

The Existentialist Lens

An Honors Companion to Of Mice and Men
Reading Steinbeck with Camus and Sartre



HOW THIS PACKET WORKS

This packet is for students who want to read *Of Mice and Men* through a second, deeper lens — the questions the existentialist philosophers were asking at almost the same moment Steinbeck was writing. Work through each week's pages after you read that week's chapters, but before you write your Capstone, so the ideas can sit with you while you work.

Read the passages slowly — they reward patience. Sit with the questions in writing. There are no single right answers here; only thinking worth doing. Keep this packet beside your handouts all six weeks.

WHO YOU'LL MEET

Albert Camus wrote about the absurd — the gap between what we long for and what the world gives us — and the surprising kind of joy that can come from facing it without flinching.

Jean-Paul Sartre wrote that existence precedes essence — that we aren't born with a fixed nature, but become who we are through the choices we make.

Both were writing in France in the 1940s, at almost the same moment Steinbeck was writing in California. They were asking questions that run underneath *Of Mice and Men*: what does a human life mean, when the world doesn't seem to mean anything back? And what do we do about it?

THREE WRITERS, ONE DECADE

1937 John Steinbeck publishes *Of Mice and Men* — California.

1942 Albert Camus publishes *The Myth of Sisyphus* — France.

1946 Jean-Paul Sartre delivers *Existentialism Is a Humanism* — Paris.

KEY TERMS

Existentialism — A way of thinking that begins with a hard truth — the world is not built to make sense to us — and ends in a hopeful claim: we are still free to choose how we live and who we become.

The absurd — Camus's name for the gap between what we long for (meaning, fairness, lasting joy) and what the world gives back (often, much less). Not a problem to solve, but the human condition to face.

Existence precedes essence — Sartre's idea that we are not born with a fixed purpose. We exist first, then build who we are, choice by choice.

Bad faith — Sartre's term for lying to ourselves that we have no choice — that our circumstances forced us. It is the way we hide from our own freedom.

A QUESTION TO CARRY

Hold this one question across all six weeks. Come back to it as your reading deepens, and jot how your thinking changes — you'll draw on it for your final piece.

*Is *Of Mice and Men* a hopeful book?*

Why this lens?

As you read Chapters 1 and 2 this week, watch for the moments where the world refuses to give the characters what they long for. Watch also for the moments where they hold on anyway.

- 1.** *What do George and Lennie long for in Chapter 1 that the world isn't giving them? What are they doing about it?*

- 2.** *Why do you think they travel together when most ranch hands travel alone? Write down your first guess — we'll come back to this.*

The myth of Sisyphus

CAMUS IN HIS OWN WORDS

Camus did not tell the myth as a horror story. He told it as a portrait of every human being who keeps going in a world that gives no easy answers. Read his words slowly.

I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain. One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself, forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.

— Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 1942

IN PLAIN LANGUAGE

Camus is saying that even when life feels like rolling a boulder up a hill that never stays put, the struggle itself can be enough — if we face it clear-eyed, without pretending it isn't hard. Sisyphus is not a victim. He is a man who knows exactly what his life is, and chooses to keep climbing anyway.

Camus calls this the absurd — not in the sense of “ridiculous,” but the gap between what we long for and what the world gives back. The absurd is not a problem to be solved. It is the human condition. What we do with it is up to us.

SIT WITH THESE

1. *Camus ends with, “One must imagine Sisyphus happy.” What do you think he means? Do you find it convincing — why or why not?*

2. *Where in Chapter 3 — or in your own life — do you see someone “raising rocks”: continuing a hard, repeating task, and finding a way to keep their dignity inside it?*

Camus and the world of the ranch

Choose two of the questions below and write a few sentences on each. The questions move between Sisyphus, your own life, and the ranch — let them speak to each other.

1. *What in ordinary life resembles Sisyphus's boulder? What do people push uphill again and again, knowing it will roll back? How do they keep going?*
2. *Camus says the struggle itself can fill a man's heart. Have you ever experienced that — a moment where the effort mattered more than whether you "won"?*
3. *Is the dream of the small farm foolish, or is it what makes their lives bearable? Could it be both at once?*
4. *George and Lennie travel together when most ranch hands travel alone. How does their friendship change the meaning of their work?*
5. *Camus ends with, "One must imagine Sisyphus happy." What does it mean for a person to be happy when their circumstances haven't changed? Where do you see flickers of that kind of happiness in this novel?*

YOUR TWO RESPONSES

Sartre and the choices we make

SARTRE IN HIS OWN WORDS

This is from Sartre's 1946 lecture Existentialism Is a Humanism. Read it slowly. Some of it is dense — that's okay. Read it twice if you need to.

