

Of mice and men, a novel by john steinbeck: character analysis of crooks

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For which character of Mice and Men do you have most sympathy? Show how John Steinbeck's presentation of your chosen character creates sympathy for him or her.

In my opinion, Crooks is the character who possess and deserves the most sympathy. I say this as it is clear that Steinbeck encourages the reader to feel compassion towards Crooks in the novel through the way he depicts his character and develops his story. Crooks is the only black man in the novel and is fittingly named as Steinbeck's chosen title illustrates his disability as he has a crooked back caused by a kick from a horse. Through the use of Crooks, Steinbeck shows us the position of coloured people in society during the 1930's, which is very different to our modern day views as whites and blacks were segregated and coloured people were considered as 2nd class citizens. In the novel, Crooks is constantly referred to as 'nigger' by the other characters, showing that black men and women were often treated as barely human and degraded constantly by white people during this period of time.

However, the author also demonstrates the subservient position of disabled individuals by purposely creating Crooks to be a physically disabled character. Segregation and racism was the norm during the 1930's due to the Jim Crow Laws, which were regulations in America enforced between 1876 and 1965 that provided a legal basis for segregating and discriminating against African-Americans. Therefore, not an ounce of sympathy would be felt from the readers towards a man purely because he was black as discrimination was common and culturally accepted by the white society of

America. For this reason, Steinbeck burdens Crook's with a physical impairment in order to evoke compassion from his audience.

Crooks is introduced half way through the book as the stable buck who owns "pain-tightened lips" and a "face lined with pain" however, his eyes are 'patient'. In this first description, Steinbeck instantly gains our sympathy as we know Crooks is in pain. However, the pitiful character is noble about it as his eyes are patient. Additionally, Steinbeck's introduction of Crooks portrays him to be obedient and dutiful towards 'Mr Slim', as he offers to do more than he has been asked by insisting to put warm tar on the Mules foot for him and he informs Slim that Lennie is playing with the puppies in a way 'that won't do them no good.' Through showing Crook's willingness, the author increases the reader's feelings of empathy towards the touching character as the atrocious and constant abuse that he receives from his ranch works and other members of society hasn't lead to a reduction in his kind and honest behaviour.

Our sympathy is further raised when we meet Crooks for the second time through the way that Steinbeck describes his living quarters. He is banned from the bunkhouse with the exception of Christmas day and doesn't live with the other ranchers' as he inhabits a stable alone. This is exemplified at the beginning of the novel when Candy states 'they let the nigger come in' which implies the occasion to be a special treat for Crooks. Steinbeck uses this quotation in order to underline the irony of the lack of Christian charity in the ranchers' behaviour during the festive period. As a result of his isolation and lowly living arrangements, the reader develops the impression

that Crooks is seen to be below the other men on the ranch. Sadly, the implication from the author is true as the 1930's was a period of inflamed class conflict. The upper class consisted of mostly white Aristocratic families that dwelled in large and stately mansion. Whereas the lower class consisted of the labourers which included ranch workers, however, all African Americans were seen as lesser citizens and though to be at the bottom of America's society. By virtue of the country's class system, it would have been natural for the ranch workers to victimize Crooks as his place in society was lower than theirs, meaning that the white workers owned power over Crooks and the right to segregate him as a result of his disability and race. With regards to Crook's living space, the author creates the image of an animal living in the stables while sleeping in a box by stating ' Crooks had his bunk in the harness room' and ' his bunk was a long box filled with straw'. These quotations convey the daily abuse that Crooks receives and through using animal imagery to present Crook's living conditions, Steinbeck successfully manages to expand the readers' feelings of empathy towards the woeful character.

