
Of Mice and Men: How Does Steinbeck Use Foreshadowing?

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Overview: John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* tells a story of two very different friends who share the same dream. Throughout the novel, starting with the title, Steinbeck provides clues as to what will happen next. This Mini-Q asks you to discover the clues that prepare the reader for key events in *Of Mice and Men*.

The Documents:

Document A: “To a Mouse”

Document B: “Pet it like it was a mouse”

Document C: “A little piece of land”

Document D: “Right in the back of the head”

A Mini Document Based Question (Mini-Q)

Hook Exercise: Foreshadowing

Directions: Working with a partner or in a small group, look at the cartoon and answer the questions below.

1. Who is teaching the “class” in the cartoon below?
2. What term is this “teacher” discussing?
3. What do you see in this cartoon that can help you figure out the meaning of “foreshadowing”?
4. What is your best guess of what “foreshadowing” means?

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Of Mice and Men: How Does Steinbeck Use Foreshadowing?

Of Mice and Men is a short book that tells a powerful story. It is a tale of two unlikely friends—small, intelligent George and enormous but child-like Lennie—travelling through California during the 1930s. George and Lennie are **migrant workers**. They take on temporary jobs at different ranches in an effort to make enough money to buy a place of their own. At their new job, they meet a cast of characters: Candy, the one-handed old “swamper” who cleans the bunk house; Slim, a man of God-like wisdom who is described as the “prince of the ranch”; Crooks, the African-American stable hand, living a solitary life on the ranch because of his race; Curley, the boss’s hostile and aggressive son; and Curley’s nameless wife, a woman desperate for attention. Things start out well enough, and Candy offers to put up money and join George and Lennie in their dream of buying their own farm. Quickly, though, the book begins to move towards its disastrous conclusion—and if they’ve been paying attention, readers see it coming. Although *Of Mice and Men* is short, it is carefully crafted.

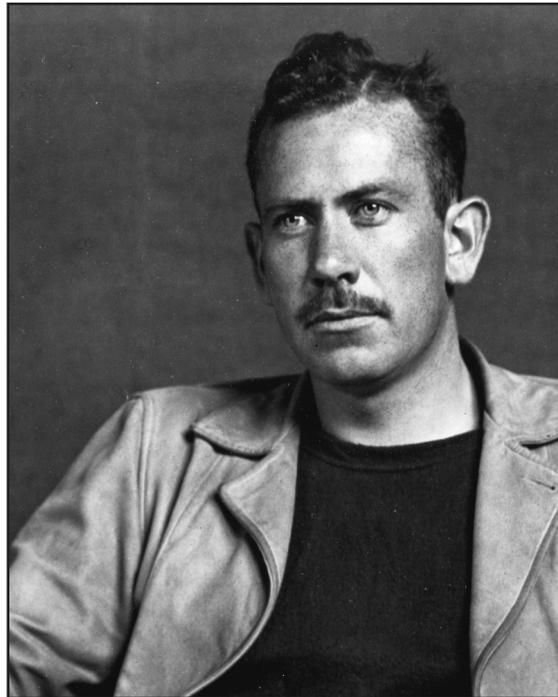
In this American classic, Nobel Prize-winning author John Steinbeck uses several structural elements. For one, the title, *Of Mice and Men*, is an **allusion**, meaning it was taken from another work. Steinbeck borrowed his title from the poem, “To a Mouse,” by Scottish farmer and poet, Robert Burns. Writers use allusions as a short-cut to a set of ideas. By taking his title from a well-known poem, Steinbeck is asking readers to recall what that poem contains and suggests,

and then to apply those ideas to the novel. Your first step, then, will be to read an edited version of “To a Mouse” in Document A.

