

Of struggles for power

Business



The Great Depression Era in American history was a time of excessive hardships and difficulties. Even for those who were well off before the Depression began in 1929, times were hard and the average American life was no longer so average. Families were separated as many men left their homes and traveled the country, looking for any sort of work. John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* tells of two men working to earn the money to fulfill their vision of owning land – the epitome of the American dream. Although life is grueling for all in this time, for some it is more challenging than others.

Many of the main characters in the novel have an obstacle to face, which makes life difficult no matter how good times may be. Steinbeck exquisitely reveals power struggles taken on by characters with impediments as they confront one another. While they are all on the bottom rung of society, they still wrestle for the highest ground possibly available to them. Steinbeck illustrates power struggles through characters such as Curley's wife, the lone woman on the ranch; Crooks, the African-American hunchbacked stable-hand; and those with disabilities such as Candy and Lennie. Curley's wife is the first character to portray a struggle for power even though she knows there is no way to better her life because of her gender.

Because she is the solitary woman on the ranch she is constantly striving to receive any sort of attention she can from the workers. Her husband, Curley, tries to isolate her from the men but spends no time himself with his wife except to order her inside. Curley's wife's flirtations with the workers cause many to think that Curley "married...a tart"(28), but they are unaware that she truly just wants human interaction. She laments to Lennie that she could

have had a successful career as an actress, but because that did not occur, she married Curley. She is willing to talk to anyone because she has nobody else to talk to. In one significant scene, she comes into Crooks's room where he, Candy, and Lennie are talking and converses with them for awhile until Crooks suggests that she leaves.

She angrily asserts the only power she has to gain any ground: her racial superiority. She threatens Crooks, telling him " what [she] could do if [he] open[ed] [his] trap"(80). She has this one power and she knows how to wield it – she will do anything to gain dominance over anyone. This desperation shows her true self: scared, lonely, and frantic for a friend. Crooks is the next character to struggle for power in the harsh society imprinted even on the most remote places like the ranch. Because of Crooks's race, he is not allowed to live in the bunkhouse with the rest of the working men; he is an outcast in the barn.

Although he puts on a facade of indifference, his true feelings show through when Candy admires his private room and Crooks replies with the sarcastic comment, " and a manure pile under the window. Sure, it's swell"(75). While Candy dreams of his own quarters, Crooks desperately wants to be with everybody else. Crooks is also unique in the sense that he has two obstacles, his race and his crooked back. He is bullied by Curley's wife because of his race, but he also has a weapon of power up his sleeve, his mental capacity.

He taunts Lennie, saying George will never come home because he wants to have the feeling of being on top for once. Many would think that Crooks would have empathy for Lennie because Crooks knows how it feels to be an

outsider. A product of the harsh environment he subsists in, Crooks wants to be the bully for once and thus displays a naturalistic quality of this novel. The final characters to be found in the arena of power struggles are those with disabilities, such as Candy and Lennie. Although they are both disabled, they have very different struggles because whereas Lennie is typically included by others but does not understand everything that occurs, Candy does understand everything but is not always included because of his physical disability. Candy knows he “ ain’t much good with on’y one hand”(59), and his growing age makes him nervous that he will soon lose his job on the ranch.

Candy knows he does not fit in well with the rest of the ranch workers, and this is proven when Carlson shoots Candy’s dog, not because he is cruel, but because Carlson does not truly appreciate what the dog means to Candy. Candy makes an effort to take control in the scene in Crooks’s room when he stands up to Curley’s wife, and he ultimately has dominion over the situation – and Curley’s wife – until she accosts Crooks. And though Lennie has no control over Curley’s wife and Crooks when they are simply talking, Lennie has the vital card in the struggle – his brute strength. The minute Lennie threatens Crooks when he is taunting Lennie about George, Crooks immediately stops because he sees who the winner would be in a battle of strength. Critically, Curley’s wife does not see the same thing Crooks does and just wants to talk to Lennie; she does not see the potential danger in alarming Lennie or making him feel uncomfortable. Although many players in this game have advantages over one another, it is Lennie who has the

ultimate power and tragically evokes his weapon for the climactic scene of the novel.

The struggles for power in *Of Mice and Men* clearly demonstrate the harsh reality of life during the Depression. In a typical circumstance where misfits may have banded together for added security, these characters may have had a happier story and may have even flourished. But the naturalist themes come through to show how lower-class and uneducated people deal with problems in their lives. Women are excluded, different races are segregated, and the disabled are considered useless; in essence, those who are considered worthless are left to fend for themselves. The novel exploits discrimination towards all kinds of people in life and serves as a reminder to society that helping each other up instead of pushing each other down will lead to much happier endings.