

OF MICE AND MEN

May 2018: Crooks as a powerless victim

- a) With reference to the ways Steinbeck **presents** Crooks, show how far you agree that Crooks is a **powerless victim**.

NB: In the following essay plan, I have used a colour-coding system whereby **narrative methods** are presented in red and **quotations** are highlighted.

There is substantial evidence for viewing Crooks as a powerless victim: he is ostracized on the basis of his race, as seen in the way he is forced to occupy separate quarters and subjected to racial abuse from the other characters. However, Crooks also demonstrates some traits that arguably challenge his status as a victim: his pride and resilience in the face of his unfavourable circumstances invite respect rather than pity, while his hostile behaviour towards other characters threatens our sympathy for his character to some extent. Steinbeck draws on a variety of narrative methods to suggest that, like other characters on the ranch, Crooks is a victim of a cruel and unequal society who takes his bitterness out on others.

A key way in which Steinbeck presents Crooks as a powerless victim is by portraying him as a victim of racial prejudice.

- Steinbeck uses a range of methods to show that as a black person, Crooks has no rights to speak of. One sign of Crooks's marginalization is the way he is **represented as physically cut off from the other workers**. He is not allowed in the communal bunkhouse, and is forced to live in the barn with the animals: **'[he] had his bunk in the harness room; a little shed that leaned off the wall of the barn.'**
- Steinbeck also highlights Crooks's status as an outcast through the way he differentiates himself from the rest of the ranch workers through the use of **pronouns**: **'They say I stink.'** The **juxtaposition of the collective pronoun 'they' and the first-person pronoun 'I'** strengthens our perception of Crooks as a powerless victim by reminding us of the weak social position he occupies on the ranch and the fact that he is ostracized by the other workers.
- An additional way in which Steinbeck portrays Crooks as a powerless victim is by presenting him as a victim of racial abuse. Crooks's mistreatment at the hands of the other ranch workers is illustrated through Candy's disclosure to George that at Christmas he watched a ranch hand called Smitty attack Crooks and not only failed to intervene but actively encouraged him. Candy's approval of Smitty's actions is communicated through the **admiring tone** he uses to recount the event: **'Little skinner name of Smitty took after the nigger. Done pretty good too'.**
- Curley's wife also behaves in a vindictive and threatening manner towards Crooks when he threatens to tell Curley about her coming into the barn, referring to him using the **derogatory term 'nigger'** and implying that she could have him hanged: **'I could get you strung up on a tree so easy it ain't even funny.'** Her statement lends weight to the idea that Crooks is a powerless victim by reminding us that he occupies a vulnerable position on the ranch as his word carries no weight with those in authority.

A further way in which Steinbeck presents Crooks as a powerless victim is by highlighting his physical infirmity.

- Steinbeck uses **vivid visual imagery** to capture Crooks's thin and gaunt physique. He is described as having a **'lean face was lined with deep black wrinkles'** and a pair of **'thin, pain-tightened lips'**.
- Our pity for Crooks as a powerless victim is enhanced further by the **images** Steinbeck uses to describe his contorted frame – **'his body was bent over to the left by his crooked spine'** – and our awareness that he must carry out taxing manual labour despite his condition.

Additional evidence for viewing Crooks as a powerless victim lies in the fact that he is presented as lonely, which reminds us of the fact that he is ostracized by the other workers.

- Crook's loneliness is clear from the **plaintive tone** he uses to warn Lennie of the dangers of solitude: **'He whined, "A guy goes nuts if he ain't got nobody.'**
- Crooks can also be seen as a powerless victim due to the way his loneliness and his subordinate position have led him to become jaded and pessimistic, as signaled through the **bitter, emphatic tone** he uses to dismiss Lennie's description of his and George's dream: **'Nobody never gets to heaven, and nobody gets no land.'**
- The reader's pity for Crooks as a powerless victim is reinforced when he reveals a more vulnerable side to his character through his tentative offer to join George and Lennie on their farm: **'If you... guys would want a hand to work for nothing... why I'd come an' lend a hand.'** His **hesitant tone** here, conveyed through the use of **ellipsis**, reveals his underlying loneliness and his desire for companionship, and suggests that his surface hostility is a defence mechanism he has developed to deal with the racial abuse he is used to receiving.

