

How does Steinbeck create the theme of insecurity in the novel?

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



Write about:

- Why some characters feel insecure
- How language contributes to a sense of the characters' insecurity
- How the settings contribute to a sense of insecurity
- Other features which create a sense of insecurity You must: Explore how Steinbeck creates a sense of insecurity through the presentation of insecure characters, eg through: Lennie, Crooks and Curley's wife
- Look at language/settings, eg the situation of Curley's wife and how she feels about Curley and her life on the ranch, and her appearance
 - Show how Steinbeck uses language/settings to create insecurity, eg how language is used to show Lennie's insecurity about George
- End by evaluating how the different elements work together
- In 45 minutes, three characters are enough to consider.

Choose settings to look at in some detail, eg the pool in the valley where the novel begins and ends; the harness room (chapter 4) which is where Crooks lives; the Great Barn (chapter 5) where Lennie kills Curley's wife. Comment on the language Steinbeck uses to describe characters and settings. • The movement from harmony to discord appears in most of the settings in the book. Look at the opening description on page 18. This peaceful world of nature is disturbed by the arrival of George and Lennie. Make your point and use evidence/quotation to support it.

Lennie is described as a 'bear'. This image establishes his essential nature – the combination of brute strength and animal-like innocence. An appropriate image which emphasises his tendency to hold onto things in a 'bear-hug'.

Steinbeck suggests a great deal about Lennie by describing his movements.

- Now go on to look at what we learn about Lennie; George is ill at ease with Lennie's behaviour as he helps him to rehearse how he should behave when they arrive at the ranch the following day. Comment on what causes Lennie's insecurity.

We soon see that Lennie is totally dependent on George, unable to cope in the world on his own. His innocence and ignorance of the world and other people lead him into trouble. As a result, Lennie is the main source of conflict in the novel, though as George tells us, he "never done it in meanness." Lennie's obsession for 'petting' shows that he has deep-rooted emotional needs which he himself does not understand, but which nevertheless have to be satisfied. There is a dreadful progression in his victims from dead mouse to dead girl.

We are told something of the reasons why George and Lennie are on their way to a new job and what life is like for itinerant workers during the Great Depression in America in the 1930s

- George sometimes appears cruel in his treatment of Lennie when he tells him he could have a better life without him, (page 29) but we soon realise that this is a form of control and that in fact, George actually enjoys their companionship and his responsibility, because the alternative life of the lonely migrant worker has little to recommend it. However, Lennie's interpretation of George's words is always literal and he

fears that George will abandon him if he does a 'bad thing'. It is this that makes him feel insecure.

- To reassure himself that they have a future together, to feel secure, Lennie frequently asks George to 'tell about the rabbits'. Comment on the significance of the 'dream farm' (p. 31) "Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world...."
- Lennie enjoys George's story just as a child enjoys a familiar fairy story. But it represents far more to both men.
- The 'heaven' as Crooks later calls it, becomes not only their dream, but also that of Candy, Crooks and Curley's wife.
- In chapter 4, Steinbeck brings together the most vulnerable and insecure characters in the novel. Show how and why this is dramatically effective; the chapter ends as it begins; it prepares us for the novel's final tragedy; achieving the 'dream' is impossible - "Nobody never gets to heaven." the potential for happiness is dashed each time.
- Look in detail at Crooks and the setting of the harness room, where he lives. Note that Steinbeck's portrayal of Crooks is sympathetic.

He emphasises his experience of silent suffering, because of his crooked back but also because of the racism he is subjected to because he is black. It is his enforced segregation from the other workers, which causes his insecurity. Look at how Steinbeck's description of the setting gives us an insight into Crooks's character (p. 98, 99) as well as his use of language, "he had thin, pain-tightened lips". He is a victim of oppressive violence and prejudice and has learned to cope with it by withdrawing into himself. He is '

proud and aloof' as a defence against the cruel treatment he receives from the other men because he is black. In this chapter, Lennie acts as a catalyst. It is through him that Crooks and Curley's wife reveal their insecurities. In spite of Crooks' experience which has taught him that "nobody never gets to heaven", he too gets caught up in Lennie's dream of owning land and having a future, but Curley's wife's cruelty in reminding him of her racial superiority, "Well, you keep your place then, Nigger." (p. 113) when he asks her to leave, leaves him feeling humiliated. He realises that in this world of white supremacy, there will never be any security for him.

He will never escape from his life of suffering, "What she says is true." Curley's wife is never named in the novel. She is perceived as Curley's possession, referred to as Curley's wife. Her husband married her because she is 'purty' and naively she married him because she must have believed that the security of marriage would bring her happiness. Instead, she finds herself in a world of men who do not treat her as an individual, but see her as a sex-object, or a piece of 'jail bait'. Desperate for companionship, she approaches the men in a provocative way. Find examples of Steinbeck's description of her.

Experience has taught her that men are only interested in her looks. A victim of sexual prejudice, she herself enjoys being cruel to the men in section. Angry at being left alone while her husband has gone to spend the evening with prostitutes, she tells them, "An' what am I doin'? Standin' here talking to a bunch of bindle stiffs-a nigger an' a dum-dum" Like Crooks, who takes the opportunity to vent his pent up anger on someone weaker than

himself when he tries to frighten Lennie into believing that George has deserted him, she gets pleasure in watching others suffer.

The setting is the Great Barn, where Lennie has just accidentally killed his puppy. Curley's wife confides in Lennie just as Crooks did. This results in her death and the start of the man-hunt for Lennie. Steinbeck evocatively creates a warm and lazy atmosphere through visual detail supported by onomatopoeia, "The hay came down like a mountain slope to the other end of the barn..." "There was the buzz of flies in the air, the lazy afternoon humming." This is disrupted by the violence of the killing of Curley's wife.

She relishes the opportunity to talk to someone. In a form of soliloquy, she talks about the life she dreamed of and confesses, "I don't like Curley." On page 129, Steinbeck's writing technique resembles script writing for film, "And the meanness and the plannings and the discontent and the ache for attention were all gone from her face." Death has restored her to a natural state of innocence and the visual detail of the description in its softness contrasts with earlier harsh descriptions of her, where Steinbeck suggests that her body language is intended to attract the men's attention, "...leaned against the door frame so that her body was thrown forward." In death she is relieved of the loneliness and insecurity, which led her to dream and to search for attention. • With her death, Lennie's insecurity returns, "I done a real bad thing,... George'll be mad..." By ending the novel where it began, Steinbeck brings the action of the book full circle which gives a feeling of completeness to the story. Once again, the last chapter opens with a

description of the setting. Lennie has returned to the brush, where George has instructed him to go.

Steinbeck focuses on the beauty of the natural world, but this time hints at the violence in nature as a heron swoops down on a water snake “ and plucked it out by the head,” The insecurity felt by these characters is a result of overt discrimination against race, gender and mental disability. Lack of understanding causes their suffering. Both Lennie and Curley’s wife die and Steinbeck suggests this is the only way to end their suffering. Crooks is doomed to a life of suffering and insecurity. Through these characters, Steinbeck paints a bleak picture of the lives of migrant workers at this time.