Steinbeck also sets up two important ideas in the book’s opening pages. In the first paragraph, animals scurry onto the scene: “a lizard...Rabbits...dogs from the ranches...and...deer...” The title has already clued the reader into the importance of animals in this book, for “mice” are right there with the “men,” and the presence of animals in the first paragraph makes this point even more strongly. In the next paragraph, Steinbeck introduces a second idea. Moments before George and Lennie literally walk into the picture, we see an image of “a path beaten hard by boys coming down from the ranches,” “an ash pile made by many fires,” and a “limb...worn smooth by men who have sat on it.” This beaten path, this ash pile, and this smooth

limb are evidence that George and Lennie are not the first men to come to this place, and they will not be the last. In other words, Steinbeck is preparing us for a story that is **universal**.

Perhaps the most important structural element in *Of Mice and Men* is **foreshadowing**. Foreshadowing is a device used by an author to provide clues of what is to come. Just as **ominous** clouds alert us that a thunderstorm is on its way, small disasters and seemingly insignificant events prepare the reader for larger disasters on the horizon. As you read the documents that follow, your job is to discover the clouds and answer the question: *Of Mice and Men: How does Steinbeck use foreshadowing?*



Photograph of John Steinbeck, c. 1935

Background Essay Questions

1. *Of Mice and Men* tells the story of what two friends? What are they hoping to do?

2. Name five other characters in the novel.

3. Who is the author of *Of Mice and Men*? Which prestigious prize did he win?

4. Where does the title, *Of Mice and Men*, come from?

5. What two ideas does Steinbeck set up in the first pages of the book?

6. Define these terms:

migrant workers

allusion

universal

foreshadowing

ominous

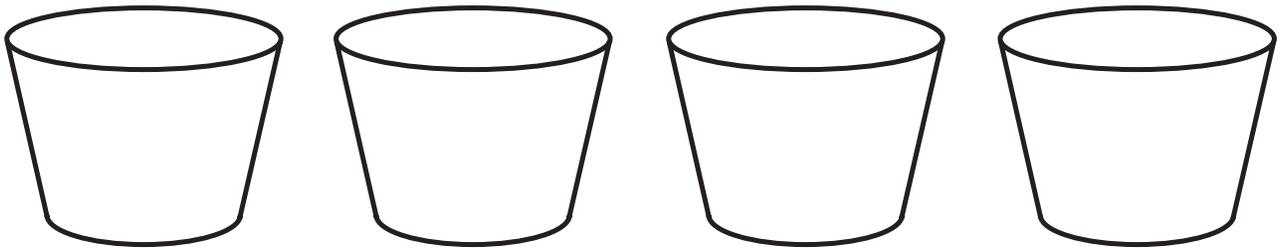
Understanding the Question and Pre-Bucketing

Understanding the Question

1. What is the analytical question asked by this Mini-Q?
2. Which terms in the question need to be defined?
3. Rewrite the question in your own words.

Pre-Bucketing

Directions: Using any clues from the Mini-Q question and the Background Essay, establish general analytical categories and label the buckets.



Document A: “To a Mouse”

Source: Robert Burns, “To a Mouse” (edited), 1785.

Note: This poem was written when the poet, who was also a farmer, turned up a mouse’s nest while plowing a field. This is Burns’s apology to the mouse, and has been translated from the original Scottish. The poem in its entirety is eight stanzas long, but only four stanzas are provided here.

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Small, sleek, cowering, timorous beast,
O, what a panic is in your breast!
You need not start away so hasty
With hurrying scamper!
I would be loath to run and chase you,
With murdering plough-staff.

... Your small house, too, in ruin!
Its feeble walls the winds are scattering!
And nothing now, to build a new one,
Of coarse grass green!
And bleak December’s winds coming,
Both bitter and keen!

... That small bit heap of leaves and stubble,
Has cost you many a weary nibble!
Now you are turned out, for all your trouble,
Without house or holding,
To endure the winter’s sleety dribble,
And hoar-frost cold.

