

How does the  
steinbeck present  
lennie as a  
sympathetic  
character



First is Lennie's name—Lennie Small. I don't think Steinbeck makes up this name just by chance. Just like Curley says, Lennie is not small. He is a big guy with prodigious strength, but he is small on the other hand due to his low social status.

How low? Everyone can hurt him, can make him a joke, even George at first jokes on him too, and his existence is insignificant. Lennie has a bear-like big body but still can't escape the danger caused by a mean little man Curley. The reason is simple. The physically bigness can't fight the socially smallness.

This kind of contrast makes him a sympathetic guy the first time the readers encounter him on the first page. Second contrast is that Lennie is good in nature and just likes a child but because of his mental handicap and the innocence that doesn't fit in with his times, he always does the things that get him into trouble, and eventually brings him death. Lennie has no ability to understand abstract concepts like death. He is very loyal to George, does everything George asks him to do, even the command means jumping into the water, but actually he has no idea what loyalty is.

For this reason he usually does not mean to do the things that get him into trouble, and once he does get into trouble, he has no conscience to define his actions in terms of guilt. He only knows the consequences such as "George would be mad" or "George is gonna let me tender no rabbits". Just like what happened in Weed, Lennie touches the girl's red dress just because he likes it. There isn't any place in his brain for dirty things but the world is deep and dirty where people would never believe in such pure wishes.

Lennie however doesn't understand that, and he does what his instincts tell him to do. So Lennie gets into trouble, with no harm or even good intent, loses his job and runs away. When Lennie plays with small animals such as rats, he really likes them. But at last they are always killed by him.

Is that because Lennie doesn't like them anymore or because Lennie is a brute man? Of course not. The answer would be heart-breaking—because Lennie can't control himself, both mentally and physically. He loves those little things, those cute furry soft things, he touches them to get great security but when they bite him softly, he nips their heads by the light of nature. If Lennie doesn't have prodigious strength, the situation may not be that worse, but with such strength, his unconscious nip kills his puppy. Just like he asks himself "Why do you got to get killed? You ain't so little as mice."—of course he doesn't know what he has done.

It is the same with the final trouble Lennie gets into. He touches Curley's wife's hair, her soft hair—Lennie loves soft things, and then he forgets that he should not clinch the hair so tight, let alone covers Curley's wife's mouth hard. Why does he do that? He fears that her yell may get George mad, and then George may let him tend no rabbits. What an innocent man! As for killing, that is the last thing in Lennie's head, which turns out to be the only real thing. Then comes Lennie's doomed fate. Why a good and harmless man can't help himself falling into danger and going straight to the doomed fate? Is innocence a bad thing? No, it is a moving quality.

Is having prodigious strength a wrong thing? No, it helps a lot when machine in pre-machine time. Is mental handicap really that terrible? Not necessarily,

many people live a good life with mental handicap. So what's the problem. The problem is that Steinbeck brings these three elements together in Lennie.

People usually say kindness brings blessing, but here, comes a contrast: the good and kind Lennie with a soft heart does everything wrong unconsciously, and gets nothing but a doomed fate. If that is not sympathetic, what else would be? The third contrast is that the hope inside Lennie and the impossibility the hope is. Lennie has strong belief in his future life with George. He always begs George to tell the blue print again and again, even if he remembers every sentence of the plan. "And the rabbits, George, talk about them" or "I would tend the rabbits" Lennie says as if what they are talking is real, as if tomorrow they are going to live that free and happy life.

The rabbits, yes, the rabbits, that is what Lennie cares about because rabbits represent Lennie's great hope for the coming lovely days. But every reader knows that their dream would never come true because Lennie would never make things right. He will make mistakes, unconsciously, he will get scoldings for his dumb, but next time, he will repeat his previous actions, again. This dead circle would never end. The more fierce Lennie's hope grows, the more sympathetic he is.

Dreaming of an impossible dream and take it as a real thing—only Lennie can confuse the truth to such extent and that's why he is so sympathetic.