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# The Significance of the Subject of Loss as Depicted in John Steinbeck's Book, Of Mice and Men

## How Important Is the Theme of Death in the Novel?

Steinbeck explores many different themes in his book but arguably one of the most prominent themes is death. Death is the reason for the numerous tragedies throughout the novel that eventually lead to the death of Lennie. He illustrates this concept through the use of symbolism and description infused within a semantic field of death, especially apparent in chapter six. Not only does the idea of death allow Steinbeck to engage the reader but it also allows him to explore the idea of suffering of characters due to their description before and after their death. Furthermore, it ultimately allows him to explore sub themes such as dreams due to the death of the American dream and also the role of women on the ranch and the impact it has.

Symbolism is one of the key linguistic techniques Steinbeck uses and in particular he uses animals to foreshadow and represent the death or deterioration of characters in the book. This idea is greatly explored through the death of Candy's dog who as we can tell through the description is used to represent Candy. Candy is described as having a "stick-like wrist" and the noun "stick" has connotations of being fragile and therefore implies that he is physically weak but could also mean he is emotionally delicate. Furthermore, this idea of Candy slowly deteriorating fits in with his dog being described as "struggled lamely ... grunting to himself" but Candy explaining that he was "a good sheep dog when he was younger". This similar comparison between the two is clearly used to infer that Candy's dog symbolises Candy and his future. As the book matures, Slim states "I wisht somebody'd shoot me shoot me if I got old an' a cripple", in order to convince Candy to let his dog be killed. However, the death of his dog and the quote by Slim shows that Candy will soon face a similar fate after being deemed useless and also introduces the idea of Darwinism and survival of the fittest into the book. Additionally, as the book develops, the animals Lennie kills progressively get larger in size starting with a mouse and growing to a puppy. This use of animals getting larger not only shows Lennie's animalistic instincts but also foreshadows the inevitable death of Curley's wife. Furthermore, when Steinbeck is describing her passing he uses animals further to symbolise death. He writes "A pigeon flew in through the open hay door and circles and flew out again". One interpretation is that it represents her short time on the ranch and the use of the noun "circle" also references the overall cyclical structure of the book and the concept that nothing ever changes on the ranch. However, an alternative interpretation is that the "pigeon" is the ranch equivalent of a dove which not only represents her death but may infer that Curley's wife is finally at peace. Therefore, symbolism is one of the novel's key features and the symbolism of animals is one way in which Steinbeck represents the theme of death, whether it is through animals symbolising characters and ultimately their fate or the use of animals to foreshadow death in the novel.

Death is also an important way in which Steinbeck explores individual characters and the impact of the ranch on them, this concept is especially significant in regards to Curley's wife. She is first presented to us as being "jailbait" or a "tart" and this is heavily assisted by the use of the colour red to portray her. When describing her the author says she wore "red mules, on the insteps of which were little bouquets of red ostrich feathers". The repetition of the word red is

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significant as it may symbolise passion and sexuality or danger, portraying her as a threat to the American dream. Furthermore, she is described as “brittle” and “heavily made up” which may show that she is in fact vulnerable and wears a mask of makeup in order to seem more grown up than she is or it may serve as an alter ego. Furthermore, it may indicate that she is alike a doll and is not only fragile but beneath the flirtatious layers is actually a “girl”. This first impression the reader creates significantly contrasts with the image of her after her death. Once Lennie has killed her, Steinbeck writes “the meanness and the planning and the discontent and the ache for attention were all gone from her face”. This may show that after her death, her real personality was exposed and she is now portrayed as innocent and “simple”. Therefore, through her death Steinbeck could be attempting to show how the ranch impacts people and changes them. In particular Curley’s wife helps to represent the stereotypical characterisation of women on the ranch which is also explored through a female dog’s “heavy and hanging duds”, showing she is just used with no empathy towards her. As a result, death plays an important role in the novel in exposing characters for who they truly are showing how the ranch impacts them but also shows how women are viewed and characterized which the reader also experiences due to the contrast between Curley’s wife’s first and last impression.

Chapter six marks the end of the novel and is the most tragic part of the book for the readers exploring many different themes. Chapter six begins in the same place as chapter one does but also in the same way in regards to it opening with a description of the setting referencing the overall cyclical structure of the book. During the opening narrative, it clearly has a semantic field of death with the theme infused within the description. The sun is described as having “left the valley”, which foreshadows death of either Lennie or the American dream seen as the word “sun” is commonly associated with the idea of hope. Contrastingly, when Lennie appears at the scene and disturbs the natural environment the sun is said that as it climbed the “mountains [it] seemed to blaze with increasing brightness”, which may reference that hope is returning for George when Lennie dies or that the depression for him is over. However, an alternative interpretation is that it represents the gates to heaven where Lennie will eventually go. Steinbeck deliberately uses edenic language to reference the idea of temptation, with Curley’s wife symbolizing the forbidden fruit such as “snake”. Nevertheless, the most obvious event that occurs in chapter six is the shooting of Lennie which as a result causes the death of the dream. However, the idea that their personal heaven is destroyed by his death is foreshadowed from the beginning of chapter one. Steinbeck opens, similarly to the opening of chapter six, with a deep detailed description of the nature. He deliberately uses adjectives that allude to a fairytale which is, in reality, unattainable and furthermore, he uses long sentences that are detailed, the parallel of Lennie and George’s dream. Additionally, not only is this idea of beauty unattainable but it is disturbed by the “two men emerging”, referencing the nature being destroyed by the impending darkness of humanity. Furthermore, the edenic scene is further ruined by Lennie killing the mouse. His likeness for soft things which ultimately lead to death is first introduced to the reader in chapter one and hence foreshadows the death of Curley’s wife due to her soft hair. Therefore, the cyclical structure of the book means that chapter one as well as six explore how the use of the environment and the opening description of the chapters foreshadows the end of the book. It also carries the theme of death within the description as well as the idea of the American dream being unattainable from the beginning.

Therefore, overall the theme of death is infused within every aspect of the book and it intertwined with every event. Steinbeck uses mainly literary devices to convey the idea of death but he puts emphasis on foreshadowing and symbolism by representing the end of the book through the animals Lennie kills. He further uses symbolism through the description of the

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chapters to either represent the paradise of nature and garden of Eden or create a semantic field of death. Additionally, he uses death to present to the reader the way disabled people and women were treated on the ranch and the lack of authority they had on the ranch as well as the impact it has on them in regards to it changing their personalities. In this way Steinbeck effectively carries the concept of death to deliver powerful messages to the reader that evoke empathy.

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