

How does Steinbeck create sympathy for Lennie in 'Of Mice and Men'?

Of Mice and Men is a novel written by John Steinbeck to deliberately expose the nature of America and itinerant workers during the 1930s. Steinbeck purposely creates and describes the character of Lennie and the events that surround him in the aim of evoking the reader's sympathy towards him.

It is obvious from the beginning of the novel that Lennie is in some way mentally disabled, and has the mind and actions of a child, the first time that a character mentions this is Slim, who remarks that Lennie is 'Jes like a kid', Curley's wife also point out that he is 'jus' like a big baby'. It is obvious to the reader of Lennie's mental ability by the way he speaks, as he has a definite speech impediment. By having Lennie be described as like a child and by his actions being like a child, it effectively creates sympathy for the character from the readers. This is because it is always easy for a reader to feel sympathetic towards a person with mental difficulties as you can understand how challenging it must be in their situation.

Lennie does not realise his own strength and crushes Curley's hand, which was an unintentional way of getting him to stop. After this incident Lennie is described as 'crouched fearfully against the wall' and he cries how he 'didn't wanta hurt him'. Just after he has broken Curley's hand you would not feel any sympathy towards Lennie, it is not until he shows his regret and remorse about the incident that it shows his timid and childlike side again. No sympathy is felt towards Curley during this, because of the dislike built up against his character by this point even though he is the one seriously injured, all the sympathy is felt towards Lennie by the characters and the readers alike. After the encounter and being comforted by George, Lennie exclaims 'I can still tend the rabbits, George?' it shows how easily satisfied Lennie is and also how easy it is for him to forget major occurrences.

In the final part of the novella, we see Lennie's true strength when he kills Curley's wife. This act was clearly not in malice as he only put his hand over her mouth to stop her screaming, as he felt that him being able to 'tend the rabbits' would be jeopardised. This is Lennie once again looking out for himself. The sympathy felt towards Lennie is however regained, by the end of the book. Lennie is deeply remorseful about his actions and understand the burden he must be for George 'I won't be no more trouble to George', and how what he does affects everyone else. In this final part Lennie is more childlike than ever, he cries and worries and calls for George like a child for its parent. George finally shoots Lennie and kills him, believing it is the best for Lennie and everyone else, a sort of mercy killing. However, you do not feel deep sympathy towards Lennie at this point as in a way he is free now of his mental burden, in my opinion I am glad that this was what happened to Lennie as his shackles have been cut loose and he nor anyone else has to suffer.

Steinbeck's inclusion of Lennie allowed the reader insight into the psychological workings of a character who was treated differently on the ranch because of his mental disability. Steinbeck made it very easy for us to feel sorry for him as he presented him with difficult and challenging situations that exposed his true character which at times, forced him to make the wrong decisions.

How does Steinbeck present different types of strength and weakness in 'Of Mice and Men'?

In *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck portrays many strengths and weaknesses in a wide spectrum. Many characters are there to present this theme in very different ways. During the 1930s, America had been hit with depression and people had to find inner strength to survive. Steinbeck wanted to highlight the difficulties of such a theme. The novella has a pecking order of the ranch, Curley has most power, and is a bully. His wife has no identity, and is terribly lonely, but she too kicks down. Cruelty and abuse of power characterises the bulk of the novel, with the most noticeable exception of George and Lennie.

Lenny is physically the strongest character in the book. He is 'as strong as a bull' and is frequently compared to strong animals – 'bear like' and when he crushes Curley's hand in his massive 'paw'. However he has a weakness as well, although we aren't sure how it happened he is mentally retarded. We know this because of quotes that are childish and his naivety, 'I remember about the rabbit.' Despite Lennie's physical strength, he is gentle and intimidated by George at the start of the book. The violence of George's language is almost abusive - 'crazy bastard' is repeated, and George seizes the mouse. This catches the readers' interest into the contrast of how someone so strong and big could be controlled, and why the mood is so extreme. We later see George as more of a parent, 'Lennie looked helplessly at George', and the semantic field of children/helplessness is often used for Lennie 'Blubbering like a baby'. So we understand George is frustrated, not abusive. He later talks to Slim about abusing his power over Lennie in Auburn – where he told him to 'jump in' and Lennie 'clean forgot' he couldn't swim' and was so 'grateful' to him after, George says "I ain't done nothin' like that no more". He cares for Lennie. This care is most clearly seen in contrast to Curley's reaction to Lennie.

When Curley is hitting Lennie in the face George tells Lennie 'let him have it' 'let him have it Lennie' This then exhibits Lennie's strength as he crushes Curley's hand in his 'paw'. We can see George cares for him as he was urging him on to stand up for himself and hit Curley. Curley is powerful and this makes him cruel – whereas George is compassionate.

Curley's wife, who theoretically should have a lot of power being Curley's wife, doesn't. This is mainly due to the fact she is the only woman on the farm leading her to being a target for verbal abuse, possibly because the other men are jealous as they don't have a wife. She's both below and above them, and they direct violent sexist comments like 'looloo', 'tart' at her, saying 'she got the eye'. She has power over them through her sexual allure, but it frightens them. George says she's 'poison', 'trouble' 'jailbait' and a 'rattrap': this violent language shows how weak he feels when she's around. Yet, she's desperately lonely and they have no respect for her, though they fear her.

Moreover many physical weaknesses are displayed throughout the novel. Disability is one of the main themes, not only does Lennie come under this but Crooks and Candy. Crooks although considered the lowest authority on the farm possesses. He is intelligent and reads 'has a copy of the Californian law code.' In addition he also has a strong sense of his rights, which is partially a weakness at the same time as he is black. Back in 1937 black people had

no rights. Crooks also expresses a physical weakness as well, his bad back which does allow him to do strong physical labour. One of the most ironic weaknesses of them all is Candy, although working on a farm is 99% labour Candy doesn't have a hand. When the workers can't work, they're no use and Candy says "I wisht someone'd shoot me".

In conclusion, Steinbeck wrote that he wrote *Of Mice and Men* to show the triumph of the human spirit against "weakness and despair" that friendship and kindness is the "great rally flag of hope". He questions traditional ideas of strength, and shows that power should not be abused – but that it's easily done. He shows that cruelty breeds more cruelty and so George's compassion towards Lennie stands out even more brightly. It is clear that the message of the novel is that these weak characters are unfortunately overpowered by the stronger in this world.