIVITY



- Go through the summary boxes below and **highlight** what you think is the **key moment** in each chapter.
- Then find each moment in the **text** and **reread** it. Write down **two reasons** why you think each moment is so **important**.

## CHAPTER ONE

- George and Lennie, having walked a long way, stop at a pool by the Salinas River.
- They are off to take up work at a nearby ranch.
- They have had to leave their previous work for some, as yet to be explained, reason to do with Lennie.
- It is clear that Lennie is slow to understand. He has been keeping a dead mouse to 'pet'. George makes him get rid of it.
- We learn that they left Weed because Lennie had touched a girl's dress, she'd yelled out, and they'd had to hide in a ditch to escape angry townsfolk.
- George tells Lennie a story he has obviously told before about how one day they plan to have their own little farm.
- George makes Lennie promise to meet him at the pool if there's trouble.



## CHAPTER TWO

- George and Lennie start work at the farm.
- They meet the other ranch hands, the boss's aggressive son Curley, and Curley's wife who comes into the bunk house and flirts with them.
- Lennie is attracted to Curley's wife and George is worried.
- George makes Lennie promise to meet him by the pool if there is any trouble.
- They also meet Slim, in charge of the horses, who is a man with natural authority.

## CHAPTER THREE

- George reveals to Slim why they were 'run out' of Weed.
- Slim gives Lennie a puppy from his own dog's litter.
- Carlson, a farm hand, convinces Candy, an old man who cleans up around the farm, to let his aged dog be shot.
- Candy overhears George and Lennie's plan for their own farm and offers to put in half the money if they will let him join them.
- Curley comes in and starts a fight with Lennie, hitting him until George tells Lennie to fight back. Lennie breaks Curley's hand.
- Slim makes Curley say that his hand was injured in an accident.



## CHAPTER FOUR

- While the other ranch hands go out to the local town Lennie enters the hut of Crooks, a crippled stable hand.
- Candy also appears and they tell Crooks about their dream for the farm.
- They are interrupted by Curley's wife who laughs at them and threatens Crooks with a charge of rape when he tells her to leave.
- Later, Lennie kills the pup he has been given, not knowing his own strength.

## CHAPTER FIVE

- Lennie tries to bury the puppy in the straw in the barn.
- Curley's wife comes in and they talk, and she asks him to stroke her hair.
- She panics when she feels Lennie's strength, and in grabbing her he breaks her neck by accident.
- When the body is found it is obvious Lennie is the killer.
- A hunt is started for him, with Curley keen to be the one who shoots Lennie.



## CHAPTER SIX

- George realises Lennie could not bear life in prison, and also can't stand the thought of him being lynched by Curley and the others.
- George finds Lennie by the pool where they had agreed to meet if there was trouble.
- He talks to Lennie about their dream farm, and then shoots him just before the others arrive.
- Slim comforts George and tells him he had no choice.

## Chapter One: Moving On

### SUMMARY

- 1 The setting of the Salinas river, 'south of Soledad', is introduced.
- 2 Lennie and George arrive by a pool, and Lennie drinks from the water, 'like a horse'. He is a huge man and George is small.
- 3 Lennie has been carrying a dead mouse to 'pet', but George takes it from him and throws it away.
- 4 We find out that they have come from a town in the north, Weed, and are going to a ranch for work. George tells Lennie not to speak to the boss when they get there, or he'll know how 'crazy' he is.
- 5 When Lennie comes back from collecting wood for the fire, he has retrieved the dead mouse, but George realises and takes it from him a second time.
- 6 We find out more about George and how he looks after Lennie. We also learn the reason why they had to leave Weed – because Lennie touched a girl's dress and she yelled out, thinking she was being attacked.
- 7 Lennie asks George to tell him about the farm they plan to have one day.
- 8 George makes Lennie promise that if there's any future trouble he'll come back to the same pool and wait for George until he arrives.

#### EXAMINER'S TIP

Read your exam question carefully. If it's about the **culture** of *Of Mice and Men* – the US background, farm, working life – stick to those elements.

### WHY IS THIS CHAPTER IMPORTANT?

- A It establishes the **setting**
- B We are introduced to the **two main characters**, Lennie and George
- C Their **relationship** is made clear
- D We find out **what has happened previously** in Weed [the reason they are here now], and are told **where they are going next**
- E It provides initial **clues** about **key ideas**, **themes** and **events** which will come up again as the book progresses

### THE SETTING – STILL LIFE, HOT NIGHT

The book opens with a varied and colourful description of the rural Californian setting, south of Soledad by the Salinas River, in particular a 'narrow pool' by which Lennie and George eventually make camp. Like a stage-set, the place seems to be waiting for their arrival, and Steinbeck uses vivid **images** to create the warm, dry evening.

