

How does Steinbeck present the life of an itinerant worker at the beginning of th...

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Steinbeck begins his novel by creating the setting. He paints a beautiful image of a peaceful environment where Lennie and George live in. This suggests an ironic tone to their lives as it is not quite as peaceful and harmonic as the setting. Their lives are quite the opposite, as they work hard and their only form of entertainment is starting fights, drinking heartily and going to cathouses. Readers are introduced to the lives of itinerant workers in America during the Great Depression.

Steinbeck uses setting to describe itinerant workers' lives such as "small square windows" - a symbolism of the prison-like working conditions of a farmhand worker. Also, it portrays the small constricted view of the outside world that these itinerant workers had. They did not have any privileges and did not afford to have any luxury. It could be argued that their bosses had total control over the itinerant workers.

They were confined to have a simple life such as displayed when it is said "Tell ya what - know what he done Christmas? Brang a gallon of whisky right in here and says, Drink hearty, boys. Christmas comes but once a year." This shows their simplicity and how they are easily pleased and impressed due to their low expectations. Although, at the mercy of their bosses, itinerant workers were victims of exploitation of work such as being overworked and maltreated as seen in this quote "The boss gives him hell when he's mad". This suggests the workers had to keep the boss satisfied.

African-American itinerant workers are mentioned at the beginning of the book and the frequent use of the word, now an explicitly racist word "nigger" is heavily used to emphasise the attitude society had to African-

Americans. The first reference to it is in the quote “ Ya see the stable buck’s a nigger.” We are hinted to the idea of “ niggers” being treated worse than men such as Lennie and George, because of their skin colour and the old belief of African-Americans being less “ worthy”. Itinerant workers were used to the constant verbal and occasional physical abuse given by their bosses. Readers get the opportunity to understand better the mentality of itinerant workers and how they would prefer to spend their leisure time.

“ When the end of the month come, I could take my fifty bucks and go into town and get whatever I want. Why, I could stay in a cathouse all night.”, “ Order any damn thing I could think of”, “ Get a gallon of whisky, or set in a pool room and play cards or shoot pool”. Readers keep being reminded of their simple life and low-life cheap entertainment which was the norm, this was what itinerant workers enjoyed. Another suggestion to entertainment enjoyed by them is in the form of violence: “ After that the guys went into Soledad and raised hell.”. As they were farm-men and known for being masculine, they would carry out violent acts for the sake of satisfaction.

Their simple way of living and their natural simplicity is stressed several times in the beginning of the novel such as when Lennie is described to the boss in an attempt to make him appear more handy: “ Oh! I ain’t saying he’s bright. He ain’t. But I say he’s a God damn good worker.”. This emphasises the lack of education amongst itinerant workers. It is also reflected in the sociolect used by these men, which is grammatically incorrect but widely spoken: “ An’ you ain’t gonna do no bad things like you done in Weed, neither.”

In conclusion, we are exposed to a lot of information in the beginning of the novel that describes the way itinerant workers lived and their personalities and interests in order to properly understand the story.