

Of mice and men, and racism: analyzing the character of crooks

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



Throughout the novella "Of Mice and Men," Steinbeck uses the character of Crooks to highlight the racial discrimination in 1930s America. During the great depression Black Americans faced hostility, bigotry and persecution. In Southern states, Jim Crow laws bolstered racial segregation and groups such as the Ku Klux Klan were extremely active. Despite his own humanism, Steinbeck does not systematically aim to write either for or against racism but simply portrays the harsh reality of the time. As a reader we begin to see the psychological and emotional impact that this has on Crooks.

During the 1930s for most white Americans, racism was normal. Blacks were "inferior" according to the popular prejudices of the time. The realism of dialogue in "Of Mice and Men" highlights this unfortunate historical context well. Steinbeck imitates the way the ranch hands really spoke giving us an accurate insight into the context of the novel. In 186 pages Crooks is referred to as 'nigger' 16 times. When Candy mentions Crooks for the first time in section two, he says "Ya see the stable buck's a nigger." However, he immediately follows up by saying that Crooks is a "Nice fella too." This perfectly displays the normality of racism in the 1930s. Candy has great respect for Crooks and is not using the word "nigger" as an offensive slur (as it is seen in the 21st century) but simply as part of his day to day language. The reader never learns Crooks' real name; Crooks is most likely a nickname because "he's got a crooked back where a horse kicked him". He is only ever identified by his colour and his job. The constant referral to him as "the stable buck" or "the nigger" whether used in a derogatory manner or not perfectly illustrates the constant dehumanisation of black Americans in the time the novella is set.

In section four, the theme of racial prejudice is explored in depth, giving the reader an insight into Crooks as a character for the first time. The scene is set, Crooks is alone in his "bunk in the harness room; a little shed that leaned off the barn" The description of Crooks' room is of great importance. We are told that he possesses a "tattered dictionary and a maul-ed copy of the California civil code for 1905". This indicates that he wants to be aware of the few rights he has as a black man. Unlike the other men, he obviously makes an effort to educate himself. His room is segregated from the others but more importantly it is part of the barn; perhaps a subtle reference to the fact that despite the abolition of slavery in 1865 as a black man he is still treated and given the same level of respect as an animal. He even shares his medical supplies with animals; in the "apple box over his bunk" there is a "range of medicines, both for himself and the horses". Crooks' is described as "a proud aloof man. He kept his distance and demanded that others kept theirs." For the first time this shows how he has been pushed away by everyone else therefore he pushes others away to protect himself. His "pained lips" indicate he is a man who has suffered, hinting at the difficult life he has likely endured as a black man.

It is a Saturday night and all the men have gone into town to spend their earnings except the three mentally or physically impaired "outcasts" of the farm- Lennie, Candy and Crooks. When Lennie visits Crooks in his room, at first he is fiercely defensive of it. Despite Lennie smiling "helplessly in an attempt to make friends, Crooks tells him "you got no right to come in my room. This room's my room. Nobody got any right in here but me" He turns

Lennie away. However, Lennie does not understand the unwritten code of racial segregation and does not leave. Crooks tells him “ You go on get outta my room. I ain’t wanted in the bunk house, and you ain’t wanted in my room.” Crooks is obviously resentful because of the unjust treatment he receives as a black man living in 1930s America. His room is his only space, he has so little rights and his frequent referral to his rights indicates that he is clinging onto the rights that he does have. Crooks is painfully self-aware. Lennie asks Crooks “ Why ain’t you wanted?” and Crooks replies “ Cause I’m black”. The contrast between Lennie’s naivety and Crook’s bitterness emphasises the importance of this point. Lennie is simple, he looks beyond skin colour. Lennie’s “ disarming smile” defeats Crooks and his desire for company ultimately wins out. He invites Lennie to sit with him. This reaction begins to reveal Crooks’ loneliness.

However, just as Steinbeck begins to present Crooks as a vulnerable character, shaped by the prejudice of the time he is living in; a character that we begin to feel sympathy towards, we are shown a cruel side to Crooks as he begins to suggest to Lennie that that George might not come back from town. Lennie becomes scared and upset but “ Crooks’ face” is described as “ lighted with pleasure in his torture”. Crooks is not used to having the “ upper hand”. As a black man Crooks is used to being at the very bottom of the hierarchy. He is used feeling weak and vulnerable himself. Crooks uses the given the opportunity to feel superior to someone else. However, as Crooks senses the aura of danger surrounding Lennie, he stops taunting him. He tells Lennie “ I didn’t mean to scare you”. Knowing that “ a

guy can talk" to Lennie " an' be sure" he " won't go blabbing". Crooks begins to open up, he says " a guy needs somebody - to be near him" and that " a guy goes nuts if he ain't got nobody". Here Steinbeck uses emotive verbs describing Crooks as " crying" and " whining" showing the hidden emotional pain that Crooks is in. Despite Lennie being mentally handicapped he has George. As a " nigger" living in a prejudice time it is only inevitable that Crooks will be jealous of this companionship. He tells Lennie " I tell ya a guy gets too lonely an' he gets sick". The negative psychological impacts that racial discrimination has on Crooks begin to very obviously surface; starting to give the reader a possible explanation to the cold-hearted way in which he treated Lennie.