The rabbits Steinbeck describes will come to have greater significance as the novel progresses. The **simile** he uses to describe them as 'sculptured stones' also adds to the mythic or timeless feel. Later Steinbeck uses the **present tense**, which also contributes to the timelessness, but also suggests this is a real place that still survives today.

The detailed snapshot of nature tells us that many other men have stopped there, and could imply George and Lennie are small, unimportant figures in the world.

#### KEY QUOTE

'On the sand-banks the rabbits sat as quietly as little grey, sculptured stones.'





## LENNIE AND GEORGE – FRIENDS AND FOES?

Lennie and George's introduction emphasises their similarity at first – 'both' wear the same denim clothing and black hats. But George is small and has 'defined' features. Lennie is huge, rather 'shapeless' and bear-like.

Steinbeck's use of **metaphor** makes Lennie's bear-like qualities clear, but his delight in causing ripples also implies his simple-minded, child-like nature.

George, for his part, is presented as both irritated and angered by Lennie's simplicity, but feels responsibility for him.

The 'bad things' and 'hot water' Lennie gets George into are revealed – he touched the girl's dress in Weed. This, along with Lennie's fixation with things to 'pet' **foreshadow** events later in the story. However, their closeness is revealed by their shared enjoyment of the dream of owning a farm.

### EXAMINER'S TIP: WRITING ABOUT LENNIE'S DREAM



This section is very important. It not only establishes the closeness of Lennie and George – the 'farm speech' has obviously been recited before – but makes us sympathetic to their simple ambition. Their dream is to have a small farm to 'live off the fatta the lan!' as Lennie says. Lennie's response to it is like a small child being told a favourite bedtime story.

The dream of the farm seems very much Lennie's fantasy here, but later, when we meet Candy, the old man at the ranch, it suddenly seems to become a reality. The **key theme** of **dreams and hopes** is therefore placed right at the start of the novel.

#### KEY QUOTE

'Lennie dabbled his big paw in the water and wiggled his fingers so the water arose in little splashes'

#### ★ GRADE BOOSTER

Think originally! For example, George seems decent, but you could argue he has a nasty side, criticising Lennie and ordering him around.

## Progress and revision check

### REVISION ACTIVITY



- 1 What happened at Weed that caused Lennie and George to leave? (Write your answers below)  
.....
- 2 What happens to Candy's dog?  
.....
- 3 What happens when Curley picks a fight with Lennie?  
.....
- 4 Why is Lennie in the barn when Curley's wife comes in?  
.....
- 5 Where does Lennie go to be alone after killing Curley's wife?  
.....

### REVISION ACTIVITY



On a piece of paper write down answers to these questions:

- What earlier events in the story **foreshadow** the way Lennie kills Curley's wife?  
Start: *We know that Lennie and George had to leave Weed because ...*
- In what way could it be said that the story comes full circle [returning to where it began]?  
Start: *The novel opens with Lennie and George arriving at a ...*

### GRADE BOOSTER



Answer this longer, practice question about the plot/action of the novel:

Q: In what ways could it be said that the novel is highly structured? Think about ...

- The way events or actions are repeated or mirrored
- The way events slowly build up to a climax

**For a C grade:** convey your ideas clearly and appropriately [you could use the words from the question to guide your answer] and refer to details from the text [use specific examples].

**For an A grade:** make sure you comment on the varied ways the story is structured, and if possible come up with your own original or alternative ideas.

# PART THREE: CHARACTERS

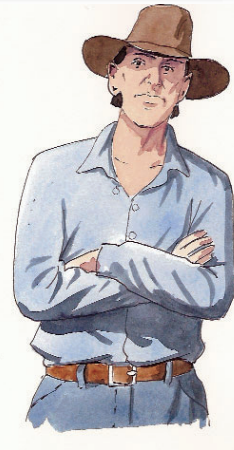
## Slim

### WHO IS SLIM?

Slim is a 'jerkliness skinner', in control of a team of horses, and is seen as the leading worker in the bunk house.

### WHAT DOES SLIM DO IN THE NOVEL?

- Slim meets George and Lennie in the bunk house (see pp. 34–6).
- Slim gives a puppy to Lennie (see pp. 39, 43–4).
- Slim agrees that Candy's dog must be killed (see p. 46).
- Slim makes Curley promise not to blame Lennie for hurting his hand (see p. 64).
- Slim is the one who checks Curley's wife to confirm she is dead (see p. 95).
- Slim comforts George for having killed Lennie (see p. 106).



