
The Limitations of The Great Depression

The circumstances of history inevitably shape the lives of people living at that time. The Great Depression, one of the most difficult periods in American history, resulted in life-changing economic hardships and significant struggles for many families. In addition, the massive drought and dust storms which swept through the Great Plains resulted in a mass exodus to the West as people competed for jobs. In the novella *Of Mice and Men*, the characters demonstrate the lives of a typical migrant worker living in California during the 1930's.

Plagued with limitations, they still yearned for better lives. In the fiction novella *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck develops the characters Crooks, Candy, and Lennie with limitations in order to demonstrate the isolation and discrimination migrant workers experienced in society during the Great Depression. Struggling to make ends meet, migrant workers sought jobs wherever they could find them often facing unjust treatment. Steinbeck creates the character Crooks to emphasize how African American workers were viewed and treated during these times. Crooks, segregated because of his race, lives in the ranch's barn alone tending to livestock. He feels lonely and unaccepted by the other ranch hands. In addition, his crooked spine limits the types of tasks he performs, how quickly he works, and the amount of work completed.

Both his race and physical limitations reduce the level of respect his fellow workers give him. As a result, Crooks tries to defend himself, acting protective of his personal space and belongings which further alienates him from the others. As Crooks finally begins to open up to Lennie, showing interest in his fantasy of the American dream, Curley's wife appears stating, "Well you keep your place then, nigger. I could get you strung up on a tree so easily it ain't even funny," (Steinbeck 81). Curley's wife demolishes Crooks' hopes and dreams while her harsh attitude diminishes him as a person. Her words show the prejudices black individuals faced and the power a white person held over them.

As a result, Crooks' character becomes bitter. He copes with being a disabled black man by reading books which distract him from the outside world. Crooks also finds comfort when Lennie visits him, listening to his thoughts and feelings. Even though Lennie cannot fully understand Crooks, his presence makes Crook feel as though someone cares about him. Furthermore, Crooks copes with his situation by tormenting Lennie about the possibility of George leaving him alone in the world. Crook's anger causes him to target Lennie, a weaker person, as he seeks revenge on all those who degraded him in the past.

Similar to Crooks, the character Candy deals with discrimination on the ranch. Steinbeck portrays Candy as an old, feeble ranch worker with "wrists like sticks" and a "white bristled cheek" (Steinbeck 18-19). Through this description, Steinbeck demonstrates Candy's physical weaknesses and old age. Moreover, his missing hand makes Candy less productive compared to the other workers. As a result of this, Candy feels useless and isolated. Fearful of losing his job he states, "I ain't much good with one hand. I lost it right here on this ranch...Jus' as soon as I can't swamp out no bunkhouses they'll put me in the country," (Steinbeck 59-60). Candy expresses this to George as he worries about his future.

He knows the day will come when he will be sent away because he no longer can perform his

job. Through Candy's character, Steinbeck reflects the discrimination of the elderly in society. Viewed no longer as contributors to society, they get discarded or sent away. Due to this, Candy becomes keen on helping Lennie and George establish their American dream of owning a farm. Candy would feel useful again conducting simple tasks, such as working in the garden, which make his fears disappear. This hopefulness helps him cope with his limitations bringing joy and purpose again to his life.

Just as Crooks and Candy endured isolation and discrimination, so does the character Lennie. Steinbeck creates Lennie as an animal-like person with several disabilities to further show the situation of migrant workers. Although physically large and strong, Lennie struggles with the limitations of short-term memory loss, cognitive deficits, reduced social skills, and obsessive-compulsive behaviors. Lennie often forgets events or things people tell him. One example occurs on the way to the farm when Lennie thinks he lost his work ticket so he states, "George I ain't got mine.

I must've lost it," (Steinbeck 5). Panicked, Lennie does not remember George taking the ticket for safe keeping. George attempts to manage Lennie's memory loss by having him repeat words or sentences spoken to him over and over. Limitations like this make Lennie unable to live on his own and fit into a typical society. Child-like and innocent, Lennie does not understand the consequences of his actions. Dependent on George, Lennie often turns to him for help or support. As they prepare to go to the ranch George explains to Lennie, "That ranch we're going to is right down there about a quarter mile. We're gonna go in and see the boss. Now, look- I'll give him the work tickets, but you don't say nothing. I

if he finds out what a crazy bastard you are, we won't get no job, but if he sees ya work before he hears you talk, we're set. You got that?" (Steinbeck 6). George instructs Lennie not to speak to their new boss so they do not lose their jobs. This quote suggests the prejudice held by society against individuals with cognitive difficulties who could not effectively communicate. When situations become confusing or scary, Lennie becomes safe by George's presence and by touching something soft like a mouse or a rabbit. Additionally, Lennie finds comfort when he hears the story of the farm he and George dream about owning some day.

The farm represents a place where Lennie can feel safe surrounded by his favorite things. Throughout the novella, Lennie also experiences social isolation because of his reduced intellect and poor social skills. As a result, he has trouble forming relationships. He copes with this isolation by attempting to be friendly to others on the ranch although they often reject him. As a result, he turns to animals for friendship and security as a way to deal with his poor social interaction.

Throughout John Steinbeck's novella *Of Mice and Men*, the characters Crooks, Candy, and Lennie represent the social isolation and discrimination migrant farm workers faced during the time of the Great Depression. Steinbeck creates his characters with specific limitations making their struggles visible to the reader while showing how they were viewed by society through the eyes of the other ranchers. Crooks' race and physical disability, Candy's age and frailty, and Lennie's cognitive difficulties put them each at a disadvantage.

Each character deals with their shortcomings in different ways but they all find hope by dreaming of a better life. Ultimately, the American dream is unattainable for them because their limitations and discrimination. Left to struggle, the migrant workers of the Great Depression

remained isolated from the rest of society. Since that time, society's views of those of different races and disabilities has dramatically changed. After all, each and every individual should have the right to pursue their own American dream.

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