
“Nought But Grief An’ Pain”: Oppression In Of Mice And Men

Of Mice and Men by John Steinbeck illustrates an unlikely friendship between two men traveling together; one born with a mental disability but is also extremely strong, depending on the other, who is small but nimble and smart. George and Lennie embark on their journey and choose to work at a new ranch in hopes of leaving behind whatever problems they faced in the past and someday being able to build up and live on their own dream ranch. Upon arrival, they meet many new people at the ranch, whom they soon discover are all facing their own problems. Curley’s wife, for example, happens to be the only woman on the ranch, Candy, an old man with a physical disability, and Crooks, the only African American worker living on the ranch.

Ultimately, the constant oppression the characters face is what causes the tragedy that lies at the heart of the novel. Firstly, the way Curley’s wife is being constantly told what to do and isolated by the other men is the reason for how alone she feels when living on the ranch. When she sits down to try and talk with Lennie, he refuses at first, telling her that he is not allowed to talk to her. “I don’t know why I can’t talk to you. I ain’t doin’ no harm to you.” “Well, George says you’ll get us in a mess.” “Aw, nuts!” she said. “What kinda harm am I doin’ to you? Seems like they ain’t none of them cares how I gotta live. I tell you I ain’t used to livin’ like this. I coulda made somethin’ of myself.” (87-88) Lennie first tells her that George does not let him even talk to her, which already illustrates how the other men do not treat her as an equal, and try to avoid any interaction with her. Furthermore, she exclaims that she does not understand what harm she is doing to Lennie by simply talking to him, which not only shows how she is almost unaware of how the men view her as below them, or a “tart”, but also that she is lonely and in need of someone to talk to. At the end of the passage, she tells herself that she could have made something of herself, which shows how not only is she being treated differently on the ranch now, but in her childhood years, her dreams and hopes were crushed by her mother and the people around her. Secondly, Candy’s old age and physical disability is the basis for his constant oppression and fear of being replaced. After Lennie accidentally kills Curley’s wife, all the men, especially Curley, are incredibly enraged and leave the ranch hoping to find Lennie and shoot him.

At this time, Candy is left alone and abandoned in the barn, and Steinbeck writes that “the sound of the men grew fainter. The barn was darkening gradually and, in their stalls, the horses shifted their feet and rattled the halter chains. Old Candy lay down in the hay and covered his eyes with his arm” (98). Steinbeck first writes that the sound of the men grew fainter, which shows how Candy’s coworkers are getting further and further away from him, and Candy himself is becoming more oppressed, isolated and alone, unable to relate to the other men on the ranch. Furthermore, Steinbeck writes that the horses rattled the halter chains, which is one of the more obvious representations of oppression throughout the novel, as we see the symbol of the halter chains being repeated in the chapters of the other isolated characters. Towards the end of the passage, Candy lays down and covers himself in the hay. From the many events that happen throughout the novel, such as when Carlson almost forces Candy to allow him to shoot his dog or when Candy is left alone at the ranch when all the other men go out, we can see the men are constantly mistreating Candy. The action of being oppressed, or pressed down, is very similar to how Candy lays down and covers himself in the hay, making the ending of the

passage another representation of Candy's constant oppression. Thirdly, the way others on the ranch treat and view Crooks as their subordinate is the reason why he lived an isolated lifestyle on the ranch. When Crooks tells Curley's wife to leave his room, saying that she has no right to stay in his room, Curley's wife lashes out at Crooks, and threatens to have him lynched. She closed on him. "You know what I could do?" Crooks seemed to grow smaller, and he pressed himself against the wall. "Yes, ma'am." "Well, you keep your place then, Nigger. I could get you strung up on a tree so easy it ain't even funny." Crooks had reduced himself to nothing.

There was no personality, no ego—nothing to arouse either like or dislike. He said, "Yes, ma'am," and his voice was toneless. (80-81) Steinbeck first writes that Curley's wife "closes in", on Crooks, which shows how she knows that she has some sort of power over Crooks and takes satisfaction in exploiting that power to oppress him and his words. Furthermore, the author writes that Crooks presses himself against the wall, which symbolizes the action of being oppressed by something or someone else, or being pressed onto and not able to fight back and react, which is precisely what Crooks does. Finally, the most important part of their exchange is how Curley's wife threatens to have Crooks lynched. The threat alone is something that Crooks is entirely unable to fight back against and can only accept, which is the most powerful piece of evidence to support how Crooks is completely oppressed by the other people living on the ranch and cannot change the way he is viewed, and is instead isolated and treated as someone lower than everyone else. Ultimately, Lennie is the one who accidentally kills Curley's wife.

All throughout her years, she had been denied from the opportunities and desires she longed for, whether it be her childhood dreams of being an actress, or her simple need for a companion, and someone to talk to in hopes of escaping her loneliness. All these burdens, added up, are what causes Curley's wife to sit down and talk to Lennie. Consequently, it is also what leads to her death. When she lies in the barn, unconscious, Steinbeck writes that she appeared "pretty and simple", her face "sweet and young", as if all the built up pain and oppression that she had dealt with from all the past years had finally disappeared, along with her life.