

### **In of mice and men, the strong prey on the weak: Discuss**

In Steinbeck's novel Of Mice and Men, the worst of human nature can be seen. Brutality, even cruelty and above all, an inability to empathise, characterises many of the characters on the ranch. Some characters exist only to pick fights with those weaker than them and are total troublemakers. The weak characters pick on those weaker than them. George is a break from the norm in his care for Lennie. However, the only character that is truly strong and respected by all, but cares for and can empathise with the weak, is Slim the jerkline skinner.

Curley is characterised by his small size and ability to fight. As Candy tells George at the beginning of the novel, "Curley's pretty handy in the ring." The moment Curley lays his eyes on Lennie, "his fists curled...his glance at once calculating and pugnacious." The scene is at once set for confrontation. George warns Candy, that Curley "had better watch out" because Lennie "is big and he's strong." Candy also tells George that Curley is like a lot of little guys in that "he's always picking scraps with big guys." The reason why Curley picks on Lennie immediately, is because he feels threatened by Lennie's size and senses his vulnerability as a mentally-challenged person. However, when Curley meets his match with Slim and Carlson, he does not stand a chance. As Carlson says, "You goddamn punk. You tried to throw a scare into Slim...If you come near me, I'll kick your goddamn head off." Curley is eager to stay on top of the pecking order and this culminates in a fight with Lennie after his argument with Slim. In a vicious manner and with the intent to hurt, Curley brutally bashes Lennie. He "attacked his chest and knocked out his wind," and delivered upper-cuts to the face and nose causing blood to spurt out. However, George urges Lennie to fight back saying "Get 'im Lennie." Lennie then proceeds to crush Curley's hand with his immense strength. Curley is a mean bully who only picks on guys he believes cannot fight back. When Curley is faced with individuals who are stronger and more respected than he is, he immediately backs down.

Crooks demonstrates how the weakest can prey on even the weaker in the way he mercilessly picks on Lennie. In those times, blacks were seen as inferior to white people. As a black or a 'nigger', Crooks is discriminated in every way on the ranch. He is not allowed to sleep in the bunkhouse and has to live near the barn. He is not allowed to socialise or "play rummy in the bunkhouse" with the other men. In fact, Candy reveals to George that they only let Crooks socialise with them on Christmas. He tells George, "Jesus we had fun...They let the nigger out that night." This portrays the total intolerance the ranch hands have for Crooks as a black person. In fact, even Curley's wife picks on Crooks telling him, "Do you know what I could do to you if you open your trap. I could get you strung up on a tree so easy it ain't even funny." However when Crooks meets Lennie he immediately senses his weakness as a mentally challenged person and proceeds to taunt him. Crooks picks on Lennie's weakness, his utter dependence on George, saying "S'pose George don't come back?", "S'pose he gets killed or hurt so he can't come back?" As he taunts Lennie, "Crooks' face lighted with pleasure in his torture," because for once, he feels like he has power. Lennie's "face wrinkled with apprehension." He repeats, "George is careful...he won't get hurt," almost to himself to assure himself that George will come back for him. Then Crooks tells Lennie, "They'll take ya' to the booby hatch. They'll tie you up with a collar like a dog." This statement shows how cruel Crooks can become when he realises he is in power. Even the weak characters in the book

prey on the weaker portraying the ruthless 'dog eat dog' attitude and mindset which is the norm for the characters on the ranch.

However amongst the brutal and ruthless attitude revealed by Crooks and Curley, there are two characters which shine as a beacon of light in an unloving and uncaring society, namely George and Slim. From the very beginning of the novel, Steinbeck portrays George as a caring person who genuinely wants the best for his friend Lennie. George defends Lennie and praises him at every opportunity. He tells the boss that Lennie "ain't very bright, but he's a damn good worker." He later tells Slim, "that big bastard there can put up more grain alone than most pairs can," and Slim "looked approvingly at George for having given the compliment." George also humours Lennie's constant requests for George to repeat their dream and always includes the rabbits in his retelling as this is Lennie's obsession.

Slim, the "jerkline skinner" with his "ageless face" and impeccable skill on the ranch is respected by all. "His word was law" in all topics, and his skill was such that he could kill "a fly...without touching the mule," with a bull-whip. Slim is wholly different to all the characters on the ranch in that he understands and even sympathises with all the 'weak' characters on the ranch. Crooks respects Slim for this telling Lennie, "Slim's a real skinner. He looks out for his team." Slim, unlike even George, has a degree of understanding for Curley's wife. He is the only character who does not make derogatory remarks about her unlike the ranch-hands who call her "a rat-trap", "jailbait", and "a tart." He even talks to her in an uplifting manner as we can see when she says at the beginning of the novel, "Hi Slim," he replies, "Hi good-lookin'", unlike George and the rest of the men who don't even want to talk to her.

In the brutal culture of the ranch, there is a clear hierarchy or social order with the weak and the strong. Curley who is obviously one of the 'strong' characters due to his position as the "boss' son" and his fighting ability, abuses his position and picks on weak characters like Lennie. Slim on the other hand, as a well-respected and powerful person in this hierarchy "looks out for his team" in a literal and figurative sense, even reaching out to 'untouchables' such as Curley's wife who the other men perceive as a "rat trap." However the idea of the strong preying on the weak is seen even in the weak themselves, picking on those weaker than them, namely Crooks taunting Lennie. In *Of Mice and Men*, all the characters prey on those who are weaker than themselves except for a select few; George and Slim, who use their power for good and seek to understand and help those around them.