A key theme in the novel is loneliness and the suffering it can cause and the author highlights this theme through the uses of Crook's character. When Lennie pays Crooks a visit in the stable room to see the puppies, Crooks initially attempts to be unwelcoming. ' I don't know what you're doing in the barn anyway' he complained, but he soon mellows to Lennie's company as demonstrated when Steinbeck writes ' Crooks scowled, but Lennie's disarming smile defeated him.' The reader is encouraged to see a warm,

friendly side to Crooks, which exists despite the way he is excluded by the others. Steinbeck creates an affectionate picture of someone who again complains when Candy comes to join them, but is clearly actually pleased to finally have some company. This is shown in the following quotation: 'Come on in. If ever'body's comin' in, you might just as well'. It was difficult for Crooks to conceal his pleasure with anger'. The reader warms to this excluded character as he clearly lives in physical and emotional pain, but can still show kindness to others despite the daily discrimination he receives.

The author develops the effect of loneliness further in the stable scene through this moving and heart-breaking description." S'pose you didn't have nobody. S'pose you couldn't go into the bunk house and play rummy 'cause you were black... A guy needs somebody - to be near him... I tell ya a guy gets too lonely an' he gets sick." The reader pities Crooks and our compassion towards the character increases as he describes how he is discriminated against by the ranchers to the point where he feels unwell from the experience.

On the contrary, Steinbeck uses Crook's character to show how a lifetime of prejudice and unfairness can affect people. The author does this through showing how Crooks can't resist the temptation of manipulating Lennie as he realises that his status in society could be higher than his mentally disabled acquaintances. The weaker characters, who include Crooks, Lennie and Curley's wife, have been left behind while the others go into town. Despite his intelligence, which Steinbeck informs the reader about at the beginning of the chapter through informing us that he owns " a tattered dictionary and

a mauled copy of the California civil code for 1905". This evidences that he's a knowledgeable man with little or no schooling but does what he can to better himself and that he also wants to be aware of the few rights he has as a black man. In defiance of his own experience of discrimination, Crooks can't resist taking an opportunity to pick on Lennie in a cruel way by convincing Lennie to believe that George has abandoned him in order to acquire a better life. ' S'pose George don't come back no more. S'pose he took a powder and just ain't coming back'. The motives of the weaker characters show the complexities of relationships when people are continually downtrodden themselves. The reader's sympathy towards Crooks deteriorates in this scene as he is a wise individual who's endured a life of pain; meaning that he should know better than to take advantage of Lennie on the basis of his mental health and is being hypocritical by doing so. Additionally, Crooks is frightened by the intensity of Lennie's reaction, and is clearly physically intimidated by him, possibly giving an indication of things to come as Steinbeck portrays Crooks to be a bright and insightful man.

By contrast, Steinbeck develops the readers regard and empathy for Crooks by showing that he has endeavoured to rise above the discrimination and pain through the way other characters describe him. ' Nice fella too. The boss gives him hell when he's mad. But the stable buck don't give a damn about that. He reads a lot, got books in his room'. The author clearly admires Crooks in the way that he presents him. He is investing a lesser character with independence, dignity and intelligence, which may have been surprising to a typical reader at the time, who might not expect such positive qualities

from a black disabled man. Steinbeck is clearly challenging stereotypical views through the novel.

At the end of this passage, Steinbeck uses Curley's wife to show just what a dangerous position black people held in society. As she arrives at the stable, Crooks tries to prevent her from entering by showing some pride and independence over his living space. " You got no rights comin' in a coloured man's room'. Her scornful response immediately demeans him, " you keep your place then, Nigger. I could get you strung up on a tree so easy it ain't even funny." She implies that she could frame Crooks and would be believed without question, even if the other people present supported Crook's version of events as her position in society was higher than his, even as a woman. Steinbeck's description of Crook's reaction is a chilling example of how powerless black people were in society at this time. ' Crooks had reduced himself to nothing. There was no personality, no ego -nothing to arouse either like or dislike.' He is used to being in threatening situations and knows he must be meek and not at all assertive as he is potentially saving his life. The reader pities Crooks as all of his dignity and independence disappears quickly and he is obviously very used to being in this situation.