

# The missing hand: disconnection in of mice and men

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



In *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck, the characters' hands represent all that is wrong with the men and their society. Lennie's paws, Candy's missing hand, and Curley's gloved limb, the characters' pathology reveals itself in ways that are more telling than any written description could offer. From the moment of his first appearance, the metaphors that Steinbeck uses to describe Lennie compare him to an animal. He drags "his feet a little, the way a bear drags his paws" (2). Lennie has hands, but he doesn't use them, choosing instead to drink from the water in the clearing "like a horse" (3). When he does dip a hand into the water, it is to wiggle his fingers so that the water splashes (3). None of this is particularly noteworthy until George takes his own turn to drink at the pool. In contrast to Lennie, George uses his hands to cup some water and "drink with quick scoops" (3). Lennie ignores the use of his hands, giving up the role of human to act more like an animal. Steinbeck uses this disuse of the human hand to characterize Lennie as something less than human. He continues this idea with the other denizens of the ranch. When Candy first guides Lennie and George to their new quarters in the bunkhouse, Steinbeck directs the reader's attention to his work clothing and the broom that he carries in his left hand (18). This is only a prelude, however, to the revelation that Candy is missing his right hand. When he points with his right arm, what emerges from his sleeve is a "round stick-like wrist, but no hand" (18). Steinbeck calls further attention to the missing limb when he describes Candy's movement so that he can take the can that George hands him: "The old swamper shifted his broom and held it between his elbow and his side while he held out his hand for the can" (18). Candy's missing hand is the most important detail about him, one that

Steinbeck repeatedly emphasizes in his descriptions of the man. This serves to characterize Candy as a man who is not whole, both literally and figuratively. Candy is missing a hand, but he is also missing life. He has no relatives (59), and his offer to buy into the ranch with George and Lennie is evidence of his loneliness. Candy has money in the bank, but he has nothing to spend it on, and no one to share it with. His missing hand is symbolic of all that he is missing in life. He is desperate to reach out to someone, but, ironically, he cannot connect with those around him. This idea continues to descriptions of Curley, evident even before George and Lennie meet him for the first time. Candy describes Curley as “handy;” someone who’s “done quite a bit in the ring” (26). Steinbeck also includes the detail regarding Curley’s left hand, the one that the new husband is “keepin’...soft for his wife” (27). As with Lennie and Candy, Steinbeck characterizes Curley almost exclusively in terms of his hands, specifically in the way that he uses them to create conflict with others. Curley boxes with his hands, and even though he might think of the Vaseline on one hand as the mark of a lover, he uses that supposed love for his wife as an excuse to attack others. This pathology of the missing hands allows the author to comment upon society as well. These men are missing hands because something has taken them away. Through society’s misunderstanding of Lennie’s mental condition, it has removed his humanity. Candy has lost his hand in a work-related accident, and his status seems indicative of an aging population who has no one to take care of them, and no means of independent living. Curley has succumbed to a twisted ideal of what a man should be, lost in society’s requirement for him to aggressively assert his masculinity at every opportunity. In characterizing

these men, Steinbeck is sounding a warning about the dangers of treating people as only parts of themselves, rather than considering the whole. Steinbeck characterizes a group of men who are each missing something important. The hand that each man lacks means more than just a physical imperfection. Instead, these literal and figurative missing limbs demonstrate the men's emotional distance, even when what each of them wants is a connection to someone or something. Each of these men is missing a hand in some way, and missing a connection to other humans that could have been their salvation.