Man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world — and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism. And when we say that man is responsible for himself, we do not mean that he is responsible only for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men.

— Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, 1946

IN PLAIN LANGUAGE

You make yourself by what you do. Nobody hands you your character at birth — not God, not your circumstances, not your family. You build it. And every time you choose, you're telling the whole world what you think a human being should be.

Sartre also warned about something he called bad faith — when we lie to ourselves that we have no choice, that our circumstances forced us, that we couldn't help it. Bad faith is the way we hide from our own freedom.

SIT WITH THESE

1. *Sartre says we are “responsible for all men” — that each choice quietly says what a human should be. Do you agree that our choices speak beyond ourselves? Where do you see this in the novel?*

2. *Find a moment of bad faith in *Of Mice and Men* — a character telling themselves they have no choice. What freedom are they hiding from?*

Two thinkers, two starting points. You don't have to choose between them — hold both as you finish the book.

Albert Camus

STARTS WITH the absurd.

ASKS What do you do when the world refuses to give you what you long for?

HOPE The struggle itself can hold meaning. “One must imagine Sisyphus happy.”

KEY WORK The Myth of Sisyphus (1942).

Jean-Paul Sartre

STARTS WITH freedom.

ASKS What kind of person are you becoming — and have you taken responsibility for it?

HOPE Nothing is fixed. You make yourself by what you choose.

KEY WORK Existentialism Is a Humanism (1946).

They were friends who eventually broke over real philosophical differences. Keep that tension in mind — disagreement can be its own kind of honesty.

Sartre and the people of the ranch

Choose two of the questions below and write a few sentences on each.

1. *Look at George across the novel. What kind of person is he becoming through how he treats Lennie? How does he define himself by the small daily decisions, not just the big ones?*
2. *Lennie does not always understand his actions or their consequences. Does that complicate Sartre's claim that we are what we choose to do? What does it ask of the people who love and care for him?*
3. *Where do you see characters telling themselves they have no choice — Sartre's bad faith? Where do you see them owning their choices?*
4. *Curley's wife says she could have made something of herself. Is she right, or is she telling herself a story? Where does her freedom genuinely end, and where does she have more agency than she admits?*
5. *Crooks lives in a world that has decided what he is allowed to be. How does he still make choices about who he becomes — in his books, in his solitude, in his guarded kindness toward Lennie?*
6. *If every choice is also a quiet statement about how a person should live — what statement does the friendship between George and Lennie make? What does it teach us is possible?*

YOUR TWO RESPONSES

Bringing it together

Pick one of these and bring it with your Capstone. This is your final piece — the place where everything you’ve read comes home.

A reflective journal entry

Pick one character from *Of Mice and Men* — not George or Lennie. In two or three paragraphs, look closely at the choices that character has made (or refused to make). What kind of person are they becoming? Where do you see Camus’ absurd in their life? Where do you see Sartre’s freedom?

A conversation between Camus and Sartre

Imagine Camus and Sartre have just finished reading the novel. They sit down at a French café to discuss it. Write a one-page dialogue between them. What does each see in the book? Where do they agree, and where do they disagree? Let them argue — they were friends who eventually broke over real philosophical differences.

A short comparative essay

In about a page and a half: Is *Of Mice and Men* a hopeful book? Use one passage from Camus and one from Sartre to support your reading. Don’t resolve the question too quickly — the strongest essays take it seriously and show their thinking.

I’m choosing: ☐ Journal entry ☐ Dialogue ☐ Comparative essay

WHAT MAKES A STRONG PIECE

- *It takes the question seriously and doesn’t resolve it too quickly.*
- *It uses the book — a specific moment, line, or character — as evidence.*
- *It brings in Camus or Sartre in their own terms: the absurd, freedom, bad faith, existence precedes essence.*
- *It shows your thinking — including where you’re still unsure.*

Submit your honors piece together with your Capstone, either at the final Zoom or via Google Classroom.

None of these are required — they're just the next doors, if you want to walk through them.

| *Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus.*

The full essay we excerpted in Week Two. About a hundred pages, written to be read by anyone willing to think carefully.

| *Jean-Paul Sartre, Existentialism Is a Humanism.*

The full lecture we excerpted in Week Four. Short, accessible — a good first real philosophy book.

| *Viktor Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning.*

Written by a Holocaust survivor about finding meaning in suffering. If anything in Camus or Sartre made you ask “but what about real suffering?”, this is the book that asks that question with you.



If anything in this lens grabbed you and won't let go, that is exactly what philosophy is for.