As Crooks is opening up, Candy appears at the door. Again, Crooks' defensive barrier rises. In an " irritable" manner Crooks' invites Candy in. At first Candy is described as seeming " Embarrassed" it is obvious that both men are uncomfortable. We learn that this is the first time Candy has been in Crooks' room and the social boundary between them is clear. However, it is revealed that although he masks this with a tough exterior Crooks is secretly pleased to have more company as Steinbeck tells us " It was difficult" for Crooks " to conceal his pleasure with anger". Candy and Lennie discuss the " dream farm". Crooks is shown to be wise and observant as he listens to them talk, however he does this with great cynicism. He interrupts " brutally" saying " you guys is just kidding yourself" and makes the harsh comment that " Nobody never gets to heaven, and nobody gets no land." However, as the two other men talk, Crooks begins to become drawn into the dream. This

is an indication that like all the ranch hands, he wants a place where he can have some security and is another massive indicator of his loneliness.

Eventually he doubles back on himself by saying “ why I’d come an’ lend a hand”. However, this dream is unachievable, there is no security for anyone in a prejudiced world, least of all a black stable hand with a crooked back. Curley’s wife appears and interrupts the men’s daydreaming.

During this section the theme of racial discrimination reaches its height. Curley’s wife says “ they left all the weak ones here”, which is in fact the truth. She continues and calls the three “ a nigger an’ a dum-dum and a lousy ol’ sheep”. Crooks, however, having been somewhat emboldened by the company of two others suggests to Curley’s wife that maybe she should go to her own house, as they “ don’t want no trouble.”. However, he soon oversteps his line as a black man by telling Curley’s wife “ you got no rights comin in a coloured mans’ room” “ get out quick”. Jolted into that era’s reality by Curley’s wife as she says “ you know what I can do to you if you open your trap”. He accepts the fact that he lives with ever-present racial discrimination and just stares “ hopelessly” and is metaphorically described as “ growing smaller”. Curley’s wife then makes a very real threat, she “ puts him in his place” by saying “ nigger. I could get you strung up on a tree so easy it aint even funny”. To this, Crooks does not react, as this is his reality; it would have been very easy for her to get a lynch mob together.

Crooks’ situation powerfully reflects the extreme racism of the early 1930s. Most whites believed that blacks were inferior in every way and blacks just accepted this prejudice against them as a way of life. After Curley’s wife’s

final threat Steinbeck describes Crooks as having “reduced himself to nothing.” The use of imagery here is powerful. We are told “There was no personality, no ego- nothing to arouse either like or dislike”. This futility shows how little power Crooks has. As Crooks “slowly comes out of the layers of protection he had put on” He dismisses the other men by saying “you guys comin in an settin’ made me forget. What she says is true.” He tells Candy to “jus’ forget” about him helping on the “dream ranch”, protecting himself by claiming he was “just foolin”.

Steinbeck makes us as an audience feel for the character of Crooks through the use colloquial dialogue and nearer the end of the section, strong imagery. Racism feeds into the wider theme of loneliness and as section four progresses it becomes clear that the crippling sense of isolation which Crooks’ faces as a black man has inevitably fed into him to appearing so bitter and gruff. This is not to say Crooks’ does not have his faults. The reader as an individual has to decide whether Crooks deserves sympathy. There is no way of knowing how what Crooks’ personality would be like if he was not born black. It could be argued that perhaps he is just a harsh and cynical person naturally. Crooks’ is intelligent and the way he toys with Lennie’s feelings is cruel. Yet this is likely retribution for his own treatment. Like Curley’s wife, Crooks is a disempowered character who turns his vulnerability into a weapon to attack those who are even weaker. Steinbeck gives us plenty of evidence that Crooks has humanity under his rough exterior. This does not justify his cruel actions, however it is hard not to feel for this ostracised man who has “retired into the protective dignity of a

negro". It is obvious that Crooks has been greatly affected by discrimination, resulting in him being miserable and angry at the unjust society he is living in. He is trapped in a never-ending, vicious cycle; he has been lonely for so long that he almost can't deal with someone trying to be nice to him. He sadly has no hope of ever seeing a better life, both he and the reader are horribly aware of this.