



A COMPANION READING

The Existentialist Lens

Reading Of Mice and Men with Camus & Sartre



Read each week's page in the Lens — then bring your thinking here. One place, by hand, for the questions worth sitting with.

HOW THIS COMPANION WORKS

This companion runs alongside the six weeks of *Of Mice and Men*. Read your week's page in the Lens (or in *In the Margin*) after you read the chapters, but before you write that week's Capstone piece — so the ideas can sit with you while you work.

EVERYONE

Every student meets a thinker or idea in plain language — a few paragraphs you can read in five minutes. The short summary at the top of each week is yours to keep.

HONORS TRACK

Going deeper means reading the philosophers in their own words and sitting with a question or two. The honors work lives here — write it by hand in the boxes, not on your weekly Capstone handout.

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 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, almost the same moment Steinbeck was writing in California — asking what a human life means when the world doesn't seem to mean anything back, and what we do about it.



WEEK ONE · THE EXISTENTIALIST LENS

Why This Lens?

Where the questions begin

WEEK ONE OF SIX

EVERYONE**THE IDEA THIS WEEK**

Steinbeck wrote *Of Mice and Men* in 1937, during the Great Depression. At almost the same moment, philosophers in Europe were asking a question that runs underneath the novel: what does a human life mean, when the world doesn't seem to mean anything back?

That movement is called existentialism. It begins with a hard truth — the world isn't built to make sense to us, and our dreams aren't guaranteed to come true. But it ends with a powerful claim: we still have the freedom to choose how we live, what we love, and who we become. Awareness is power. Choice is dignity. The struggle itself can hold meaning.

HONORS TRACK**SIT WITH THIS**

As you read Chapters 1 and 2, watch for the moments where the world refuses to give the characters what they long for — and 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 your first guess — we'll come back to it.

READ MORE · FREE ONLINE

Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy — Existentialism:
iep.utm.edu/existent



WEEK TWO · THE EXISTENTIALIST LENS

The Myth of Sisyphus

A boulder, a mountain, a different way to read them



WEEK TWO OF SIX

EVERYONE**THE IDEA THIS WEEK**

In Greek myth, the clever king Sisyphus tricked the gods more than once — he even outwitted Death for a while. When the gods finally caught him, they invented a punishment to last forever: roll an enormous boulder to the top of a mountain. But each time he neared the summit, the stone would slip and roll all the way back down, and he would begin again. Forever.

For thousands of years, people told this myth as a story of horror. Then, in 1942, a French writer named Albert Camus read it differently.

HONORS TRACK**CAMUS IN HIS OWN WORDS**

Camus told the myth not as horror but as a portrait of every person who keeps going in a world that gives no easy answers. The essay closes on a single line:

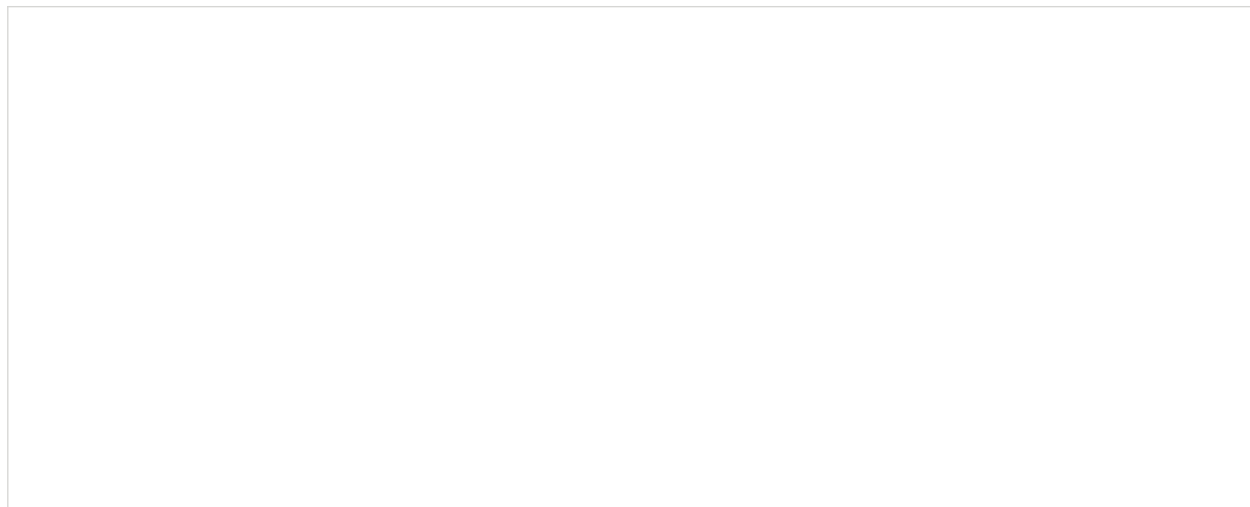
| *“One must imagine Sisyphus happy.”* — Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 1942
Read the full passage in the Lens reading, then sit with it.

IN PLAIN LANGUAGE

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 isn’t a victim; he knows exactly what his life is, and chooses to keep climbing. Camus calls the gap between what we long for and what the world gives the absurd — not a problem to be solved, but the human condition. What we do with it is up to us.

SIT WITH CAMUS

What in these words stays with you? Where do you already see a boulder — in the novel, or in your own life?