### HOW IS SLIM DESCRIBED AND WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Quotation	Means?
He is 'godlike' and 'moved with majesty'	Suggests both an attractive, almost-princely appearance [which is confirmed by Curley's suspicions] and how the other men admire and look up to him.
'understanding beyond thought'	He doesn't need to think things through to 'get them'; he realises instinctively how George and Lennie get along, what Lennie is like, and why George had to kill Lennie.
'there was gravity in his manner ... all talk stopped when he spoke'	He is respected and listened to; and what he has to say usually has 'gravity' – power and importance.
'His hands, large and lean, were as delicate in their action as those of a temple dancer'	His hands are masculine and strong, but also seem skilful and tender, implying he is almost like an artist, or performer, as the <b>simile</b> suggests.

### EXAMINER'S TIP: WRITING ABOUT SLIM

When you are writing about Slim make sure you focus on the right thing. Is it his what he does, or what he seems to represent or **symbolise** [decency, the conscience of the novel] that is important or both? Whatever you say about him, make sure you get across the idea of his general decency, but also his practical understanding – he knows that life is hard, and that dreams don't come true. He drowns the puppies [apart from Lennie's] because the mother 'couldn't feed that many'. But despite being charismatic, prince-like, understanding and skilled at what he does, he is also trapped by the life he leads.

### ★ GRADE BOOSTER

To boost your own ideas, find two more quotations about Slim. Draw your own table and write in the second column what you think each quotation means.

### 🔓 EXAMINER'S TIP

Physical descriptions are only worth mentioning in written responses if they add to our understanding of character or behaviour. Slim's hands are worth mentioning for this reason.

# PART FOUR: GRADE BOOSTER

## Understanding the question



Questions in exams or controlled conditions often need **'decoding'**. Decoding the question helps to ensure that your answer will be relevant and refers to what you have been asked.



### UNDERSTAND EXAM LANGUAGE

Get used to exam and essay style language by looking at specimen questions and the words they use. For example:

Exam speak!	Means?	Example
'convey ideas'	'get across a point to the reader' Usually you have to say 'how' this is done.	The sad description of the dead puppy might <i>convey</i> the idea of a hard life for innocent people in <i>Of Mice and Men</i> .
'methods, techniques, ways'	The ' <i>things</i> ' the writer does – such as a powerful description, introducing a shocking event, how someone speaks, etc.	The writer might use the <i>method</i> of contrasting characters to show good and bad, e.g. SLIM versus CURLEY.
'present, represent'	1) present: ' <i>the ways things are told to us</i> ' 2) represent: ' <i>what those things might mean underneath</i> '	The writer <i>presents</i> the reader with descriptions of the bunk house. It could <i>represent</i> a family home, or perhaps even a prison.



### 'BREAK DOWN' THE QUESTION

Pick out the **key words** or phrases. For example:

**Question:** How does Steinbeck use the **character of Candy** to **represent** the **idea of broken dreams** in the novel?

- The focus is on **character** [CANDY] so you will need to talk about him, what he does, says and how he is described
- The words '**represent** the **idea of broken dreams**' tell us this a question that is equally about one of the novel's **themes**, e.g. 'broken or failed dreams'.

What does this tell you?

**Focus** on CANDY not on other characters, except for their relationships to him [i.e. CANDY shares GEORGE and LENNIE's dream]



### KNOW YOUR LITERARY LANGUAGE!

When studying texts you will come across words such as '**theme**', '**symbol**', '**imagery**', '**metaphor**' etc. Some of these words could come up in the question you are asked. **MAKE SURE** you know what they mean before you use them!

## Improve your grade



It is useful to know the type of responses examiners are looking for when they award different grades. The following broad guidance should help you to improve your grade when responding to the task you are set!

### GRADE C

What you need to show	What this means
<b>Sustained response</b> to task and text	You write enough! You don't run out of ideas after two paragraphs.
<b>Effective</b> use of <b>details</b> to <b>support</b> your <b>explanations</b>	You generally support what you say with evidence, e.g. <i>Crooks is treated badly by Curley's wife. Once she realises he disapproves of her, she threatens him, forcing him to back down in Chapter Four.</i>
<b>Explanation</b> of the writer's <b>use of language, structure, form</b> , etc., and the <b>effect on readers</b>	You must write about the writer's use of these things. It's not enough simply to give a viewpoint. So, you might comment on the way Steinbeck builds tension and suspense for the readers through small details, e.g. how the men play cards while waiting for Candy's dog to be shot, or how <b>similes</b> such as ' <b>snorting ... like a horse</b> ' are used to describe Lennie, as a sort of animal/beast.
<b>Appropriate</b> comment on <b>characters, plot, themes, ideas</b> and <b>settings</b>	What you say is relevant. If the task asks you to comment on how Crooks is treated, that is what you write about.