But Mouse, you are not alone,
In proving foresight may be vain:
The best laid schemes of mice and men
Go often askew,
And leaves us nothing but grief and pain,
For promised joy!...

Document Analysis

1. Besides being a poet, what was Robert Burns’s other profession?
2. In the first stanza, why is the mouse feeling “panic”? Why does the speaker in the poem say the mouse doesn’t need to run away?
3. What is the state of the mouse’s house? What will happen to the mouse now?
4. Find the line(s) in which the title, *Of Mice and Men*, appears. Write the complete sentence (after the colon) here.
5. In what way have the “schemes” (meaning “plans”) of the mouse gone “askew” (meaning “off track”)?
6. Since Steinbeck chose *Of Mice and Men* as the title for his novel, what should we expect will happen to the “men” (meaning all humans) in the novel?

Document B: “Pet it like it was a mouse”

Source: John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*, 1937.

Story Note: George is reminding Lennie why they had to leave their last job in the town of Weed.

“Jus’ wanted to feel that girl’s dress—jus’ wanted to pet it like it was a mouse— Well, how the hell did she know you jus’ wanted to feel her dress? She jerks back and you hold on like it was a mouse. She yells and we got to hide in a irrigation ditch all day with guys lookin’ for us, and we got to sneak out in the dark and get outta the country. All the time somethin’ like that—all the time.” (*Chapter 1*)

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Story Note: Lennie is alone in the barn while the other men are playing horseshoes.

Lennie sat in the hay looked at a little dead puppy that lay in front of him. Lennie looked at it for a long time, and then he put out his huge hand and stroked it, stroked it clear from one end to the other. And Lennie said softly to the puppy, “Why do you got to get killed? You ain’t so little as mice. I didn’t bounce you hard.” (*Chapter 5*)

Story Note: After the death of the puppy, Curley’s wife sits with Lennie in the barn. When he tells her about his love of petting soft things—such as mice, puppies, and rabbits—she offers her hair for him to touch.

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.”
 “Look out, now, you’ll muss it.” And then she cried angrily, “You stop it now, you’ll mess it all up.” She jerked her head sideways, and Lennie’s fingers closed on her hair and hung on. “Let go,” she cried. “You let go!”
 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.”
 She struggled violently under his hands. Her feet battered on the hay and she writhed to be free; and from under Lennie’s hand came a muffled screaming. Lennie began to cry with fright. “Oh! Please don’t do none of that,” he begged. “George gonna say I done a bad thing. He ain’t gonna let me tend no rabbits.” He moved his hand a little and her hoarse cry came out. Then Lennie grew angry. “Now don’t,” he said. “I don’t want you to yell. You gonna get me in trouble jus’ like George says you will. Now don’t you do that.” And she continued to struggle, and her eyes were wild with terror. He shook her then, and he was angry with her. “Don’t you go yellin’,” he said, and he shook her; and her body flopped like a fish. And then she was still, for Lennie had broken her neck. (*Chapter 5*)

Document Analysis

1. What happened in Weed that made it necessary for George and Lennie to “hide” and “sneak” away? What does George say to indicate that things like this have happened before?
2. What animals does Lennie like to pet? Why does he like to pet them?
3. How does the puppy die?
4. How does Curley’s wife die?
5. How does Steinbeck use foreshadowing to signal that Curley’s wife will die? Give at least two specific examples.

Document C: “A little piece of land”

Source: John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*, 1937.

Story Note: Before they arrive at their new job, Lennie and George spend the night alone by the water. Lennie urges George to describe the little farm they plan to buy “like you done before.”

“Go on, George! Tell about what we’re gonna have in the garden and about the rabbits in the cages and about the rain in the winter and the stove, and how thick the cream is on the milk like you can hardly cut it. Tell about that, George.”

“Why’n’t you do it yourself? You know all of it.”

“No...you tell it. It ain’t the same if I tell it. Go on...George. How I get to tend the rabbits.”