READ MORE · FREE ONLINE

Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy — Albert Camus: iep.utm.edu/albert-camus



WEEK THREE · THE EXISTENTIALIST LENS

Camus and the World of the Ranch

Look for the boulders in the bunkhouse

WEEK THREE OF SIX

EVERYONE**THE IDEA THIS WEEK**

Last week you met Sisyphus and Camus. This week the same questions sit beside what's happening on the ranch. The men wake, work, eat, sleep, and do it again. Their dream of a small farm with rabbits is a kind of stone they keep rolling uphill. Camus would ask: is that dream foolish — or is it the thing that makes their lives bearable?

As you read Chapters 4 and 5, look for the boulders. Crooks reading his books in a room he's not allowed to leave. Candy still working after his hand is gone. Curley's wife saying she could've made something of herself. Each is rolling a stone uphill — and each is making a choice about how to live inside that.

HONORS TRACK**SIT WITH TWO OF THESE**

Choose two of the questions below and write a few sentences on each. Let them 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 — and how do they keep going?
2. Camus says the struggle itself can fill a person's heart. Have you ever felt 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.” Where do you see flickers of that kind of happiness in this novel, even though nothing in the characters’ circumstances has changed?

The first question I chose — number:

The second question I chose — number:



WEEK FOUR · THE EXISTENTIALIST LENS

Sartre and the Choices We Make

We arrive first — and then we build who we are



WEEK FOUR OF SIX

EVERYONE**THE IDEA THIS WEEK**

A few years after Camus wrote about Sisyphus, another French philosopher — Jean-Paul Sartre — gave a famous lecture in Paris. Existentialism, he said, isn't gloomy. It is the most demanding and the most hopeful kind of thinking, because it places the future of every human life in the hands of the person living it.

His most famous idea is sometimes summed up in three words: existence precedes essence. A knife is made to cut; a key to open a particular lock — their purpose comes before they exist. People are different. We arrive in the world first, without a fixed purpose, and then we build who we are by what we choose to do. You aren't born brave or kind or cruel — you become these things, choice by choice. And when you choose, you quietly say: this is the kind of thing a human can do.

HONORS TRACK**SARTRE IN HIS OWN WORDS**

*Sartre's 1946 lecture, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, turns on that one idea — existence precedes essence — and a warning he called bad faith. Read the full passage in the Lens reading.*

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 bad faith — lying 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 SARTRE



*Where have you “become” something through small choices?
Where do you see bad faith — in the novel, or anywhere in your
own life?*

READ MORE · FREE ONLINE

Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy — Sartre’s Existentialism:
iep.utm.edu/sartre-ex

WEEK FIVE · THE EXISTENTIALIST LENS

Sartre and the People of the Ranch

What is the one true thing your character has chosen to be?



WEEK FIVE OF SIX

EVERYONE

THE IDEA THIS WEEK

This week you've finished the book. The ending is hard. Before you write your haiku, sit for a moment with Sartre's question: what kind of person was each of these characters becoming, through the choices they made?

George chose to travel with Lennie. Lennie chose, again and again, to trust George. Curley's wife chose to come down to the barn that afternoon. Crooks chose to keep his books, chose his guarded kindness. Even the small choices matter, Sartre would say — even the ones that look like no choice at all. Carry this as you shape your character's haiku.

HONORS TRACK

SIT WITH TWO OF THESE

Choose two questions 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 — in 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 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 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, his solitude, 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?

The first question I chose — number:

The second question I chose — number:



WEEK SIX · THE EXISTENTIALIST LENS

Bringing It Together

The thread comes home

WEEK SIX OF SIX

EVERYONE**THE IDEA THIS WEEK**

Existentialism isn't a closed system with right answers — it's a way of looking. Camus asks: what do you do when the world refuses to give you what you long for? Sartre asks: what kind of person are you becoming, and have you taken responsibility for it?

Both questions are alive in *Of Mice and Men*, and both are alive in your own life. The hope of existentialism is that hard questions don't have to crush you — knowing what you're facing is the beginning of facing it well. As you finish your Relation Study and gather your Capstone, hold both philosophers loosely in mind. You don't have to choose between them. They asked their questions side by side. So can we.

HONORS TRACK**CHOOSE ONE TO CARRY THE LENS FURTHER**

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 the two have just finished reading the novel and sit down at a French café to discuss it. Write a one-page dialogue. What does Camus see? What does Sartre see? 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 idea 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.

The one I chose —

My first thoughts and plan...

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



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



IF YOU WANT TO READ FURTHER

Going On From Here

If existentialism has caught hold of you, here are places to keep reading — none required, just the next doors if you want to walk through them.

FREE OVERVIEWS · NO SIGN-IN

Short, trustworthy articles written by professional philosophers — free to read in your browser.

Albert Camus

The absurd, the Sisyphean struggle, and “one must imagine Sisyphus happy.”

iep.utm.edu/albert-camus

Sartre's Existentialism

Existence precedes essence, radical freedom, and bad faith.

iep.utm.edu/sartre-ex

Existentialism

The whole movement — how these thinkers fit together.

iep.utm.edu/existent

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Fyodor Dostoevsky, Notes from the Underground

Often called the first existentialist novel — a voice arguing for freedom over tidy reason.

gutenberg.org/ebooks/600

Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spake Zarathustra

The thinker who shaped both Camus and Sartre, on meaning after the old certainties fall away.

gutenberg.org/ebooks/1998

Marcus Aurelius, Meditations

The Stoic root of “the struggle itself is enough” — a Roman emperor writing to steady himself.

gutenberg.org/ebooks/2680



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These are recent and still under copyright — find them at a library or bookstore. The full Camus and Sartre passages from this lens live in the Lens reading.

Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus.

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

Viktor Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning.

A Holocaust survivor on finding meaning in suffering — the book that asks “but what about real suffering?” with you.



*What you have made is small, and it is yours, and it is real.
That is the whole point.*