That being said, Crooks's status as a powerless victim is threatened by the fact that he occupies a relatively secure position on the ranch in comparison to the other workers.

- Despite his infirmity and his low social status, Crooks' position on the ranch is not as weak as others, since **'being a stable buck and a cripple he was more permanent than the other men'**.
- He also has his own private space and owns more possessions than the other ranch workers, as indicated by Steinbeck's use of **listing** to enumerate the items he has accumulated: **'Crooks possessed several pairs of shoes, a pair of rubber boots, a big alarm clock and a single-barreled shotgun.'**

Crooks's resilience in the face of his situation arguably invites the reader's respect and discourages us from seeing him as a powerless victim.

- Steinbeck suggests that Crooks possesses a certain strength of character by describing him as **'a proud, aloof man'**.
- Steinbeck's use of **imagery** to describe Crooks' self-medication routine also presents him as a strong character as opposed to a powerless victim by highlighting his resilience in the face of the pain generated by his physical condition: **'he flexed his muscles against his back and shivered.'**
- The **assertive tone** Crooks uses to tell Lennie **'You got no right to come into my room'** also makes him appear more powerful by showing that he is determined to assert what limited autonomy he has.

Another barrier to viewing Crooks as a powerless victim lies in the fact that he is hostile towards other characters and displays little empathy.

- He addresses Lennie in a **rude tone**, telling him: **'I don't blame the guy you travel with for keepin' you outta sight.'** He also uses a **blunt tone** to tell Candy: **'You'll be a swamper here'**

till they take you out in a box.’ Such verbally aggressive behaviour encourages us to see Crooks as more powerful than those he bullies.

- He also reveals a malicious and manipulative side to his character that challenges his status as a powerless victim when he tries to convince Lennie that George is not coming back: ‘S’pose George don’t come back no more’. Steinbeck highlights Crooks’s enjoyment of this exchange through the **image** ‘Crooks’ face lighted with pleasure in his torture.’

Ultimately, however, Crooks’s retreat into silence and solitude at the end of Chapter 4 reinforces his status as a powerless victim by highlighting his powerlessness in the social hierarchy of 1930s’ America.

- Steinbeck conveys Crooks’s awareness of his powerlessness through his use of the **noun** ‘nothing’ in the description ‘Crooks had reduced himself to nothing’ and the submissive manner in which he addresses Curley’s wife: ‘He said, “Yes, ma’am,” and his voice was toneless.’”
- Steinbeck’s use of the **adverb** ‘just’ in Crooks’s observation that “If I say something, why it’s just a nigger sayin’ it” emphasizes the way black people’s views are dismissed in this society, thereby eliciting pity for his powerless position.
- The reader’s pity for Crooks as a victim is enhanced by the way his mistreatment at Curley’s wife’s hands appears to remind him of the harsh reality of his position in 1930s’ American society and leads him to renounce his interest in George and Lennie’s dream of owning their own farm despite his previous interest, as shown when he tells Candy in a **defensive tone**: ‘jus’ forget it... I wouldn’ want to go no place like that.’” This statement indicates Crooks’s awareness that he will never escape his powerless situation.
- The **image** of Crooks sitting alone at the end of Chapter 4 and tending to his back – ‘he fell slowly to rubbing his back’ – portrays him as a powerless victim by emphasizing his loneliness and implying that his ailment leaves him in constant physical discomfort.

Having considered the ways Steinbeck presents Crooks throughout the novel, it is clear that despite the way he fights back against his disadvantaged position and occasionally attempts to exert his superiority over other characters, Crooks can ultimately be considered a powerless victim due to his physical condition, his loneliness and the way he is marginalized on the basis of his skin colour.