“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—Nuts!” He took out his pocket knife. “I ain’t got time for no more.” (*Chapter 1*)

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Story Note: Lennie is talking with Crooks, the stable hand, about their plan to get their own farm. A *bindle* is a little bundle of possessions, often carried on the end of a stick.

“You’re nuts.”

“We are too. You ast George.”

“You’re nuts.” Crooks was scornful. “I seen hunderds of men come by on the road an’ on the ranches, with 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.” (*Chapter 4*)

Story Note: After Lennie kills Curley’s wife, George and Candy are discussing what they will do next.

Now Candy spoke his greatest fear. “You an’ me can get that little place, can’t we, George? You an’ me can go there an’ live nice, can’t we, George? Can’t we?”

Before George answered, Candy dropped his head and looked down at the hay. He knew.

George said softly, “—I think I knowed from the very first. I think I knowed we’d never do her.” (*Chapter 5*)

Document Analysis

1. In the first excerpt, as he has “done before,” what does George describe to Lennie?
2. At the end of the first excerpt, George breaks off suddenly, saying he “ain’t got time for no more.” Why do you think George stops his description so abruptly?
3. Does Crooks think Lennie and George will get their own “little piece of land”? Explain his reason.
4. In the final excerpt, what is it that George “knowed from the very first”?
5. How does Steinbeck use foreshadowing to hint that George and Lennie will not get their own farm? Find two examples, one from the first excerpt and another from the second excerpt.

Document D: “Right in the back of the head”

Source: John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*, 1937.

Story Note: Carlson, one of the ranch hands, is complaining about Candy’s old dog.

“Look, Candy. This ol’ dog jus’ suffers hisself all the time. If you was to take him out and shoot him right in the back of the head—” he leaned over and pointed, “—right there, why he’d never know what hit him.”

Candy looked about unhappily. “No,” he said softly. “No, I couldn’ do that. I had ’im too long.”

“He don’t have no fun,” Carlson insisted. “And he stinks to beat hell. Tell you what. I’ll shoot him for you. Then it won’t be you that does it.”

Candy threw his legs off his bunk. He scratched the white stubble whiskers on his cheek nervously. “I’m so used to him,” he said softly. “I had him from a pup.”

“Well, you ain’t bein’ kind to him keepin’ him alive,” said Carlson. “Look, Slim’s bitch got a litter right now. I bet Slim would give you one of them pups to raise up, wouldn’t you, Slim?”

The skinner had been studying the old dog with his calm eyes. “Yeah,” he said. “You can have a pup if you want to.” He seemed to shake himself free for speech. “Carl’s right, Candy. That dog ain’t no good to himself. I wisht somebody’d shoot me if I got old an’ a cripple.”

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.”

Carlson said, “The way I’d shoot him, he wouldn’t feel nothing. I’d put the gun right there.” He pointed with his toe. “Right back of the head. He wouldn’t even quiver.” (*Chapter 3*)

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Story Note: After Carlson shoots Candy’s dog, Candy asks George and Lennie if he can join them in buying their little piece of land. Candy goes on to discuss the shooting of his dog.

“I oughtta of shot that dog myself, George. I shouldn’t oughtta of let no stranger shoot my dog.” (*Chapter 3*)

Story Note: After Lennie kills Curley’s wife, Curley is searching for Lennie in order to shoot him painfully “in the guts.” George finds Lennie at their agreed-upon meeting place “in the brush” where he again tells Lennie about the farm they plan to buy.

