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 peace. (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.