### GRADE A

What you need to show in addition to the above	What this means
<b>Insightful, exploratory</b> response to the text	You look beyond the obvious. You might question the idea of Lennie as a victim and say he deserved his fate; or, you might find some new aspect to comment on, e.g. how the setting of the ranch could be seen as a sort of prison. These need not be ideas you are sure about, but you can suggest them for the examiner to consider.
<b>Close analysis</b> and use of <b>detail</b>	If you are looking at the writer's use of language, you comment on each word in a sentence, drawing out its distinctive effect on the reader, e.g. when Curley's wife confides in Lennie, ' <b>her words tumbled out in a passion of communication</b> '. Here you might focus on how 'tumbled' suggests she is brimming with things she has to say, and ' <b>passion</b> ' further emphasises her fiery and impulsive nature.
<b>Convincing</b> and <b>imaginative interpretation</b>	Your viewpoint is convincing the examiner. You show you have engaged with the text, and come up with your own ideas. These may be based on what you have discussed in class or read about, but you have made your own decisions.

## Examiner's desk



This section will provide you with two model answers, one at **C grade** and one at **A grade**, to give you an idea of what is required to achieve at different levels.

**Question:** Read from page 34 ['A tall man stood in the doorway ...'] to page 36 ['It's a lot nicer to go around with a guy you know']. Answer both parts of the question:

- A How do the details in the passage add to your understanding of Slim?
- B How does Steinbeck use the character of Slim in the novel as a whole to convey ideas about working life on ranches in 1930s America?

## CANDIDATE 1

Says what the passage does

Interprets what the author is doing

Right to move to the second part of the question

Better – focusing on the working life now

Good supporting quote

John Steinbeck introduces Slim for the first time in this passage and we are shown what he looks like and how he behaves. It says that he was a 'tall man' and 'like the others, he wore blue jeans and a short denim jacket.' This means that he isn't trying to show off but is like the other men who work on the ranch. It also says that he has 'majesty'. This suggests that he is like the king of the ranch who everybody obeys or looks up to. Later when he sees George and Lennie, it says that he spoke 'kindly' and that his voice was 'gentle'.

In the novel as a whole Slim is important because he comes across as a kinder character who understands George and Lennie and sees that Lennie is a nice person really. But it shows also that working on a ranch is a hard life. Slim may be nice but he drowns the puppies when he has to. 'I drowned four of 'em right off. She couldn't feed that many.' He also agrees with Carlson shooting Candy's dog.

The most important thing, though, is that everyone respects Slim. Even Curley, who thinks Slim may be having an affair with his wife, is scared of him. 'Well, I didn't mean nothing, Slim. I just ast you.' This is interesting because jobs are not easy to get in America in the 30s

Correctly focuses on this passage

This quotation is good but it doesn't say what this adds

Weak description – doesn't say much

Good – shows knowledge of social background

**Overall comment:** This is a solid essay in which the student supports his/her views with some well-chosen quotations. Occasionally, the points made are not supported by evidence, and whilst the answer is clear and well argued, there is not very much evidence of original, or alternative thinking. Perhaps more reference to Slim's majestic approach and understanding would also help.

**GRADE C**

## CANDIDATE 2



Original thought linking Slim to film

Very well-chosen quotation with explanation

Again, inventive idea to think of Slim as feminine

Lots of supporting references but no quotes

Interesting contrast with Curley and widens out to mention the book as a 'tragedy'

The introduction of Slim into the novel could almost be the introduction of a hero from a classic Western as he 'stood in the doorway', as if framed in a film. And this idea is developed as the passage goes on, with his skill as a 'jerkline skinner' emphasised by his ability to kill flies with a 'bull whip without touching the mule.'

More importantly, his skills extend beyond his work; he is clearly respected and listened to – 'his word was taken on any subject, be it politics or love', and the description of his hands which are 'delicate as those of a temple dancer' make him sound almost feminine despite their being 'large and lean'.

What this passage shows, then, is that an ordinary working man, who shares a room in a bunk-house, can have 'majesty' and 'gravity' – and, through the use of the word 'kindly', shows he understands Lennie and George.

Nevertheless, although our initial impressions of Slim are positive, we should not be blind to the fact that the ranch life is a tough life; Slim is forced to drown four puppies because the mother wouldn't have enough to feed them, and he allows Carlson to shoot Candy's dog. Even he doesn't stand in the way of Lennie being killed. This is a tough society in which people take the law into their own hands – as Lennie and George found out when they were in Weed.

Finally, though, Slim reminds us that for every Curley – unpleasant, rich, and violent – there are decent, honourable characters and although the book could be seen as a sort of tragedy of American life, it ends with Slim comforting George after he kills Lennie. 'You hadda George. I swear you hadda.'

Shows how the writer develops our understanding of Slim

Good – focusing on the working life now

Bit of a weak quote to end but it does support the point

**Overall comment:** This is an outstanding response with few weak points. Quotations and evidence are woven skilfully into the answer, and there are several examples of original thinking and ideas. The response is slightly weaker in the second half with perhaps not enough reference to working life on the farm and Slim's place within it, but overall this is very successful.

**GRADE A**

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