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. The crash of the shot rolled up the hills and rolled down again. Lennie jarred, and then settled slowly forward to the sand, and he lay without quivering. (*Chapter 6*)

Document Analysis

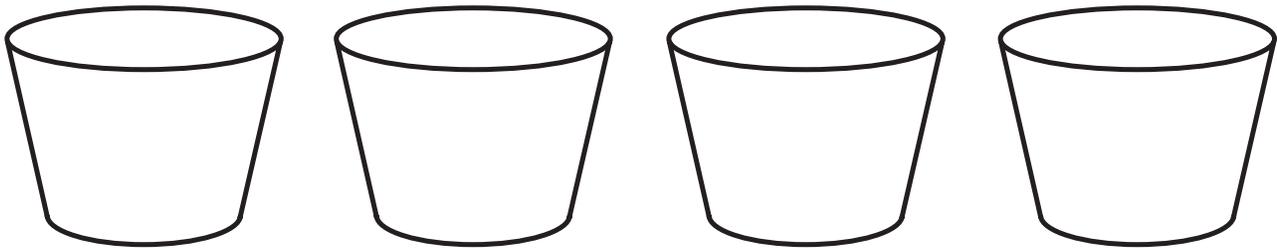
1. Why does Carlson offer to shoot Candy’s dog?
2. How does Carlson say he will shoot the dog?
3. Why does Candy tell George that he “oughtta of shot that dog myself”?
4. Why does George shoot Lennie?
5. How does George shoot Lennie?
6. How does Steinbeck use foreshadowing to suggest how Lennie will die? Be specific.

Bucketing—Getting Ready to Write

Bucketing

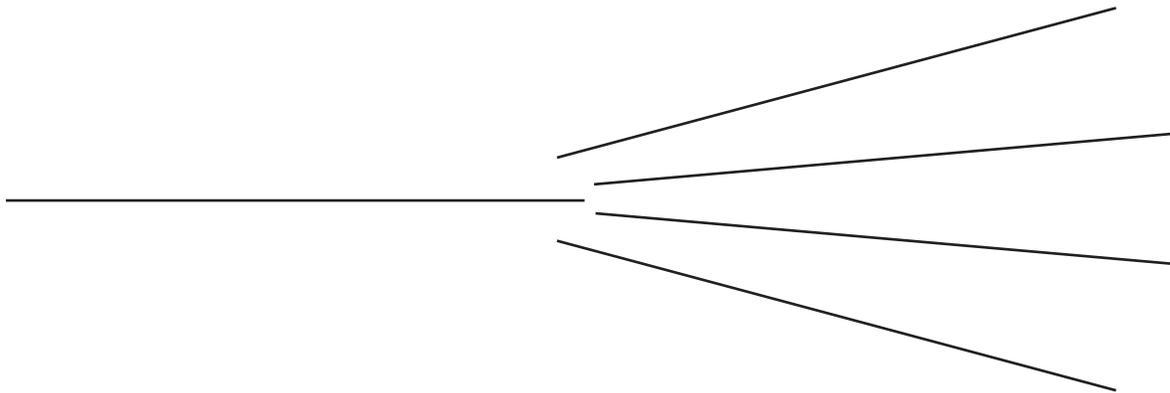
Look over all the documents and organize them into your final buckets. Write final bucket labels under each bucket and place the letters of the documents in the buckets where they belong. Remember, your buckets are going to become your body paragraphs.

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Thesis Development and Road Map

On the chickenfoot below, write your thesis and your road map. Your thesis is always an opinion and answers the Mini-Q question. The road map is created from your bucket labels and lists the topic areas you will examine in order to prove your thesis.



From Thesis to Essay Writing

Mini-Q Essay Outline Guide

Unit Title

Paragraph #1

Grabber

Brief and relevant plot summary

Restating the question with key terms defined

Thesis and Road Map

Paragraph #2

Baby Thesis for bucket one

Evidence: Supporting detail and quotation from document with document citation

Argument: Connecting evidence to the thesis

Paragraph #3

Baby Thesis for bucket two

Evidence

Argument

Paragraph #4

Baby Thesis for bucket three

Evidence

Argument

Paragraph #5

Baby Thesis for bucket four

Evidence

Argument

Paragraph #6

Conclusion: Restatement of main idea, along with a fresh insight or wrinkle

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