

## **Symbolism in Of Mice and Men**

Symbolism is when objects and actions stand for something else.

### **Animals**

Animals in the novel represent life in the 1930s. When an animal is no longer useful, it is got rid of. e.g. George throws away the dead mouse, Slim drowns puppies, Lennie throws away his dead puppy in the barn.

Candy's dog is shot because it is old, crippled and elderly. Candy is like this too and realises that he will be sacked as soon as he is unable to help.

Nobody objects to Carlson's plan to shoot the dog or recognises an emotional bond between it and Candy. The decision is totally unsentimental and harsh.

The shooting of the dog in the back of the head foreshadows the shooting of Lennie, an emotional cripple who has also become a nuisance to himself.

The animals described by the pool at the start and end seem innocent in chapter 1 but there is a sense of threat. In chapter 6, the heron eats the water snake, just as fate swallows up the dreams of the characters. It's survival of the fittest in nature as on the ranch.

The giant talking rabbit in Lennie's vision before he dies represents his confusion and guilt.

### **Hands**

To survive the harshness of life, the characters would need a good pair of hands to work and to fight. Workers were called "ranch hands".

**George's hands** are described as small but strong. The fact that he is with Lennie compensates for his small hands. George has a stronger mind to compensate for Lennie's weaker intelligence.

**Lennie** has big strong hands which are good for farm work but destructive in that they like to stroke and won't let go. Strong hands coupled with a weaker brain can be dangerous.

**Curley** uses his hands to fight but crudely boasts that he keeps one hand soft in a glove for his wife. Lennie crushing his fighting hand makes him even more angry.

**Candy** has lost a hand while working on the ranch which shows how harsh ranch life is.

**Curley's Wife** polishes her nails in front of the men and puts her hands on her hips to attract them. In the barn, she uses a swirling hand gesture to show Lennie how she'd act in films. She uses her hands to try to get what she wants.

**Slim's** hands reflect his calm strength and control. They are large and lean and elegant as those of a temple dancer.

### **Light and Dark**

Light represents hope. Darkness represents despair. Steinbeck often describes how the light shines in a scene and this contributes to the mood. The light seems to fade as the novel moves on. Dusk gathers as George prepares to shoot Lennie and the dream fades with him.

### **Red**

Red is traditionally linked with danger, passion and temptation. Curley's Wife wears red. Lennie got into trouble touching a red dress in Weed.

### **Religious Symbols**

Red is often associated with the devil and temptation (and Curley's Wife in the novel as she tempts the men.)

Slim is described as godlike and has authority on the ranch.

The dream is described as a "little piece of heaven." in contrast to the harshness of life on the ranch.

**Soledad**, the local town, means loneliness in Spanish. All the characters are lonely.