

OF MICE AND MEN – CROOKS

CONTEXT

- Description of Crooks is at the beginning of part 4 of the novel.
- He is a minor character in terms of his contribution to the plot, however he is vital to a full understanding of the social and historical context of the story.
- The reader should already be aware of the wider social issues surrounding the novel – the poverty of the Great Depression in the 1930's.
- Crooks is used by Steinbeck to add detail to his background. He shows us what it was like to be a black American during this period.
- Racism was an everyday part of life in the Southern States; it was accepted and encouraged.
- The story is set 50 years after the end of the Civil war – Fought over slavery. After the war, when the south was defeated, all the slaves gained their freedom. However, attitudes towards blacks had not changed at all.

WHO IS CROOKS?

- He is a Northern black man living in the South.
- He is an educated man – he has a copy of a dictionary, the 'California Civil Code' and other books in his room.
- His status on the ranch is no higher than the animals because he is black.
- He is disabled in a world where a man's worth is measured by his ability to do physical labour.

HOW DOES STEINBECK USE LITERARY TECHNIQUES IN HIS CREATION OF CROOKS?

- He creates a character the audience want to believe in and have some sympathy for.

- This is achieved through the use of detail in the description of the place he lives, and accurate description of his physical appearance.
- The main feature of the description that strikes the reader is that Crooks lives in the stable with the horses.
- His room is filled with the paraphernalia of his work – harnesses, leather, a collar, saddle, soap and tar. These are the tools of his trade.
- It is a bit like a gardener sleeping in their shed – he has had to make his living area in the room where he works on mending the tack belonging to the horses.
- This description is even more degrading than the description of the bunkhouse and immediately makes the reader feel sympathy towards Crooks.
- The next thing Steinbeck does in his crafting of this character is to give him hope – this happens when Crooks discusses the dream with Lennie – he becomes animated and sees a way of becoming part of a world in which he has at least some status. The audience shares this sense of optimism with him.
- Steinbeck then brings him back down to earth with a bang when Curley's wife reminds him of his place. (She can have him hanged).
- Steinbeck is using this detailed cameo to reflect how futile life was for the ranch workers and show that any dream they had was impossible.
- The 'cameo' technique is used to show a character briefly and use them to make a point. Steinbeck uses the same technique with Curley's wife and Candy – builds up a picture of hope, and then destroys it.
- This pattern is followed on a much larger scale in the novel as a whole with Lennie – the building up of hope then its destruction.

CROOKS' POSITION ON THE RANCH

- He and Candy are the only two employed workers who have permanent positions on the ranch.
- At first glance this may make them seem fortunate; however they have the two worst jobs on the ranch. Candy is a 'swamper' (cleans) and Crooks is a 'stable-buck' – looks after the horses.
- He is generally isolated by the other men. This is a racist issue and also indicates his job status – although his job is vital because the

horses couldn't work without his input. He doesn't do anything that brings in money – therefore he is the lowliest person on the ranch.

- He is described as being 'aloof' – he doesn't think much of the other men and probably looks down on the uneducated amongst them.
- There was an established tradition of lynching black men in the area for any perceived wrong-doing. This means that Curley's wife threat to have him hanged was a real one – many black men were lynched just for speaking in the wrong way to white women and many were falsely accused of rape.
- The persecution of black people was almost like a sport to white men, in the same way hunting animals was.