OF MICE AND MEN
ANIMAL IMAGERY

- The use of imagery related to the natural world generally, and animals in particular is one which can be seen throughout the novel.
- It reflects the fact that Steinbeck had spent a lot of time in this area and accuracy in his description was important to him.
- This imagery also demonstrates his attention to detail as a writer. This contributes to the sense of realism created for the reader. An example of this is in his description of the trees by the river and the pool – they are classified as willows and sycamores rather than just trees – thus creating a more vivid picture of the place for the reader. Images such as this enhance both the sense of place and enforce the sense of reality in the novel.

- In a question relating to animal imagery it would be easy to stick only to the obvious examples – Lennie as a bear – it is worth looking deeper into the text for some of the more obscure examples to enhance the detail in your answer. It is also worth remembering that detailed explanations of the imagery are required – beware of making your answer too vague and general.
‘He walked heavily, dragging his feet a little, the way a bear drags his paws’

‘Lennie dabbled his big paw in the water’

‘Curley was white and shrunken by now. He stood crying, his fit lost in Lennie’s paw’

‘He pawed up the hay until it partly covered her’. 

- Many of the images allude to Lennie’s hands being like the paws of a bear. Hands are used throughout the novel to give detail to the characters. His hands being like **paws** signify his size and strength. He would not be particularly dextrous and is heavy-handed throughout the story.

- It is his heavy handedness that causes the deaths of the mice, puppy and Curley’s wife.

- The hands that he uses to stroke and ‘pet’ the soft things he likes are the same hands that cause death and destruction so easily. Just like a bear this is where his strength and power lies and what he relies on to get him out of trouble.

- In a sense Lennie does not realise his own strength and power and finds it difficult to use his hands in a gentle or delicate way.

- When they first arrive at the ranch George describes Lennie as

‘strong as a bull’

- It is another particularly appropriate simile for Lennie. He is powerful and the sort of worker any ranch owner would like to have. It also makes up for his lack of brain – he just needs to be strong – in this world where the men are judged on their ability to work Lennie would be a valuable commodity to the boss – he could do the work of two
men easily but the boss would only have to pay him once so he represents good value for money.

- Curley is described using the image of a terrier:

  **‘Curley stepped over to Lennie like a terrier’**

  - This is a well thought out image. He is small and vocal, just like a terrier. He is quick tempered and agile too, and also is the aggressor in this situation. Terriers are traditionally bred as dogs to hunt small animals and will go to great lengths to catch them. They are known for their speed and agility.
  
  - There are two occasions where the image of a fish is used in Steinbeck’s description. The first is when Lennie has broken Curley’s hand:

  **‘The next minute Curley was flopping like a fish on a line..Lennie watched in terror the flopping little man he held’**

  - The difference in size between the two men is highlighted effectively in this simile. The verb **flopping** is used to suggest that Curley has no control over his movements and that he has been engulfed by the sheer size and strength of Lennie.
  
  - The image of the fisherman and his catch is also reinforcing the image of Curley having been caught by Lennie – just like a fish there is no release for him until the hook is removed – in this image that is the link to the removal of Lennie’s hand and that will only happen when George tells him to let go. Until that point Curley is completely powerless.
  
  - Just like the fish when out of water Curley would be struggling for breath.
  
  - He is in a completely alien situation – he isn’t used to being so completely humiliated in a fight so he is just like the fish when it comes out of the water.
  
  - The second time this image is used is at the end of the novel when Lennie has killed Curley’s wife:

  **‘He shook her then, and he was angry with her…and he shook her; and her body flopped like a fish’**
• She too has been destroyed by Lennie’s immense strength. He didn’t mean to kill her, unlike the attack on Curley. The image links the two events together in the mind of the reader and reminds us of just how strong Lennie is. Again, his victim looks small and insignificant next to his great size. Also, the victim does not have any control or chance to get away from Lennie – he is just too powerful.

• The imagery of rabbits runs throughout the novel and is always associated with Lennie and his dream of a better place. He loves this particular animal because he once saw some at a fair in Sacramento. They represent a world in which Lennie would be allowed to have his own pets to look after himself. He imagines ‘tending’ them – being responsible for them. They are part of a fantasy world which Lennie clings on to as a way of having some purpose in his life and hope for something better. The rabbits take on many different forms in the novel – sometimes they are coloured, sometimes giant. They are able to speak to Lennie and in his mind they are the voice of his conscience.

• The use of animals in description is particularly relevant at the beginning and end of the novel in the descriptions of the place down by the river where George and Lennie camp and then where Lennie dies.

• There is the description of a water-snake in both passages. In the opening of the story:

‘A water-snake slipped along the pool, its head held up like a little periscope’.

• The water snake is a detail that adds to the tranquillity of the place – it is green and fertile and the home of many species of wildlife. It represents a place that has not been disturbed by death.

• The water-snake appears again at the end of the novel and shows a change of tone:

‘A water-snake glided smoothly up the pool, twisting its periscope head from side to side; and it swam the length of the pool and came
to the legs of a motionless heron that stood in the shallows. A silent head and beak lanced down and plucked it out by the head...

- This image is a foreshadowing of Lennie’s death. At the beginning of the novel the pool had been a place of life and tranquillity. At the end of the novel little has changed apart from the presence of death. Lennie’s death, like that of the water – snake is swift and quiet. It is also unexpected for him. Both Lennie and the snake are doing things that are natural and normal to them when their lives are ended.
- This final scene also reminds us of our place in nature and that all life is precarious.

Please see separate section for notes on Candy's dog.